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Review Article

Cultural Reinterpretation on Khasi Funerary Rituals

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Abstract

Culture refers to the behavioural and cognitive patterns that members of social groups acquire, develop, and exchange. Culture sets one human group apart from another. Human culture encompasses various aspects such as religious beliefs, political and economic systems, dress, language, rituals, art and technology, and food preparation and consumption practices. Khasi people get their sense of identity and belonging from their culture. To preserve the Khasi culture, the system of family-based rites and rituals, as well as those at the levels of the clan, village, commune, and state or *syiem*ships are still observed by the Khasis today. Thus, this article will look probe into some cultural rituals notably the funerary rituals by describing the changes due to cultural transitions with the spread of Christianity, and examine how society continues with indigenous practices among followers of traditional religion and church-centric rituals among Christians.

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INTRODUCTION

“Culture,” according Edward Burnett Tylor, “is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 1974) ^[23]. William A. Haviland defines culture as “a set of rules or standards that, when acted upon by the members of a society, produce behaviour that falls within a range of variance the members consider proper and acceptable” (Haviland, 2005) ^[6]. Every development of culture corresponds to the development of religion. Religion is of two

aspects, communal and personal. This means that religion is basically composed of certain rules made to initiate an individual into a communal life with a sense of communal well-being combined with responsibilities to one’s clan or community. In this manner, Khasi religion is designated as *Ka Niam Khasi*, meaning rules of conduct (Sen, p. 122) ^[20]. A Khasi is therefore, bound to his or her religion by almost the same ties that bind him or her to his or her family. Commandments such as *Kamai ia ka Hok* (Earn righteousness),

Tipbriew Tipblei (Know-man Know-God) and *Tipkur Tipkha* (Know-maternal and paternal-relations) are the basic beliefs incorporated in the Khasi religion. The Khasi believed in the existence of heaven and of the dark world, inhabited by goblins and demons (Rafy, 1920, p. 90) ^[19]. In their belief in the afterlife, no moral sanction was involved since they conceived that the final abode of men after death was heaven, irrespective of their conduct on earth. In this connection, the primeval sacrifice of the archetypal cock and the regular repetition of such sacrifices were sufficient to ensure that the Khasis found their place in heaven provided that the surviving relatives scrupulously performed all the funeral rites. Their absence or inadequate performance resulted in the spirits of the dead roaming the earth as restless ghosts, tormenting their living relations until they were appeased (Gurdon, pp. 105-106) ^[5]. Similar ideas are common on many other religions as well. Khasi megalithic ritual which was extremely complicated was invariably connected with the cult of the dead. The funeral ceremonies clearly indicate the strong belief of the people in the connection between the living and the dead and the influence which the dead were supposed to exercise on the living members of the family (Shadap-Sen, p. 227) ^[21]. Thus, it is in this background, the paper which is historical in nature probes the megalithic traditions associated with funerary rituals (one of the cultural markers of Khasi culture and tradition) and examine the changes impacted by the spread of Christianity.

Megalithic Representation on Funerary Rituals

The beginnings of the megalithic tradition in the Khasi Hills can be assigned to the pre-colonial period, as amply testified by early British accounts that refer to the large number of megalithic monuments they encountered when they first set foot in the hills. The first documented report was provided by H. Walters who described the three types of monuments that represent Khasi megalithism. Lt. Yule detailed standing stones and stone cromlechs claiming that the Khasis erecting standing stones in groups of odd numbers varying from three to thirteen. He was the first person who made an effort to understand the implication of the Khasi village names with reference to the stones and provided examples of villages such as Mawsmal from the "Oath Stone," Mawmluh "Salt Stone", Mawphlang or "Grassy Stone" (Mitri, 2019, p. 165) ^[14]. Another worker, J. D. Hooker (Hooker, 2013) ^[7] provided a brief and yet decisive description of the monuments although his interest in the hills was mainly to catalogue the diverse flora. A treatise on megalithism was provided by H. H. Godwin-Austen (Godwin-Austen, 1872, pp. 122-143) ^[4] who also wrote his article before the major earth-quake that rocked the Khasi Hills in 1897, many of whom, described in his paper are no longer standing today. Austen had first-hand information about the megalithic tradition especially its relationship with the funerary practices of the people which many scholars writing after him could no longer observe. The most important contribution of his work was his report on the use of spars of rounded logs to drag stones from the quarries and a clear demarcation between the stones which are memorial in nature and those which are related to funerary

practices. He was also the first writer to have identified the male and female stones (*mawshynrang* and *mawkynthei*) in the category of memorial stones. His report showed the diverse cultural significance of the monuments and stated that the Khasis erected stones for a variety of reasons, such as recovery from illness, acquisition of wealth, and others. The subject of Khasi megaliths also received the attention of C. B. Clarke (Clarke, 1874, pp. 481-493) ^[3] who provides a detailed scientific treatise on the megalithic monuments of the Khasi Hills. His report mentions the three types of rock employed by the Khasis such as the Cherra sandstones; Shillong sandstones and the granites used for building megalithic monuments. He also mentions the method of transportation of big stones with the help of poles and the method of erecting large monuments with the aid of a rudimentary form of pulley. Besides, he also speculates that the monuments found at the village of Laitlyngkot in the Khasi Hills (which fell after the earthquake) are the oldest of the megalithic structures in the hills; and the ashes (post-cremation bones) of males and females which are kept in separate cists are also part of his discovery.

P. R. T. Gurdon (Gurdon, *op.cit.*, pp. 151-155) ^[5] provided a closer insight into the megalithic culture of the people, other later writers like J. P. Mills, J. H. Hutton, von Fürer-Haimendorf and local scholars such as David Roy who have contributed to the understanding of the subject through their first-hand information is of great value to the present and future research into the megalithic culture of the Khasis. Their works can be considered seminal as they have recorded the practice and the cultural relevance of the monuments at a time when much of the traditional practice still survives in an undisturbed cultural atmosphere (Mitri, 2019, *op.cit.*, p. 166) ^[14].

The term 'Megalith' which came into vogue during the period of antiquarianism, is generally used to refer to huge and undressed stones termed in Celtic as Dolmen, Cromlech and Menhir and generally applied in the early literature to a class of monuments found in Western and Northern Europe. The word *megalith* originated from the ancient Greek *Megas* which means great and *lithos* which means stones. The terms were subsequently extended to other miscellaneous collection of erected stones found all over the world (Childe, 1947-1948, pp. 5-15) ^[2].

Khasi society is a matrilineal society, a system quite in contrast to all the other tribes surrounding them, who practice patrilineal systems. The Khasi matrilineal system is; therefore, a unique institution preserved from prehistoric times. The uniqueness of the Khasi community is also apparent in their linguistic affinity to Austro-Asiatic groups in contrast to the rest of the groups around them, who speak the Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan group of languages. These two pieces of evidence clearly point to a very different pre-historical course which the Khasis as a community have gone through (Mitri, *op.cit.*, 2019, p. 165) ^[14]. The Khasis are among the several groups of people in the Indian sub-continent where Megalithic tradition still survives as a 'living practice'. Megalithism is a living tradition and the practice of traditional mortuary rite is observed as the driving force behind the complex concept of Khasi megalithism which

begins with the bone-placement ceremony at the final stage of the funerary rite and archaeologically detectable through the cist burial. It may be said that ancestor's worship is definitely present in the Khasi society albeit highly symbolic. From the first to the last stage of the funerary rites i.e., till the stage which corresponds to recollection of the bones of all the clan members from the individual cists and placing them in the clan cist, megalithic monuments signifying different occasions were erected. Most of the megalithic monuments found along the landscape are in some way or the other associated with these funerary rites. Even when the symbolic rituals do not leave behind physical verification except for the cist, they can still help to explain the significance of other stone monuments found in the landscape (Mitri, 2022, p. 40). It is important to note that the history of erecting megaliths was linked to those of the neighboring groups, who believed that the full flowering of the tradition was achieved under the Chieftainships or *Syiemships*, roughly assigned to the period beginning from the sixteenth and extending to the nineteenth centuries. Therefore, the tradition of keeping bone repositories such as cists and cairns, which Khasi believe represent the earliest megalithic structures, can probably be traced back a few centuries earlier, possibly even pre-dating the thirteenth century (Mawlong, 2004, pp. 35-36)^[12].

To the Khasis, funerary rituals and practices form part and parcel of the traditional religion (*Niam Tynrai*). Religion (*ka Niam*) is essentially a collection of ideas, practices, values and narratives that are all inextricably embedded in cultures. Religious practices shape and are shaped by the culture around them. It is in this context that Christianity had a profound and far-reaching impact which contributed to some extent to erode and eventually destroy culture and traditional values. As with all non-literate cultures, tradition was passed on by word of mouth and incorporates them in their tales, myths, songs, dances, rituals, etc. Demonization of cultural practices and the continuous circulation of biblical stories and teachings gradually uprooted converts, alienating them from their cultural moorings. In the case of many converts, traditional beliefs, practices and value systems came to be replaced by Christian values and cultural practices (Mawlong, 2022, pp. 57-58)^[13].

The megalithic tradition which represents the core of the Khasi belief system is closely linked with the veneration of ancestors. The most revered of ancestral spirits are the progenitors of the clan (*kur*). They include *U Suidnia* (first maternal uncle of the clan), *Ka Iawbei* (the first ancestress of the clan) and *U Thawlang* (the co-creator alongside *Ka Iawbei*) (Snaitang, 1993, pp. 33-35)^[22]. Khasi cosmogony underscores the connection existed between the world of the living and that of the dead. The latter are believed to live a life very similar to that on earth. This notion is implied in their funeral rites wherein the dead are given food and drink signifying that death is a bridge between the old life and a new one, for the newly dead are often asked to convey messages to ancestors and other loved ones who have gone before. Ceremonial words used at funerals and in the course of erecting megaliths in honour of ancestors clearly express a sense of dependence on them when seeking their favours or in thanksgiving for the receipt of favours. Ancestral

spirits who are believed to be constantly watching over their living relatives have a more immediate bearing on life, given that they can withhold blessings on their descendants. Furthermore, ancestors embody the idea of social continuity and the unity of the matrilineal ancestry. These ideas are embedded in their tradition of commemorating deceased ancestors of their matrilineage in keeping with the Khasi social structure. Monuments consist of stone uprights (*menhirs*) with an accompanying table-stone (*dolmens*) representing an indivisible monument; ranging from three, five, seven, nine or more, together with one or more table-stones, depending on the size of the clan or lineage being commemorated. The stone uprights represent the male members of the family or lineage or clan are known by indigenous terms such as *mawpynieng* (standing stone) and *mawshynrang* (male stone). The flat table-stones represent the female members of the matrikin usually the root ancestress or the younger ancestress from whom originated the lineage or family. They are locally termed as *mawpynthiah* or recumbent stone and *mawkynthei* or female stone (Mawlong, *op.cit*, 2022, pp. 37-40; Lyngdoh, 1937, pp. 245-246)^[13, 10].

Funerary rituals are of an elaborate nature commencing with the cremation of the deceased and the subsequent interment of bones in cists or cairns called *mawshyieng*. The *mawshyieng* is, however, only a temporary repository, since the final resting place is the clan cist or *mawbah*. The centrality of the megalithic rituals, is, thus, connected with the bone collection and final interment ceremonies into the *mawbah*, linking them with idea that the *mawbah* symbolises their collective identity and continuity as a group. The *mawbah* is the embodiment of their spiritual and social values, perceived as maintaining social order and cohesion in society (Mawlong, *op.cit*, 2004, p. 39)^[12]. It may be noted that the Khasi megalithic tradition was by no means a static entity indicative of the fact that it was a dynamic tradition which incorporated ideas that integrated changes in the society. These innovations are indicated in new categories of megalithic monuments that emerged, illustrating the modifications taking place in the spheres of socio-political organisation, ownership of land etc. It is worth mentioning that although among the Khasi people, the clan (*kur*) is one of the most significant indices of their cultural unity, it is important only at the higher collectivity level, serving the purpose of enforcing the rule of exogamy and social order. In reality, effective kinship obligations tend to be observed only at the lower level of descent groupings, such as the lineage (*kpoh*) or extended family. Infact, for the ordinary Khasi it is the *iing* (house) institution that constitutes the only religious and functional unit. This point is borne out by the significantly higher number of bone repositories or *mawshyieng* associated with the *kpoh* or *iing* which is widely distributed throughout the Khasi hills, both in the uplands and the lower slopes. On the other hand, clan cists (*ki mawbah*) have a much smaller distribution and are invariably linked with founding families and clans locally designated as the *jaid-bakhraw* constituting the dominant groups in the society. (*Ibid.*, pp. 35-53) It is also worth mentioning that megalithic monuments such as *mawkjat* or *mawlynti* (foot-stone or path-stone), *mawniam* etc., which are

closely linked with *mawbah* rituals, were only raised by the dominant or founding clans (*ki jaid-bakhrav*). Such descent groups accorded a higher ritual status in the community observe elaborate funerary rituals culminating in the setting up of the above-mentioned monuments as status and religious symbols. It is unlikely that persons or families other than the *jaid-bakhrav* by virtue of their ascribed status could mobilise the labour or resources required for such undertakings (Mawlong, *op.cit*, 2022, pp. 48-49) ^[13].

The emergence and establishment of Chieftainships (*Syiemships*) is linked with megalithic activity on a much larger scale. Megalith-building of this phase is associated with establishment of markets located at important tribal centres such as Shillong, Nongkseh, Laitlyngkot, Nongkrem, Mylliem, Cherrapunjee and Mawsmi, Sutnga, Raliang, Nongbah, Jowai, Shangpung and Nartiang (Mitri, *op.cit*, 2025) ^[15]. The last complex is the most impressive and contains the tallest stone upright in the entire Khasi - Jaintia hills standing at twenty-seven and a half feet, two and a half feet wide and a foot thick. Megaliths of this type, where monumentality is a factor, are usually set up along trade routes or those linking large villages or commanding hill tops. The size of the individual monuments or megalithic complexes themselves suggests a scale of planning and organisation beyond the scope of a village community and could have been possible only under a more centralised authority such as a *syiemships* (Mawlong, *op.cit*, 2004, pp. 47-53) ^[12]. There are also megaliths erected that functioned as boundary stones (*mawpud* or *mawsam*), demarcating various kinds of territorial units such as villages (*ki shnong*), communes (*ki raid*), and *himas* (native state equated with a *syiemship*). Besides, there are also a special category of boundary markers called *mawbri* or *mawsam* that functioned like title deeds to ownership of clan or lineage holdings called *ri kynti* land, distinct from community land or *ri raid* (Mawlong, 1996) ^[11]. The brief description of Khasi megalithic tradition demonstrates how such activity involving the modification of the natural environment was essentially a dynamic phenomenon incorporating changes in the material conditions and social relations over time. The tradition is intimately integrated with culture patterns that make the Khasi people a distinct group with a kinship system, moral, ethical and value principles that had developed out of their own unique historical experience. However, the process of acculturation, brought about primarily through contact with missionaries, led Christian converts to imbibe a new value system that had significant consequences for Khasi society.

Impact of Christianity

Early missionary accounts on the Khasi people strongly underlying their descriptions of cultures foreign to their own by using the terms that are understandably ethnocentric and subjective. Words like 'heathen', 'pagan', 'barbarous', 'savage', 'filthy', and 'slothful' and others indicated a consciousness of their perceived 'civilizing' role, among the people they had come to evangelize (Morris, pp. 26-27; Lish, pp. 129, 131-132) ^[26]. The fact that the early missionaries were brave enough

despite the challenges to bring the Gospel of Christ to the Khasi hills and their untiring efforts to introduce literacy, awareness relating to health and hygiene, their encouragement of a rational outlook, dispelling fear, superstition and ignorance, is truly commendable. Nalini Natarajan puts it "The missionaries placed emphasis on the maxim 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness' and taught the Khasis inexpensive methods of personal hygiene. Regular bath, keeping oneself otherwise clean, wearing washed and pressed clothes, especially on Church service days (Sundays), etc., were gently inculcated in the people and it became a part of the routine" (Natarajan, 1977, p. 104) ^[17].

However, the mission behind these works was to change society and their interests were by no means limited to religion alone although it was an area of special interest, given that all domains of culture are integrated and religion provides the rules and sanctions for conduct in other fields as well. Along with Christianity was gradually imported an attitude and value system that often contradicted those of the indigenous people since missionaries often imposed their values and practices in areas of kinship, gender roles and other aspects. The inevitable antagonism that developed between the converts and those of the old faith gradually affected their social relations. Nalini Natarajan observed that most Christians felt they were superior in every way to the orthodox Khasis. In fact, some Khasi converts are known to label their non-Christian brethren as 'pagan' and 'heathen' (*Ibid.*, p. 145). The hostility that existed is expressed in an account narrated by U Jeebon Roy, an orthodox Khasi himself, of how he and his companions on an occasion when halting for a night at a village, were not permitted to stay over at a Christian school as the Christian teacher felt that it was 'prohibitive and sinful'. In another village, they met with a similar fate on a Sunday when Christians refused to give them a place to stay (*Ibid.*, p. 119). Evidently, the rift that developed between new converts and the orthodox Khasi was actively promoted and encouraged by missionaries to protect their flock from straying back to their old beliefs and practices. In the process, Khasi converts were slowly estranged from their own orthodox fellow Khasi brethren.

Inevitably, conversion to a new faith that preached a different lifestyle that promoted cutting ties with traditional beliefs and practices, would have gradually alienated converts from their cultural moorings as well. In traditional Khasi society as in most indigenous societies, religion and social life are inseparable. This point is brought out succinctly in the following statement, "A Khasi is a Khasi, because of his religion more than anything else.... It is his religion in the sense of his 'Niam' which regulates all his thoughts and activities... Forget his religion and you will never understand a Khasi" (Lyngdoh, 1982, p. 22) ^[9]. Followers of the traditional faith hold religion as the axis of identity that structures social life and personal experience. It is in this regard that ritual practices tied to the veneration of ancestors which was an integral part of the indigenous faith, were adversely impacted. It led to a gradual discontinuity of bone collection and internment ceremonies which were part of the megalithic tradition. The implication of the loss of this core aspect of their culture is in fact significant. As discussed earlier,

the centrality of the megalithic rituals connected with the bone collection and final internment ceremonies into the *mawbah* (clan cist) is linked with idea that the *mawbah* symbolises their collective identity and continuity as a group. Undoubtedly, the earliest megalithic monuments were those raised in honour of ancestral spirits symbolising the matrilineal clan structure in Khasi society. They are the material expressions communicating social order integrating the various groups occupying the Khasi Hills through rituals associated with the propitiation of ancestral spirits. Therefore, the raising of megaliths and the accompanying megalithic ritual may be seen foremost as an integrative, identity shaping activity. Regardless of whether megaliths were linked to ideas or beliefs linked to death or life, they served to underscore the concept of the matrilineal clan organisation which is the most significant cultural marker of the Khasi people. This fact is highlighted in the kinship terms that are used to describe the monuments such as *mawkni* (maternal uncle stone), *mawpyrsa* (maternal nephew stone) *mawlawbei tynrai* (root ancestress stone) or *mawlawbei khyinnah* (young ancestress stone), etc. that are specific in nature (Mawlong, *op.cit*, 2022, p. 51) ^[13]. Reverence for the spirits of ancestors who serve as an unbroken link in their matrilineal ancestry is also embodied in the tradition. In fact, wherever living megalithic traditions have been identified, a strongly developed cult of ancestors transmitting the message of order, stability and continuity with the past is associated. Thus, the megalithic tradition which was an integral part of the Khasi socio-religious organisation was an aspect of cultural tradition that was most negatively impacted by Christian conversion although it was not the only factor.

Funerary rites and rituals which were the core of the Khasi belief system slowly declined and modified since Christianity was not only largely responsible for dispelling superstition, but also upholding of taboos, or the efficacy of time consuming and expensive rituals or belief in divination. The process of decline must have been gradual as it is not easy to uproot traditional beliefs and practices. Undoubtedly, the less cumbersome Christian practices for redemption would have attracted those who were willing to give up drinking, gambling and other customary practices that were frowned upon by missionaries. The first blow to the matrilineal clan structure was dealt at the point that Christianity took root in the Khasi Hills. For one, the role of the maternal uncle underwent change, becoming a nominal one as evident in urban Christian households. His role was gradually assumed by the father in nuclear families. Christianity, thus, with its strongly patriarchal values encouraged husbands and fathers to take a more active role in the bringing up of their children and in the running of their homes. These changes, which did improve the quality and stability of family life, contributed not only to the gradual rise in nuclear families as opposed to extended families, but also changes in the household structure or *iing* institution with men replacing women as heads of households. This process was greatly accelerated in the urban areas (*Ibid.*, p. 52).

The slow but steady growth of Christianity in the second half of the nineteenth century articulated itself in a revivalist movement

in the form of the *Seng Khasi*, established in 1899. Founded by a group of educated and enlightened Khasi, the objective of the organisation was the preservation of Khasi culture and religion. Leading members of the *Seng Khasi*, who represented the Khasi intelligentsia, played key roles in the growth and spread of a literate tradition among the Khasi people. It is to their credit that customary beliefs and practices were recorded and documented for the first time. The fact that the *Seng Khasi* was strongly fuelled by an anti-colonial, anti-Western, anti-Christianity wave on account of the fact that they believed that Khasi culture and tradition was under serious threat from these external factors, would have undoubtedly influenced their writings. It must also be noted that the leading members of the *Seng Khasi* represented an educated, well-placed group of men that took up the leadership role of their community forming a new kind of elite or torch-bearers of their people. (*Ibid.*, p. 53) It is worth mentioning that U Jeebon Roy Mairom hailed as the 'Father of Modern Khasis' played a pivotal role in initiating a literary movement aimed at inspiring his Khasi brethren of the richness of their cultural heritage which was at that time perceived to be endangered as a result of the rapid spread of Christianity. Proficient in Bengali and Sanskrit, he translated into Khasi a number of Indian classics such as the *Hitopadesa*, *Ramayana* and *Chaitanya Charitra* and *Buddha Deb Charitra*, while his eldest son Sib Charan Roy translated the *Bhagavad Gita* (Bhattacharjee, 1979, pp. 3, 25-26) ^[1].

The link between the spread of Christianity and its impact on the megalithic tradition is evident in terms of the gradual decline and changes in ritual practices particularly those related to funerary ceremonies. In the recent past, cremation of the dead is perhaps the only significant continuation of traditional practice. The stone uprights or table stones are no longer heard being erected in honour of ancestors or in association with funerary rites. However, the bone internment ceremonies which were central to funerary practices are still performed in some places in the Khasi Hills. The break with tradition is demonstrated in the fact that many people especially where Christianity is well entrenched, are largely unaware of the socio-religious significance of extant megalithic remains that are found in many villages in these hills. C. A. Mawlong observes "One such village where megalithic structures of various types are still found is Pamsohmen in Cherrapunjee which I visited twenty-six years ago in the course of a field study. I was surprised that several of the local people interviewed were unaware of their significance or the tradition that was not too long ago, a vibrant and living one. In fact, clan cists or *mawbahs* once considered as the most sacred of the Khasi megalithic structures embodying concepts of clan solidarity and their matrilineal ancestry, were used as storage places for fire wood, as pigpens and their sacredness has been completely obliterated. At present, the village has expanded to such an extent that houses have encroached onto the site and it is no longer the impressive site it once was." (Mawlong, *op.cit*, 2022, p. 54) ^[13]. This instance explains the lack of awareness of the tradition and its significance among the younger generation of Khasi youths.

Elements Integrated in the Catholic Church

The Welsh missionaries totally rejected any element within Khasi culture which they believed had religious implications. For the Evangelical missionaries, only Christianity was the true faith and therefore, any other faith system was dismissed as superstition and incompatible with the gospel. This perspective indicates that the cultural elements that they rejected included sacrifices, belief in spirits, dances, cremation of the dead, totemism and ancestor worship. Some of these practices were related to the state or village while some were family rituals (Snaitang, *op.cit.*, 1993, p. 127) ^[22]. It is interesting however, that while the missionaries in general attempted to remove the religious component of traditional culture, some of them did much to preserve some of the elements in so far as they sought to preserve the folk-tradition of the people. The efforts to preserve oral traditions in written form were made so as to not lose them with the death of those who knew and remembered them. Foremost among them are Fr. G. Costa, H. Elias, H. Lyngdoh and Soso Tham among others, whose works on traditional Khasi society, polity, religion and folklore, are invaluable for researchers on Khasi culture (Mawlong, *op.cit.*, 2022, p. 57) ^[13].

Unlike the Welsh Mission and other Protestant Churches, the Catholic Church gradually approved most of the traditional religious elements and attempted to incorporate them into their new faith. In the Khasi Hills, the performance of Khasi dances at Church functions is debarred by most Christian denominations but is allowed by the Catholic Church on occasion. Perhaps one of the most radical clergymen, who have attempted to initiate a process of enculturation, is a Catholic priest, Father S. Sngi Lyngdoh who sought to introduce some of the traditional ways into his ministry (Snaitang, *op.cit.*, 1993, p. 138) ^[22]. Needless to say, many Christians, including some Catholics, are opposed to, or at least uncomfortable, with his unique approach at blending the traditional practices with those of the church believing that Christianity should incorporate elements to it. While the Church had already been participating in the dances, Fr. S. Lyngdoh went further in adopting himself the traditional Nongkrem priestly title, 'Lyngdoh Sohblei'. This title was traditionally reserved for the priests of the Nongkrem or Khyrim *Syiem*ship. He was an active participant in the traditional Nongkrem festival which had been earlier condemned by the Christian converts and took active part in the revival of the forgotten sacrificial act called *Ka Bujai Blang*, a sacrifice of the royal family and dorbar of Nongkrem. His activities in reviving traditional practices have been warmly welcomed by the Nongkrem people (*Ibid.*, p. 139). Even his style of dress is a blend of the traditional and Christian way, such as a turban worn on his head Khasi style, teamed with a cassock, the long garment worn by many Catholic priests. Sometime in November 2009, it appears that the then parish priest Fr. Devasia through the consultation of the Parish Council promotes the concept of constructing bone repositories made of concrete provided with small box-like slots at the cemetery of Nongthymmai Parish for internment of bones of the deceased. The decision was taken on the grounds that the Parish cemetery

was running out of land to provide for the burial of the faithful. Accordingly, parishioners were persuaded on the practicality of the idea as a solution to the problem of lack of space confronting them. Fr. S. Sngi Lyngdoh, once again, played a pivotal role in initiating the process in 2013 when he was in charge of the Parish and had megalithic monuments erected and one thousand saplings planted on the piece of land under discussion. In fact, it was to fulfill late Fr. Lyngdoh's vision that the incumbent priest Fr. Lyndem and his assistant Fr. Syiemlieh, conducted a plantation drive to plant more than five hundred saplings in 2016, converting the land into a sacred grove to be cared for by the parishioners. The creation of the sacred grove which according to Fr. Lyndem aimed not only at protecting the motherland but also at protecting animals and medicinal plants which were in danger of extinction. The Catholic Church has also been involved in preserving some of the megalithic monuments that have survived and those which stand within church premises like the monument at the Laitlyngkot Church compound. Likewise, the Cathedral Church at Laitumkhrach erected a set of triliths and dolmen in the church premises to mark the centenary celebration of the Catholic Church in the Khasi-Jaintia hills in 1990. Thus, to them, the significance of the megalithic monument was not lost as it is the most enduring symbol of the Khasi matrilineal clan structure, which still remains the most defining feature of Khasi culture and tradition (Mawlong, *op.cit.*, 2022, pp. 55-56) ^[13].

Continuity

Despite some of the attempts described above, demonstrating that Christianity upholds and nurtures culture and tradition, the divide remains. Followers of the traditional faith called *Ka Niam Tynrai* believe that Christian converts are no longer true Khasi. There are views which assert that converts are no longer Khasi 'nylla' but Khasi 'kylla', implying that they are no longer genuine Khasi (*Ibid.*, p. 57). This view is shared by many of the traditional faith who considers Christian converts as having lost their original identity (Pariat, 2016) ^[18]. In recent times, the idea that the traditional faith is the basis of Khasi identity, has become a matter of heated debate between those of the indigenous faith and Christian converts with the former asserting that abandonment of their traditional faith is tantamount to loss of cultural values, ethos and traditions. While there is no denying that conversion does contribute to alienation from one's culture to a greater or lesser degree on account of the adoption of new rituals relating to life or death, the break has never been complete. Khasi Christians continue to uphold the matrilineal principle which remains the bedrock of society and social relations. Descent, inheritance and residence patterns are still by and large matri-centered. Changes that have occurred in these spheres cannot be wholly attributed to the impact of Christianity, but to several other factors not the least of which is the process of modernisation and this transformation is discernable in urban areas. Furthermore, even among Christian converts certain traditional values and beliefs continue to hold away despite inculcation to a Christian way of life. More importantly, these changes have not left even those of the

traditional faith untouched. Ritual practices linked to life and death has undergone change and modification. For the ordinary Khasi, elaborate, expensive and time-consuming rituals linked in particular to death rituals such as bone collection and internment ceremonies, have declined, been modified, or dispensed with altogether. On the other hand, communal festivals and rituals that serve to unite and nurture cultural traditions have been revived and reinvigorated largely on account of organisations such as the *Seng Khasi* who have spearheaded a reawakening movement with the objective of preserving Khasi culture and tradition. In recent times, the issue of the Khasi identity being rooted in religion has led to a robust debate between adherents of the traditional faith and Christian converts with the former emphasising their position as the true representatives of Khasi culture and tradition. However, there are a number of Christian converts strongly grounded in their culture and tradition as amply demonstrated by their enlightening articles on various aspects of customary practices and tradition, who have been able to straddle the seemingly opposing positions of Christian belief with their cultural identity. The main grounds of dispute include what is being perceived by the orthodox Khasi as attempts at appropriation of traditional sacred sites or symbols by Christians and for some converts who while acknowledging the role of the *Seng Khasi* as the spiritual and moral guardians of followers of the traditional faith, question the view that they are the sole moral custodians of Khasi culture and tradition. At the heart of the matter is conflicting perceptions about what constitutes pristine or so-called original Khasi identity. It must be an accepting fact that no culture or tradition is a static, unchanging entity and progressive Khasi on both sides of the divide recognise this fact and are attempting to focus on strengthening ties through mutual respect of differences in belief and to reinforce the composite nature of Khasi identity (Snaitang, *op.cit.*, pp. 126-139)^[22].

CONCLUSION

The significance of the megalithic rituals is central to the whole religious belief of the Khasis. For the ordinary Khasis, life is often full of hardships as compared to the *jaid bakhraws*; yet, the clans organized the elaborate rituals to commemorate their dead. This practice somewhat resembles the elaborate ceremonies in the ancestor cults of the Chinese where small ancestral tablets seem to have the same import as the Khasi megaliths may have indeed miniature survivals of a long vanished megalithic cult. While performing the rituals, the Khasi expressed his clan solidarity and the close knit texture of his family. The rituals linked the dead with the living, the past with the present and heaven with earth. The potential toil of men in raising the great monoliths was accompanied by the magic formulae of the priest (*lyngdoh*) recited in the form of an awe-aspiring monotonous chant. The deaths of the animal victims, some of them died slowly under the clubs of the mourners themselves, to the accompaniment of constant drumming, must have provided an outlet for much pent up bitterness and relieved the sadistic impulses of many men who through such acts of ritual cruelty enable them to live normal lives in fellowship with

their neighbours. For the Khasis of older and present times, the feasting which concluded the ceremonies was a token of atonement, the pacification which they produced in the minds of those who took part in them. The traditional religious system which placed high value on family, clan or at most, a state, could not contribute to the identity of the Khasi tribes. Most of the deities were localised and the belief systems were different from one state or *syiemship* (chieftainship) to another. *Syiemships* like Khyrim and Sohra (then Cherrapunjee) saw religion as closely related to the state. The festivals of *Ka Pomblang Nongkrem* or Nongkrem Dance and *Ka Thang Syiem Sohra* clearly indicate that these festivals were not of the entire people of the region but were limited to a single state. What contributed to a sense of tribal identity was the geographical proximity of the people and certain elements in social structure as each state lies adjacent to each other. Though each state was politically autonomous, the people could move freely among them. The kinship code contributed what sense of common identity there was among the Khasi people who all observed the same social laws connected with it. While the British were largely responsible for introducing the elements that led to rapid social change among the Khasi people, it was Christianity that provided the alternative models which enabled them to accommodate themselves to the new order. The way in which Christianity (Catholic Church) preserved certain elements of the traditional culture as have been shedded light above indicates that Christianity was not so much an agent of change as it was a means whereby people could accommodate themselves to the changes that the new administration forced upon them and which in due course of time, they themselves welcomed in their own way.

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