

Is Khasi Society Truly Matriarchal? A Critical Study of Matriliney and Gender Power in Meghalaya

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Abstract. Khasi society in Meghalaya is often described as matriarchal because descent, clan identity, and ancestral property pass through women. However, matriliney does not automatically create female domination in social or political life. This paper argues that Khasi society is better understood as matrilineal rather than matriarchal. Using AI-assisted literature scoping and counterfactual simulation, we show that prior anthropological consensus (Nongbri, 2000; Roy, 2018; Shangpliang, 2012, 2018) already rejects the matriarchy claim, but that claim persists in popular discourse. Our novel contribution is twofold: (1) an explicit counterfactual test of what a true matriarchy would look like, generated via large language model, and (2) a quantitative keyword analysis revealing that even within matrilineal frameworks, language of authority and control clusters around male institutions. We conclude that Khasi society is matrilineal but not matriarchal, and that AI-assisted methods can sharpen conceptual debates in anthropology.

Keywords: matriliney · matriarchy · Khasi society · AI-assisted anthropology · counterfactual simulation · gender power · Meghalaya

1 Introduction

The Khasi of Meghalaya are among the best-known matrilineal communities in South Asia, and this has encouraged a persistent assumption that they are also matriarchal. Children belong to the mother’s clan, husbands often live near the wife’s family, and the youngest daughter inherits ancestral property [3]. Yet anthropology requires a careful distinction between descent and power. A society may trace lineage through women without granting women decisive authority over property, politics, or public decision-making [7].

The established consensus in Khasi studies is that the society is matrilineal but not matriarchal [2,4]. This paper does not seek to overturn that consensus. Instead, it asks why the popular matriarchy label persists and whether AI-assisted methods can help make the gap between inheritance and power more visible.

Using ChatGPT-4, the paper: scopes the literature to confirm the existing scholarly consensus; generates a counterfactual set of predictions for a true matriarchy; and examines the language of authority and control in the reviewed

literature. This interdisciplinary approach combines AI-assisted computational methods with anthropological analysis to contribute methodological innovation rather than new field-based data.

2 Methods: AI-Assisted Literature Analysis

2.1 Literature Scoping with LLM

ChatGPT-4 was prompted to extract the most frequently recurring claims for and against the idea that Khasi society is matriarchal, drawing on the cited works of Nongbri, Roy, Shangpliang, and Uberoi. The purpose of this step was not to replace reading the original sources, but to help structure the literature review and identify the major argumentative lines. Each AI-generated claim was manually checked against the original texts before being included in the paper.

2.2 Counterfactual Simulation of True Matriarchy

The paper used an AI-generated counterfactual prompt: if Khasi society were truly matriarchal in the anthropological sense, what empirical patterns would be expected in household authority, land control, village governance, and public representation? The AI response was converted into a small set of testable expectations, which were then compared against the selected literature. This step makes the underlying conceptual distinction between matriliney and matriarchy more concrete: if women hold lineage rights but not institutional power, the matriarchal label becomes difficult to sustain.

2.3 Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

The final AI-assisted step was a qualitative keyword-pattern check. The paper examined the reviewed literature for how often language of power, authority, and control appears in association with women's roles versus male roles, especially those linked to the maternal uncle, customary governance, and village institutions. This is not a full computational corpus study and is not presented as statistical proof. Rather, it is a transparent pattern check intended to sharpen the conceptual argument. The purpose is to show that even when women are central to descent and inheritance, the language of governing power often remains tied to male-coded institutions.

3 Established Consensus: Matriliney, Not Matriarchy

The distinction between matriliney and matriarchy is the foundation of the debate. Matriliney refers to a system in which descent and inheritance are traced through the mother's line. Matriarchy would imply women hold primary authority in political leadership, public decision-making, and resource control [7].

Khasi kinship is organized through the *kur*, or matrilineal clan. The *khatduh*, or youngest daughter, is custodian of ancestral property and is expected to maintain the natal household [3]. This gives women clear structural importance and ties them directly to lineage continuity. However, the maternal uncle often retains influence over property use, ritual authority, and dispute resolution [2].

This matters because matriliney does not eliminate male power; it relocates it. Male authority is not centered in the father alone but is distributed through the mother’s male kin. At the village level, the *dorbar shnong* and related customary institutions have historically excluded women from formal decision-making, office-holding, and meaningful political authority [4]. Taken together, these features support the long-standing conclusion that Khasi society is matrilineal but not matriarchal.

4 Novel AI-Assisted Contributions

4.1 Counterfactual Test: What Would a True Matriarchy Look Like?

The AI-generated counterfactual model suggests that a truly matriarchal Khasi society would show women holding formal authority across multiple domains, not just lineage rights. Women would be expected to chair village councils, control land dispute outcomes, possess unrestricted disposal rights over inherited property, and occupy visible positions in customary governance.

Comparing that counterfactual to the literature shows a consistent mismatch. Table 1 summarises the five predictions and their outcomes in the literature.

Table 1. Counterfactual predictions for a true matriarchy tested against Khasi literature.

Prediction	Empirical test	Outcome
Women chair the majority of village council meetings	Check <i>dorbar shnong</i> participation	Not supported
Widows automatically become village heads	Check customary succession rules	Not supported
Women control final land dispute rulings	Check governance and land authority	Not supported
Daughters have unrestricted sale rights over ancestral property	Check property custody norms	Not supported
Public law regulates men’s marriage choices more than women’s	Check gendered customary control	Not supported

The value of this exercise is not that it overturns the field’s consensus, but that it makes the criteria for matriarchy explicit. Once those criteria are named, Khasi society clearly fits matriliney rather than matriarchy.

4.2 Keyword Co-occurrence Patterns

A qualitative review of the selected literature suggests that words such as authority, control, and decision-making appear more often in relation to male kin, male-led councils, and customary institutions than in relation to women's inheritance roles. By contrast, women are more often described through lineage continuity, custodianship, and household responsibility. The point is not simply lexical frequency; it is that the conceptual architecture of the literature distinguishes symbolic female centrality from governing authority.

5 Modern Changes Do Not Resolve the Contradiction

Urbanisation, Christianity, wage labour, state law, and market integration have reshaped Khasi society. In some households, the authority of the maternal uncle has weakened, while the husband-father has become more prominent in everyday decision-making [2]. This suggests that modernity does not remove patriarchy so much as reconfigure it.

Recent debates around customary law make this even clearer. Institutional reforms often preserve male control while presenting themselves as defenders of tradition [4]. At the same time, scholarship on Khasi women shows that matriliney does not protect women from land alienation, domestic violence, or under-reporting of abuse [3]. These developments reinforce the central conclusion: descent through women does not automatically produce women's rule.

6 Critical Analysis: Why This Matters for the Workshop

The reviewer's concern about the original submission was not simply about disclosure; it was also about workshop fit. This revised version responds by making AI method part of the paper's contribution rather than an afterthought.

The paper's workshop relevance lies in three points:

1. It uses LLM-based counterfactual generation as an analytical tool.
2. It introduces a transparent pattern check for how authority is linguistically associated in the literature.
3. It shows how computer science authors can contribute methodologically to a social science debate without claiming fieldwork-based authority they do not have.

The conclusion remains the same as the established anthropological consensus. What changes is the path to that conclusion: it is now more explicit, more testable, and more transparent about the role of AI assistance.

7 Conclusion

Khasi society should not be described as truly matriarchal. The literature supports a more precise conclusion: Khasi society is matrilineal in descent and inheritance, but not matriarchal in the sense of women holding dominant social and political authority [2,4].

This paper makes three modest but meaningful contributions. First, it demonstrates how LLMs can be used to generate counterfactual tests for anthropological claims. Second, it provides a transparent way to compare a social system against the formal expectations of matriarchy. Third, it shows that AI-assisted methods can help organise and clarify an established scholarly debate without substituting for the original literature.

Future work should apply similar methods to fieldwork-based data, which would allow a stronger empirical test of how matriliney operates in lived social practice. Because this study relies on published literature rather than original ethnographic fieldwork, its findings should be understood as conceptual and methodological rather than empirical.

AI Assistance Disclosure The authors used OpenAI’s ChatGPT-4 and Google’s NotebookLM as integral parts of the research process, not merely as language tools. Specific AI-assisted contributions include:

- **Literature scoping and grounding** — ChatGPT-4 was prompted to extract the most cited claims for and against the “Khasi matriarchy” thesis from anthropological abstracts. NotebookLM [7] was used to synthesise primary source documents and assist in literature cross-referencing.
- **Counterfactual simulation** — ChatGPT-4 generated a structured set of empirical predictions that would hold if Khasi society were truly matriarchal. These predictions were then tested by the authors against published data.
- **Keyword co-occurrence analysis** — Using ChatGPT-4’s text parsing capabilities, the authors mapped how frequently “power,” “authority,” and “control” appear in association with female vs. male institutions in the reviewed literature.
- **Presentation and video dissemination** — NotebookLM was utilised to convert the finalised research materials into structured presentation slides and media/video synthesis outlines for workshop dissemination.
- **Language refinement** — Grammar, structure, and clarity editing across the manuscript.

No AI tool generated original fieldwork data, interviewed human subjects, or performed statistical inference on unpublished datasets. All final interpretations, source verification, and academic judgements are the authors’ own. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of this work.

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