

KA Jainsem: Tracing Identity and Contextual Meanings Therein

Suzanne R J Khongwar¹, Bobina Wanniang^{2*}

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Shillong College, Meghalaya, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shillong College, Meghalaya, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21507299>

Published Date: 23-July-2026

Abstract: Within the matrilineal Khasi society, this study examines the cultural and symbolic significance of Ka Jainsem, the traditional attire worn by Khasi women, as a marker of gendered and ethnic identity. Through a qualitative thematic analysis of existing literature, the study explores how Ka Jainsem conveys gendered responsibilities, cultural adaptation, and collective identity. Spanning from pre-colonial seclusion to post-independence assertions of identity, this traditional clothing reflects continuity amid historical and contemporary influences and serves as a visual representation of Khasi heritage.

The study highlights the central role of women in preserving tradition by embodying dignity, authority, and modesty—particularly in formal settings and rituals. It also underscores the evolving nature of Ka Jainsem, noting how it has incorporated modern styles while retaining its cultural essence, as seen in its use as a school uniform and in contemporary stylistic adaptations.

The findings affirm Ka Jainsem's dynamic role as a cultural artifact that bridges tradition and modernity. It supports the Khasi community's ongoing efforts to preserve and reinterpret their identity in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Ka Jainsem, Khasi women, matrilineal society, ethnic identity, gender roles, cultural symbolism, traditional attire, heritage preservation, ritual significance, Northeast India, indigenous clothing.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has become an increasingly interesting area of exploration and research in recent years to examine the concept of identity in a more dynamic and multifaceted way—giving due attention to the various identities a person may hold or project across different contexts and through a variety of symbols.

Identity has been defined as “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 2). The term is also used “to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture” (Deng 1995, 1).

Every tribe possesses its own distinct cultural practices, traditional beliefs, and ways of life. Material culture serves as a key marker of identification for a particular tribe, distinguishing it from others. Among the elements of material culture, clothing stands out as a highly visible and definitive expression of identity—a visual language that functions as a non-verbal representation of cultural belonging.

Turner (1984) refers to clothing as “the social skin.” Clothes are cultural artifacts embedded with meanings rooted in both culture and social structure. Scholars have emphasized that ethnic attire can be viewed as an external marker of a group’s identity—through which individuals recognize themselves as members of the group and are similarly recognized by others (Nash [1989]; Eicher and Sumberg [1995]). Numerous studies acknowledge the importance of dress in culture and its potential to reveal the deep connections between people and their cultural identities. Clothing not only influences our outward appearance but also reflects our inner worlds. For many indigenous communities, dress represents cultural expression and conveys multiple layers of meaning.

Manning Nash's *The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World* (1989), a seminal work in the field, explores the role of dress as an ethnic marker—one of the “surface pointers” that allows for “recognition at a distance, or in a fleeting instance.” Through dress as an object of culture, identities, attitudes, cultural values, and beliefs are articulated and communicated (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1995; Ngwenya, 2002; Crane, Hamilton & Wilson, 2004).

In the context of exploring the construction of cultural identity through dress, this study focuses on Ka Jainsem as the object of analysis, owing to its prominent visibility in the everyday life of Khasi society. As a cultural form, Ka Jainsem functions as a signifier of identity. Worn by women, it is emblematic of the traditional attire of the Khasi tribe and conveys symbolic membership in social categories where identity and its inherent socio-cultural meanings are embedded.

To understand the deeper implications of Ka Jainsem and its significance within the social setting, this study aims to analyze its cultural relevance in shaping and expressing identity. It further seeks to investigate how Ka Jainsem has been imbued with symbolic cultural meanings, serving not only as a tool of identification but also as a communicative agent. The attire conveys a range of messages that reveal the underlying gendered conventions deeply rooted in Khasi matrilineal society.

Signifying Collective Identity: Clothing has long been a subject of anthropological and sociological interest and is widely regarded as a social phenomenon. According to Eicher and Sumberg (1995), ethnic dress is closely tied to ethnicity and ethnic identity. Dress plays a significant role in ethnic identity, as it communicates both individual identity within a group and the collective identity of the group itself. Various scholars argue that ethnicity involves notions of group cohesion and includes boundaries that distinguish members from non-members. This unity is often based on a shared heritage that includes language, dress, beliefs, conduct, and general ways of life. Ethnic dress, as Eicher and Sumberg (1995:302) suggest, “indicates common or shared ways of dress that identify a group of people who share a common background and heritage.” Edensor (2002) supports this view, stating that dress serves as a marker of cultural identity and is often used to express identity during national ceremonies and cultural events. In this regard, material culture artifacts are appropriated to reflect the values and beliefs of an ethnic group or nation (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1989; Eicher & Sumberg, 1995; Kaiser, 1998).

Studies on clothing have contributed to an understanding of dress as central to the dynamics of both collective and personal identity, as well as social differentiation. The classical works of Simmel (1904), Veblen (1899), and Blumer (1969) have significantly shaped theoretical frameworks for analyzing clothing as a socio-cultural phenomenon. To understand the perception of Ka Jainsem as a symbolic marker of identity, it is essential to examine how this item of dress holds cultural and social significance within the Khasi social milieu.

Simmel's (1904) perspective on clothing emphasizes its dual role in expressing both unity and difference. Unity involves inclusion through group membership, evoking a sense of belonging. In contrast, difference implies exclusion, highlighting what sets an individual or group apart. In this context, Simmel's notion of unity relates to the construction of group identity. Ka Jainsem, as the traditional attire of Khasi women, functions as a visible signifier of Khasi cultural identity. In terms of difference, Ka Jainsem not only distinguishes the Khasi from other tribal communities but also affirms the gender identity of the wearer.

Notably, Simmel (1904) argues that clothing is consciously used to satisfy one's need to belong. Due to their visibility, clothes serve as symbolic representations that communicate values, identity, and group affiliation (Ryan, 1966). These visible markers of clothing enable individuals and communities to differentiate “us” from “them,” confirming the existence of distinctions between various cultural groups (Hodder, 1982).

As cultural members, individuals internalize the conventions of their society and express them through systems of representation. Just as there is no individual without culture, there is no identity that does not find expression through cultural elements. Human interaction is grounded in systems of cultural symbolism. G. N. Gordon (1969) explains: “Almost every society known to man has evolved a rich symbol system whereby at first glance, strange objects and odd types of behaviour appear to the outside observer to have irrational meaning and seem to evoke odd unwarranted cognitions and emotions. Upon examination, however, each symbol system reflects a specific cultural logic, and every symbolism functions to communicate between members of the culture in much the same way as, but in a much more subtle manner than, conversational language.”

Within the Khasi social context, Ka Jainsem continues to serve as a reminder and a symbol of values deeply entrenched in this matrilineal society.

Ka Jainsem is a garment worn exclusively by women. The fact that it is selected as the "object" of analysis to locate the identity marker of the Khasi tribe highlights the importance of emphasizing that the Khasi are a matrilineal society. In line with matrilineal principles, the woman in Khasi society bears the responsibility of continuing the lineage and ensuring the continuity of the group as a collective. This places women in a central position within the cultural landscape. In Khasi ideology, women are regarded not only as the "embodiment of Khasi matrilineity" (Pakyntein, V: 2000), but also as those who "are held responsible for the maintenance of... traditions" (Nongbri, T. 1988). This underscores the notion that women are the repositories of Khasi traditions and practices. Consequently, they bear the responsibility of representing the collective identity of the community. By positioning Khasi women as emblems of the tribe's collective identity, it becomes fitting that Ka Jainsem is viewed as a significant cultural marker.

Women play a crucial role in preserving clothing traditions as symbols of identity. It is observable in Khasi society that women maintain the practice of wearing traditional clothing in their everyday lives. Since women uphold this tradition, they also become the agents through whom the Khasi tribal identity—especially that of men—is publicly affirmed. Studies by Howe (1998), Salvador (1997), Young (1971), Tice (1995), and Knauff (2007), as cited in Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2012), show similar findings in ethnic communities in South America, where women have preserved traditional dress while men have increasingly adopted Western clothing.

Today, whether in daily life or on formal occasions, it is the Khasi woman who dons and represents traditional attire. The very structure of matrilineal culture places a significant responsibility on women—not only as caretakers of the home and nurturers of the family—but also as custodians and defenders of the community's traditions and cultural heritage. It is evident that in fulfilling her role as a Khasi woman, she also bears the responsibility of preserving the tradition of attire, keeping it alive and relevant. This underscores the woman's vital role in both sustaining her culture and projecting it to the wider world. When a woman wears Ka Jainsem outside the region, it becomes an act of cultural preservation—an emblem of her indigenous identity that affirms her ethnic roots. In the realm of dress practices, the bearer and symbol of Khasi identity is, unmistakably, the woman.

Records indicate that in pre-colonial times, the Khasis preferred a relatively insulated existence in the hills, largely untainted by external influences on their way of life. In his introduction to Lt. Col. Gurdon's *The Khasis* (1914), Sir Charles Lyall refers to the "isolation of the Khasi race, in the midst of a great encircling population all of whom belong to the Tibeto-Burman stock," who "preserved their independence and their ancestral institutions through many centuries in the face of the attractions offered by the alien forms of culture around them."

Up to this point in history, the traditional attire of both men and women served as a clear identity marker, reflecting the Khasi people's pride in and determined effort to preserve their unique culture. Significantly, traditional dress functioned as a collective symbol of resistance to external cultural influences.

The arrival of Christian missionaries and the establishment of colonial rule brought sweeping changes—most notably, the advent of Christianity, which in turn brought about a fundamental shift in worldview. Lt. Col. P.R.T. Gurdon's detailed and valuable account of the Khasis notes that the British presence in the region led to changes in the dress practices of Khasi men and women. Among women, the jympien was replaced by a chemise, along with the adoption of items such as short coats, stockings, and shoes—all borrowed from British styles. However, the essential jainsem and the traditional cloak remained intact.

By this time, Khasi men had already begun showing a growing preference for Western attire. The ka boh khaila was replaced by knickerbockers, while coats, collars, and waistcoats took on Western cuts—replacing the longer cotton or endi waistcoats of earlier times that featured fringes at the bottom. For perhaps the first time in their history, the Khasi people became receptive to changes brought about by external forces, displaying an unprecedented openness to outside influences in many fundamental aspects of tribal life.

Today, Khasi men have fully adopted Western clothing, and traditional menswear has largely been relinquished and relegated to the status of a costume—worn primarily during stage performances or by dancers and performers at cultural and traditional religious festivals. At important events and ceremonies today, a turban of eri or khor, or an eri shawl draped around the neck, are often the only visible tokens of traditional male dress, worn as accessories to a Western-style suit.

Studies reveal that in various cultures under colonization, the mode of dress among indigenous people underwent drastic changes to conform to the colonizer's concept of how the body should be clothed. Apparently, British colonizers, as well

as missionaries, approved of Ka Jainsem as a garment that represented modesty, dignity, and propriety in women, as there was no tampering with its form. According to Gurdon, the women were “infinitely more decently clothed than Bengali coolie women,” and “they show taste as regards the blending of colours in their different garments.” The traditional dress of Khasi women more than met the moral standards of the Victorian code of dress for women.

Post-independence, the region and its people became part of the state of Assam. A renewed need arose for the community to assert its identity and autonomy, which was manifested through the Hill State Movement and culminated in the formation of Meghalaya as a separate state in 1972. With the achievement of statehood, new threats emerged in the form of increased migration and the presence of outsiders, leading to unrest and communal riots from the late 1970s into the 1990s.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the politics of dress became pronounced, marked by restrictions imposed on Khasi women by organizations like the KSU and the HNLC. These groups forbade women from wearing Indian-style clothing such as the salwar kameez. This stance likely stemmed from the belief that adopting external dress practices could lead to the gradual erosion of other cultural aspects, thereby diluting the distinctiveness of Khasi identity. The dress code diktats echoed the idea of dress as a cultural boundary—distinguishing between ‘us’ and ‘them’—and upheld the traditional ideology that women are the ‘keepers of tradition.’

Moreover, this period highlighted “the strength of dress as a symbol of protest and a tool for mass mobilization,” while also serving to “remind the people of their power” (Kharsyntiew, p.165). During these decades, Ka Jainsem was appropriated as a symbol of identity struggle and resistance—a rejection of dominant Indian cultural influence (ibid, p.171)—reflecting an uneasy relationship with mainland India. When dress becomes a collective expression of identity, it transforms into what Judith Butler refers to as “body-politics” (Butler, 1993). As a signifier of body-politics, dress is used to reinforce indigenous tribal identity and to “lay claim to a political space that is often dominated by mainstream discourse” (Kharsyntiew, p.161).

Signifying Gendered Meaning

“Clothes,” writes Keenan, “are society’s way of showing where we belong in the order of things, our role and position in the social pageantry” (Keenan, 2001, p.13), expressing and communicating normative gender performance within the social setting. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher also assert that “gender distinctions are a crucial part of the construction of dress.” Such observations point to the fact that clothing has long been one of the most visible ways of expressing differences, particularly gendered identities. The process of gendering assigns specific roles and expectations based on perceived biological differences, and the stark contrast in dress codes between men and women illustrates the extent to which gender identity is performed through clothing.

In the context of Simmel’s (1904) perspective that clothing elicits difference, Ka Jainsem marks the tribal identity of the Khasi as distinct from other tribal communities. Furthermore, it asserts the wearer’s gender identity, serving as a form of gender-based exclusion enacted through dress. The absence of Ka Jainsem from male dress underscores a culturally encoded ideology wherein clothing rules reinforce gender identities.

Among the Khasi, cultural dress icons are represented through women’s indigenous attire. A woman’s social identity—symbolically conveyed through Ka Jainsem—aligns with the cultural framework of Khasi society. Deeply rooted in matriliney, long-held cultural ideals prescribe specific social norms and expectations for women’s behavior and appearance. These expectations are articulated in expressions such as ka kynthei nongri-nongkdup, ka kynthei ka nongsumar, ka kynthei ka bari/ba bat ia ka riti-ka dustur, and ka kynthei ka ban ri ia ka burom-ka akor—each emphasizing women’s roles as nurturers, preservers of custom, and upholders of moral and social decorum.

As such, women are expected to present an image of modesty and propriety at all times, revealing an underlying form of cultural imposition. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992:6) observe that dress reflects, among other things, a community’s “belief systems that shape moral and aesthetic standards for dress,” including what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate in terms of modesty.

Stuart Hall’s (2001) discourse on representation describes symbols as composed of such elements as sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions and clothes which are all part of our natural world and material world. It is in their function of constructing meaning and transmitting it that they operate as symbols that stand for the meanings we wish to convey.

When a young Khasi girl reaches puberty and attains a certain level of maturity, she appears in public wearing Ka Jainsem. This conscious act involving a garment conveys a subliminal message that she identifies herself as an adult, albeit young.

This is when she seeks to identify herself with her social group as a Khasi, associating herself with a distinct tribal group identity and presenting sartorial symbolic allegiance to everything that a 'Khasi woman' stands for. It is an acknowledgement of a transition from girlhood to womanhood. On an even more significant level, it symbolises a conformity, an incorporation and a conscious identification with the community and the culture at large. Henceforth, her family and others view her as a young Khasi adult which fact entails certain culturally-determined expectations. This awareness of her identity will dominate almost all-important aspects and decisions in life. "Simplicity in outlook, modesty in spirit and grace in movement," (Bareh, 1967) are the desirable qualities that she should imbibe and manifest in all facets of life, private and public. As such, Ka Jainsem represents a momentous transition, the equivalent of a 'rite of passage', a 'coming of age'.

In the domestic space, the mother and other female members usually wear ka jainkyrshah. Its purpose is to serve as an apron, making it a utility garment. The fact that it covers half of a woman's body lengthwise also suggests the inherent modesty that is displayed by the woman even within the confines of the home and the consequent respect that it commands. It symbolises a mother figure, a figure of authority and respect, of wisdom, of love, care and nurture, of safety and security. Furthermore, it also encodes a meaning of elderliness and all that being 'elderly' demands from others, especially from the young.

Ka jainkyrshah is replaced by the more formal jainsem when women move into public space especially in the urban areas. The inherent meanings of ka jainkyrshah are transferred and extended to ka jainsem. The same meanings are extended to this dress in the work space where, in particular, women in the teaching profession still overwhelmingly choose Ka jainsem for work. The students perceive and understand the inherent meaning of respect, control and benevolent authority that a jainsem-clad woman represents in the classroom and conform to this unspoken code. The classroom, in this sense, is an extension of the home where a figure of knowledge, dignity and authority is to be heard, learned from and obeyed, and sometimes from whom deserving and correctional treatment is to be borne and accepted.

Studies of societies in antiquity by Alicia Batten (2009) show how dress and adornment since the olden days were bound up with gender and honour. The directions on women's dress are not concerned solely with how the women are perceived within the community, but how their dress reflect upon the men in the family and community, and in turn, how the community is perceived by others. Interestingly, "how a woman dresses and behaves bears considerable consequences for the perception of her husband" or family. In general, the ideal woman who was "modestly dressed, quiet and obedient" was an asset to her husband and upheld his honour in the eyes of the community. Consequently, a woman's public appearance has always been crucial where, in many cases "male honor is largely dependent upon female behaviour, female honor does not always".

It may be noted that in Khasi society there have been strict rules of conduct clearly laid down for women as this is considered of paramount importance in maintaining the honor of the family and the clan. The core precepts which had been orally passed from generation to generation were compiled in written form, "Ki Jingsneng Tymmen", by U Rangbah Radhon Sing Berry in 1903 and translated into English (The Teachings of Elders) by Bijoya Sawian (ed. 2016).

Ki Jingsneng Tymmen akin to 'moral codes of conduct', reflect the value system of the society. The poetic rendition of the core precepts of a Khasi way of life encapsulates the essence of 'Ka Akor Khasi' or the Khasi code of ethics (Syiem). These precepts act as a compass to steer the behavioural conduct and provide directions on proper etiquette in day-to-day living so as to mould individuals into ideal men or women who embody the Khasi worldview. Though these directions on matters related to ethics, etiquette, decorum and propriety are prescribed for the community in general, some sections in Part II of the book give specific instructions related to women. In verse 43, the ideal woman is referred to as "akin to the goddess of wealth", "like the queen bee", "endowed with the sun's glory", "like a golden seal", the very "foundation of home" who "grows and revels in her purity". Words of caution are spelled out against giving her "too much freedom" as she "may lose her dignity" through excessive or imprudent behaviour. The far-reaching implications of such a tragedy are given in no uncertain terms. Not only will this bring shame and dishonour to her own self but, more importantly, "Children, Kith and Kin near her don't go", "Her home, too, will be destroyed forever, /Her kith and kin will also suffer". This clearly indicates that the honor of the family and the clan rests on the woman, a responsibility that she is to be cognizant of at all times. The centrality of the woman's position in upholding the honor and dignity of her family and clan is unmistakable.

One of the standards for maintaining honour and dignity is through clothing practices. As a dress reflecting modesty and propriety, Ka Jainsem fits this criterion perfectly. Through this representation it enables a woman to, in part, carry out her duty and responsibility in maintaining the honor of her family and her clan in particular and the community in general.

Khasi culture acknowledges women as individuals with capabilities that extend beyond being mere homemakers, though within the limits of certain restrictions as reflected in the writings of R.S Berry, 'Ki Jingsneng Tymmen' and H. Bareh in his book 'The History and Culture of the Khasis'. It is not surprising to note that women dominate shopkeeping and trade in the traditional "jew", be it in urban or rural areas. In such places as Iewduh, Khasi women are seen in their traditional Jainsem over which a functional 'jainkyrshah' is worn. This attire portrays a down-to-earth, practical side to her, reflecting an independence, mental sharpness and business acumen that does not necessarily entail a need to defeminise oneself. The overall strong presence of Khasi women in the work space (traditional and modern) testifies to the fact that women have traditionally contributed in shouldering the financial responsibilities of her family with dignity and equanimity. This has reaped a rich dividend as the pressures and demands of modern life keep increasing exponentially.

Today women are getting even more educated and occupying more prestigious positions, many of who have broken the traditional barrier of restrictions*. Interestingly the dominant choice of Ka jainsem in the workplace (in whatever capacity) points to a positive underscoring of these women identifying themselves primarily as Khasi, as traditional, even as they keep up with the times in terms of the growing expectations and needs of the modern world. With increased education, earning power, exposure, and availability of choice in this liberal globalised environment, it is only natural that the modern Khasi woman embraces different forms of modern fashion in different situations.

When it comes to events related to death Ka Jainsem remains the dominant dress code as no other attire can succinctly convey the appropriate non-verbal statements as fluently as it does. In such a situation it is the women's attire that plays a significant role - an attire consisting of Ka Jainsem over which ka jaintapmoh/stole/shawl is draped- both of which are of dark, sober colours. The women gathered at such a home wear an almost uniform look through which individuals collectively identify or empathise with the bereaved family. It is female attire Ka Jainsem that affords an enactment of symbolic mourning through clothing. In such a significant life event, women's clothing is primarily the symbol of a community coming together in a shared experience and offering solace, support, sympathy and comfort. (Mention may be made that men's clothing at such times is not different from their everyday wear).

In the past, the family of the dead were not supposed to be particularly concerned with physical appearance and to attempt to do so would be viewed with disapproval as unbecoming in mourning. In her work on Clothing and Adornment in Antiquity, Alicia J. Batten (2010) observes how '(u)nsoiled, undamaged clothes and stylish appearance are generally associated with positive characteristics and circumstances, whereas dirty garments connote ... death'. From this, we may infer that it is a more or less universal attitude in ancient societies to view a rather plain, austere, sometimes unkempt appearance as relevant during unpleasant and tragic occasions in life.

In the recent past it has been observed in urban areas that ka jainsem dhara (in relevant dark tones) is worn by the family members of the deceased during a funeral. This is especially the case in the death of someone elderly and a highly respected member of the family, the clan and/ or the community. Ka Jainsem dhara which is woven of silk and incorporating a distinctive pattern along the border is traditionally considered a formal dress and as such it is reserved for occasions like weddings and festivals as well as important functions and ceremonies. That it is now worn by the family members at a time of death and bereavement adds yet another dimension of meaning to it. In the light of customary observance in mourning this would be seen as incongruous. Viewed from a different perspective, Ka dhara symbolises a celebration of shared memory and remembrance, an acknowledgement of a life well lived, a legacy that is honoured, a life that deserves to be commemorated, a life whose end deserve a grand and befitting farewell. A garment traditionally associated with joy, happiness, celebration and thanksgiving has appropriated a new set of meanings through its presence at a time of loss and mourning.

The study aims at following objectives

1. To analyse how Ka Jainsem embodies Khasi tribal identity and preserves cultural values in a matrilineal society.
2. To explore how Ka Jainsem conveys evolving gendered and cultural meanings in modern contexts.
3. To evaluate how Ka Jainsem blends tradition and modernity to reinforce Khasi collective and individual identities.

A major area of research across cultures has examined the relationship between ethnic identity and dress showing how dress can be a potent indicator of social cultural and political differences. Clothes have been used to define hierarchies negotiate identities in the face of internal and external changes and indicate belonging since the dawn of civilization and continue to do so in modern tribal communities. The review of the literature uses examples from China Ethiopia India Botswana and other places to examine how traditional clothing and textiles reflect and shape ethnic identity. The analysis emphasizes how dress is a dynamic cultural artifact how it preserves heritage and how it adapts to contemporary sociopolitical contexts. It focuses on the conflicts between modernity and tradition local and global influences and individual and collective identities.

In China clothing has long been used to denote political order and to differentiate between civilization and barbarism (Bulag 2010). Chinese dynasties have used dress codes to denote differences in status and authority since the beginning of written history. These fashion standards were seriously challenged by the frequent conquests by pastoral nomads from Inner Asia. Foreign clothing styles frequently imposed under duress were introduced with each wave of non-Chinese rule causing severe identity crises for the Chinese. King Wuling of Zhao (325–298 BCE) is a notable example of a military reformer who in order to improve his states military capabilities ordered the adoption of Xiongnu barbarian clothing such as unsplit pants appropriate for cavalry (Bulag 2010). This practical acceptance of foreign clothing or hufu qishe caused controversy in the Zhao court because it went against the conventions of Confucian fashion. A recurrent theme in the history of dress and identity the conflict between pragmatic adaptation and cultural fidelity is highlighted by King Wulings explanation that such modifications would not change Zhaos cultural essence. It's interesting to note that although China was able to successfully export its dress codes to neighbouring countries like Korea Vietnam and Japan which painstakingly copied Chinese fashions while modifying them to fit local customs it found it difficult to impose its fashion culture on Inner Asian nomads frequently adopting their looks instead (Bulag 2010). This reciprocal influence emphasizes how clothing is a flexible identity marker that is influenced by power relationships and cross-cultural interactions.

Ahmed (2017) examined the intricate connection between ethnic identity and attire in modern Ethiopia through the Siltie people. The promotion of traditional costumes became a means for many ethnic groups including the Siltie to assert their unique identities after Ethiopia's 1995 ethnic federalism policy. According to Ahmeds research the Siltie created a new cultural costume by combining signs colours and symbols that were not traditionally used in their attire but were intended to represent their distinct ethnic identity. A conscious attempt to project an Us versus them identity is reflected in this process of creating costumes which is closely linked to the larger political context of ethnic recognition and self-administration (Ahmed 2017). Through qualitative techniques like focus groups and interviews Ahmed discovered that although the new costume was first an elitist endeavour the Siltie began to accept it more and more indicating that it might eventually become a permanent identity marker. This case highlights how tradition is constructed in response to contemporary socio-political frameworks and demonstrates how clothing can be reimagined to serve modern political and cultural goals.

Sarkar and Bairagis (2023) study of Indias tribal communities especially the Tripuri women of Tripura highlight the transformative role of clothing in expressing ethnic identity. The change in traditional textiles and costumes impacted by media religion cultural exchange and demographic shifts is documented by their ethnographic research conducted between 2011 and 2017. The study finds that Tripuri women's fashion tastes differ in rural and urban areas with urban areas adopting more modern styles as a result of increased exposure to both domestic and international influences (Sarkar and Bairagi 2023). Questions concerning cultural conviviality and the effects of cross-cultural and cross-national interactions on local identities are raised by the dress change which is a reflection of larger socioeconomic and cultural changes. Additionally, Rabhas (n. d.). An analysis of the Rabha community in India highlights the symbolic value of traditional attire and decorations such as the Pajar for men and the Kambung and Hancha for women in maintaining cultural heritage in the face of modernization. In order to serve scholarly and communal goals Rabha emphasizes the significance of clothing in promoting cultural pride and preserving indigenous customs by recording these items through field observations and oral histories (Rabha n. d.).

The interaction of identity ecology and cultural transmission is further demonstrated by the textile heritage of tribal communities in Northeast India. Verman (2022) investigates how folk culture and natural elements have a significant influence on traditional textiles in states like Nagaland and Meghalaya with motifs and patterns that represent the ecological biodiversity of the area. In order to maintain tribal weaves relevance in the face of globalization the study emphasizes the economic empowerment of women weavers who adapt them to contemporary markets while preserving them (Verman 2022). Similar to this Meynell (2022) investigates the shared textile heritage of the Khasi Bhoi Karbi and Khat-ar Lyngdoh communities in the Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya where a smooth exchange of designs and techniques has resulted from

cultural assimilation. According to Meynell (2022) this shared heritage coexists with different ethnic identities indicating a regional identity that is anchored in local customs but transcends political boundaries. The traditional jewellery and clothing of the Mishing tribe in Assam are documented by Chungkrang Phukan and Gogoi (2016) who highlight their significance as ancestors' symbols of ethnic identity. In order to protect these cultural components which are becoming more and more endangered due to modernization their study emphasizes the necessity of conducting in-depth research (Chungkrang et al. 2016). Varekan and Ellen (2021) draw attention to the Tangkhul tribes handloom goods in Manipur highlighting their cultural significance and the need to preserve these costumes in order to prevent the assimilation of tribal identity into larger sociopolitical dynamics.

According to Power Tyler and Disele (2011) since Botswana lacks a well-defined national traditional dress there have been calls for its reinstatement as a representation of cultural heritage. The preservation of Setswana culture through tangible items like clothing which represent ethnic identity and promote national cohesion is emphasized in the government's National Policy on Culture (2001). The research highlights the close connection between dress and identity for both residents and visitors delving into the historical foundations of traditional attire and its capacity to preserve cultural values in a society that is rapidly modernizing (Power et al. 2011). This viewpoint supports Shukla's (2016) more thorough investigation of costume as an act of identity performance. Shukla illustrates the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary contexts by using case studies from the US Brazil and Sweden to show how costumes allow people to project different selves during festivals reenactments or theatrical performances (Shukla 2016). The practice of dressing up reinforces the social and communicative roles of clothing by turning it into a purposeful expression of heritage or role-playing.

The matrilineal social structure of the Khasi community in Northeast India influences cultural practices including clothing as Ghosh (2021) explains. As a symbol of social standing and cultural heritage the Khasis traditional clothing reflects their unique identity which is based on matrilineal descent. The study emphasizes how in the larger framework of Northeast India's diverse ethnic landscape clothing along with other cultural components like festivals and rituals reinforces the community's distinct identity (Ghosh 2021). Ahmed (2017) Sarkar and Bairagi (2023) and other researchers' findings that clothing negotiates identity in response to both internal and external pressures are in line with this emphasis on dress as a cultural signifier.

Together the literature shows that traditional clothing and textiles are dynamic manifestations of ethnic identity that are influenced by historical political and sociocultural factors rather than being static artifacts. Adoption of foreign clothing in China pushed cultural boundaries while serving political and military goals (Bulag 2010). According to Ahmed (2017) Ethiopia's recently developed costumes represent current ethnic assertions within a federalist framework. While incorporating contemporary influences tribal textiles in India represent ecological and cultural narratives (Verma 2022 Meynell 2022). As the world becomes more interconnected the demand for a national dress in Botswana highlights the importance of conserving cultural heritage (Power et al. 2011). Communities negotiate tradition and modernity local and global identities and individual and collective expressions through clothing in all of these contexts. According to Shukla (2016) the performative aspect of costumes enhances their ability to convey identity whether for formal or informal settings. Using a variety of cultural contexts to illustrate common themes of adaptation preservation and transformation this review emphasizes the complex role that clothing plays in creating and expressing ethnic identity. Future studies could look at how global fashion trends and digital media affect traditional attire as well as how intergenerational transmission helps to maintain cultural customs. By looking at these relationships' academics can better understand how in a world growing more interconnected by the day ethnic identities are still shaped and reflected through clothing.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the cultural and symbolic significance of Ka Jainsem within Khasi society—particularly its function as a marker of ethnic and gendered identity—this study uses a qualitative methodology based on thematic analysis of existing literature. This investigation is suited for qualitative research since it enables a thorough examination of intricate social phenomena highlighting the contextual meanings ingrained in cultural artifacts such as apparel. Without requiring primary data collection this method reveals the complex roles of Ka Jainsem in forming Khasi identity by examining earlier academic works. With an emphasis on the role of Ka Jainsem in Khasi society the research design entails a methodical review of the literature on gender dress and identity in indigenous contexts. The approach gives priority to secondary sources that address clothing as a gendered practice ethnic marker and cultural symbol such as scholarly publications and historical

narratives. These sources were chosen to ensure alignment with the study's goals by being pertinent to themes of cultural identity matrilineal traditions and resistance to outside influences. The literature offers a strong basis for analysis because it covers historical sociological and anthropological viewpoints. The process of collecting data involved obtaining written materials that discuss Ka Jainsem or similar indigenous clothing either directly or indirectly. Key themes that were thought to be essential to comprehending Ka Jainsem significance were identified through the process of examining these papers including gendered role's collective identity and cultural continuity. The research incorporated a variety of sources that addressed Khasi culture matrilineal customs and the sociopolitical ramifications of clothing especially in colonial and post-independence settings to guarantee a thorough examination. The main method of analysis used was thematic analysis which involved a systematic process of theme development and coding. First codes were developed using terms like ethnic marker gender responsibility and cultural adaptation that were frequently used in the literature. By combining related concepts into more comprehensive themes that represent Ka Jainsem varied roles these codes were improved through iterative engagement with the texts. The examination centered on the way that Ka Jainsem is portrayed in literature as a representation of Khasi identity its gendered meanings and its development in the face of modernity. By guaranteeing accurate representation of the literature and avoiding misunderstandings of cultural contexts ethical considerations were taken into account. The methodology's strength is its capacity to integrate various viewpoints into a coherent comprehension of the cultural significance of Ka Jainsem. The use of pre-existing literature which might not include new voices or unpublished viewpoints is one of the limitations though. Additionally, a focus on textual analysis might obscure lived experiences that could be revealed by primary data. In spite of these limitations the qualitative method successfully reveals the significance of Ka Jainsem as a living cultural relic adding to more general conversations about indigenous identity and material culture

3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Based only on previous research the thematic analysis reveals three main themes: gendered responsibility cultural continuity and modern adaptation. These themes support the study's finding that Ka Jainsem continues to be a timeless representation of Khasi identity preserving cultural heritage while adjusting to new situations. As a cultural and gendered artifact Ka Jainsem significance is reflected in these themes which arise from a synthesis of textual discussions on its role in Khasi society.

Cultural Continuity: Throughout history Ka Jainsem has been portrayed in literature as a resilient symbol of Khasi cultural identity that has endured through transitions from pre-colonial isolation to contemporary globalization. Literature emphasizes its importance in festivals rituals and day-to-day life where it acts as a visual representation of tribal unity and pride. The persistence of the clothing especially in the form of women's weaving techniques highlights its contribution to the preservation of Khasi culture. The preservation of ancient craftsmanship is emphasized in discussions of traditional eri silk production establishing Ka Jainsem as a physical link to the past. This theme provides a link to Khasi history and values and is consistent with the conclusion's emphasis on the clothing's resilience to contemporary pressures.

Gendered Responsibility: In Khasi matrilineal society where women are tasked with maintaining cultural traditions the literature emphasizes the role that Ka Jainsem plays in reaffirming women's centrality. According to literature women constantly wear Ka Jainsem representing the tribe's identity in both public and private settings in contrast to men who dress in Western fashion. Presented as a responsibility to uphold family and clan honour this gendered expectation uses Ka Jainsem as a symbol of authority decorum and modesty. The clothing displays empathy and respect in situations such as funerals and work environments reaffirming women's role as cultural stewards. This theme supports the claim made in the conclusion that Ka Jainsem is a symbol of the crucial role that women play in upholding Khasi identity.

Contemporary Adaptation: Literature demonstrates how Ka Jainsem has developed into a dynamic cultural artifact that has adapted to contemporary settings while maintaining its traditional core. According to literature women are able to express their uniqueness within a cultural framework by incorporating modern designs like embroidery and contemporary motifs. Stories of Ka Jainsem being used in educational contexts like school uniforms demonstrate initiatives to foster a sense of cultural pride in the next generation. Women combine Ka Jainsem with contemporary accessories in urban settings demonstrating a harmony between the two. The conclusion that Ka Jainsem acts as a blank canvas for new meanings allowing the Khasi community to navigate change while maintaining their heritage roots is supported by this theme.

Collectively these themes demonstrate Ka Jainsem tenacity as a cultural icon representing gendered roles continuity and flexibility. The literary-based analysis supports the finding that Ka Jainsem is a priceless piece of heritage actively forming Khasi identity in changing sociocultural environments.

4. CONCLUSION

The observations made in this paper show how Ka Jainsem has withstood the test of time and remains an integral part of Khasi culture, embodying deeply entrenched cultural values, a strong sense of belonging, and collective identity. Ka Jainsem continues to serve as a vital symbol of Khasi cultural identity, representing not only collective belonging but also gendered roles within the matrilineal society. Its enduring presence highlights the resilience of Khasi traditions amidst modern influences.

The garment's evolving designs and uses reflect a dynamic balance between heritage and contemporary expression. Through practices like weaving, Khasi women actively preserve and revitalize their cultural heritage. Ka Jainsem, thus, serves as a powerful marker of identity, connecting the past, present, and future.

In the face of modern life and the rapid changes it brings, the importance of preserving and protecting culture becomes even more significant. Given the tradition of orality and the absence of written texts prior to the introduction of the Khasi alphabet in the mid-1800s, the preservation and survival of material culture are of tremendous importance, offering valuable insights into the past. This awareness has led to a revival and revitalization of certain fading cultural practices.

One such practice is the traditional art of cotton and eri silk weaving—a skill passed down through generations. This craft is primarily practiced by women who form cooperative clusters and work collectively as a community. The dhara, shawls, stoles, scarves, jympien, and lengths of raw silk cloth produced by these groups are highly coveted items.

The entire production process—from cotton/silk rearing to yarn spinning, cloth weaving, and natural dyeing—is carried out in an organic, sustainable manner, which adds to the intrinsic value of each product. These handcrafted items represent ancient artistry and workmanship. The creation of hand-woven eri silk Jainsem serves as a form of historical preservation. The garment represents the community's attempt to reconnect with, revive, and celebrate its traditions and heritage. It symbolizes nostalgia, authenticity, and pride in one's roots—right down to the material and the methods of production. It marks a return to indigenous practices and a proud declaration of Khasi identity in its purest form. As such, Ka Jainsem is not merely 'attire'—it reasserts its rightful place as a priceless piece of heritage and culture, a family heirloom worthy of being passed down to future generations.

A distinctive aspect of this restoration initiative is that the weaving and production of these indigenous fabrics are primarily directed toward the creation of women's attire. This underscores the fact that women's clothing serves as a definitive, visible marker of cultural representation, deserving of preservation.

Elements of both change and continuity can be observed as this garment evolves over time. Even while retaining its original form, Ka Jainsem has undergone new and contemporary interpretations. Its basic form acts as a blank canvas upon which the modern Khasi woman can imprint her individuality—based on personal taste or current trends.

Today, Ka Jainsem features a wide array of artistic embellishments such as embroidery, beadwork, sequin work, zari, appliqué, and fabric painting. These designs reflect a blend of traditional, ethnic, and modern aesthetics. On the whole, the garment mirrors the evolving roles of women as they adapt to the demands of changing times while remaining grounded in their roots and cultural heritage. It also reflects the community's capacity to embrace modernity while remaining steadfast in upholding its identity and traditions.

The evolving use and contemporaneity of this traditional dress is further reinforced by the recent development announced on the front page of the Shillong Times dated 25 July 2019, wherein we read of a decision to introduce it as a school uniform for girls every Wednesday at St Xavier's School, Umoid. According to the Principal, Fr. Paul Coelho,: "Education must not alienate students from their culture and their roots. We want them to feel proud of their culture and to love the identity of being members of the Khasi tribe and embrace their culture which is so rich and beautiful".

The process of change does not always necessarily lead to a replacement of the indigenous or the old by the exogenous or the modern. New ways are continuously explored and discovered to reconnect with, and redefine, our past, our tradition and culture. Tradition is not necessarily in conflict with modernity. For the Khasi, Ka Jainsem continues to be a dynamic cultural marker to which new meaning is infused according to new and changing contexts to which it lends its presence, offering a significant mode through which the community as a whole can revisit and rewrite the past in the context of the present.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ahmed, K. M. 2017. "Clothes and Ethnic Identity: (Re)constructing Identity Through Cultural Clothes as Ethnic Markers. The Case of Siltie Nationality of Southern Ethiopia." Master's thesis, UiT Norges Arktiske Universitet.
- [2] Bareh, H. 1997. *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*. New Delhi: United Publisher.
- [3] Batten, A. J. 2009. "Neither Gold nor Braided Hair (1 Timothy 2.9; 1 Peter 3.3): Adornment, Gender and Honour in Antiquity." *New Testament Studies* 55: 484–501.
- [4] Batten, A. J. 2010. "Clothing and Adornment." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 40(3): 148–59. <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journals>.
- [5] Blumer, H. 1969. "Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection." *Sociological Quarterly* 10: 275–91.
- [6] Bulag, U. E. 2010. "Wearing Ethnic Identity: Power of Dress." In *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, Vol. 6. Oxford: Berg.
- [7] Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge.
- [8] Chungkrang, L., Phukan, A., and Gogoi, N. 2016. "A Study on Mishing Tribes and Their Traditional Costumes of Assam." *International Journal of Textile and Fashion Technology* 6(5): 2250–78.
- [9] Crane, T. C., Hamilton, J. A., and Wilson, L. E. 2004. "Scottish Dress, Ethnicity and Self-Identity." *Journal of Fashion Marketing* 8(1): 66–83.
- [10] Deng, F. M. 1995. *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- [11] Disele, P. L. P., Tyler, D. J., and Power, E. J. 2011. "Conserving and Sustaining Culture Through Traditional Dress." *Journal of Social Development in Africa* 26: 10.4314.
- [12] Edensor, T. 2002. *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.
- [13] Eicher, J. B., and Sumberg, B. 1995. "World Fashion, Ethnic and National Dress." In *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time*, edited by Joanne B. Eicher. Oxford: Berg.
- [14] Entwistle, J. 2000. *The Fashioned Body*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [15] Ghosh, B. N. 2021. "Cultural Heritage of the Khasi Community of North East India." In *Indigenous Ethnographies of North East India: A Study from EMIC Perspective*, 62.
- [16] Gordon, G. N. n.d. "Communication." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. <http://www.britannica.com/topic/communication>.
- [17] Gordon, G. N. 1969. *The Languages of Communication*. New York: Hastings House.
- [18] Gurdon, P. R. T. 1914. *The Khasis*. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan & Co. Limited.
- [19] Hall, S. 1989. "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference." *Radical America* 23: 9–20.
- [20] Hamilton, J. A., and Hamilton, J. W. 1989. "Dress as a Reflection and Sustainer of Social Reality: A Cross Cultural Perspective." *Clothing and Textile Research Journal* 7(2): 16–22.
- [21] Hodder, I. 1982. *Symbols in Action: Ethnoarchaeological Studies of Material Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [22] Hogg, M., and Abrams, D. 1988. *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes*. London: Routledge.
- [23] Howe, J. 1998. *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States and the San Blas Kuna*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- [24] Kaiser, S. 1998. *The Social-Psychological Aspects of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan.
- [25] Keenan, W. J. F. 2001. "Intro. Sartor Resartus Restored: Dress Studies in Carlylean Perspective." In *Dressed to Impress: Looking the Part*, edited by W. J. F. Keenan, 13. New York: Berg.

- [26] Kharsyntiew, T. T. 2018. "Youth Fashion and the Identity of Resistance in NorthEast India." In *Geographies of Difference: Explorations in NorthEast Indian Studies*, edited by Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh et al., 159–73. London and New York: Routledge.
- [27] Knauff, B. M. 2007. "From Self-Decoration to Self-Fashioning: Orientalism as Backward Progress Among the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea." In *Body Arts and Modernity*, edited by E. Ewart and M. O'Hanlon, 88–107. Oxford: Sean Kingston.
- [28] Meynell, A. L. 2022. "Blurred Boundaries: Exploring Textile Heritage of the Khasi Bhoi, Karbi and Khat-ar Lyngdoh of the Ri Bhoi District in Meghalaya, Northeast India." *The Highlander* 2: 1–27.
- [29] Nash, A. M. 1989. *The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [30] Ngwenya, B. N. 2002. "Gender, Dress and Self-Empowerment: Women and Burial Societies in Botswana." *African Sociological Review* 6(2): 1–27.
- [31] Nongbri, T. 1988. "Gender and the Khasi Family Structure: Some Implications of the Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property Act, 1984." *Sociological Bulletin* 37(1&2): n.p.
- [32] Pakyntein, V. 2000. "Preference in Khasi Society: An Evaluation of Tradition, Change and Continuity." *Indian Anthropologist* 30(1/2): 27–35.
- [33] Power, E. J., Tyler, D. J., and Disele, P. L. P. 2011. "Conserving and Sustaining Culture Through Traditional Dress." *Journal of Culture and Heritage* 2(1): 1–10.
- [34] Rabha, L. P. n.d. "An Ethnographic Study of Traditional Dress and Ornaments Among the Rabha Community." Unpublished manuscript.
- [35] Roach-Higgins, M. A., and Eicher, J. B. 1992. "Dress and Identity." *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10(4): 1–8.
- [36] Roach-Higgins, M. A., Eicher, J. B., and Johnson, K. K. 1995. "Dress and Identity." New York: Fairchild Publications.
- [37] Ryan, M. S. 1966. *Clothing: A Study in Human Behaviour*. Austin, Texas: Rinehart and Winston.
- [38] Salvador, M. L. 1997. "Looking Back: Contemporary Kuna Women's Arts." In *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama*, edited by M. L. Salvador, 151–211. UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.
- [39] Sarkar, P., and Bairagi, N. 2023. "Evolving Identity: A Study on Changing Choices in the Clothing of Tribal Women of Tripura, India." *Ethnographic Research Journal* 5(2): 1–15.
- [40] Shukla, P. 2016. *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- [41] Simmel, G. 1904. "Fashion." In *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writing*, edited by D. C. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [42] Theodossopoulos, D. 2012. "Indigenous Attire, Exoticization, and Social Change: Dressing and Undressing Among the Embera of Panama." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(3): 591–612. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23321391>.
- [43] Tice, K. E. 1995. *Kuna Crafts, Gender, and the Global Economy*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- [44] Todorović, T., Toporišič, T., and Pavko Čuden, A. 2014. "Clothes and Costumes as Form of Non-verbal Communication." *Scientific Review*: 321–33.
- [45] Turner, T. S. 2012. "The Social Skin." *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2(2): 486–504.
- [46] Varekan, A. S., and Ellen, A. S. 2021. "A Tribal Identity: The Traditional Costume." *Journal of Tribal Studies* 3(1): 1–10.
- [47] Veblen, T. 1899/1953. *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. New York: Mentor.
- [48] Verman, S. R. 2022. "Tribal Textiles of Northeast India: A Survey of Folk and Natural Elements." *Nidan: International Journal for Indian Studies* 7(2): 1–16.
- [49] Young, P. D. 1971. *Ngawbe: Tradition and Change Among the Western Guaymí of Panama*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.