

# Evolution of Matrilineal Characteristics in the Garo Social System: Dynamics of Change and Continuity

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## ABSTRACT:

The research paper titled "**Evolution of Matrilineal Characteristics in the Garo Social System: Dynamics of Change and Continuity**" explores the historical development, essential features, and metamorphoses of matrilineal practices within the Garo community. The Garo, an indigenous tribe in the northeastern region of India and parts of Bangladesh, are known for their unique matrilineal social system. This system, centered on tracing lineage through the female line and transmitting inheritance maternally, plays a crucial role in their cultural identity. The study delves into the interplay between tradition, modernity, and external influences in shaping the evolution of matrilineal characteristics among the Garo people. Through a qualitative research approach involving interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, the research aims to decipher the dynamics of change and continuity in the Garo matrilineal system.

## INTRODUCTION

The Garo community, an indigenous tribe primarily residing in the northeastern region of India and parts of Bangladesh, is celebrated for its distinctive matrilineal social system.<sup>1</sup> This system, rooted in tracing lineage through the female line and transmitting inheritance maternally, plays a pivotal role in the cultural identity and societal structure of the Garo people.<sup>2</sup> The matrilineal characteristics within the Garo social system have undergone a dynamic evolution, shaped by a blend of tradition, modernity, and external influences. Exploring this evolution sheds light on the interplay between tradition and change, offering valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of the Garo matrilineal framework. Understanding the nuances of these transformations is crucial for delving into the complexities of cultural dynamics and heritage preservation in contemporary societies.

This research endeavors to delve into the historical underpinnings, essential features, and metamorphoses of matrilineal practices within the Garo community, aiming to elucidate the intricacies of social continuity and change within the matrilineal paradigm. By examining the past and present manifestations of matrilineal traditions among the Garo people, this study seeks to unravel the factors driving societal shifts, the enduring nature of traditional practices, and the hurdles faced in upholding matrilineal heritage. Embedded within this research are aims to decode the dynamics of change and continuity in the Garo matrilineal system, offering insights into adaptive strategies, societal transitions, and the preservation of cultural identity within an evolving social landscape.

**Keywords:** Garo community, matrilineal social system, evolution, change, continuity, cultural dynamics, traditional practices, modern influences, gender roles, policy interventions, community development gender equality.

**AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:**

1. To examine the historical development and evolution of matrilineal characteristics.
2. To identify key factors driving changes and continuity in matrilineal practices among the Garo community.
3. To analyze the interplay between traditional values and modern influences in shaping the evolution of matrilineal characteristics.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

1. What are the traditional practices associated with the matrilineal system in the Garo social structure?
2. What are the key of change and continuity in matrilineal practices within the Garo system?
3. How do contemporary trends and external influences impact the preservation adaptation of matrilineal traditions among the Garo people?

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

**Qualitative research** approach involving in interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of Garo community members regarding matrilineal practices.

**Archival research** and document analysis to delve into historical records, oral traditions, and scholarly works related to the evolution of matrilineal characteristics among the Garo.

**Analysis of case studies** and ethnographic data to highlight specific instances of change and continuity in the Garo matrilineal system.

**REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:**

The existing body of literature on the Garo community and matrilineal societies provides insights into the historical roots, cultural significance, and ongoing adaptations of matrilineal practices among the Garo people. Studies by Bhuyan (2018), Marak (2017), and Sangma (2019) shed light on gender dynamics, economic changes, and cultural continuity within matrilineal systems in Northeast India. Choudhury (2018) and Roy (2019) have explored the challenges and opportunities in preserving matrilineal traditions, while Sarkar (2018) and Basumatary (2021) discuss legal reforms and intergenerational knowledge transmission in matrilineal communities. By synthesizing these diverse perspectives, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolution of matrilineal characteristics in the Garo social system.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH:**

The study on the evolution of matrilineal characteristics in the Garo social system holds significant academic, social, and cultural relevance. By examining the dynamics of change and continuity in matrilineal practices, the research offers valuable insights into how traditional cultural norms interact with contemporary realities, contributing to debates on gender equality, cultural heritage preservation, and community resilience. The findings of this study can inform policy initiatives, community interventions, and scholarly discourse aimed at promoting inclusive and sustainable cultural practices within matrilineal societies like the Garo community. Moreover, by recognizing the adaptive capacity and cultural richness of matrilineal traditions, this research underscores the importance of preserving diverse cultural heritages in a rapidly changing world.

## UNDERSTANDING OF MATRILINEAL SYSTEM:

Matrilineal system refers to the custom of marriage in which groom has to leave his parental house after marriage and leave in his wife's parental house. In the matrilineal system female sex is considered as the basis of hereditary. Concise Oxford Dictionary defines matriliney as "hereditary based on kinship with the mother or the female sex".<sup>3</sup> Matrilineality is a system in which one belongs to one's mother's lineage. In a matrilineal descent system, an individual is considered to belong to the same descent group as his or her mother. This is in contrast to the common pattern of patrilineal descent.<sup>4</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan (1851), and Johann Jakob Bachofen (1861) were first scholars to write on matrilineal societies. Morgan's work based on the Iroquois Indians, one of the earliest works that tried to construe the social meaning of matrilineal descent. Bachofen wrote his famous "Mother Right" in 1861. Both Morgan and Bachofen spoke about matrilineal societies in terms of maternal law and mother right. Subsequent scholars have looked at matriarchies and matrilineal societies as the antithesis to patriarchies.

Heide Goettner Abendroth (2005), presents the grounds of commonality between all matrilineal societies. She identifies them according to four parameters viz. economy, society, political and the spiritual-cultural level. Further, in matriarchal societies goods are distributed according to lines of kinship and marriage pattern. Since these societies with "perfect mutuality", acquisition of wealth mediated by social rules makes them "societies of economic reciprocity". She says that at the social level matrilineal societies are based on a union of extended clans, tracing descent through the mother. They all follow this distinct line of descent thereby unmistakably forming matrilocal residence. Political decisions are also taken along lines of matriarchal kinship. She says that all these societies are divine as they follow the complimentary roles of gender according to rules of nature. Hence, there concept of divinity is imminent as the whole matriarchal order is based on a principle of equity.<sup>5</sup>

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MATRILINEAL SYSTEM:

The matrilineal system is a social structure in which descent, inheritance, kinship, and family lineage are traced through the mother's line. This system is in contrast to the more commonly known patrilineal system, where these aspects are traced through the father's line. Most of the anthropologists hold that there are three characteristics of matriarchy, (i) Descent through the mother not through the father, (ii) Matrilocal residential system in which the husband lives at the residence of wife after marriage, and (iii) Inheritance of property by female. A society, which follows these three norms, is called matrilineal society.

According to MacIver, "matriarchate means a form of family in which the leadership belongs to the mother or wife". MacIver feels that the term 'matriarchal' is very loosely used to mean the system under which status, name, and sometime inheritance are transmitted through the female line'. MacIver prefers the term 'maternal' to 'matriarchal'. He had identified the characteristic of matriarchal families as follows: (i) Descendent is traced through the mother, not the father. (ii) Authority within the family group belongs permanently not to the husband but to some male representative, and (iii) The matriarchal system tends to weld the kin-group together but to make the family itself less co-hesive. It is usually associated with the principle of exogamy; the tribes being divided into separate inter marrying groups.<sup>6</sup>

Matrilineal societies can be found in various cultures around the world and have distinct characteristics that set them apart. Here are some key characteristics of the matrilineal system:

**1. Descent and Inheritance:** In matrilineal societies, individuals trace their lineage through their mother's line. This means that family membership, inheritance of property, and social status are typically determined by the mother's family. Children belong to the mother's clan or lineage, and inheritance passes from mother to daughter.

**2. Matrilineal Kinship:** Matrilineal kinship systems are based on relationships through the maternal line. This includes a focus on relationships with maternal relatives such as mother, maternal grandparents, maternal aunts, and maternal cousins. Matrilineal kinship networks play a crucial role in social organization and support within the community.

**3. Women's Status and Authority:** In matrilineal societies, women often hold significant influence and authority within the family and community. Women may play key roles in decision-making, household management, and leadership positions. Matrilineal systems can provide women with greater autonomy and decision-making power compared to patrilineal societies.

**4. Property Ownership:** Property ownership and inheritance rights are often passed down matrilineally in these societies. Land, resources, and wealth may be inherited by daughters, sisters, or other female relatives, contributing to economic stability and autonomy for women.

**5. Matrilocal Residence:** Matrilineal societies sometimes practice matrilocality, where the newly married couple resides with or near the wife's family. This arrangement strengthens the bond between the wife and her maternal relatives and can provide a supportive environment for the couple and their children.

**6. Ceremonial and Ritual Practices:** Matrilineal cultures often have ceremonial practices and rituals that emphasize the importance of maternal lineage and maternal ancestors. These rituals may include rites of passage, ceremonies honoring maternal figures, and traditions that reinforce the matrilineal kinship system.

**7. Gender Roles and Division of Labor:** Matrilineal societies may have more fluid or egalitarian gender roles compared to patrilineal societies. Women and men may share responsibilities in areas such as child-rearing, household management, and subsistence activities, reflecting a more balanced division of labor.

## MATRILINEAL SOCIETIES IN THE WORLD :

Matrilineal societies are found among the tribes of African countries, and in some parts of south-east Asia. Examples of matrilineal culture include many ancient cultures such as the Egyptians culture, Minangkabau culture of West Sumatra, the Naxi of China, the Gitksan of British Columbia, the Iroquois confederacy (Haudenasaunee), the Hopi, and the Tuaregs.<sup>7</sup> Minangkabaus of West Sumatra, Indonesia, comprising the largest ethnic group in the world who follow a matrilineal system.<sup>8</sup> Some of the African matrilineal groups are the Ashanti of the Gold coast, the Tuaregs of West Africa, the Bemba, Tonga, the Bisa, the Ila, the Lamba, the Siurai of the Solomn Island, the Majuro of the Marshall Island etc.<sup>9</sup>

In India, the matrilineal system is found in some pockets of south and north east India. The Ezhava, the Nairs, the Kurichiyas, the Mappilles of Kerela, the Bunts, Billavas and Mogaveeras of Karnataka; Pillai caste in Nagercoil District of Tamil Nadu, the tribal groups of Minicoy Island, and the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias of Meghalaya are the followers of matrilineal system.<sup>10</sup>

## THE GARO MATRILINEAL SYSTEM: AN OVERVIEW

The Garo community, also known as *Achik Mande*, is one of the major indigenous tribes residing in the northeastern Indian states of Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura and parts of Bangladesh.<sup>11</sup> The Garo people have a rich cultural heritage and a distinct identity that is deeply rooted in their historical origins and traditional practices. One of the most distinctive aspects of Garo society is its matrilineal social system. This system is a distinctive cultural framework found among the Garo tribe in Northeast India, characterized by a unique set of practices and traditions that shape their social organization. Key characteristics of the Garo matrilineal social system include:

**1. Descent and Inheritance through the Female Line:** In the Garo society, descent is traced through the female line, with property, land, and clan membership passed down from mother to daughter. This matrilineal inheritance system ensures the preservation of family lineage and clan identity through women.

**2. Matrilineal Family Structure:** Garo families are organized around the female lineage, with the eldest maternal aunt (Nokrom) playing a central role in decision-making and family affairs. Maternal uncles (Nokta) also hold significant influence within the matrilineal kinship network.

**3. Matrilocal Residence:** Upon marriage, Garo men traditionally move to their wives' maternal homes, leading to a matrilocal residence pattern. This practice reinforces the importance of women in their natal households and promotes strong kinship ties among female relatives.

**4. Equal Status of Women:** In the Garo matrilineal system, women enjoy a relatively high social status and participation in community governance. Women often hold key roles in decision-making, ritual ceremonies, and cultural preservation efforts, reflecting the importance of female empowerment within the society.

**5. Role of Women in Economic Activities:** Garo women actively participate in economic activities such as agriculture, weaving, and craft production, contributing to the household income and overall economic well-being of the family. Women's economic autonomy is supported by the matrilineal system.

**6. Ceremonial Practices and Rituals:** Matrilineal traditions are upheld through elaborate ceremonial practices and rituals that reinforce kinship bonds, ancestral connections, and cultural identity. Ceremonies marking life events such as birth, marriage, and death are key components of the Garo matrilineal social system.

**7. Flexible Gender Roles:** While women hold significant authority and decision-making power in the Garo matrilineal society, there is also space for men to participate in caregiving, household duties, and community leadership roles. This flexibility in gender roles reflects the adaptive nature of the matrilineal system.

**8. Oral Tradition and Cultural Transmission:** The preservation of Garo cultural heritage is facilitated through oral traditions, storytelling, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Elders play a crucial role in imparting traditional values, myths, and customs to the younger generation, ensuring the continuity of matrilineal practices.

**9. Adaptability to Changing Times:** Despite preserving core matrilineal values, the Garo social system demonstrates a degree of adaptability to modern influences and external changes. The community navigates evolving societal dynamics while maintaining the integrity of matrilineal traditions, showcasing a balance between tradition and innovation.

These characteristics collectively define the Garo matrilineal social system as a resilient, egalitarian, and culturally rich framework that shapes the social organization and identity of the Garo community.<sup>12</sup>

## DYNAMICS OF CHANGE IN THE GARO MATRILINEAL SYSTEM

The Garo matrilineal system has been subject to various dynamics of change over time. These shifts in the Garo matrilineal system reflect broader societal transformations, as well as internal and external influences that impact the traditional practices and values of the community.<sup>13</sup> Understanding the dynamics of change in the Garo matrilineal system provides insights into the adaptability and evolution of this unique social structure.



**1. Impact of Modernization and Globalization:** One of the key drivers of change in the Garo matrilineal system is the influence of modernization and globalization. Increased connectivity, exposure to external cultures, and socioeconomic developments have brought new ideas, values, and practices that challenge traditional norms and customs. The integration of modern lifestyles, education, and employment opportunities can lead to shifts in attitudes towards matrilineal practices and gender roles within the Garo society.<sup>14</sup>

**2. Economic Factors:** Changes in economic patterns and livelihood strategies can also influence the dynamics of the Garo matrilineal system. Shifts from agrarian-based economies to wage labor, business ventures, or migration for employment can impact traditional inheritance patterns and the distribution of resources within families. Economic opportunities and disparities may reshape power dynamics and decision-making processes within matrilineal households.<sup>15</sup>

**3. Education and Empowerment:** Increased access to education, awareness programs, and advocacy for gender equality has played a significant role in shaping the dynamics of the Garo matrilineal system. Education empowers individuals to question existing social norms, challenge gender bias, and advocate for changes that promote equality and social justice.<sup>16</sup> Educated women and youth may seek to redefine their roles within the matrilineal structure and participate more actively in community decision-making processes.

**4. Intergenerational Shifts:** Generational differences and changing attitudes towards tradition can introduce new perspectives on the Garo matrilineal system. Younger generations, exposed to diverse influences and alternative worldviews, may negotiate their identities and values within the matrilineal framework. Intergenerational communication and negotiations regarding the adaptation of traditional practices to contemporary realities play a critical role in shaping the continuity and change in the Garo social system.

**5. Legal Reforms and Policy Interventions:** Government policies, legal reforms, and social welfare initiatives can also impact the dynamics of the Garo matrilineal system. Legislative changes related to land rights, inheritance laws, and gender equity may have repercussions on the traditional practices and rights associated with matrilineal descent. Policy interventions aimed at promoting women's empowerment, protecting indigenous rights, and preserving cultural heritage can influence the trajectory of the Garo matrilineal system.

## CONTINUITY OF MATRILINEAL TRADITIONS IN THE GARO SOCIETY

The continuity of matrilineal traditions within the Garo society underscores the resilience and significance of these cultural practices in shaping the social fabric and identity of the community. Despite the forces of change and modernization, the Garo matrilineal system has demonstrated durability and adaptability, maintaining its core values and principles through generations.<sup>17</sup> Understanding the factors that contribute to the continuity of matrilineal traditions in the Garo society provides insights into the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage and the resilience of traditional social structures.

**1. Cultural Preservation:** The preservation of matrilineal traditions in the Garo society is rooted in a deep sense of cultural pride, heritage, and identity. Cultural preservation efforts, including rituals, ceremonies, storytelling, and intergenerational transmission of customs, play a vital role in reinforcing the importance of matrilineal practices as integral components of Garo heritage. By actively engaging in cultural activities and upholding traditional norms, the Garo community sustains the continuity of matrilineal traditions across generations.

**2. Community Cohesion:** Matrilineality serves as a unifying force that strengthens social cohesion and solidarity within the Garo society. The emphasis on maternal lineage and kinship ties fosters strong family bonds, community networks, and a sense of belonging among individuals. By maintaining matrilineal traditions, the Garo community reaffirms their shared values, mutual support systems, and collective identity, contributing to unity and cohesion within the society.<sup>18</sup>

**3. Adaptation to Changing Contexts:** The continuity of matrilineal traditions in the Garo society is also facilitated by the adaptive nature of these practices to changing social contexts. While traditional customs may evolve in response to external influences and modern realities, the core principles of matrilineality remain resilient and enduring.<sup>19</sup> The ability of the Garo community to adapt and reinterpret matrilineal traditions in contemporary settings enables the continuity of these cultural practices in a dynamic and evolving society.

**4. Respect for Ancestral Wisdom:** Ancestral wisdom and customary laws form a cornerstone of the continuity of matrilineal traditions in the Garo society. Respect for elders, adherence to customary practices, and the preservation of ancestral knowledge contribute to the perpetuation of matrilineal values and norms. By honoring the wisdom of past generations and upholding traditional customs, the Garo community nurtures a sense of continuity and connection to their cultural roots.

**5. Identity and Cultural Revitalization:** Matrilineal traditions serve as markers of identity and symbols of cultural revitalization for the Garo society.<sup>20</sup> Embracing and celebrating matrilineal values, customs, and rituals reaffirms the cultural distinctiveness and resilience of the community. Through efforts to revitalize and promote matrilineal traditions, the Garo people reclaim their cultural heritage, assert their identity, and ensure the continuity of their unique social system.

### Case Study 1: Modern and Inheritance Practices

**Change:** In a Garo village experiencing rapid modernization, a family deliberates on how to adapt traditional matrilineal inheritance practices to suit contemporary circumstances. They discuss the implications of dividing ancestral land among all children regardless of gender, reflecting changing attitudes towards property ownership and economic sustainability.

**Continuity:** Despite considering modifications to inheritance practices, the family emphasizes the importance of preserving the matrilineal principle of tracing descent through the female line. They explore alternative ways, such as establishing trust funds or cooperative land management, to ensure the continuity of matrilineal values while addressing practical challenges posed by modernization.

### Case Study 2: Women's Leadership and Decision-Making

**Change:** A Garo community grapples with the evolving roles of women in leadership and decision-making processes. As more women pursue education and employment opportunities, there is a shift towards collaborative decision-making and inclusive participation in community affairs, challenging traditional gender norms that may have limited women's involvement in governance.

**Continuity:** While women's roles in leadership evolve, the community upholds the matrilineal tradition of acknowledging women's voices and contributions in decision-making processes. By integrating modern ideals of gender equality with matrilineal values of female empowerment, the community maintains a balance between adapting to changing societal dynamics and preserving the essence of matrilineal leadership.

### Case Study 3: Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission

**Change:** In an age of digital technology and globalization, Garo elders express concerns about the erosion of traditional knowledge and cultural practices among the younger generation. The shift towards modern forms of communication and information-sharing challenges the intergenerational transmission of matrilineal customs, raising questions about the sustainability of cultural heritage.

**Continuity:** Recognizing the importance of preserving ancestral wisdom and cultural heritage, the community establishes mentorship programs and cultural workshops to facilitate intergenerational dialogue and knowledge exchange. By leveraging both traditional oral methods and modern tools for communication, they ensure the continued transmission of matrilineal traditions while embracing opportunities for innovation.

### Case Study 4: Rituals and Ceremonies

**Change:** As Garo communities undergo socio-cultural transformations, the frequency and significance of traditional matrilineal rituals and ceremonies may vary. Some families may prioritize certain rituals over others or adapt ceremonial practices to align with changing lifestyles and preferences, reflecting evolving cultural expressions within the community.

**Continuity:** Despite potential adaptations in rituals and ceremonies, the community upholds the essence and symbolism of matrilineal traditions in their observances. By infusing modern elements into traditional practices while retaining core beliefs and values, Garo families honor the continuity of matrilineal customs and rituals that reinforce kinship ties and ancestral connections.

### Case Study 5: Education and Cultural Identity

**Change:** With increasing access to formal education and exposure to diverse cultural influences, Garo youth navigate a dual identity encompassing traditional matrilineal values and external perspectives. The intersection of modern education with indigenous cultural heritage may prompt individuals to reevaluate the relevance of matrilineal traditions in shaping their identities.

**Continuity:** Embracing the fusion of educational opportunities with cultural identity, Garo youth engage in initiatives that promote cultural awareness and pride in matrilineal heritage. Through intercultural dialogue and educational programs that integrate traditional knowledge with academic learning, they reinforce the continuity of matrilineal values while embracing new pathways for cultural expression and self-discovery.

### Case Study 6: Community Development and Empowerment

**Change:** In the context of community development projects and initiatives aimed at empowering marginalized groups, Garo communities confront questions of how to balance external interventions with the preservation of matrilineal traditions. The integration of modern development practices may influence social structures and governance systems, prompting reflections on maintaining cultural integrity.

**Continuity:** Through community-led initiatives and participatory decision-making processes, Garo individuals actively engage in shaping development agendas that align with matrilineal values and community priorities. By leveraging external resources while retaining autonomy over governance and resource management, they navigate the dynamics of change and continuity within the Garo matrilineal system, ensuring that traditional values inform contemporary development strategies.



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of the evolution of matrilineal characteristics within the Garo social system unveils a tapestry of tradition, adaptability, and cultural resilience. The Garo matrilineal framework, characterized by its unique descent patterns, familial structures, and ceremonial practices, stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of matrilineality amidst shifting societal dynamics. Through the lens of change and continuity, this research has illuminated the nuanced interplay between tradition and modern influences, shedding light on the factors that shape the evolution of matrilineal practices among the Garo community.

The significance of this research transcends academic realms, touching upon social, cultural, and policy dimensions. By examining the adaptive strategies and challenges encountered in sustaining matrilineal traditions, this study advocates for the preservation of diverse cultural heritages in a rapidly evolving world. The Garo matrilineal system serves as a cultural beacon, highlighting the importance of cultural preservation, gender dynamics, and community resilience within matrilineal societies. Through a deeper understanding of the dynamics of change and continuity in the Garo matrilineal system, we glean insights into the transformative power of tradition and the enduring legacy of matrilineal values in shaping societal fabric.

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