

Cultural Differences: **a roadmap for UU visitors from the US** **traveling to the Khasi Hills of India**

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There are many cultural differences. I will list only a few of this fascinating, ancient culture. The earliest mention of the word “Khasi” appears in Sankardeva’s “Baghavata Purana” of Indo-Aryan literature about 1500 ce. Keep in mind that many of these traditions are dying particularly in the city of Shillong. The Khasi culture differs greatly from the typical images of mainland India, their culture and ethnic background being more akin to Southeast Asia. They are not vegetarians, and they do not typically cook spicy curries. They were pre-literate until the 1880’s when Christian missionaries set their language to an alphabet.

Family & Home

This **matrilineal society** is built on a strong clan system, and family ties are deeply valued within extended families. The youngest daughter, ‘duh duh’ inherits ancestral property. She is the one who stays with her parents and takes care of them in their old age. And she is responsible to care for / take in any family or even close clan members in need for their whole lives. Children are given their mother’s last name and live in the village of their mothers, not fathers. Women own all property. Marrying within the clan is the most important taboo and is strictly forbidden. In the end, the maternal uncle is in charge of decision-making within the family.

Clan relationship: brother, sister, aunt, uncle, cousin-sister or cousin-brother, all can mean someone in the same clan, or someone close to your family. These names do not necessarily mean someone with the same blood ties we expect. This is also true for “my house”—which may be an aunt’s house, not a place where the speaker actually resides. Their last name or ‘title name’ as they would term it, will be their clan name.

People inherit these from their mothers.

Names: Most people have a 'nickname' which designates their place in family. Males: bah bah is eldest, bah rit is a middle, bah duh is the youngest. Females: Kong ieit (love) is the most common. 'Duh duh' is the youngest daughter. These nicknames can be confusing, as few people actually are referred to by their given names. Don't just ask people what their name is, but what people call them. In all cases, a person you don't know can be addressed Kong (female) or Bah (male). These will be used as titles in front of people's names too, (ex. Bah Bring or Kong Molti.) It is fun to ask people what their names mean in English—they are usually beautiful, and often tell a story about their birth, or their family's hopes for them. (And might help you learn the unusual sounds.) Kong Sngithiangnora is a member of the Madan Laban church. Her name means sngi=day thiang=sweet, she explains was a beautiful clear morning after lots of clouds the day she was born. And all her female cousins share this 'nora' ending to their names."

Personal questions can make people uncomfortable. They don't ask them of each other. This goes back to the belief in evil spirits named 'Thlen' who comes in the disguise of people who ask too many questions!

Perceived Cleanliness: As is true in most Asian countries be aware of your **right hand** (clean) and your **left hand** (unclean). (Particularly if you are eating with your hands, and are naturally left-handed!)

Ironing is still in fashion. People change clothes to fresh clean clothes to leave the house, even to go to the market for daily goods.

Women wear skirts & dresses No one will scold a woman for doing otherwise, (but they do provide a measure of protection/cover when it is necessary to toilet outdoors).

The People

Khasi/Pnar/Bhoi/War—4 areas make up “Khasi Hills” with different languages, cultures, and habits. These are the 4 interconnected tribes—who share some stories, and a sense of interconnectedness through their story of origin.

Khasi area (Ri Khasi) is in the western part of the region, including Shillong. Pnar (Ri Pnar) people live in the Jaitia Hills, the eastern part of the region. They were part of vast Jaintia Kingdom, with a capital in Jaintiapur—now in Bangladesh. Bhoi people (Ri Bhoi) live on the northern foothills, closest to Assam. And War people (Ri War) live in the south of the region, closest to Bangladesh. Their language is most distinct from Khasi.

These people were pre-literate prior to British invasion of late 1870’s. Missionaries created a simple phonic alphabet for them, and declared the dialect spoken where they were located at that time, to be ‘THE’ Khasi: it is the dialect from Cherrapunjee (Sohra). There are many dialects, languages within a small area. Particularly the 4 inter-related tribes have their own languages.

Seng Khasi (tribal religion):

the modern name for their traditional, tribal religion. They believe in animal sacrifice for healing and divination. Spells and curses are common. Many Khasis, particularly the ones who live in villages believe that illnesses and bad fortune come from evil spirits. The ‘Cock’ (or Rooster) is the symbol of this group.

Women’s realms & Men’s realms are usually separate. Women often congregate in the kitchen, and men in front rooms. Women own the houses, and both work. Men traditionally run government and institutions, such as a church. This is shifting somewhat. But men still sit on one side of a church, and women on the other. Church elders and dignitaries sit segregated again, up front. You may be asked, with an arm

gesture, to sit up front.

Church and Religion

What it means to be a Unitarian

They are all believers in one, panentheistic God, uniformly. **Panentheism** is a word from Greek: *pan* = all, *en* = in, and *theos* = God; "all-in-God." It means that God is immanent within the Universe, but also transcends it. They are a creedal religion, and are not focused on "freedom of religious beliefs" at all. Their understanding of God is a synthesis from traditional tribal beliefs and some biblical references. They generally are not bible readers, but have some selected references in their hymnal. They do not understand 'atheism' since they cannot comprehend how anyone could say that God wasn't there: since the food we eat, the love of family, the air we breathe, the water we drink—everything that comes to us is a gift from God.

Going to church

The typical **order of service** is in the front of the hymnal. You can follow along, and try to speak the prayers, readings & hymns.

Collections usually taken once or twice (second time for a special need or cause) Rs10 is the least to give. Have money/cash with you at each service.

Ask to buy a hymnal. They are useful, and owned personally.

Sunday school time is usually in the morning, and all-church time is usually after lunch (~2pm). Children will be in Sunday school themselves in the morning, and then come back to afternoon services. Sunday school is a time to learn the catechism and hymns. Often there are also early Sunday morning services and Wednesday evening services too. These are less attended.

After service, some times honored guests will be served tea with a few people from the church. Typically, people go to each other's houses for snacks and tea.

Sometimes this is followed by a **home service**, where everyone

re-gathers in a church member's house for another service. One room holds the elders and whoever is preaching. The other rooms hold everyone else, segregated by gender and often age. Few people 'hear' the sermon, or anything else. They don't care.

Don't be surprised **if you are asked to speak**, it's an honor. Remember that everyone is a layperson here, they all have given sermons. Just smile and do your best. Don't worry. Also ask and find out how long they want you to speak. If you are given advanced notice to speak:

ask:

-how long should I speak

-will it be translated, or summarized at the end (makes a difference how long your speech will take, and include this time in your speech length calculations)

-ask what they think you should speak about .

If you aren't given advance notice, say a simple greeting & thanks.

General tips:

Bring and wear layers

Never leave home without a sweater and/or a shawl

No central heat . . . heating is by charcoal and electric space heaters.

Laundry is done by hand. Only a very few rich people in the city will have a semi-automatic machine for washing. Driers are unheard of. You can drop your clothes to be washed and pressed with a local laundry shop.

Going out/shopping

Finding your way around: there are not street addresses, so learn the name of where you are staying. People can get you back to a location name.

Taxis are cheap; don't be afraid to use them. Some serve as small 'buses' and run a regular route. People flag them down

along the route. You can ask one, if it is just sitting to take you somewhere on your own. Ask how much it will cost before you depart.

Wear shoes for Bara Bazar, it is very crowded and toes get stepped on.

Watch out when crossing street! Traffic is traveling in the opposite direction than you are used to.

Bartering is common with Indian/Bangla “plains” people, and not as much with Khasis. You can barter even in shops (where you will find mostly plains people as owners/employees).

Fixed-price goods are a feature of all of India, so small stalls are selling things at the same price as larger stores. This is for manufactured food stuffs, and staples.

Being invited to someone’s home

Some Khasis (like other Indians) remove their **shoes** before entering their homes. Follow their lead.

Time to Eat!

5pm is **visiting** time, not dinner time in Shillong and Jowai.

Dinner is at 9 or 10pm in Shillong. It’s earlier in the villages. Guests might be invited at 6:00 but food might not be served until 9:00 after much conversation. Unitarians say prayers before meals. The host family or in some cases just the woman will not eat with the guests. They will watch you eat. It is their function to take care of the guests who might want seconds but are using their fingers to eat the meal and trying not to be too messy. Traditionally, no one talks during the meal in respect for the gifts from God and the cook. Immediately after eating, the guests leave – sometimes the family will walk the guests home (this dates back to the days when lions might have been on the path). Then, the host family rushes back home to eat and clean up.

Tea is served anytime: ‘sha’ is the Khasi for tea. Tea is generally served with both milk and sugar. ‘Sha saw’ (pronounced ‘sha sau’ means ‘red tea’ and will be tea without the milk. ‘Sha saw khlem shini’ is plain, ‘black tea’ as

we would call it. Tea is not generally served this way, please ask for it prior to being served, and your hostess will prepare it beside the regular tea, because they will cook the tea with the milk and sugar it in.

Like in Britian, tea can be served at any time. But “Tea” can also mean the mealtime, between 3 and 4 pm, when you drink tea and eat a snack.

Coffee is not generally available in a household, or restaurant. Sorry. Few people will have ever tried it. Instant may be available in a big food store. And one restaurant that serves southern-style Indian cuisine was serving it in downtown Shillong.

Drinking the water . . . asked for boiled, it usually is anyway. Don’t ask for bottled, most Khasis are not into spending money that way, and have to purify their water in large amounts. Urban people boil and filter their water. Rural people boil water. When it doubt, drink tea.

Toilets: ‘latrines’ is the common word used. Usually in the city home, they are around back, behind someone’s home. It will be a squat toilet, with a bucket of water with a dipper for you to use to flush (and wash yourself, in lieu of TP). There are few public toilets in most city-centers. They are filthy, but serve if absolutely necessary (squat-type). Try to find a hotel to use their toilet (often western style).

“Bam kwai”—offering of betel nut, translates into “Eat Kwai?” Kwai, also called Betel nut, is actually three things. It is a piece of areca nut, a piece of betel leaf, and a dab of lime paste, made from mixing powdered lime (the mineral not the fruit) and water. It is served the nut and lime folded into the leaf, and is held in between the back teeth and slowly chewed. It is a stimulant. And can make your teeth and lips bright red, unless you remove most of the lime. (Tear a bit of the leaf off

with where the lime is dabbed.)

It is central to their **story of hospitality**. People love to tell this story, which is somewhat gruesome (so I'll tell it to you now so you can smile when they first tell it to you). It is THE central teaching story about hospitality, and since you are guest, you might want to understand it. There are variations, but I'll do my best:

Hospitality has always been important to our people, and we love to have people over, and share what we have with them. We feel it is very important to treat guests well, and give them the best that we have. People used to think that all gifts of hospitality should be met with an equal gift in return.

Once there were two men who were friends, and they loved meeting in the marketplace and sharing ideas and stories. One of them was very rich and the other very poor. But that didn't matter, because they loved each other's company.

One day, the rich man invited the poor man over to his house. When he was there, he was served many fine foods, drank good tea and enjoyed delicious fruits. He had a wonderful visit. The poor man went home and told his wife about the lovely meal they had shared.

The next time they met in the marketplace, the poor man insisted that the rich man come to his house this time. The rich man knew that his friend was poor, and said 'oh no, let us just sit here in this tea stall and enjoy each other's company.' But the poor man insisted. And the rich man resisted, but eventually he gave in and went to his friend's house.

When they got there, the poor man called to his wife in the kitchen, "My friend is here. Fix a nice meal for us." And they settled into the front room and enjoyed talking. After some time, the poor man was curious, just why his wife had not brought any tea, and he didn't smell any food cooking. So he

went back into the kitchen saying “Wife, why are you neglecting my good friend? He is the best friend I have, and he has extended good hospitality to me.” But as the curtain in the door parted, he saw that his wife was dead on the floor. He saw that she had stabbed herself. He was shocked, and wondered why she had done this. Then he looked about the kitchen and noticed that there was no food in the kitchen at all. Suddenly he felt tremendous grief for the shame he caused his wife, asking her to prepare a meal when they had no food. He had loved her dearly, and this was no way to repay all her years of kindness. Thinking of nothing else, he too stabbed himself.

After some time, the guest was wondering just where his best friend was, and so finally, feeling embarrassed, he got up and went to the kitchen doorway. He called out, “Friend, I am lonely for you. Where are you? Is there something wrong?” And hearing no answer, he tried again. And again hearing no answer, he parted the curtain and found his friend and his wife dead—both stabbed.

At first he thought there had been a crime, but then as he looked about the kitchen, he realized that there was no food in the house at all. He was horrified to think that his dear friend and his wife were both dead all because he had come to the house to eat. He had so much food back at his house. He felt such shame and remorse, he couldn’t bear to think about living with himself after this. And so he stabbed himself to death.

After seeing all this sorrow in one day, God gave the Khasi people kwai to serve to guests. It is told that one serving of kwai is equal to a delightful meal. It is given that even the poorest people can give without feeling shame.

Speaking English (Indian English, Khasi-style):

- “Used to be” -verb, often present tense!! “I used to be studying at St. Edmond’s School” generally would mean that the speaker currently is studying at St. Edmond’s School. “My father used to be working as a government office worker,” generally would mean that the speaker’s father is a government office worker.
- All double consonants which have an ‘h’ as the second position will sound different. They don’t aspirate this sound. “Phin” sounds like “Pin,” “the” sounds like ‘te’
- Shifting: means moving a household
- Biscuits: cookies, but less sweet.
- Title: surname, or ‘last name’
- ‘where from?’ is translated directly from question in Khasi, means ‘what are you doing currently?’

Minister Visiting a Village church

-When speaking, keep the language very simple, and the ideas very simple. Very few people listening will have much of any education, and of course, there will be kids of all ages there too.

-you may be asked to visit homes. Say ‘Khublei’ and hold out your hand. People may be too shy to greet you at first, especially the women. It is especially important to greet the “Kong” of the house - the senior woman.

If you visit the homes, usually you will be served kwai and sometimes tea with biscuits. Wear ‘slippers’ as they are called here--shoes or sandals that you can take on and off easily. You will want to take them off at the door in any house where people will be sitting on the floor. Wear sensible sturdy sandals. There are many stone steps, things to climb over, mud puddles (in season), and other obstacles of village life. Ask to use a toilet if you need to go, someone will take you there, often it will be a walk. Sometimes it will be a field. Children will follow you from house to house and peer in the

windows and doors. They like it if you play a kind of peek-a-boo with them with your smile.

If you are a woman, bring a jain kyrshah (the checkered aprons worn everywhere by most women.) You can wear a nice dress in church, and then don the jain kyrshah to go from house to house, where you may be expected to sit on the floor (on a cane mat), or on a short stool. A jain kyrshah is also useful to cover your body when bathing in a public washing space, or as a towel.

As a minister, you may be asked to give a baby a name. This happened to me several times, and the first time it really surprised me. Honor them and think of something. Give a name, and tell them why you made this choice. They'll ask for a second choice if it doesn't sound right to their ear.