

Inheritance, Identity, and Power: The Role of Women and Maternal Uncle in Khasi Matrilineal Lineage Systems

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Abstract:

The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, India, is one of the few societies globally that practices matrilineal descent, where inheritance, identity, and power are transmitted through the female line. This system, which places women as the primary custodians of property and lineage, contrasts sharply with patriarchal norms seen in most other societies. At the heart of the Khasi matrilineal structure are two key figures: the woman (usually the youngest daughter) and her maternal uncle, known as a “Kni”. While women inherit property and are responsible for maintaining the family’s social standing, the maternal uncle wields substantial authority over family matters, making key decisions regarding resources, social obligation, and the family's future.

This study investigates the intertwined roles of women and maternal uncles in the Khasi society, focusing on how inheritance practices shape identity and power within the family and community. Using qualitative ethnographic methods and historical analysis, this research will delve into how these roles have evolved and the challenges they face in a modernizing world. Semi-structured interviews with Khasi families, including both women and maternal uncles, will provide a deep understanding of the lived experiences of these key actors. The study will also explore the influence of external factors such as education, urbanization, and shifting gender norms on traditional Khasi customs.

The research will employ a case study approach focusing on multiple Khasi families across rural and urban settings to assess how geographic location impacts the persistence of traditional roles. Participant observation will be used to observe family interactions and the decision-making process about inheritance and property division. Document analysis of Khasi legal and cultural records will complement the fieldwork, providing historical context for the development of matrilineal systems in the region. This mixed-methods approach ensures that both contemporary and historical perspectives are incorporated.

Findings from this study will highlight the complementary but sometimes contested nature of the relationship between Khasi women and their maternal uncles. Women, as custodians of the family’s material and social inheritance, hold significant status in their families and communities, yet their power is often moderated by the uncle’s authority, who acts as a guardian and decision-maker. This dual structure, while empowering women in many respects, also introduces tensions, especially in matters related to property disputes, marriage arrangements, and family governance.

By providing an in-depth examination of the Khasi matrilineal system, this study contributes to the broader understanding of gendered power dynamics in indigenous matrilineal societies. It sheds light on how traditional kinship systems adapt to external pressures while maintaining cultural integrity, offering

insights into the balance between modernization and tradition in societies that diverge from the global norm of patrilineality.

Keywords: Matrilineal, Khasi Society, Inheritance, Women Empowerment, Maternal Uncle.

Introduction:

North-eastern India is becoming more and more recognized for its natural and cultural diversity, as well as for its distinct personalities. Across eight states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim- makeup Northeast India, an area rich in ethnic and cultural diversity. Beautiful scenery, a wealth of wildlife, and dynamic cultures are what make this region famous. 'MEGHALAYA' a state located in the Northeastern part of India also called 'the abode of clouds' is known for its unique practice of Matrilineal descent among the Khasi, Jaintia, and the Garo people. A Matrilineal social structure is one in which familial relationships, inheritance, and ancestry are all traced back through the female line. As per the 2011 census, Meghalaya is a state in India with a population of 2,966,889, comprised of 1,863,347 Khasi and Jaintia individuals and 1,103,542 Garo individuals. Meghalaya is famous as it is one of the few places that follow the Matrilineal System in India. In this system the kinship is traced through the mother lineage which also involves in inheritance of property, the youngest daughter (KA KHADDUH) inherits all the property of the family and she is the one who has to look after her parents in their old age. With the power the Uncle (U KNI) is the head in decision-making. In matrilineal society, after the marriage, the groom has to stay in the house of the wife with his in-laws. Additionally, if the wife passes away, the husband is expected to leave the couple's home and leave his kids with his in-laws. In stark contrast to patriarchal societies, this cultural framework empowers women and offers an intriguing illustration of gender dynamics across cultural boundaries.

The Nairs of Kerala and Lakshadweep in the South, as well as trace elements among the Oraons, Santhals, Gonds, Kadars, Puliya Chenchus, are some other regions where Matrilineal is practised.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

This paper is based on the following main objectives:

1. Lineage and inheritance
2. Marriage
3. Role of Maternal Uncle
4. Women Empowerment

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is an exploratory study using a qualitative methodology with primary and secondary data. Interview, observation, and interactive approaches were used to collect primary data. Studying publications, research papers, and articles is how secondary data is gathered.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

A system that includes the matrilineal principal but does not include the patrilineal principal will be called a matrilineal system. (Schneider & Gough, 1962)

The term matriarchy or matriliney has become inseparably associated with the Khasi social organization since it was first used in 1914 by Gurdon to describe Khasi social customs. (Roy, 1964)

A man married to an heiress usually lives with his wife's parents and her unmarried or divorced brothers and sisters. For a man, life after marriage under such circumstances requires great adjustment and endurance. The husband's status is especially weak when a male member of the wife's kin lives in the same household. The management of property and all economic activities are entirely controlled by the authority (wife's brother or maternal uncle) of the iing. The husband works in the wife's field under constant supervision from this authority. The children have more attachment to, and are more obedient to, the maternal uncle than to the father. The tie between the uncle and the nephew is so strong that the father is rather like an additional member of the household. He is the last person to be introduced to visitors.

Among these successful marital families, there are also shadows of a matrilineal order. These affect especially those men who are in the position of authority in an iing. Such a man, though he has an independent household with his wife and children, often visits his youngest sister's (or niece's) house, iing, and sometimes stays there. Such a man's attachment to his iing is not only social or psychological, but also often economic. The man, as an authority of his natal iing, usually has economic control over the management, particularly so, if his iing has considerable property or active trading business. As husband/father in his family, he works for his wife and children but often takes into consideration as well the interest of his iing. (Nakane, 1968)

The Khadduh or the youngest daughter is an institution in herself. Her house is open to all. If any member of the family faces any trouble or is in distress, he finds solace and all kinds of help in the house of the Khadduh. A man who marries a Khadduh is supposed to be open hearted and accommodating too and to help all the members of the family. This seems to be very incomprehensible and difficult to many people who are non-Khasis. The Khadduh is a custodian of the family property and the ancestral house. (Banerjee, 2015, pp.918-930)

KHASI

As per the divine theory of origin, the Khasi are considered descendants of the Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum- meaning seven huts- who migrated from heaven to the earth. Initially, tradition tells of sixteen families that lived in heaven, descending to the earth to fulfill their duties via a ladder. However, one day, while the seven family units were working in the fields, a diabolical individual severed the ladder, leading to their separation from the nine families. These seven families could no longer return to heaven, forcing them to dwell on earth. The large family tree originating from these seven huts forms the Khasi community, which is classified into various clans. Nonetheless, this account is often deemed a myth or an altered story passed down through their ancestors' folklore.

'Kha' means born, 'Si' signifies ancient mother, and therefore the name Khasi, meaning born of the mother. The Khasi derives his descent from the mother. The first ancestress is called "Ka Iawbei," the first progenitor is called "U Thawlong," the first uncle is called "U Suidnia," a brother of the Iawbei, and her descendants take on their surname after her throughout the decades.

The Khasi community follows a matrilineal system of reckoning descent, wherein the "Iawbei Tynrai" or "Ka Blei Iawbei"- the first ancestress or mother of the root- is considered the source of descent.

Rice is a reliable crop for the tribes of Meghalaya, and other important crops include oilseeds, oranges, ginger, turmeric, potatoes, jute, black pepper, maize, wheat, millet, sugarcane, and pulses. There are also many vegetables grown in this area, such as chilies, beans, brinjal, cauliflower, and cabbage. Apart from agriculture, Meghalaya offers diverse job opportunities in fields such as horticulture and floral design,

handicrafts, forestry, bamboo, mining, tourism, government services, trading and commerce, education, and fishing and aquaculture.

The Pnar and Khasi people speak distinct dialects of the Khasi language. Apart from their original language, almost all people in Meghalaya can also speak Hindi and English.

Between the rich and the needy, Kwai has served as a bridge in Khasi. Kwai is a betel nut, the Khasi-Pnar culture includes it, guests and visitors are typically served. Even if they have nothing more to offer in the house, a poor family may manage to give it at least a piece of kwai. The people of Meghalaya chew kwai regularly. Giving someone kwai is equivalent to extending a hand of friendship and respect.

In Khasi culture, family descent is traced through the female line. The family surname of a newborn is taken from the mother, whereas in Patrilineal societies, it is taken from the father.

In Khasi society, Ka Khadduh, the youngest daughter, inherits the property. Property in Khasi society is divided into two categories: 1) Ancestral Property, also referred to as Ka Nongtymmen, is a category of property that is inherited by a family and has been for many generations. It can include cash, ornaments, fields, houses, land, and other items. 2) Self-acquired property earned during a person's lifetime, known as Ka Nongkynraw.

Inheritance of ancestral property takes place strictly in the female line. When it fails or when the youngest daughter passes away, the property is passed down to the next youngest daughter in the family. Ka Nongtymmen is passed from the mother to the youngest daughter also known Ka Khadduh. Furthermore, if the youngest daughter has only sons or is childless, then additionally, the property will pass to her elder sister's youngest daughter.

It is possible for the youngest daughter to inherit all the parent's inherited property but this does not mean she can inherit all of their independently acquired property or Ka Nongkynraw. In order to assist the other elder sibling in establishing a separate household, Ka Nongkynraw or Self-acquired property may be given to the others as a gift in kind or in cash, contingent upon the parents' financial situation.

In Khasi society, marrying within the same clan is forbidden or considered sinful (sang). It is not customary to marry the son or daughter of one's paternal or maternal uncles; instead, marriage should be exogamy or outside the clan. An endogamous couple is not allowed to remain in the clan or shah kyntait kur and also, they will not receive any gift or property.

Unlike other communities, where it is customary for the groom to bring his bride home after the marriage, in Khasi society, the groom is expected to move in with his wife and leave his parents' home. If he gets married to the middle or the eldest daughter, he would have to live in a separate home with his wife. And if he married the youngest daughter, he would have to live with her parents (matrilocal).

When a Khasi woman and her husband start a new household, it signifies the start of a new Iing that is distinct from her natal Iing. After they have children, the father leads the new household as its executive leader, and his wife and the kids reside with him. He is highly esteemed in his wife's clan as he is considered as u nongbet symbai ia ka kur or as the one who give seed to the clan in reproduction. His successors and the offspring of his wife's matrilineal lines always hold the father in the highest regard.

Divorce occurs frequently. If a pair decides to get a divorce because they are unable to live happily together, the family who is present in their marriage must also be present during their divorce.

When both parties agree to end the marriage, a traditional party will simply exchange coins in front of the elders to finalize the divorce. If neither party can agree, the party filing for divorce must pay a small fee called Ka bai mynrain khmat.

Matrilineal cultures have maternal males who are just as motivated to protect their sisters' children as they

are to protect their own. The way they reproduce is by passing on seed, or bet symbai, to another matrilineal group called Kur. To maintain the continuation of the other matrilineal group, men from that group will similarly exchange services. The reason for U Kni (maternal uncle) high status is that he was the one who carried out the households' religious rites and ceremonies and was aware of their various implications.

Maternal uncle or U Kni, play a crucial role in marriages since it is their responsibility to approach the parents of the prospective bride or groom. He bears significant responsibilities for the ancestral property, or Ka Nongtymmen, as well. He grants permission to sell family assets like land and houses, while Ka Khadduh's sole duty is to look after the assets she is unable to sell without U Kni approval.

Given that the term "long jaid na ka kynthei" or originates from the female line, women in matrilineal society enjoy significant empowerment. Khadduh bears a great deal of responsibility as well because it is her job to tend to the needs of the members who are unable to support themselves. She must tend to their needs and feed them. She also has a heavy responsibility for maintaining the family's belongings. By giving a name after a woman and assigning her responsibilities, the Khasi demonstrate their belief in and empowerment of women.

Conclusion:

The intricate relationships between inheritance, identity, and power within the Khasi matrilineal lineage system have been thoroughly examined by this extensive study. The results highlight how important it is for women and maternal uncles to maintain cultural continuity, manage power relationships, and uphold social structure.

All things considered, the matrilineal system of the Khasi people subverts traditional patriarchal norms by emphasizing the value of female agency and the protective role that maternal uncles play in forming identity and power relations within the community. The unusual configuration emphasizes the cooperative nature of social roles in preserving the cultural fabric of the Khasi people, fostering a sense of continuity and belonging.

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