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Formation of descent system in “Kur” (Clans) among the Khasi

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Abstract

In the *Khasi* Society of Meghalaya, the *Kur* system is the social entity around which every social institution of the *Khasi* society revolves. *Kur* system is the stronghold of the *Khasi* Matrilineal system based on the concept of ‘*tip kur tip kha*’. It signifies the network of kinship, relationship, obligations conviction and beliefs that weave *Khasi* society together. To understand the nature of *Khasi* social organization, it becomes necessary to state the general rule of a matrilineal system in which descent is from the female line that is from the mother. The *Khasi* acknowledge the notions of *Kur* or clan allegiance, as exemplified by “*teh kur*,” “*ting kur*,” and “*tang jait*,” in which the *Khasi* blood relationship is not the sole criterion but is also established on the basis of friendship and support during periods of adversity and crisis.

This paper attempts to examine the formation of descent clans among the *Khasi* tribes of Meghalaya.

Keywords: Clan (kur), Descent, Tangjait, Ting kur, Teh kur

1. Introduction

The kinship system refers to a set of social relationships based on blood ties, such as those of relatives or through marriage. Human beings are known as social animals, even though many species have shown social behaviour. But what sets humans apart is the complexity of our social organization. Kinship is the basic organizing principle, and it provides a model for interpersonal behaviour. Kinship plays an important role in shaping social organization and a person’s identity. From birth to death, it is the rules of kinship that govern the rites of passage. According to Radcliffe Brown (1950), “every kinship system provides each person in a society with a set of dyadic (person-to-person) relationships, so that he stands as it were, at the centre of a narrower or wider circle of relatives”. Evans Pritchard (1940:149) identified a relationship between the political structure and the lineage system. According to him, the clan, which was divided into lineages, was the largest group in the lineage structure. He referred to the segments of a maximal lineage as major lineages, the segments of the major lineages as minor lineages, and the segments of the minor lineages as minimal lineages. The lineage system served as an expression of the local organizational structure. One of the few matrilineal societies in the world, the *Khasi* society of Meghalaya traces its line of descent, succession, and inheritance back to the mother. The *Khasi* constitute one of the major tribes of the total population of Meghalaya, found within the districts of East, West, South, and *Ri Bhoi*. The *Khasi* are matrilineal, and the clans traced their descent from an old ancestress known as ‘*Ka ĩawbei Tynrai*’ literally, primeval grandmother. Therefore, the popular saying ‘*longjait na kakynthei kaba dei ka kmie*’ meaning from the woman who is a mother sprang the clan (*Kur*). The foundation of *Khasi* society rests on the concept of *Kur* (clan), which refers to relatives from the mother’s side (cognates), and *kha* which refers to relatives from the father’s side (agnates). Every individual belongs to a specific clan, which can be traced back to a mother. Therefore, one basic principle of *Khasi* society is *Tipkur-Tipkha*, which means to know one’s maternal relations (*Kur*) cognates and paternal relations (*Kha*) agnates.

2. Concept of Kur among the Khasi

According to *Giri* (1985:159), the *Kur* is the first social entity of the *Khasi* around which every social institution revolves. Each *Kur* traces its descent to *ka ĩawbei Tynrai*, or primeval ancestress. According to *RS Berry* in *Jingsneng Tymmen* (The Teachings of Elders) (LII:49),

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the phrase "*ka Kur ka dei ka doh, ka shyieng, ka snam*" translates to "the *Kur* is the flesh, the bone, and the blood". The term "flesh" denotes the constituent elements of the body, "bone" symbolizes the structural support for the flesh, and "blood" represents the life-giving force. This conveys the *Kur*'s important and determining role. The existence of the "*longkur*" (clan) signifies that the *Kur* becomes very crucial and decisive. There would be no "*longkur*" (clan) without "*longkpoh*" (womb or lineage) given that the *Khasi* traditions are unadulterated and should be traced back to the mother *ka Mei* or *ka iaw*, which is the sole identity of the *Khasi* people. It is evident that our forefathers of the *Khasi* tribe had a profound understanding of preserving and safeguarding their knowledge and wisdom in a manner that is incomparable to any other ethnic group. Based on my observations and acquired knowledge, I find myself compelled to explore the profound depths of his intellectual awareness rather than fixate solely on his scholarly expertise or the present era. As an exemplification, it can be observed that the word "*Kur*" is interchangeable with the phrase "*ka Kpoh ka Kur*", or "*ka jait-kakhong*". The establishment of our genealogical lineage is firmly cemented in such a manner that it concurrently integrates into the comprehensive construction of the omnipotent creator. Henceforth, the substantiation of tangible proof serves as a valuable resource for the implementation of diverse modes of existence among the *Khasi* people, who happen to be the most diminutive ethnic group globally. The term "*Kpoh*" refers to the complex process of fetal development taking place inside a female human uterus. Maternal figure exhibits social connection with "*U sohpet U ksai*," an individual who does not share any blood ties with the mother's spouse. Concerns about the gender balance of a couple's offspring have led the *Khasi* people to institute the "*Ka Long Kur*" covenant. The phenomenon mentioned above leads to the development of "*Longkpoh*," which eventually evolves into a clan known as "*Longkur*". This progression ultimately results in the creation of a group called "*Ka Long Jait*".

As per the scholarly work of H.O Mawrie in his literary masterpiece "*Ka Risaw jong Ka Niam Khasi*", the phrase "*ka snam ka dei ka juh kabatuid ha ngi baroh shikur shijait*" can be comprehended as an articulation of the conviction that the vital fluid of the *Kur* serves as a cohesive element that runs through the veins of every human being. The author expounded upon the notion of "*la pynshong ia ka longkurlongjait ha ki kynthei*", which concerns the pivotal role of women as the principal progenitor in the procreation of their lineage within the *Kur* frame work. The concept of a shared matriarchal ancestor, which regards the female gender as the primary progenitors who hold the esteemed position of motherhood and are responsible for the continuation of their familial line, forms the foundation of this system. The writer emphasized the crucial significance of this role within the context of the societal and customary traditions of the community. The *Khasi* have this saying, "*snam kur*", which translates to clan blood, and this bloodline flows from one generation to another as long as there is a female in the family. The kindred spirit between the clans is stronger through blood; hence, the feeling of oneness is stronger from the mother's bloodline than from the father's side. The *Khasi*, however, do not disregard the father. Relationships from the father's side are also extremely important to them. It is said that the bond of the umbilical cord (*synri kha*), which refers to the paternal

cousins, binds them for three generations. Any sexual relations would be considered incest, leading to their excommunication from the clan and the prohibition of burying their bones in the same cairn.

3. Origin and Nomenclature of Kurs

As the *Kur* population increased, individuals began to migrate from one location to another. The desire to acquire more cultivable land and the search for iron ore drove this migration. These kinship groups were often too far apart to perform the *Kur* spiritual ceremony at a suitable time and place. Religious rituals divided each *Kur* into multiple *jait*s. The arrival of people from other places contributed to the rise of *Kurs* and *jait*s. During wartime, *Khasi* fighters married lowland women. After marrying *Khasi* men, their children assimilated *Khasi* customs, mores, spiritual practices, and way of life. Every *Khasi* clan member became an ancestress, or *iawbei*. The venerated progenitors of a lineage include the forebear matriarch *ka iawbei*, the divinized patriarch *U Thawlang*, and the avuncular figure *U Suitnia*. Dr. OL Snaitang believes *Ka iawbei* is the clan's progenitor. The initial progenitrix of every *Kur* is *ka iawbei*, and the first male to support a female from any *Kur* is *U Thawlang*. PRT Gurdon found *U Thawlang* to be *Ka iawbei*'s progenitor and spouse. Bareh says, "*U Thawlang* is a father who defies society. The *Kur* revered *U Suitnia*, the eldest sibling of *Ka iawbei* and their maternal uncle. *U Suitnia* is *Ka iawbei*'s primogeniture and the clan's ancestral uncle, according to *Kynpham Sing*. The *Khasi* nomenclature system demonstrates a profound connection to the natural world. Specific clans use geological or botanical entities as totems, reflecting deep reverence and admiration for their associated myths and legends. These legends hold significant cultural and spiritual importance, and certain indigenous communities strictly adhere to taboos against consuming or harming them. The *Kharumnuid* clan abstains from pork consumption, believing that pigs provided sustenance for their ancestors. Generations meticulously preserve and pass down this folklore. Additionally, the "*ka iawbei tynrai*" name of their ancestral matriarch serves as the basis for some *Khasi* subclan names. An example is the *Thangkhiew* clan, named after the matriarch who cremated her deceased child in an urn. During the early Shillong State period, the progenitor of this lineage migrated from *Jowai* to *Bhoi* and established their settlement in *Nongkseh* as a *Basan*. The *Shrieh* clan represents monkeys, and the *Tham* clan represents crabs, respectively. *Lamin*, *Nongspung*, *Nongkhlaw*, *Pariong*, *Marngar*, and other clans are named after their homes. According to *Tngensi Rynjah*, the *Rynjah* clan's name derives from a young female entity with benevolent supernatural powers who roamed the area. An elderly man from the *Kur Mawroh* who lived nearby met this young lady and graciously fed and housed her. He then referred to her as *Ka Rynjah*. An elderly woman named *Talang* married a *Dhar* tribesman after traveling from the *Khasi* Hills village of *Nobosohphoh* to *Jaintia* Hills, according to H. H. Mohrmen. They've decided to stay in *Am Prai*. The colonists settled in *Amprai*, now *Amtapoh*. There were nine daughters. While the rest of the *Talang* family was farming, one of their daughters gave birth, and her sibling and other relatives were not at home. The grandfather barbecued the placenta instead of suspending it from a tree or burying it, as was custom. A new family member greeted them after a long day of work. Unknown to

them, their patriarch's food contained placental tissue from his recent birth. The matrilineal kin and their offspring were astonished to learn they were breaking a cultural taboo by eating their own tissue. This gave them a name: "*Talang* who consumes the placenta" or "*Talang* who bears the appellation *Basieh*." Overwhelmed by the painful memory, both chose to go their separate ways. One of the *Myntdu* sisters married her fraternal kin, resulting in the *Nongtdu* lineage. The children of the female sibling who relocated to the southwest were known as "*Nialang*", a collective expression of sorrow. The siblings *Liting* crossed the *Liting* River and traveled to the *Khasi* Hills. One sibling left *Jaraiñ* and settled in *Skhen Talang*, while the mother moved south to *Amtapoh* and settled in *Nongtalang*. A sibling moved to *Amwi*, while another moved to *Skhen Talang* from *Jaraiñ* and had the *Buam*. *I Kharkongor* asserts that a female lowlander, who relocated to the highlands founded the *Kharkongor* lineage. *Mei Moh Kynhong*, a revered progenitor of the *Kharkongor* lineage, travelled to the hills to end the *Khasi* hills-plain conflict. The woman sought a safer environment in the mountains. She settled in *Nongkynntir* after finding it by chance. After that, all *Kharkongors* considered this place their ancestral home. The name *Kharkongor* originates from the term "*kongor*," which refers to the male consorts of the reigning matriarchs. This refers to the royal lineage's custom of choosing grooms from this clan. Many clans can trace their ancestry to the matriarch. The *Mylliemngap* and *Mylliempdah* lineages trace their origins to the term "*ngap*", meaning "honey," while their matriarch, the *Ka Pdah*, adopts their forebear's name. The *Kurbah* clan, denoted by the term "*ka kurkaba heh bah*," refers to a sizable clan characterized by its substantial size and the presence of numerous *kpohs*. An example is provided where it is recounted that the progenitor of the *Kurbah* lineage was once asked, "*En khon katno ngut*," which can be translated as "How many offspring do you possess?" In response, she reciprocated by stating "*Hynñiewta*", a term denoting a numerical value of seven offspring. Subsequently, the *Hynñiewta* clan came into prominence. The *Basaiawmoit* clan originated from one of the daughters of the *Kurbah* ancestress, who was regarded as attractive by the local community and thus given the name "*moit*," meaning "the pretty one." Another example involves the *Jaiñtia* Hills, where one of the *Kurbahs'* daughters became pregnant and developed a strong craving for lemons. Consequently, the local community began referring to her as "the one who ate '*bajaw bajaw*'", alluding to her consumption of sour lemons. This event marked the origin of the *Majaw* clan. The clans, namely *Kurbah*, *Hynñiewta*, *Basaiawmoit*, and *Majaw*, are believed to share a common ancestral lineage and are culturally forbidden from engaging in intermarriage. Interactions and conversations with some *Khasi* elders revealed that, according to customary practices, the progenitor of the *Dohtdong* lineage was a female individual who bore numerous offspring, including both male and female children. Traditionally, the male members of the family have taken on the role of engaging in hunting activities, demonstrating a notable proficiency in this domain. After successfully capturing an animal, a customary practice among the hunting community involves the equitable allocation of meat, referred to as "*doh kyndang*", a string of meat to all participating members. However, the individual who successfully shot the animal is granted the

privilege of receiving the "rump" portion, also known as "*ka dohtdong*." It is important to note that this distribution process is contingent upon the initial presentation of the hump meat to the family's matriarch. Consequently, this practice led to the emergence of the *Dohtdong* clan. According to legend, the *Iawphniaw* lineage descended from a foreign woman who settled in one of *Shella's* small villages. This region is characterized by three adjacent plains. According to legend, the woman settled in a neutral area, which became densely populated with homes over time. As a result the population built homes and settled on the upper and lower grounds. The *Nengnong*, or *Nongneng*, live on higher ground, whereas the *Nongrum*, or *Rumnong*, live on lower ground. *Nongneng* is the demographic cohort that lived between extremes. Thus, the four *Kurs* are believed to be descendants of the matriarchal figure *ka Iawphniaw*, and thus *shikur*, indicating their clan affiliation. The *Kharmuti*, *Kharbuki*, and *Nengnong* clans have formed an unbreakable alliance with the *Kharlor* and *Kharkongor* clans. *Kurja Kurdoh* commemorates the *Kurs* pledge. On this occasion, a feast and ritual offerings reinforce the covenant. (90, 91). A quarter of displaced lowlanders stopped their journey along the *Umiam* riverbank due to a lack of lodgings, according to reports. The narrative's prologue describes the origin of the *Nongneng-Kharmuti* relationship. The people carried valuable treasures in two different containers they had purchased. The aforementioned individuals were protected by the powerful *Nongneng* clan. Following his death, the *Nongnengs* decided to bury one of the absconders in their lineage's grave. Their alliance began when one of their siblings married a *Nongkhlaw* man. It is believed that the first sister gave birth to the *Kharmuti*, while the second sister gave birth to the *Kharbuki*, the clan's progenitor.

4. Other forms of clan formation among the Khasi

People commonly accept that our ancestors possessed extraordinary wisdom to invent these modes of clan multiplication. The following are the traditional practices established by our ancestors to achieve this goal:

4.1 *Ka Tangkur-tangjait*

Tangjait is a system among the *Khasis* where a *Khasi* male marries a non-*Khasi* female, and their children absorb the *Khasi* customs and traditions through a ritual known as *tangjait*. The term "*pynkynntang*", meaning to "set apart" or the act of consecration, is the source of the word "*tang*". *Tangjait* explains that in *Khasi* matrilineal society, children of a *Khasi* male and a non-*Khasi* female cannot inherit the title or clan of either parent. Because she was non-*Khasi*, the mother had to follow *Khasi* customs and observances. This is an ancient custom. Thus, the lineage's ancestors and patriarchs invented *tangjait* to create a new kinship group. They took this action to lessen the challenges and ambiguities faced by the newly formed household. The nascent lineage receives the prefix "*khar*" or "*Dkhar*" as a prefix to their given name after the "*nongkñia*", a priest, completes the ceremonial proceedings in the presence of family and community leaders. A new clan chooses a non-*Khasi* woman as *Ka Iawbei*, or clan founder, during *tangjait*. Following the ceremony, the children fully integrate into the *Kur* community. *Tangjait's* joining the family is significant. The *Ka Thep Mawbah* ceremony, or communal Sepulcher is a religious ritual that involves placing the deceased's bones.

After making preparations, choose a date for the *tangjait* presentation. In *Khasi* society, the establishment of a new clan necessitates a ritualistic ceremony involving family members of both parties. The revered *Nongkñia*, *Khasi* spiritual leaders, perform sacred rites. Their expertise lies in divine incantations, holy verse composition, and ceremonial item arrangement, all in strict accordance with our forefathers' customs and traditions which are now customary law. The ceremony uses a bottle gourd (u klong u skaw), dried fish (*khapiah khadai*), rice beer (*iad-um*), plaintif top leaf (*laliar*), rice (*khaw*), and a wooden slab (*diengshat*) to create a temporary shrine. Once accepted into the community, they can inherit, participate, and receive other benefits specific to the *Khasi*. In honour of the ancestral matriarch, the first male and female offspring will be named *U suidnia* and *Ka iawbei tynrai*, respectively.

In accordance with the sixth schedule of the Constitution of India, the *Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council* has included *ka tangjait* in the 1997 Act. According to the law, the *tangjait* ritual is required for *Khasi* assimilation. The Act mandates the conduct of the ceremony, as detailed below. If the *Khasi* patriarch is absent or *Khasis* have adopted a different faith, the customary practice is performed by any uncle or adult male member of the *Kur* or *Jait* who is a *Khasi* from the *Kpoh* of the *Khasi* father. If the *Kpoh*, a lineage, wants to practice it, it may be different from *Kur* to *Kur*.

4.2 Ka iatehkur (bonding between clans)

Anthropologist Robin Fox said, "*kinship is not just about biological links; it is also about social bonds*". *Tehkur* is when two different *Kur* descended from different ancestresses decide to bind each other as if they were collateral groups of the same *Kur* (*Nongkynrih* 2002p, 41). The *Khasis* have a non-consanguineous kinship system. *Ka tehkur* (meaning to bind) is a social contract between two or more clans. This process occurs when an individual provides exceptional assistance during times of need and crisis, thereby proposing the establishment of a fictive kinship through the *Ka tehkur* pact. These *Kur* are not permitted to participate in the rites associated with maintaining the bones in the clan cairn or the *mawbah*, and they do practice *Kur* exogamy. For instance, *Warjri* and *Kharbuli* claim that they belong to the same *Kur* through the process of *iatehkur*. *Syiemlieh*, *Kurkalang*, *Nongspung*, and *Nongstein*. The *Kharkongor*, *Kharlor*, and *Kharshiing* are also affiliated with each other in this way.

4.3 Ka Tingkur (Clan Adoption)

Another important process of clan formation among the *Khasis* known as *tingkur* (where "ting" means adoption) also helps *Kur* evolution in *Khasi* society. Using its *kur's* name, a *ing* can adopt a female orphan as a daughter. *Nongkynrih* (2018:43). The family can treat the child as if he were a biological child. A young lady's offspring will only be eligible for induction into the *Kur* if the *Kur's* elders, who represent the diverse lineages that make up the *Kur* and its affiliated factions, approve. The daughter receives the name *Kur* by adding a suffix to the royal patriarch's *Kur* designation, indicating non-lineal descent from the same matriarchal progenitor. This allows the young lady to earn the "*kur*" title.

5. Challenges and Conclusions

Currently, the *Khasi* community faces numerous challenges due to the advent of modernization and the formalization of

education. This trend, further propagated by missionaries, has significantly transformed the traditional family structure and society as a whole, altering the dynamic roles of men and women. The *Khasi Kur* system's challenges primarily revolve around the role of the *Khadduh*, who serves as the custodian and caretaker of ancestral property and family affairs. However, a recent development has been the excessive exploitation of power by certain *Khadduhs*, resulting in the misappropriation of ancestral property for personal gain. The individual in question has seriously abused the system, going so far as to engage in clan property sales and mortgaging. One of the primary challenges is that female offspring exclusively inherit family ancestral property, leaving male offspring without any entitlement. Consequently, several associations, such as SRT, or "*Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai*," and the Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property (*Khasi* and *Jaintia* Special Provision) Act 1986, have endeavoured to introduce modifications aimed at achieving equitable inheritance distribution between sons and daughters based on their respective merits. In families with only male children, having a legal document that gives the sons the right to the family's assets protects those assets from being taken by the *Kur* (clan) after the parents die. This legal provision is particularly crucial due to the customary absence of such protective measures.

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