

## **The Pnar Trilogy: Explicating Pnar Society and Culture through the *Lahoo* Dance**

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### **Abstract:**

This presentation is about an indigenous Pnar community inhabiting Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya, in North East India. The traditional Lahoo dance symbolizes Pnar society and culture. Through this dance one can explicate the traditional Pnar Society- social, economic, religious and political organizations. Pnar matrilineality is at present compromise with Christianization and modern polity; yet it perpetuate in forms at variance from the past.

### **The Pnars:**

The Pnars inhabits Jaintia Hills District on the eastern part of Meghalaya, in North East India. The Jaintia Hills District is bounded in the North by Karbi Anglong District of Assam (formerly known as the Mikir Hills District); East by North Cachar Hills and the Cachar District of Assam; South by Bangladesh and west by the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. The Pnars are subdivided into highland and lowland groups. The former's resides in hilly ridges and the latter inhabit a mixture of lowland tropical forest spreading from southern parts of Jaintia Hills to the present Bangladesh border. Currently the term Jaintia is used to denote various groups of people inhabiting Jaintia Hills viz. the Pnars, the Wars, Bhois, the Hadems, the Lalungs, the Biates. The Jaintias can also be found in the neighbouring Hill Districts of Khasi Hills, Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills in the plains of Cachar of Assam, and in the adjoining district of Sylhet in Bangladesh.

### **Origin and Migration:**

The Pnar myth of origin stated that they were originally sixteen families residing in the heavenly abode out of which seven came down to earth and settled. Cultural historians agreed that the Khasi-Pnar people had migrated from outside, but there is no agreement about the exact place of their origin. They entered into these hills from the north-eastern direction across the Kopili river- in the northern boundary of Jaintia Hills. This supposition is made on the basis of some cultural and linguistic affinities of the Jaintias with the Kachin people. Again, the find of stone – monoliths, remnants of bone- containers alongwith the reverence of the river Kopili led some scholars to believe that they had scattered from the east (Jaintia Hills) towards the west

(KhasiHills). The Jaintias will not cross the Kopili without performing some sacrificial rites etc, to the river(Gurdon 1975:11-12 and Bareh 1967: 15-19).

### **Lahoo Dance:**

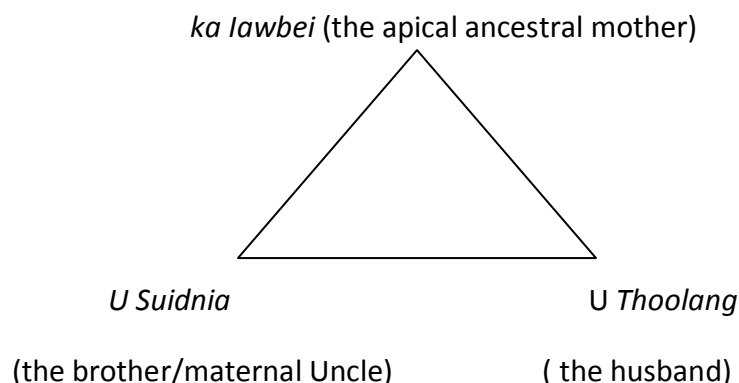
The Lahoo dance is one of the oldest traditional dances of the Pnar or Jaintia living in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. It has emerged as an important symbol of the Pnar's cultural identity. This is a very important dance festival as it is associated with the creation and origin of the people in these hills, when they had a close and direct relation with the Supreme Being above in the heaven. It is associated with the earliest settlement and habitation of the Pnar. It is a thanksgiving dance *to honor God, the Creator for all His blessings that He has bestowed upon the people.* Chad Lahoo is connected with the creation of the world, and how God having provided them with all their needs and requirements on earth went away (Lyngdoh 2009:71).

The original name Of the Lahoo dance is *Chad Chiphiah* or Chiphiah dance. This dance had come into disuse but was revived by a particular family of the *Nikhla* clan and it became known as ka *Chad long Nikhla* that is the Nikhla dance or the dance of the Nikhla clan. The Nikhla clan celebrated it at a place called Biar longpiah in Jowai in the Jaintia Hills. Lahoo is the term used later by non-Pnar, after the tune of the singers who sings "*Hoooh aah hoooh- aah hoooh*", in concordance with the steps of the dancers. Though the Nikhla clan revived the dance other clans can also participate in this dance. The Chad Chiphiah or most popularly known as the Lahoo Dance- is the traditional dance of the Pnar, and it has become the most important symbol of the Pnar's culture and their oldest dance festival as it is connected with the beginning of the Pnar's habitation here on earth.

*Chiphiah means splitting i.e* the splitting of the dancers which again is related to the people's myth about the origin of this particular dance as well as myth related to their beliefs and practices. Basically there are three dancers in a group- a female flank by two males on her right and left. The two male dancers put one of their hands round the waist of the female dancer, with their other hands hold the hand of the female dancer- who spread her hands over their shoulders. In this dance there could be as many groups as possible subject to a minimum of five groups. Besides is a lone female dancer who leads the groups. This lone dancer symbolizes *Ka Langdoh* or the priestess (for details see Lyngdoh 2009: 82-85).

Lahoo dance is the embodiment of traditional Pnar society and culture. The triadic dancers in a group are symbolic and represent key individuals and their functions at the social, economic, religious as well as political organizations of Pnar society. How this dance symbolizes the structure and function of Pnar matrilineality follows.

Figure 1: The Lahoo Triad



### Social Organization:

The social organization of the Pnar revolves around their social groupings into **Kur** i.e. clans; each clan is composed of a number of **Jaid**s i.e. sub-clans, from the sub-clan sprang numerous lineages **kpoh** literally womb and a number of families **Chi-lung** constitutes a lineage. The smallest unit of their social organization is the family or **lung**. Each Pnar individual belonged to a particular clan. The Pnars who follow the indigenous belief **Niam-Tre**, practiced secondary burial i.e. internment of the uncalcined bones in the **Moo-Bah** or clan-ossuary. A Pnar thus belonged to the family and clan in life and even in the after-life. The clan is the basic unit of the Khasi-Pnar society. The functions of the clan in the past is socio-economic, socio-religious and socio-political in nature, covering all aspects of the society. The individuals and society revolves around the functions of the clan (Pakyntein:1996).

Each clan has a symbolic triad- **ka lawbei** the apical ancestral mother of the clan, **U Thoolang** her husband *who is* the progenitor of the clan and **U Suidnia** meaning the orator and mediator, who is the maternal uncle or brother of *ka lawbei*. Matrilineality is reinforced by a belief in an apical female ancestress, who is conceived as the clan-mother. Individuals trace their kinship identity to a particular lineage and clan. Clan members are comprised of individuals who claim descent from the same clan-mother. An individual belongs to the descent group of her/ his mother in life and even after it. The kinship affiliation to the father's descent group is temporal- about three to five generations at the most.

Matri-centered family and visiting husband system characterized traditional Pnar society. Traditional Pnar family constitutes the woman, her married or unmarried children, grandchildren from the daughters as well as her uncle or brother as the case maybe. Mother is the head of the family and brothers-sisters relations is strongly forged through common socio-

economic and socio-religious duties. This ensures the maintenance of strong matrilineal bonds among members of the family. According to Lyngdoh (2009:102) the Lahoo Dance depicts the family structure where the uncle, the niece and the husband or the father are represented. Alternatively the family triad consists of the mother who is the head of the household, her maternal uncle or brother who help her manage the family affairs and her sons who even after marriage continue to stay in the natal family.

### **Economic Organization:**

The Pnars traditionally gain their subsistence by slash-and-burn as well as by wet-land cultivation. These are supplemented with hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering of wild vegetables and fruits. They also domesticated animals such as hens, ducks, pigs, goats generally, bulls as well as buffaloes are mostly reared by those practicing wet-land cultivation. Larnai village is known for the production of potteries while Khyrwang and Nongphyllut are known for weaving of traditional clothes made of eri-silk. Trading with the plains people in Present Assam and Bangladesh is trace from the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards.

In agricultural society land is an important asset for subsistence activities. Traditionally the right of possession of family and lineage land is vested on women. Mother is the sustainer and the right of possession of the family property is bestowed upon her. The maternal uncle of the family and/or lineage with the consensus of the mother or sister and other members allocate and distribute land for cultivation or otherwise. The common village land is under the control of the **Doloi** ie. Chief and the headmen, and allocation and distribution of land for cultivation or otherwise is carried out with the consensus of the villagers.

The organization of labor for economic production in the family is defined by customary practices. In the traditional subsistence economy of the Pnar the triad consists of a woman or the mother, her maternal uncle or brother and her children. The land which the mother possessed is cultivated by her grown children- sons and daughters- as well as by her maternal uncle or brother. The husband of the married daughters who is oblige by custom to help his wife may contribute his minimal labor in the cultivation of the same; since he is bound by custom too to contribute fully to the economy of his mother's household. The phrase *Kamai ing kur* meaning to earn for the mother's family is use by the other khasi sub-group with negative connotations- not only to refer to the Pnar man but to any man whom they felt compromised the economic needs of his wife and children and favoring his mother's house over and above his own. The mother is the sustainer and all members work for the economic production of the household or family- including the husband of the daughter who is not a member of his wife's family.

The rule of inheritance ancestral or family property - *Yongrim*- is matronymic ie. mother to daughter. The right of possession of the family or ancestral property passes on from mother to the youngest daughter- *Ka wasdiah*. In a sense she is the custodian or the conditional owner of the property; because her maternal uncle and other sisters and brothers have a say over its management and disposal. She is supposed to heed their advised because they have a partial and silent right over it. The triadic figures repeat in the management and disposal of property. The *Wasdiah* has the right of possession of the lung-Bei -i.e. Mother's House- and over other ancestral landed property; while the maternal uncle and her brother helped and advised her over management and production of the same.

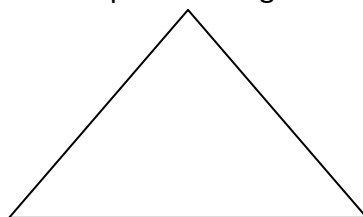
Ownership of property in the true sense of the term is applicable to the self acquired property - *Yutran*- of the individual. Such property whether movable or immovable, can be disposed off according to the will of the beholders supposedly. It is customary however for a woman to pass-on such property to any of her daughter and for a man to his maternal kin. The wife do not have a right over her husband property traditionally, except a portion of her husband's income by carrying out a ceremony called *I Kit-Khih*. In such a case, the wife sends a gourd or U Klong full of liquor to her mother-in-law and in her absence to his nearest relative. She also needs to take a vow not to marry again and to keep the bones of her dead husband in her family cairn, in addition to other religious ceremonies. It is because of these limited rights of the Jaintia wife that the family members of the man make a strong claim to the earnings of their married sons ( Lamare 2005: 27-28 ). It should be noted however that such property turn ancestral on the owner's demise.

### Religious Organization:

The Pnar indigenous religion is termed *ka Niam* but with Christianization the suffix *Tre* meaning original, is added- so presently it is known as *Ka Niam-Tre* meaning original religion. The Pnar conceived of one Supreme Being i.e. *Blai*. They also refer to this Supreme Being in the plural form as as *Ki Blai*. When invoking the Supreme Being in prayer and rituals whether familial or community the dyadic figures *U Blai-Wa Booh-Wa-Thoo* meaning God the Keeper and creator and *Ka Blai- Synshar* meaning the Ruling Goddess are always mentioned. These two are representatives of the sovereign Being.

Figure 2: The Divine Being

The Supreme Being i.e. Ki Blai



*Ka Blai* Synshar

U BlaiNongbuh-Nong-Thoo

(Ruling Goddess)

(God the Creator)

H.L. Debroy, in his article “The Dominating Motives in Jaintia Religious Life” referred to the Pnar religion as Jaintia animistic. Whether it is animistic or rather naturalistic or even polytheistic- this understanding arose from the way the people prefix the term **Blai** in their prayers. When confronting with nature and invoking for protection and blessings of the Supreme Being, the same is particularized and address in specific gender e.g ***Ka Blai Wah*** meaning Goddess of the river and ***U Blai-Lum*** meaning God of the Hills; or the same may be specified further as ***U Blai Pyrthat*** meaning God of thunder; ***Ka Blai-Myntdu*** meaning Goddess of Myntdu river, ***Ka Blai-Kopli*** meaning Goddess of Kopli river etc. When invoking the Supreme Being in their day to day life the address is made to ***Ka Blai-lung*** meaning Goddess of the household; ***Ka Blai-law*** Goddess of the market, ***U Psa*** the drought God, ***Ka Thlang*** Harvesting God , ***Ka Bei Rymmaw*** Mother-Goddess of the earth and so on. It should be reiterated that this particularization is carried out when invoking the Supreme Being and appeasing nature etc. in their everyday affairs and it should not be understood as the presence of many Gods and Goddesses in the people’s belief.

Though the religious system of the Pnar seems complex - pluralistic and naturalistic- it does not give rise to any religious leaders or elite per se. The rituals are perform at two levels viz. family and community, at the familial level by elders maternal uncle and his youngest sister or niece i.e. ***Ka wasdiah*** along with other family members as the need arise and at the community level by the head of the state U Syiem and the Doloï along with other accompanying members. Religious specialists ***Lyngdoh*** and ***Nongknia*** loosely translated as priest and diviner may assist family rituals but in community rituals their presence is a must.

The Pnar indigenous belief is rooted in the following tenets:

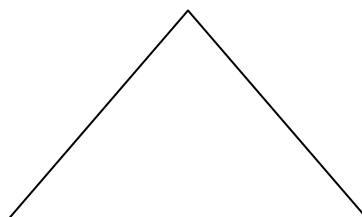
*Tip Bru Tip- Blai* -meaning respect humans and the Supreme Being.

*Tip Kur Tip- Kha*- meaning know your consanguine and affine and

*Kamai- ia-ii-Hok*- meaning to earn righteously.

Figure 2: The Three Religious Tenets of the Pnars

*Tip Bru Tip- Blai*



The first relates to the relationship between human and the divine being ie. righteous living. The second governs interpersonal relationships in the society and the last defined the moral of economic well being. Respect for human is enshrined in the concept of *Tip-Bru Tip-Blai*, inherent in it is the believe that only when one knows how to behave properly towards other fellow beings then one has serve the Supreme Being. Pervasive in the concept of *Tip-Kur Tip-Kha* is not only to know the consanguine and affine, but reciprocal relation in times of need and the togetherness at times of sorrow and joy. Implicit in the last tenet *Kamai-ia-ii-hok* i.e. earn righteously is the notion that one should toil and sweat and avoid gaining riches through unfair means – cheating and harming others as per the notion of evil spirits. These three tenets of Khasi-Pnar religious belief serves as unwritten codes of conduct and moral sanctions to be observe by members of the society.

### **Political Organization:**

The oral tradition refers to Jaintia Hills as *Ka Ri Ki Khadar Dolois* meaning land of the twelve chiefs. The original Dolois of the Pnar area belong to the *Soo Kpoh khaddar Wyrnai clan* meaning the twelve clan who originated from the four sisters Ka Bon, Ka Wet, Ka Tein and Ka Doh ( see Chattopadhyay 1988:92 and Pakyntein 1996: 355-358). The original clans rule the area through the Dolois who is the representative of the clan. The Dolois is elected by the clan-council through consensus.

The jurisdiction of a particular *Dolois* is the *Elaka* which cover of a number of villages. In every village there is a council and so with the Elaka. Each of these councils has de-facto and de-jure power over their jurisdiction. It should be noted that the clan-council plays a major role in political decision making. The political organizational structure during that time is two tiers- the Elaka and the village and there was one council of the elaka and many village councils.

The amalgamation of the various *Elakas* around the 15<sup>th</sup> century or so give rise to the Jaintiapur kingdom which extends to the plains of Assam and Sylhet. The head of the kingdom is U Syiem meaning king and only a particular clan *Sutnga* can occupy this office. The Sutnga clan has a divine myth of origin- they originated from a mermaid and a man name *Woh Ryndi*.

The political organizational structure after the establishment of the Jaintia Kingdom was three tiers- Hima meaning State, Elaka which is a cluster of many villages and chnong meaning village. In the same manner there were three councils - State council, Elaka council and village council. In the Jaintia kingdom till the coming of the British Rule there were eighteen *Dolois* who governed over their respective Elakas in the hill territory. The British liquidate the Kingdom and expanded the area into twenty Doloiship and three sirdarships (For detail see Debroy 1981: 65-72 and Chatopadhyay 1988: 74-83).

The traditional political offices of *U Syiem* (Chief) and *Doloiship*(ministers) are occupied by men only, but succession to the traditional political offices is through the female line, it is the males who actually succeed- the nephew or the eldest son of his sister king succeed into his office.

In the Khasi states like Nongkrem women figured as symbolic head associated with rituals of the community. The office of the *Syiem-sad* meaning State-priestess is accorded to the *Syiem's* mother or eldest sister. The role of the state-priestess is of religio-political nature. She is entrusted with the custody of rites and ceremonies of the states in order that her moral force may serve as a restraining hand, a power behind the throne (1989). It is also through this office that the *Syiem-sad* initiates state rituals as well as advises on the appointment of the next chief. This political office of *Ka Syiem Sad* is observable till date in the annual Nongkrem festival. The role of the state priestess in rituals of political nature is significant and can be single out. Her role may indicate that the Khasi were a truly matriarchal society in the forgotten past, and probably women's role in religion and politics was very significant to the then Khasi- Pnar society.

According to Lyngdoh (2009:102) the lone female dancer leading the groups in the Lahoo dance, symbolizes the Langdoh meaning the priestess - who is the head and custodian or religion. She further states that the inclusion of the priestess's dance may be of later addition, as nothing is mentioned in the tradition about the dance of the priestess. In all probability the lone dancer could represents the State-priestess or she could represents the mother who is the head of the family- guiding the members of her family in the dance. The reference of the Supreme Being as the Goddess who rule may refer back to the time when women were the head or ruler of the people. The office of the state priestess needs careful analysis (Pakyntein 2009:130).

#### **Contact with Hindu Culture and its Influence:**

The Pnar though lived in isolation had contacts with the Hindu people of present Bangladesh through trading prior to the establishment of the Jaintiapur Kingdom in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Evidence of commercial or emissary contacts with the Mughal emperor or their viceroys at Murishidabad around the 17<sup>th</sup> century was provided by G.G. Swell who unearthed a number of silver plated coins from the pond at Jowai in the Jaintia Hills (Bareh 1967:5).

Hindu influence on the Pnar can be traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Bor Kuhain became the first Hinduised king of the Jaintia. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1828) most of the leading men have adopted Hinduism. Nartiang the summer capital of Jaintiapur kingdom became the centre of Hinduism and till date a small section of the population profess Hinduism. A Hindu temple where the Brahman priest perform the rites and ceremonies continue to function in this village (Lamare 2005: 73-74).



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The influence of Hinduism in Jaintia hills and Nartiang in particular had brought a considerable impact on the society. The adoption of Hinduism by the king and seeing himself as a champion of a new faith helped the consolidation of his rule and culturally influenced all the subjects including the people of the hills (Lamare 2005: 94). In social life general abstention of the Pnar (especially non-christian) from eating beef could be the influence of Hinduism. Till date both among the Christian and non-christian Hindu names are very common. It became customary to give names like U Ram and U Lakhan to male twins and as Ka Konka and Durka to female twins. Musical instruments of the Hindustani music like harmonium and tabla are incorporated into Pnar indigenous music. In terms of dress though the women use the traditional way of tying their sarong but they term it as *Ka Sari* (Hindu term), the male on the other hand adopted the Hindu Dhoti.

The Hindu system had permeated to the political institution where Pakem states that with the decline of the power of the priests and the concentration of power in the hands of the secular authority, an era of the erosion of democracy began. At first, there was only a crack in the democratic nature of Jaintia State. With the experience of the king's autocratic rule in the plains, the Dalois in the hills also began to initiate the king's style of functioning. The Dalois then regarded their Raids on the same level with that of a zamindary where from popular democratic rulers they turned overnight into petty oligarchs. A crack had become a chasm and Jaintia democracy became merely an oligarchy when the British arrived on the political scene of Jaintia state (cited in Lamare 2005:93-94).

It has been commonly understood by locals and others that politics is the men's domain. In support of this the supposedly old saying is referred to- "*man da kynih da ka syiar kynthai, tae da wai ka pyrthai*" meaning "when the hen starts crowing, then it is the end of the world". Could this saying originated when the people had trade and political contact with the patriarchal Hindu culture? May the direct or indirect role and influence of women in political decision making have decline at this stage too?

The Pnar also incorporated many Hindu deities into their indigenous belief and practices. Certain Hindu deities were given local honorifics, for example Goddess of the hearth Lakshmi became *Ka Lukhimai*, God of metal Vishvakarma – *U Biskorom*, Shiv- as *Mahadev- Khloo* and so on. The local deities on the other hand were give Hindu names- like Goddess of Small-Pox- is

term as *ka Thakur Rani*, God of Accident - *Ka Ron Shand* etc. During the indigenous *Behdiengkhlam* festivals the used of *ki Rot* is probably an adoption of the Hindu Rath.

The practice of human sacrifice by the Jaintia Kings on the occasion of Durga Puja in the past is supposedly an influenced of the Hindu Tantrik cult. According to Gurdon there seems to be an idea generally that the Raja of Jaintia, owing to his conversion to Hinduism, and especially owing to his having become a devotee of the goddess, Kali; took to sacrificing human victim. However human victims were formerly sacrificed by the Jaintias to the Kopli River, which the Jaintias worshipped as a Goddess. The Hindu Goddess Kali may have been replaced with Goddess Kopli (Gurdon 1987:103-104).

Hindu culture influence Pnar culture to a certain extent- it has not affected their basis matriarchal structure e.g. marriage and family organization. But its influence on the War of Jaintia Hills residing in the border contiguous with the plain is affecting even the family organization, inheritance pattern etc. It is important to remember that the Jaintia kings had accepted Hinduism without breaking away from their ancient and most honoured customs, which they held sacred; like lineal decent and kinship should be traced from the mother and so would also be inheritance and succession. The impact of the same was greatly felt by the people residing in the southern parts of Jaintia Hills (Lamare 2005: 105).

#### **Colonization – Christianization and change:**

By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards frequent quarrels took place between the Jaintia kings and the officers of the East India Company. William M. Thackery the collector of the then Sylhet District of Bengal complained that the Raja of Jaintia, Chatra Sing was obstructing the free passage of the company's boat along the Surma and exacted tools from them or looting the contents. He also accused the Raja of committing incursions in Sylhet from where the company drew revenue ( Dutta 1988:30). The fights ended on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1774 when a treaty was signed and the Jaintia King agreed to refrain from interfering in the Company's activities; he also agreed to pay a compensation to the company (Lamare 2005: 80).

This above incidence is the beginning of the British incursion into Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Another contact with the British, which was of far greater consequence was in the year 1824, when David Scoot, Agent to the Governor General Lord Amherst (1823-1828), managed to sign a treaty with the Jaintia king Ram Sing II, because of the impending threat that the Burmese were causing at the frontier region. By this agreement of 10<sup>th</sup> March 1824, the Jaintia king acknowledges his allegiance to the Company, whereby the Company in return would protect Jaintia from any external aggression. In the year 1835 both the plain and the hill areas of the Jaintia Kingdom were annexed by the British (Lamare 2005: 81). The Pnar or Jaintia could not reconcile themselves under the British rule because their rulers interfered in their traditional

way of life. There were local uprisings when the English banned cremation of the dead bodies near the Jowai town and interfered with the local festival at Jalong village. These dissatisfactions took the shape of revolt under the leadership of u Kiang Nangbah, but he was captured and hanged to death on 30<sup>th</sup> December, 1862 and the revolt was suppressed (Lyngdoh 2009:179-180).

In pre-colonial period, an influence was made on the Pnars by the Hindu cultures of the plains, especially when the Jaintia King adopted Hinduism. Missionary activities and Christianization followed the incursion and annexation of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills into the British Empire. This impacted the culture of the Khasi-Pnar like never before and brought about long lasting changes into the Hills. In the colonial period the Pnars were exposed to western ideas through their contact with the British officials and missionaries. But the major factors of social change were education and Christianity.

Colonization of the Jaintia Kingdom the early 19th century brought about profound impact on many aspects of their culture and tradition. British colonial rule directly impacted the polity of self-governance, as well as indirectly effectuate many aspect of the society. Politically, the patriarchal influence must have started with the British officers negotiating with the men only, in line with western culture. Whatever women's role in traditional politics was ignored and relegated to the background in the new political set-up.

In Jaintia Hills it was only in the year 1842 that the Bible was preached for the first time in Jowai by Rev. Thomas Jones. After him, Rev Daniel Morton Sykes came and started a primary school in 1854. The people came into proper contact with the missionaries only after 1858. From this year onwards, one can see the fusion of Christianity amidst the local people and how the same is being anticipated and reciprocated by the people ( Lamare 2005: 82-83).

At the initial stages the coming of the Welsh missionaries into the hills was not at all liked by the Pnars who were the ardent followers of the indigenous religion Niam Tre. Several restrictions were placed by them on the new converts such as the indigenous religious rites, participation in the dances and festivals which had religious connection (Lyngdoh 2009:172). The converts were strictly debarred from attending any of these festivals by their church. As a penalty to those who refused the directions, the church would excommunicate any members from its congregations. ( Lamare 2005: 109 ).

With the advent of Christianity and western education, the transformation in the social life of the people became more apparent. It had become almost "inevitable". By pouring scorn on traditional beliefs and customs, it creates a sense of inferiority even among those who refuse to become converts. To be told constantly that whatever is tribal is evil or at least backward produces frustration and despair. The world view of the converts started changing when the

missionaries started to sway the minds of the converts and asked them to question and challenge the so called sanctity of those places declared sacred was a silly superstition. The missionaries also stressed that no harm would befall them if they disregarded such senseless beliefs. Prodded and prompted thus, the people began in the beginning to fell trees stealthily in the sacred forest or to fish surreptitiously in the sacred pools. This has become the despair and dismay of the ecologists, environmentalists and all right thinking people at the indiscriminate destruction of forest, and the poisoning of rivers for fishes for the sake of getting rich quickly ( Lamare 2005: 107-108).

With Christianization the convert abandoned their indigenous religious rites, beliefs and rituals. The roles of the youngest daughter, maternal- uncle and other religious specialist in conducting the rituals are replaced by Christian reverends. Veneration and appeasement to the ancestral figures is either syncretized or abandoned. The marriage and family organization of the Pnar are mostly affected. Thus, with the advent of Christianity a transformation took place in the social and cultural life of the people.

Christianized Pnar have made a compromise of the traditional domestic units. The age- old practice of visiting husband is generally abandoned by many converts. A Christian husband commonly joins his wife in her mother's house. A man married to the youngest daughter lives with his wife and children in his mother in law's house; as long as the marriage lasts or till his death. This gives rise to what is commonly referred to in anthropological literature as Uxorimatrilineal residence. But when a man is married to the elder daughter of the house he may join his wife in her mother's house temporarily i.e. till they establish and start another domestic unit i.e. nuclear family consisting of husband wife and children.

Christianity directly offers the traditional family form. Church has a major role in insisting the importance of conjugal relation and stamping the father and husband as head of the family. Western Christianity is embedded with 'patriarchal' principles and influenced not only the converts but those who follow the traditional beliefs too. The Nuclear type of family based on conjugal relationship is a relatively recent phenomenon. This gave rise to the importance of the husband and father and the decline of the power and authority of the maternal uncle. Besides Christianization opportunities for new economic activities also do impact Pnar family form. Non- agricultural economic activities away from the village of origin many a time resulted in Nuclear Family and strengthened conjugal ties.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of a crucial period in the history of this region from the point of view of education and literary activity. Earlier the Khasis and the Jaintias had no script of their own and it was only with the advent of the Baptist Missionaries from Serampore in 1813 that for the first time, Khasi words were compiled in the Bengali script. Later, the Welsh missionaries prepared the first books in the Roman script and in 1854 a first school was started

in Jowai and in 1858 a church was established. With formal education many Pnars entered the white collar service in various government departments from the highest administrative services to the lower clerical level. Others takes to various professions – medical, engineering, etc and in the present century into the corporate ones.

The Pnars who professed the original religion prefer not to go to school at the initial period and were therefore illiterate and in the process were looked down as ignorant and unenlightened by their own people who are Christian. The Christian converts were given much material assistance: for instance, they were settled in Mission Compounds, a place especially meant to keep them away from the ‘heathens’. The Welsh Presbyterian Mission used to give stipends to students who were likely to return to their villages for Church works or as schoolteachers. This, therefore, created a deep wedge among the people whereby those who lived in these special compounds consider themselves as Skurs meaning school going people and who are more advance and literate than those residing in the original areas, who were known as chnongs meaning heathens ( Lamare 2005: 109). In this way the Christianize Pnars has an edge over the indigenous believers in education and thereby in modern job oppurtunities and status. The chasm is observable till date.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Pnars started to think about the need of preserving and safeguarding their culture and identity for the interest of the community. In the year 1935 the Sein Rajj was formed with the sole purpose of preserving and understanding the Pnar tradition and culture. Like the Seng Khasi Organization which was started in 1899 and which mold Khasi indigenous belief in a more organize way the Sein Rajj too in collaboration with the Seng Khasi is doing the same. Right from the late nineteen century Khasi traditional leaders realise that it is imperative to be more organized in their religious activities. This gives rise to the organization of Seng-Samla Khasi (1899), which was later retitled as Seng-Khasi (1901). This organization started its youth-wings, viz., Ka Seng Samla (1922) and Ka Seng Pyni (1973), which function like a sunday school.

#### **Remarks:**

The Pnars had their own unique culture- social, political and economic organization as well as their own indigenous belief system. Central to Pnar social organization is their matrilineality, descent is traced through the mother and perpetuation of the group is through the matronymic rule. Inheritance of property is also through the female line. The ancestral land would pass over from the mother to the youngest daughter called *Ka Wasdiah or Ka lang Yung* ie. caretaker of the family. They had a subsistence economy with little trading. The peoples believe in the Supreme Being and invoke *Ki Blai* to overcome the forces of nature in their day to day life. They had their own political organization base on the territorial nature of the clans in the past.

Consensus at the family or village level governs their socio-political wisdom. The arrangement of personal relationship was governed by indigenous norms and traditions.

Lahoo dance is the embodiment of traditional Pnar society and culture. The triadic dancers in a group are symbolic and represent key individuals and their functions at the social, economic, religious as well as political organizations of Pnar society.

All these gave way to new changes with colonization by the British, coming of Christianity, as well as the inclusion of their territory into the Indian Republic with post-colonization. These religious and political factors brought about social, religious, economic and political changes in these hills. The changes brought about by western values and culture came as challenges to the Khasi traditional religion and culture.

Western Christian values and western influence, contact with the other Hindu and Muslim cultures from the plains also impacted their society and culture. The juxtaposition with people of patriarchal culture and values contravened with traditional Pnar worldviews and the underlying values. These combined factors affect many aspects of their traditional institutions, the normative roles of the individuals, and the society at large. The role and position of the individuals and their relationships needs to be redefined on account of the changes that have set in. Patterns of relationship shift from kinship and village ties to other dimension of private-public relationship/partnership, whether in the social, economic, political or religious spheres. The triadic relationship among Christians is replaced by Christian concept of The Holy Trinity. Personal relationship becomes more dyadic and personal than familial and communal. The patriarchal worldview is being slowly incorporated into indigenous worldview.

These accruing changes metamorphose individual's roles and statuses, snowballing into curtailment of certain roles and addendum others. There has been a major reorganization and redefinition of men's role as a result of the changes in the society's belief-system, economy, modernization, contact with other cultures, etc. Education, Modernization and urbanization open the gate to various means of livelihood – professionals, white-collar salaried jobs and a range of other occupations. Trade and commerce, wage labourers etc. flourishes with the introduction of cash economy. Mining and trading of coal in the Jaintia Hills brought in new dimension in their society. The chasm between the coal baron and the poor is very wide. The new economic opportunities bolster men's socio-economic position in the family, as compared to the traditional substantive-economy, where men have to cultivate the land owned by his mother. At present a man position in the family is reinforced when the family depends on his income for meeting their needs. Besides the Christian doctrine that a woman should subdue to her husband, fortified the status of man as a husband and father. Gender relationship too is being redefined- with male as more superior to female.

Notwithstanding the change Matrilineal principle of descent, residence, inheritance and succession is still binding to majority of the Khasi at present.

Notwithstanding the changes in the society Matrilineal principle of descent, residence, inheritance and succession is still binding to majority of the Khasi at present. But gradually the matrilineal structure though persisting acquires added traits. The Khasi Lineage Bill passed by the governor in 2005 is absorbed with mixed feelings by a number of people. People, especially Khasi men, have not taken to it kindly, and interpretations of the bill are varied and many. The president of the SRT has recapitulated the organization's earlier demand that there is a need to change the matrilineal system to patrilineal one, and stated that the said bill should be reviewed. The President of the Mait Shaphrang Movement (MSM) reiterates that the said bill needs to be reviewed because custom and traditions change with the changing times. He also dwells upon the need for equitable distribution of property - both ancestral and self acquired. Even those who are in favour of matronymic rule criticize the Bill and pointed out that it would have a negative impact on the males, meaning khasi men married to non-khasi women cannot legitimately confer their own title to their offsprings (Shillong Times, May 2005). If the bill is to be interpreted as such, then ceremony of Tang Jait becomes imperative for such individuals. Yet, there maybe negative consequences for the society if this ceremony is to be conducted liberally. The applicability or inapplicability and the interpretations of the said Bill need to be examined and discussed in the right forum ( Pakyntein 2009). Whatever the argument maybe this Bill has ensures the continuity of Khasi-Pnar matrilineity.

One important factor which has helped to retain some elements of Khasi customs are kinship ties and ethnicity. In spite of all factors like Christianity, modernization, western education and others, the Khasi people irrespective of religious denominations still take pride in their identity as Pnar and of their rich cultural heritage (Lyngdoh 2009:191). Pnar Matrilineality has withstood the challenge of change but at the same time, acquires traits are added. At best one can argue of the resiliency of Khasi matriarchy even if not in its pristine form.

Like people in other parts of India and the world, the people in Meghalaya have their own modern social-ills in varying degrees and magnitudes – school dropouts, unemployment, alcoholism, drug-addiction, domestic violence, violence against women, trafficking of women and children, child labour, etc. It is a gigantic task to pinpoint the factors leading to such problems in the present discussion. The issues faced by the people in this society are similar in a way to those faced by people all over the world, though they vary in degrees. Socio-cultural change is a process that is part and parcel of human society and culture. When human initiates change they aspire for a better future, but human innovation, initiation and invention brought about both positive and negative consequences. Therefore, as we are ready to accept the positive aspect of our ever changing world, we need to be ready to combat the negative issues

that follow. Khasi matrilineal society has been resilient to the religious, economic and political changes. The traditional matrilineal structure is resistive to the changes and the basic structure endures till date