

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION IN THE KHASI AND JAINTIA HILLS

A Study on the Distribution Patterns of Neolithic Sites.

(An Ethno-archaeological Approach)

Submitted By:
Mr. Marco Babit Mitri

In Partial Fulfillment
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History
School of Social Science

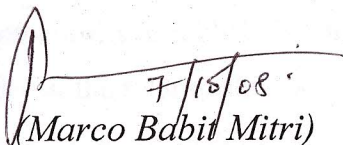


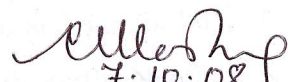
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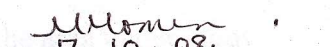
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

I, Marco Babit Mitri, hereby declare that the subject matter of the Thesis, "Archaeological Investigation in the Khasi Hills, A study on the Distribution Patterns of Neolithic Sites (An Ethno-archaeological Approach)" is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis of award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to any body else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any degree or diploma in any University / Institute.

This is being submitted to the North Eastern Hill University for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History


7/10/08
(Marco Babit Mitri)


7.10.08.
(Cecile Mawlong)
Supervisor


7.10.08.
(Mignonette Momin)
Head of Department

Preface

Reports of Neolithic findings from the Khasi and Jaintia hills of the central Meghalaya plateau, goes back to the year 1875 when Major Godwin-Austen reported about the finding of three celts from Shillong in the Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1875) and J.Cockburn's notes on stone implements from the Khasi hills reported in the same Journal (1879). These tools appear in the *Catalogue of Prehistoric Antiquities in Indian Museum*, by Coggin Brown (Calcutta 1917) and A.H. Dani in his PhD thesis which was published under the title *Pre and Proto-History of Eastern India*, (Calcutta, 1960). Thus, the Khasi hills found its place in the Pre-historic map of the country.

Field investigation however, did not take place until 1979, when a team of investigators from the Anthropology Department of Gauhati University located a Neolithic site close to the heart land of the Khasi hills at Umiam-Barapani. Explorations of the site continue till 1995 and a total number of 84 stone implements were collected during these explorations through surface collections. This site is designated as a Factory site by Archaeologists. These initial findings provided a breakthrough which has opened up scope for more intense field investigation concerning the Neolithic period.

Working under the existing reports, the present investigation attempts to understand the spread and extent of Neolithic culture in the Khasi and Jaintia hills with an aim to hypothetically establish its distribution pattern. The objective of this work is to basically work-out the relationship between the Neolithic cultures of the surrounding areas such as the reported sites of Daojali Hading of North Cachar Hills District of Assam and the sites of Sarataru and Marakdola of Karbi Anglong District of Assam with the Neolithic sites of the Khasi and Jaintia hills. This work is also aimed at getting some insights into the migration patterns of the Neolithic people both from outside and within the area under-study.

It is imperative to understand the ethnographic population of these hills, if we are to achieve more meaning out of the archaeological records since some features of the Neolithic experiences is still seen largely intact with the rural people of this region. Keeping this in mind, the present work makes an effort to provide as much ethnographic input as possible about the people, their history and culture. By applying the Direct Historical Analogy model,

the Ethnoarchaeological data from these hills have greatly help to substantiate the archaeological findings. Thus much of the achievements made through this investigation are primarily due to the inputs generated out of the ethnographic information, mostly preserved in the oral form.

Although the Neolithic artefacts documented in this research were all collected as surface finds, they have however proved very crucial from an archaeological perspective, as these findings, have helped to provide the much needed breakthrough in Neolithic investigation of the area for a detail archaeological investigation in the future.

The building of hypotheses on intra-hills migration pattern during the Neolithic, linking the Neolithic phase with the Megalithic and Iron using phase and the view which ascribes the continuity of occupation of these hills by the authors of the Neolithic tools to the period of the emergence of chiefdom societies and beginning of state formation is one the achievements of this project.

Marco Mitri

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I extend my gratitude to Dr. Tia Toshi Jamir of Nagaland University, Dr. David Titso of Deccan College and Mr. Danny Burke of National University, Ireland, for helping me out with the reading materials. I should also thank Mr. Shngian Buhroi in this regard.

I have to thank, Mr. Karmelstar Makdoh, Mr. David Diamai and Mr. Lalfamkima for helping me out with the Maps and Dawings and Mr. Ovidio Kurbah for assisting me in formatting the pictures of this Dissertation.

I should thank Dr. Ashish Malhotra and Mr. Rudolf Manih for the Spectra Analysis of the stone implements, Mr. Mansan Lyngdoh, Geologist for helping me out for the identification of the materials.

The accomplishment during the field work is mainly because of the help of so many people whom I will always remain grateful. They are, Mr. Teron, the Head Man of Liarbang village (2005), Mr. Finly Rogers Syiem of Umroi village, Mr. Bahduh Kharumnuid of Law Nongthroh village, Mr. Rymbhang Nongsiej of Sutnga Village, Mr. Phelas and Mr. Kodri Syiemlieh of Nongspung village, Mr. Gatphoh of Govt' Quarters San-Mer, the Thawmuid family of Myrkhan village, Mr. Poletson of Nongkhrah village, Late Mr. Syiem of Mawbri village, Late. Mr. G. Sumer of Archaeology Dept. Govt of Meghalaya, Mr. Dipshon Nongbri of Lumsohpet Bneng Committee and Mr. Trueman Shylla for the materials from Jaintia hills.

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Last but not the least, I Thank the Almighty for all the Unseen Blessings.

I dedicate this work to my Beloved Parents

Marco Mitri

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

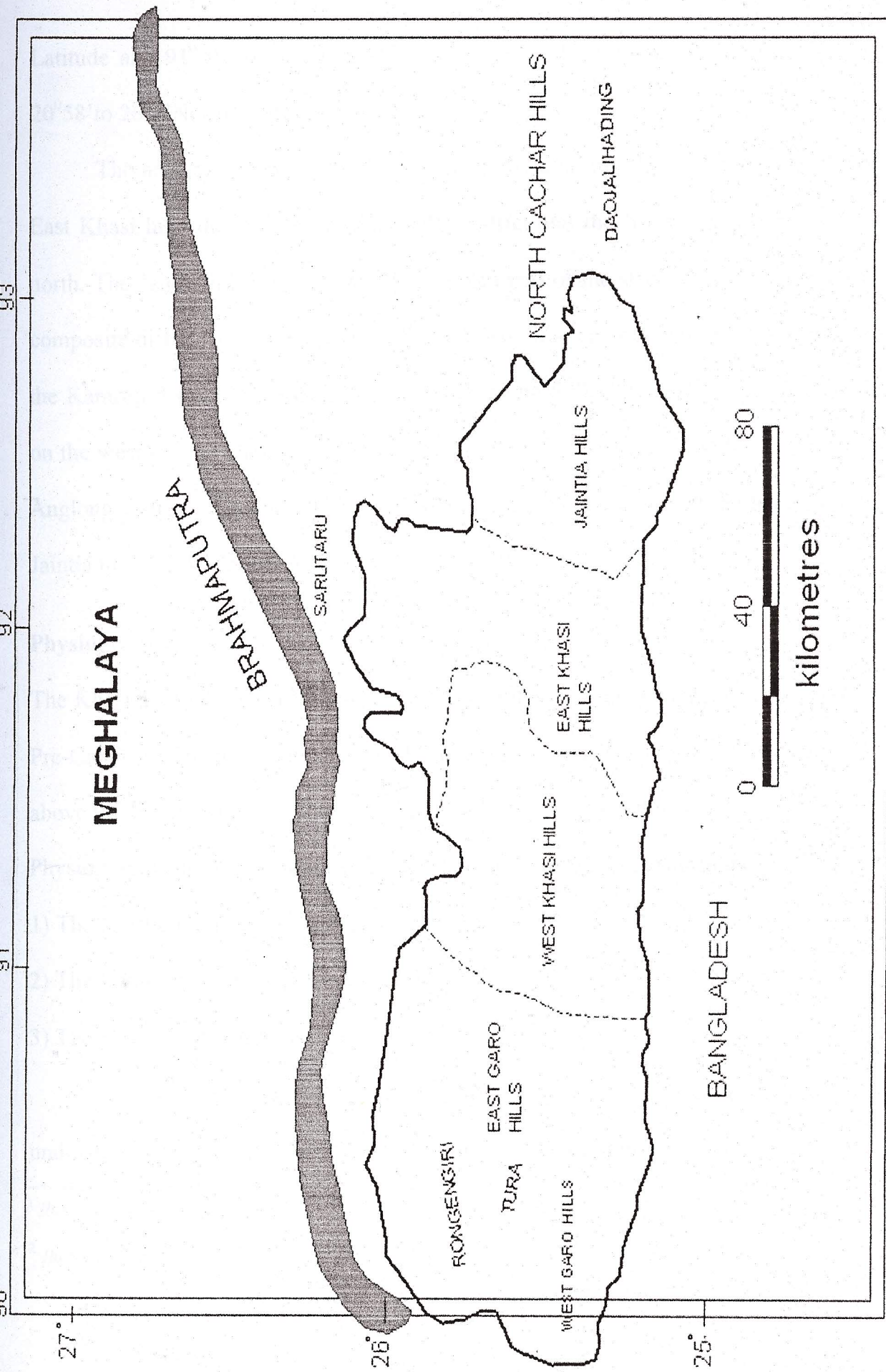
Area of Research

This research covers the central and eastern parts of the state of Meghalaya. The state was carved out from the erstwhile state of Assam and made a full fledged state on 21st January 1971 (under the North-Eastern Re-organisation Areas Act of 1971). The state shares 423Km of its border with Bangladesh in the south and the Brahmaputra valley stretches across the entire northern border. It is located between 25° 2' N to 26° 6' N Latitudes and 89° 48' E to 92° 50' E Longitudes with a total area of 22,429 sq.Km¹

The Meghalaya plateau consists of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills along the outliner formed by the Assam ranges. The plateau is the detached north-eastern extension of the Peninsular India; part of it lies buried under the alluvium deposited by the Ganga-Brahmaputra river systems which is commonly termed as the Malda gap. The Khasi and Jaintia hills which forms the central and eastern part of the Meghalaya plateau is the main focus of this research. The Khasi and Jaintia hills are located between 25°1' and 26°5' North Latitude and between 90° 47' to 92° 52' East Longitude (The Khasi hills is located between 25°10'to 25°25' North

¹ Siddheshwar Sharma, *MEGHALAYA The Land and Forest (A Remote Sensing Based Study)*, (2003, Guwahati) p. 5.

MAP NO .1



Latitude and $91^{\circ} 0'$ to $90^{\circ} 30'$ East Longitude and the Jaintia hills lies between $20^{\circ} 58'$ to $26^{\circ} 3'$ North Latitude and $91^{\circ} 59'$ to $92^{\circ} 51'$).

The administration of the Khasi hills is divided into three districts viz. the East Khasi hills district, West Khasi hills district and the Ri-Bhoi district in the north. The Jaintia hills which forms the eastern part of the state of Meghalaya is a composite district of its own. Politically, the two hills are bounded on the north by the Kamrup district of Assam, on the south by the Sylhet district of Bangladesh, on the west lay the Garo hills districts of Meghalaya and on the east by the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The total extent of the area covered by the Khasi and Jaintia hills is $14,375\text{SqKm}^1$.

Physiography

The Khasi and the Jaintia hills represent the remnants of an ancient plateau of the Pre-Cambrian Indian peninsular shield and they reach a height of 600-1800 M above the mean sea level. Therefore these hills are considered to be a true plateau. Physiographically, these hills can be divided into three distinct sub-units²:

- 1) The Northern undulating hills;
- 2) The Central Upland zone;
- 3) The Southern precipitous zone.

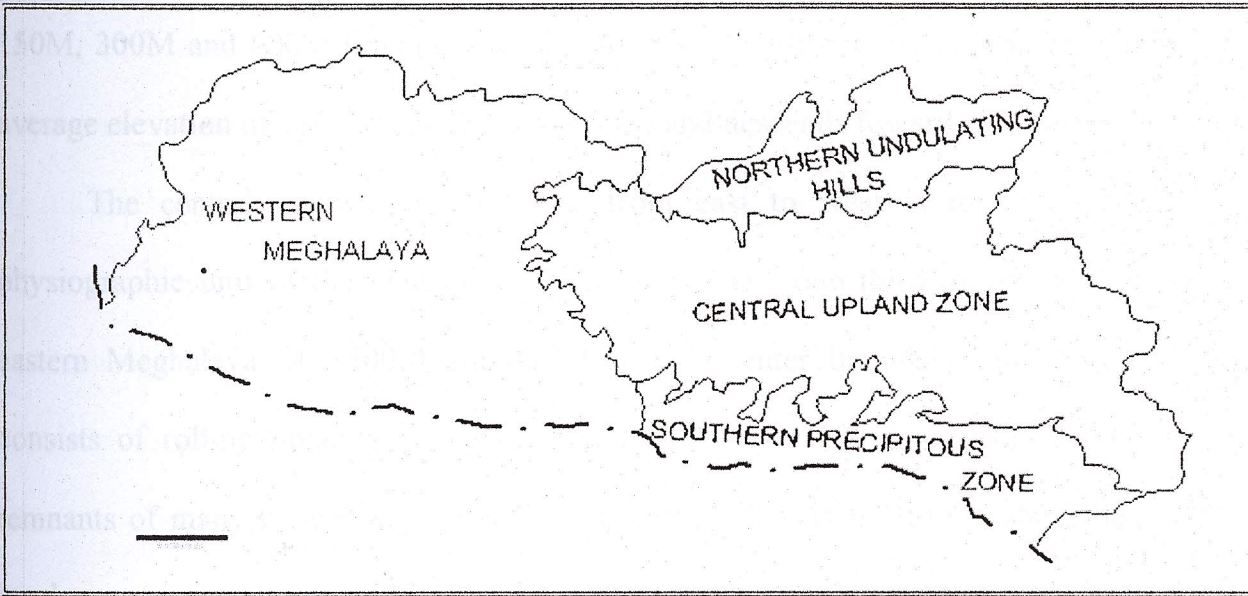
The northern part of the Khasi hills is marked by gentle slopes of undulating hills that gradually merged with the Brahamaputra valley through the

¹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

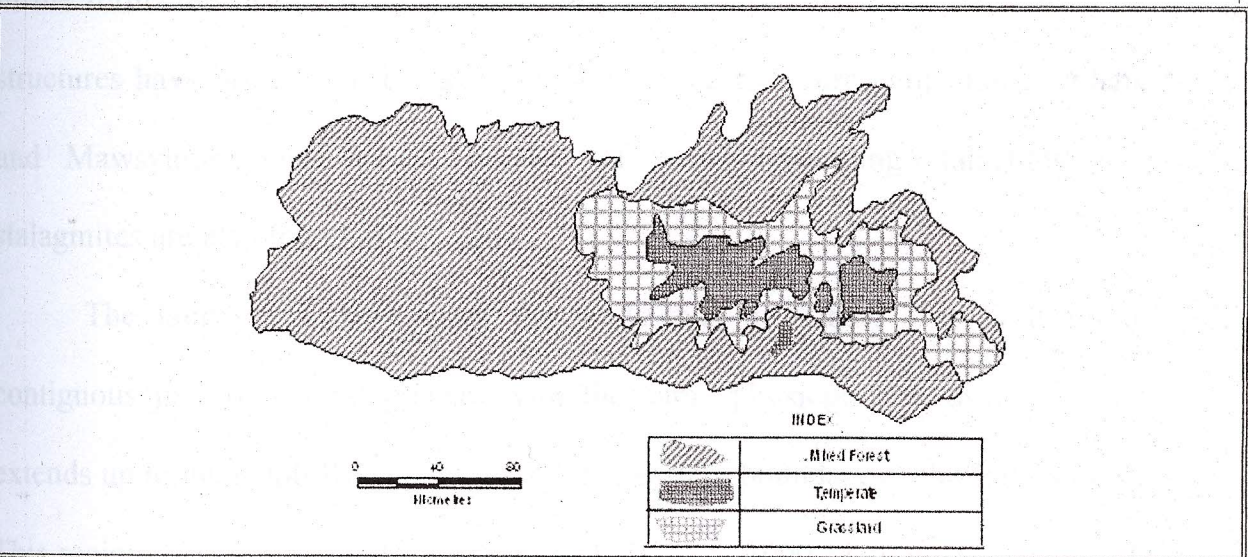
² *Ibid.*, pp.18-21

MAP NO. 2

Physiographic Units



Vegetation Types



sub-montane region known as the *Ri-Bhoi* area. There are three terraces of peneplain which can be identified throughout this region and they are formed at 150M, 300M and 600M (contour) level respectively. This region has an overall average elevation of 170-820 M above sea level and descends towards the north.

The central upland zone running from east to west is the dominant physiographic unit of the plateau. It covers more than one third of central and eastern Meghalaya. A 1500M contour, forms the outer boundary and largely consists of rolling uplands dissected by river valleys. This zone also has the remnants of many peneplain surfaces ranging from 1500M to 2083M above sea level.

The southern section of the plateau includes the steepest slopes of the state and is locally known as the *War* country. It stands as an escarpment and it has been subjected to the fluvial erosion caused by extremely heavy rainfall resulting in the formation of a number of platforms. Three sub-sections or platforms like structures have been identified and they are known as Cherrapunji, Langkyrdem and Mawsynram platform. A number of caves containing stalactites and stalagmites are also found in this zone.

The Jaintia hills have more flat lands than the Khasi hills. It forms a contiguous part of central plateau with the same physiographic divisions and extends up to the Kopli River. This marks the eastern boundary of the Jaintia hills. This region slopes from west to east, from 1450 M to 1000 M above sea level and acts as a watershed between the Surma and the Bhramaputra valley.

Climatic Condition

Unlike other parts of India, the climatic condition of the Meghalaya Plateau is largely controlled by elevation and physical relief. The pressure cells located in Northwest India and the depression of the Bay of Bengal and the South significantly influence the climatic fluctuation in the state. The Khasi and Jaintia hills experience a moderate climate. The foothills region of the south and sub-montane region of the north and central, have prevailing warm and humid climate in summer and pleasantly warm climate in winter. On an average, the two places experience a temperature of 24⁰C throughout most of the summer i.e. March-November, and about 15⁰ in winters i.e. between December and February. In winter the average temperature in the upland zone during the night falls to 4-5⁰C.

The southern part of the plateau receives the heaviest rainfall with an annual average of 12670mm. On the whole, the Khasi and Jaintia hills receive an average annual rainfall of 7700mm with more than three-fourth of the rainfall falling during the monsoon seasons.

The present climate pattern of the Khasi and Jaintia hills in a year is shown below¹;

January: Heavy morning dew and hoar frost, but generally rainless

February: Heavy morning dew and hoar frost but short spell of rain during the middle of the month

¹ I.M.Simon (ed). *MEGHALAYA DISTRICT GAZETTERS.*(Shillong,1991) p. 27.

- March–April: Generally dry, and winds continue for several weeks. Early rain starts at the end of April.
- May: Warm and dry, and rains become more frequent.
- June–August: Period of heavy rainfall
- September : Rain continues but starts to fall in frequency
- October : Rainy days stop
- November: Cold seasons sets in. Frosts in high altitudes around the end of the month
- December : Cold seasons advances. Frost becomes more widespread

Flora and Fauna

The Khasi and Jaintia hills are largely dissected and covered by dense forest over wide areas. The tropical type of broad leaf vegetation covers the area having an elevation of 990 M above sea level. The warm temperate conifer vegetation occurs in the area which has an elevation of 1300 M above sea level. In several suitable areas, there is a mixture of temperate, tropical and sub-tropical vegetation. The Sacred grooves at the central upland in Shillong Peak, Mawphlang and Mawsmai represent the type of original forest vegetation that must have covered these hills in prehistoric times¹. These pockets contain a great diversity of flora species. The

¹ *Ibid.*

secondary forest of the *Pinus kesiya* or the pine forests are very common in the places which has an elevation higher than 900 M above sea level.

The faunal composition of the Khasi and Jaintia hills region is closely connected with the geomorphological evolution of the area. The region served as a faunal gateway through which the Indo-Chinese elements of oriental fauna and paleoartic montane fauna spread to the main sub continent¹. The tropical and sub-tropical moist evergreen-forest ensures the survival of rich mammalian fauna and also other groups of animal life. The gibbon (*Hoolock*), different variety of wild cat (*Felis*), the Himalayan black bear (*Selenarctos thibenthamus*), barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*) etc are some of the common wild fauna of the region. Birds can be seen in abundance in these forests especially in places with lower altitudes. The red vented bulbul (*Picnonotus cafer bengalesis*), the thick billed green pigeon (*Teron curverostra nepalensis*), number of myna species, the red jungle fowl (*Gallus gallus*) etc. are some of the commonly found birds in the region. Besides mammals, birds and reptiles, the hills is also a home to a number of interesting amphibian species and their groups, many of which have adapted to the hill streams.

An Outline about the People

The Khasi and Jaintia hills which is covered under the present investigation derived their names from the word 'Khasi' (which includes the 'Pnar or Jaintia') tribe who are the inhabitants of the area. The earliest reference to the name can be

¹ The data is compiled by C. Radhakrishnan, Zoologist, Eastern Regional Station., Zoological Survey of India. cited in Simon, I.M. (ed), *Op.cit.*, p2.

found in Renell's map published in 1780 in which the name appeared as 'Cussey'¹. Various writers have spelt the word 'Khasi' in different ways, such as Cossyah, Khassyah, Kasia etc. The present name was adopted for the first time by the Christian Missionaries at Cherrapunjee for use in their printed works. The origin of the word is still shrouded in mystery and till date no satisfactory explanation has been made. Based on the report of David Scott, Pemberton stated that the people called themselves *Khyi*². Dalton, referred to the people by the name *Khasia*, a term often used by the people from the plains³. Godwin Austin felt that the word might have been derived from the Aryan word *Ghasi*, meaning grassy in reference to the condition of the upper landscape which is a contrast to the forest-clad valleys of the slopes and the outer hills. He said that the people never pronounced the hard 'G', and in all the Aryan originated words, the letter 'G' is pronounced as 'K'⁴. Local traditions on the other hand, suggest that the name 'Khasi' was derived from the name of a woman called *Si*, and it was prefixed by the feminine connotation 'Ka'. Therefore the actual word should be spelt as '*Kasi*', which is an eponymous ancestress of the Khasi people⁵. The confusion

¹ J.N. Chowdhury, *Ki KHUN KHASI-KHARA (The Khasi People)*, (Shillong, 1996), p. 5.

² R.B. Pemberton, *Reports on the eastern frontier of British India*, (Calcutta, 1835), p.219.

³ E.T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1872), p.54.

⁴ H.H. Godwin-Austin, "On the stone monuments of the Khasi Hill Tribes and on some of the peculiar rites and customs of the people", *Journal of Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* Volume I, 1872, pp.122-143.

⁵ Namita Cathrine Shadap Sen, *The Origin of the Khais-Synteng People*, 1981 Calcutta. p.1.

over the root of the word will however continue to be debated and a more philological research is necessary to arrive at a plausible explanation of the term.

Regarding the original home of the people, not a single authentic source of historical evidence has been found till date. Most of the inferences that have been put forward with respect to the original homeland of the people were derived mainly from traditions and linguistic affinity of the Khasi people with those who inhabited some parts of the south-east Asian countries. Based on the above sources, it has been said that the Khasis came to their present habitat from the eastern direction. They came from Assam through the Patkoi hills and this same route has been used by other immigrants from Burma such as the Ahoms of Assam¹. The migration route of the people is further confounded by the retention of the names of certain places such as the name *Makachang* which the Khasis use to refer to the Himalayas. This evidence is used by some scholars to speculate that the people might have once settled around the Himalayas². This is quite apparent in the oral traditions of certain prominent clans of the west Khasi hills who have always pointed towards the east as their migration route³. Without any doubt, this strong tendency of westward movement among the people can be taken as another ground of support to the existing speculation that the east was the original homeland of the Khasis.

¹ P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, (London 1914), pp.11-12.

² Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, (Guwahati, 1967), pp. 12.

³ *ibid.*, p.15

Settlement, Race and Language

The Khasi tribe is a common nomenclature applied to the inhabitants of the central and eastern Meghalaya Plateau. The Khasi tribe is divided into various sub-groups which has been identified mainly on the basis of their settlement patterns; the *Khyr-iem* (or the Khasis) who occupy the upland zone of central track of the Meghalaya plateau, the *War-Khasi* occupy the southern precipitous terrain of the Khasi hills, the *War-Jaintia* groups who occupy the low elevated lying belt of Jaintia hills, the *Bhoi* groups that occupy the entire northern slopes of the central Meghalaya Plateau and the *Synteng* or the *Pnar* groups that occupy the eastern uplands of Meghalaya plateau also known as Jaintia hills. How long ago has the settlement pattern assumed its present shape, is a question, yet to be answered. On the of basis conjectures supported by folk tradition, the segregation can be best linked with the different waves of migration of the Khasis into their present habitat¹.

On the basis of the general physical characteristics, the Khasi have been racially classified as Mongoloid². Although typical Mongoloid features are quite noticeable among the Khasis, it is scientifically not plausible to straightaway classify the people without placing them within the broad anthropological parameters. The Khasis differ from the *Brachycephalic* (broad-headed) true

¹ Hamlet Bareh, *The Art History of Meghalaya*, (Delhi 1991), p.24 (the details of the folk tradition is mentioned in the concluding chapter (Chapter. 6).

² W.W.Hunter, *Statistical Account of Assam*, (London 1879), (reprint 1975), p. 216.

mongoloid feature, and they fall under the *Mesophalic* head-form (short-headed)¹. Although in general, the Khasis possess short stature and mesophalic head shape, there are variations in the face and nose. While some anthropologists' measurement showed more evidence of *mesorrhine* (medium) form of nose, others reveal high occurrence of *platyrrhine* (broad) nose form. There is also a disagreement among scholars with respect to the facial index. In trying to establish their racial and ethnic affinity, the Khasis have been subjected to more anthropometric studies than any other tribe. Even then, no unanimity has been arrived at with regard to the physical characteristics of the different groups within the Khasi tribe itself, not to talk about a comparative study with the other neighbouring tribes having allied mongoloid features. Efforts have also been made to establish a relationship on the basis of the blood-group pattern. The Khasis' blood-group pattern showed high percentage concentration of blood-group B and AB which link them with Tibet and China². This blood-group evidence somehow goes in contrast with the existing notion that the Khasis have more racial affinity with south-east Asia than to China or Tibet³. The absence of unanimity among scholars with regard to the physical features of the Khasis has been attributed largely to the great admixture of racial traits which took place in the adjoining and contiguous areas of south and east Asiatic region.

¹ T. Raychodhury, *Journal of Department of Letters* Volume. xxvi, (Calcutta University 1935), p. 1.

² Namita Cathrine Shadap Sen, *Op.cit.*, p. 16.

³ J.N. Chowdhury, *Ki KHUN KHASI-KHARA (The Khasi People)*. (Shillong 1996), p. 32.

In their present habitat, the Khasis are surrounded on all directions by other groups speaking the Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan languages. J.R.Logan¹ is perhaps one of the earliest writers who demonstrated the relationship between the Khasis and certain people of further India along with the Mons, Palung and Khmer of South East Asia on the basis of vocabularies. Linguistics studies indicate that the Khasis form a group of the Mon-Khmer language that belongs to the Austro-Asiatic type which is one branch of the 'Austic' family of languages, a theory developed by Father W. Schmidt in 1906². Besides the Khasis, the Austro-Asiatic group of languages also include the Munda language, chief of which are the Mundari, Santali, Nicobares, Munda, Santal, Ho and Gadaba of Chotanagpur plateau, the Mon of South Burma and South-west Thailand, Khmer of Combodia, Wa and Palung of Burma, Sakai and Semang tribal of Malaya and many other insignificant tribes. In the form of speech, however there is a great difference between the Mon-Khmer and the Mundari with respect to the grammar, vocabulary, phonetics and syntax. The most distinct feature is that, the Mon-Khmer which includes the Khasi, forms, the monosyllabic groups, whereas the Mundari which includes the Nicobarese, make use of polysyllables³. Although, polysyllabic words are numerous in the Khasi language, they are generally seen as

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

² P.R.T. Gurdon, *Op.,cit.*, p. xix.

³ Hamlet Barch *Op.,cit.*, p. 17.

compounds with recognizable monosyllabic root words¹. The present-day geographical distribution of the Mon Khmer languages seems to indicate that the language originated from northern Thailand and there are as many as 80 Mon-Khmer linguistic groups that exist around the world². The Mon-Khmer family of languages probably originated in the region of northern Thailand, and the jungles of this region being the home of the Mrabri or *Phi Tong Luang* who are considered as one of the most primitive people in the world, and who speak the Mon-Khmer language³

Glottochronologists, have developed a hypothesis that the deviation of one language from another proceeds at a uniform rate and on the basis of this hypothesis, Professor Eugénie Henderson of London University concludes that the Khasi, Mon, Khmer and Vietnamese had a common language until about 2400 B.C. Professor H.L. Shroto of the same University, on the other hand, points to a much remoter period and concludes that Khasi language appeared at about 4300 B.C.⁴ On the basis of the linguistic affinity, some scholars⁵ associate the Austric-speaking population with the advent of the proto-Austroloid racial element who entered India only after the Negroid element.

¹ Namita Cathrine Shadap Sen, *Op.cit.*, p. 52.

² Hamlet Bareh. *Op.cit.*,

³ Cited in Namita Cathrine Shadap Sen, *Op.cit.*, p. 54.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵ S.K. Chatarjee in *Indian Culture*, as cited in J.N. Chowdhury, *Op.cit.*, p. 37.

The genetic evidences on the basis of Y-chromosome SNP and STR data analysis from 1222 individuals of 25 Indian populations may provide additional evidence while dealing with the migration of the Khasi population. From the studies, it has been found that haplogroup O-M95 is found all over Southeast Asia, while in India it is restricted to the regions where Austro-Asiatic populations are concentrated. It has also been observed that, haplogroup O-M95 is found in a relatively high frequency among the Khasi (41%) as also with other Austro Asiatic populations of India (highest among the Mundari 55%). This may underscore that the Mundari, Khasi and Mon-Khmer groups of India are not only linguistically related but also genetically linked. This haplogroup has been reported to be absent or present in low frequency in other linguistic groups of India, suggesting a distinct genetic identity of the Indian Austro-Asiatic populations. The Khasis on the other hand also show relatively high frequency of haplogroup O-M122 (29%) and given that populations of the Khasi sub-family are concentrated in the regions North of Burma and Thailand, it is possible that Khasi populations may have migrated from Southeast Asia to India. However, the presence of O-M122 in the Khasi is observed to be due to gene flow from the neighboring Garo population (having 55% of O-M122), further suggesting that the Khasi population was initially devoid of this haplogroup. Thus it has been postulated that the Mundari and Khasi populations had separated long back and the latter have probably gone to Southeast Asia, via the northeast Indian corridor, as reflected in their geographic distribution. Therefore, the Mundari populations appear to be one of

the earliest sources of populations from which the Khasi and Mon-Khmer populations have separated quite early and migrated to and settled in Southeast Asia¹.

The Society

A notable feature of the Khasi society is their 'matrilineal system'. Regarding the antiquity of the system, there is one reference which appeared in the Calcutta Review of volume xiv May 1867 about the ancient Assam which offers some historical validation. The reference states that, after Heun Tsang's visit to Assam, the king of Kashmir who ruled between 714 and 750 A.D. attempted a vain invasion on the Jaintia kingdom which was referred to as "*Stri-Rajya*" or kingdom with a female ruler². In contrast to the other tribes around them, the Khasi matrilineal system when viewed from the region's perspective, has come to acquire a unique character. And it can perhaps be treated as an institution which has been preserved since the prehistoric period. This unique institution along with its distinctive linguistic affinity provides a clear indicator to the isolated character of the people in the context of the region they inhabited. These two evidences indirectly point to a very different (pre) historical course which the Khasis have

¹ The above data are derived from the paper downloaded from the website @<http://www.biomedcentral.com> "Y-chromosome evidence suggests a common paternal heritage of Austro-Asiatic populations", by Vikrant Kumar, Arimanda NS Reddy, Jagadeesh P Babu, Tipiriseti N Rao, and Battini M Reddy (Molecular Anthropology Group, Biological Anthropology Unit, Hyderabad). Banrida T. Langstieh (Molecular Anthropology Group, Biological Anthropology Unit, Hyderabad and Department of Anthropology, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong), Kumarasamy Thangaraj, Alla G Reddy and Lalji Singh (Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Uppal Raod, Hyderabad). *BMC Evolutionary Biology* Volume 7, 28, March, 2008.

² Homiwell Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi*. (Shillong 1962), 'Introduction'.

gone through. The matrilineal system may also be seen as mode of defense mechanism which allows the community to retain its distinct identity.

From the genetic evidence, the presence of genetic marker haplotype O-M122 on the Khasi population (the genetic marker being quite high among the Garos), and the absence of O-M95 among the Garos (the genetic marker being distinct to the Austro-Asiatic population of India, including the Khasis) does reflect some social implication. Inferring from the genetic sampling above¹, it probably shows that the Garo element is present in the Khasi genetic makeup. The survey gives an implication that when there is a mix between a Khasi and a Garo, the progeny invariably claimed a Khasi identity. The *absorption capacity* of the Khasis may be best attested to the matrilineal system which appears to operate as a protective instrument, deliberately adopted to preserve their identity, a system which acted as a *safety valve* to counter the socio-political pressure from the surrounding Tibeto-Burman speaking patrilineal/patriarchal communities. This, then allow us to speculate that the matrilineal institution of the Khasis made a huge impact on its closest neighbours, the Garos, who probably adopted the system right from the earlier times. The process of adoption is ethnographically seen among some of the Mikir communities who lived along the borders of Khasi and Jaintia hills, some of whom never claimed to be Khasis, but adopted much of the Khasi culture, most glaring, being the matrilineal system². The recent

¹Y-chromosome evidence suggests a common paternal heritage of Austro-Asiatic populations' *Op.,cit.*,

² This study is based on a random ethnographic survey conducted during the exploration for archaeological sites along the Mikir -Ri-Bhoi borders around the villages of Iapngar, Tyrso and the adjoining villages (Cont-)



observation made on the neighbouring Mikir community, can be hypothetically used as a model to demonstrate the transitional phase of Garo adoption of Khasi matriliney thereby allowing us to speculate that the Garos were among the first Tibeto-Burman speaking-population, who had interacted with the Khasis¹,

The social structure of the Khasis is composed of the *Kurs* or the clans and all of them trace their origin to one primeval mother called *Ka Iawbei Tynrai* who is the ancestress of the whole clan. In the clan line, the next is followed by *Ka Iawbei Tymmen* or the great grandmother who is the founder of the sub-clan, then finally comes the *Ka Iawbei Khyntaw* or grandmother who is the ancestress of the family or the *Iing*². From the male line, *U Thawlang* is revered as the ancestral father of the clan and *U Suidnia* is the eldest maternal uncle of the clan and the of *Ka Iawbei Tynrai*. The Khasi marriage system is strictly exogamous, and it is considered a great taboo to marry within the clan or within the sister clans³ who traces their origin to the same ancestress.

The origin of the clan points to different traditions. Some clans adopted their mother or father's name, and there are others which bear totemistic name and trace their origin to some species of animals, trees or plants such as *Shrieh* or monkey, *Tham* or crab, *Bee* or ngap, *Diengdoh* or wooden trough, *Pathaw* or

→ Some people from these villages claimed to be Khasis and adopted Khasi matrilineal system but bear non-Khasi clan title.

¹ It has to be noted that such a historical process of adoption by the Garos is not based on any substantial proof and is still at a level of conjecture only.

² P.R.T. Gurdon, *Op.,cit.*, p.63.

³ Which may bear different name(s) but are probably branches of, once the same clan. This knowledge passes on from generation to generations by each Khasi clan.

pumkin, *Sohkhia* or cucumber, *Malngiang* or a type of fish etc. There is no record from recent ethnographic study to prove, that clans with totemistic names maintain any taboo on eating or killing the plants and animals whose name they still retain as identity of the of the clan. But, traditional people believe that such a taboo prevailed in the past, like for example, the Malngiang clan considered pork a taboo, to the Ryntathiang clan eating, of one species of citrus fruit (*Soh Nairiang*) is considered a taboo, the Pathaw clan considered pumkin a taboo etc. Hence it cannot be said with certainty if totemistic practice prevailed or not among the Khasis. Some scholars, however, argue that the Khasi exogamy, arose from totemism, inferring that, the taboo from eating an animal (or plants) belonging to his totem likewise connote the danger of marrying someone within his own totem¹. There are also clans which bear the names of their ancient settlement, while others traced their descent from the goddess from whom the ruling clan originated². A clan having a common descent may not necessarily bear the same name, because through the process of time, many events may have taken place encouraging the clan to assume different names. But, there is a strong tradition which lives and is preserved in the minds of the people which guides each clan to trace its affiliation (if there is any) to one another through a common descent. Through this conventional method, a particular clan can track its affiliated clans. These clans are nothing but an overgrown family, and they are formally knitted

¹ David Roy. 'Principles of Khasi Culture' *Folklore*, Volume 47, No. 4. (Dec.,1936), pp. 384.

² P.R.T.Gurdon, *Op.,cit.*, pp. 70-71.

together through the institution of ancestor worship, vividly expressed through the mortuary practice. In the pre-Christian mortuary practice, the clan would gather together and relocate their post-cremated bones from their individual family cists to a common clan sepulcher.

The matrilineal system of the Khasis renders the position of the women more or less equal to that of men in social matters. The women being considered as the progenitors of the clan are regarded in high esteem. However, in political matters the women are not allowed to participate, as this is considered to be the exclusive domain of males. The social position of the women is well reflected in the inheritance of property in which the males have no share in the family's possession. In theory the ancestral property would always be given to the youngest female of the family who automatically enjoys the lion's share of the family possession, but in practice she remains only a custodian of that possession. She is not allowed to dispose off the family possession which she inherited without the consent of the family or clan members especially the maternal uncles. Owing to this reason perhaps, that ancestral house or the *Iing Seng* is held with sanctity. The house is a place for hosting generations of youngest daughters and offers refuge to other members of the family and the clan. At the same time, it is also the center for all religious ceremonies which involve the family. Owing to the said system, property falls under two categories; (i) Inalienable (ii) alienable. The first type is known as *Nongtymmen* or the ancestral property which cannot be disposed

off without the consent of the entire family members. The second type is known as *Nongkhynraw* or self acquired property that which can be disposed at will¹.

The retention of the matrilineal system by the Khasis may have been closely linked with the idea of *land ownership*, and the role of a clan as the guardian of the land became more important especially after the Khasis came into contact with the surrounding Tibeto-Burman groups. Because of close proximity, inter-marriage with the latter became inevitable, which probably prompted the Khasis to adopt a *system* which is congenial for preserving their identity and at the same time provided them with a sense of security over the ownership of the territory which they have made their claim upon. The matrilineal institution thus, served as an instrument of peaceful cultural assimilation adopted by the Khasis because of the pressure impacted by the neighbouring patrilineal/patriarchal groups surrounding them. The presence of a large number of Khasi clans with the prefix *Khar*², certainly corroborate the *absorption capacity* of the Khasi tribe, thereby attesting to the peaceful cultural assimilation of the community with the neighbouring tribes.

Religion

To the Khasis, religion is literally understood as *Niam*, a term which was probably either loaned from the non-tribal word *Niom*, or may have originated itself from

¹ Hamlet Bareh, *Op.,cit.*, p. 296.

² A short form of the word '*Dkhar*' which in the Khasi philology, denotes an 'outsider or foreigner' of the tribe.

the word *Nia* which literally means 'word' in the Khasi dialect. While tracing the root of the word *Niam* from the word *Nia*, there is still so much space for debates and conjectures. In Khasi religion, the word *Nia* is always associated with another word *Jutang*, meaning a 'covenant'¹. Thus, even if the word *Niam* may have been loaned, that does not imply that the Khasi are without a concept of religion at all. Khasi religion is associated with the 'covenant' through a 'word' that they made with God, who is identified as *U Blei Nongthaw* or the God of creation. This covenant is preserved in the Khasi folk lore of '*U Sohpet Bneng*'². Some scholars are of the opinion that there is a notion of the feminine attribute in the Godhead with whom is entrusted the care and control of the universe³ and she is known as *Ka Blei Synshar* or the ruling Goddess⁴. There are others who argued that the supreme God, is also revered to, as the great ancestress and hence, the term *Ka Blei Nongshynshar*. The suffix *Ka* which denoted femininity became prominent in the Khasi religion due to the influence of the matrilineal institution⁵. There are minor gods who are the anthropomorphic beings⁶. These anthropomorphized deities are of terrestrial, celestial and cosmic order, such as the tender hearted goddess, the Sun or *Ka Sngi*, the moon or *U Bnai*, the Toad or *ka Hynroh*, the god

¹ Homiwell Lyngdoh, *op., cit.*, pp.1-5.

² A detail description of the folk tale is mention in the chapter while dealing with ethnoarcheology (Chapter3). In this research , the folk tale is examined with an aim to contextualized the archeological evidences.

³ David Roy, *Op.,cit.*, p. 384.

⁴ P.R.T.Gurdon, *Op.,cit.*, p. 105.

⁵ Homiwell Lyngdoh, *op., cit.*, p.6

⁶ Namita Cathrine Shadap Sen, *Op., cit.*, p. 209.

of the hills, *U kyllang*, *U Symper*, god of thunder or *U Pyrthat*, the stream goddess or *ka Iam*, *ka Ngot*. There are presiding deities like the deity presiding over water or *Lei Umtong*, the village deity or *U Ryngkew U Basa*, *U Phan U Kyrpad*, deities of diseases *Ka Rih*, *Ka Khlam*, *Ka Tyrut*. The above mentioned are few of the innumerable classification of Khasi manifestations of God. The Khasis offer sacrifices and performed egg-breaking ceremonies to propitiate the gods and goddesses. All these divinities were agents of the supreme God¹. In practice, the traditional Khasi religion is animistic in content and propagates spirit-worship, both good and evil spirits. The other principal feature of the Khasi religion is the 'ancestor worship'. In such ceremonies, the priest or the *Lyngdohs*, who are well versed in the art of necromancy, played a very important role in propitiation of the spirits.

The Megalithic Culture

Von Furer Haimendorf stated that "*There exist no race in the Asiatic mainland which had developed Megalithic technique to such a degree as the Khasis, their row of huge menhirs, bone repository built on gigantic slab... are among the most impressive Megalithic monuments*"². The Megalithic tradition in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills was a living tradition till very recent times. The megalithic monuments are widely distributed throughout the length and breadth of the Khasi

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

² Von Furer Haimendorf, "Megalithic Rituals among the Gadabas and Bondos of Orissa", *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Volume. 9, letters 4, 1943, p.173.

and Jaintia hills. A good number of reports have been published on the Megalithic tradition of the Khasi and Jaintia hills beginning with the records of the colonial workers in the 19th century. These records have served as an important source of information about the cultural practice at the time when the tradition was still vibrant, especially concerning description about the monuments and their functional significance. However, it is rather unfortunate that till today not a single chronological date can be assigned to this practice, although one scholar is of the opinion that, probably the bone repositories such as the cairns and the cists pre-dates the thirteen century A.D¹. It is also not certain whether the practice of erecting stones among the Khasis was intrusive into their culture or had evolved from within.

A classification of the Megalithic monuments of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills was comprehensively dealt with in the PhD Thesis of Cecile Mawlong, which is briefly discussed below².

On the basis of morphology, the megalithic remains in the Khasi and Jaintia are grouped into five broad groups;

Group A: Menhirs, Alignments and Avenues.

Group B: Dolmens.

Group C: Cists, Cairns and Cairn-Cists.

¹ Cecile Mawlong, "Megaliths and Social formation in the Khasi-Jaintia hills", in Mignonette Momin and Cecile Mawlong (eds), *Society and Economy in North East India*, Volume 1, (Delhi, 2004) p.37.

² Cecile Mawlong, *Megalithic Monuments of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills: An Ethno-Archaeological Study*, Unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to the North Eastern Hills University, (Shillong 1996), pp.27-60.

Group D: Stone Circles.

Group E: Stone Cremation Platforms.

On functionally grounds, the megalithic monuments mentioned may be classified into two distinct groups;

(A) Funerary Stones or *Mawbyinna Niam* further classify into;

1. *Mawkjat/Mawlynti/ Mawksing*, *¹ stones of the foot or leg/ stones of the way or path/stones of the drum.
2. *Mawumkoi and Mawtyrut*, * stones of the Purificatory Tank and stones of the Female evil spirit.
3. *Mawklim*, * stones of adultery.
4. *Kpep*, * the Platform of cremation.
5. *Jaka Syang Syieng*, * place of drying and purifying the bones before they are interned into the clan cist.
6. *Mawsyieng*, * bone repositories which are structurally identified with the cists and cairns.

(B) Memorial Stones or *Mawbyinna Nam*

1. *Mawkni-Mawiwabei and Mawpud-Mawpyrsa*, * stones of the maternal uncles-female ancestress, and stones for demarcating boundaries-stones of maternal nephew.

¹ * Literally translated.

2. *Mawthawlang, Mawkiaw-kha, and Maw Khun-Kha* * stones of the progenitor of the clan, stones of the paternal ancestress and stones of descendants of the male relatives.
3. *Mawkni Syiem, Mawiawbei, and MawPyrssa Syiem* * stones in honour of the dead chief, stones of the ancestress of the chief and stones of the maternal nephew of the chiefs.
4. *Mawbyinna*, * memorial stones erected for important events such as political, economic and social nature.
5. *Mawbri, Mawsam* * stones that demarcate private lands (either of individual, family or clan), and stones which are erected at the junction of the above two lands.

The cairns are therefore considered as the most ancient form of Megalithic practice, and they are found mostly in the northern part of the plateau. They are a heap of stones which are functionally treated as synonymous with the cists¹. It has been opined that the megalithic tradition in these hills are closely linked to the concepts of unity of the maternal ancestry and social continuity, as a greater percentage of such memorials are dedicated to the ancestors of the matrilineal kin group². The monuments are also linked with concepts of fertility and social merit and a process involving the struggles among members of the society, over exercise

¹ Namita Cathrine Shadap Sen, *Op., cit.*, p. 208.

² Cecile Mawlong, *Op., cit.*, p.36

of social power as such structures legitimised the rank and status of the dominant groups in society over others¹.

A Brief Political History of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills

At the time of the advent of the British into the hills during the 19th Century, the Khasi hills was divided into 26 independent chieftainships. These chieftainships combined in a loose confederacy, but this did not materially affect their isolated independent existence. The Khasi and Jaintia hills were made into a new district in 1835 after the British took over the control of the region.

It has also been noted that the earliest reference of the word 'Khasi' occur in the paraphrase work of Sankaradeva's, *Bhagavata Purana*². Several records of the Khasis can be found in the Ahom *Buranjis* or the court chronicles of the Ahom kings of Assam as these provide the earliest historical reference to the people living in the hills. However, since the Ahoms had more interaction with the kings of the Jaintia hills, these records give more reference about Jaintia hills and only stray accounts are made about the Khasi hills. Among them, the *Jayantia Buranji* provides information on the relations of the Ahom kings with the Hindu kingdom of Jaintiapur ruled by the Jiantia kings. Other *Buranjis* also contains references about the people of the hills and such accounts are mostly in relation with the Jaintia kings.

¹*Ibid.*, p.49.

²Namita Cathrine Shadap Sen, *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

Actual historical records of the Khasi people started only with the coming of the Europeans. The first contact between the Khasis and the Europeans can be traced back to the Diwani of Bengal-1765, when the neighboring district of Sylhet became part of the area under the Diwani. The Europeans were actually brought into contact with the people because of their interest on the lime quarries available on the hills¹. The first European to write on the Khasis was Robert Lindsay, a collector of the East India Company of Sylhet, who brought interesting accounts about the people and refer to them as a “a tribe of independent Tartars” that had direct relation with China². Then, the work of R.B.Pemberton provided us with reference about the attack launched by Major Hinneker in 1774 in retaliation to the aggressive policy of the Jaintia king in Sylhet³. The most detailed and lengthy description of the Khasi people is found in the work of P.R.T.Gurdon, “The Khasis”⁴. Though the book is more of an ethnographical than historical work, it is a very useful record about the people. Gurdon provided a comprehensive account about the economic life of the people during that time, the prevailing social system, the tribal religious beliefs and institutions and the nature of state organization of the people. As a deputy commissioner of the district where the Khasis inhabited, he had a long and close acquaintance with the people and their

¹ W.W.Hunter. *Op.,cit.* p. 205.

² *Lives of Lindsays* as cited in the ‘Introduction’ by C.J.Lyall in P.R.T.Gurdon *Op.,cit.*, p xv.

³ R.B.Pemberton. 1835. *Reports on the Eastern frontier of British India*, cited in Namita Cathrine Shadap Sen. *Op.,cit.*,

⁴ *Op.,cit.*,

language. His monograph thus offers the closest glimpse of the people, their society and culture during the period when modern ideas had not made a deep impression in the minds of the Khasis. The work of P. C. Choudhuri¹ contains some sections which refer to the Khasis and Jaintias. Sir Edward Gait's "History of Assam" (1963) also made a reference about the political history of the Jaintias and the Khasis. Stray references about the Khasi people and their culture can be found in the works of ethnographers mostly in form of articles that are widely scattered in various journals of humanities². These materials provided some of the oldest references about the people of the region and their culture.

In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of publications on subjects dealing with the culture of the people in the region. Local scholars³, have added more on the existing materials, and such works have greatly contributed to the growth of literature on culture and early history of the people in the region. Side by side, there are also other works written in the vernacular dialect (language), and these works have come up as very useful source of information especially on the untouched areas in the field of culture and history⁴.

¹ P. C. Choudhuri. *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the 12th century*, (Gauhati 1966), p. 81.

² *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Man, Man In India, The Antropological Journal of Great Britain and Ireland*, etc.

³ Hamlet Bareh, Namita Catherine Shadap Sen, J.N. Choudhry, *Op. cit.*, Pristilla Lyngdoh, *Festival of the Khasi* (Shillong 1998).

⁴ Homiwell Lyngdoh, *Op. cit.*, Philomena Kharakor, G. Costa, H.O Mawrie, J. Baccheriallo. (details cited in Bibliography)

The Present Research

Although quite a fair amount of literature dealing with the history and culture have been published, a vast area of open space still remain untouched, especially in the field of pre-history. This research is an effort to expose the distribution of prehistoric Neolithic sites in the region under study which encompasses the entire part of the central Meghalaya plateau. Except for the discovery of some stone artifacts from a single site of Umiam-Barapani, nothing much has been written about the Neolithic culture of the Khasi-Jaintia hills. Thus, the pre-historic situation in these hills is still largely unknown. The present research is the first ever attempt in this line to expand the knowledge about the region beyond the period of oral and written history. Through the science of archaeology and the application of its various approaches, this investigation is an effort to establish the distribution and spatial extent of Neolithic culture in these hills and to come up with some form of hypothesis regarding the continuity and change in settlement in the settlement pattern of the Khasi and Jaintia hills going back to the Neolithic level. This research may leave behind some questions which will open the flood gates for more pre-historic research in the region.