



Research article

## Indigenous Flame: Cultural Memory as Oral Epistemology in Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends

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### Abstract

Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends is a marvellous literary work that enables the readers to get a handle on the rich cultural array of Khasi folklore and myths. Splendidly crafted by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, an eminent Khasi writer and a cultural upholder from Meghalaya, India, the book is a corpus of legends that signals the cultural overtones, rhetorical magic, and moral implications of some enthralling ethnic tales and legends. This paper attempts to examine how Nongkynrih's literary work turns out to be a cultural artefact encapsulating the spirit of Khasi identity by strengthening their feeling of gratification and kinship. It also explores how Nongkynrih's narrative has contributed to the admiration and treasuring of Khasi heritage among an expansive audience, stimulating intercultural exchange and indigenous knowledge reception. The orality and cultural transmission fuse in this narrative, creating an oral epistemology.

**Keywords:** Khasi legends, folklore, mythology, cultural memory, performative knowledge, oral epistemology.

### Introduction

The fundamentals of the Khasi writing, using the Roman script, came out in 1842, when Thomas Jones, a Welsh Presbyterian missionary, proposed it as a means of written expression for the Khasi folk in North-East India. Nevertheless, even before the missionary scenario, the Khasis had expressed a profound collective discernment over the mundane concerns vis-à-vis agriculture, trade, commerce, and industry. They also had an exceptional flair for storytelling. The ancient Khasi oral tradition endured even without the proper scripts. The Khasi tribe

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thrived on their ethnic wisdom and insight in confrontation with the brutish power. To them, the pillars of creation were Nature and Humanity. The Khasi had no doubt as to the certitude of their conviction that the divine sagacity could only be attained through the venerable lineage of ancestral tales. These tales of perennial happiness imparting threads of love, empathy, solicitude, absolution, and salvation continue to define and construe the existence and relevance of the Khasi community even in the present. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, the widely known folklorist from the Khasi tribe, makes an exquisite blend of tales and myths typical of his tribe. The moral convictions, beliefs, and mundane concerns of the tribe are connected together in the work *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (2007). In the book, Nongkynrih deftly garners and curates a broad spectrum of tales, knitting together an array of myths, legends, and adventures that have been transmitted through generations.

### Literature Review

Myths and legends play a vital role in human existence; without them, human beings would have been adrift without a guiding narrative, losing the invaluable reservoir of cultural richness. Faith Mehmet Berk tries to juxtapose myth and cultural identity in his research article “The Role of Mythology as a Cultural Identity and a Cultural Heritage: The Case of Phrygian Mythology”. He observes that we should have been lost if we don’t have myths. Many cultural richness has been narrating from generation to generation through the myths. The fables, myths, legends, folktales are the collective outputs (Berk, 2016). Bronislaw Malinowski has astutely recognised the profound cultural function and significance of myths. In the book *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, Malinowski employs a functionalist approach to analyse the storytelling traditions among the aboriginal communities. He argues that the primitive man has to a very limited extent the purely artistic and scientific interest in nature; there is but little room for symbolism in his ideas and tales; and myth, in fact is not an idle rhapsody, not an aimless outpouring of vain imaginings, but a hardworking, extremely important cultural force (Malinowski, 2011). He contended that folklore plays an essential function in shaping the cultural identity and providing guidance for the necessary actions to sustain and advance indigenous social cultures and practices, and traditions. From a Functionalist standpoint, the persistence of the Khasi oral tradition without written scripts displays an adaptive function, which means the oral tradition has been adapted to preserve cultural knowledge without relying on literacy. In *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing of the World*, Walter J. Ong highlights the fascinating dynamics of oral communication in a primary oral culture, where words, devoid of any visual forms, pulsate with a potent vitality:

The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven. Deeply typographic folk forget to think of words as primarily oral, as events, and hence as necessarily powered: for them, words tend rather to be assimilated to things, ‘out there’ on a flat surface. Such ‘things’ are not so readily associated with magic, for they are not actions, but are in a radical sense dead, though subject to dynamic resurrection. (Ong, 2002, p. 32)

Walter Ong reckons that a collective cultural memory is transmitted through the tradition of orality, and it is socially reinforced through repetitive storytelling and rhythmic rendering. Since storytelling is a performative act, it reflects an oral cognition and cultural validation. The

Belgian historian and anthropologist Jan Vancina perceives oral tradition as a resourceful compendium of indigenous history, ensuring cultural continuity. Vancina juxtaposes the resourceful material of oral culture and that of the written records. He maintains that the truly distinctive feature of oral tradition is transmission by word of mouth. But this very fact means that a tradition should be regarded as a series of historical documents, even if the documents are verbal ones (Vancina, 1965). J. D. Fadeiya acknowledges the oral tradition as a valuable source of cultural origin: Oral tradition includes myths and legends which throw light on the origin of communities- their social, economic, and political institutions, their taboo, totems, social concepts, and practices (Fadeiye, 2004). Dell Hymes studied the performative nature of oral storytelling and emphasised ethnographic tradition in cultural transmission (Hymes, 1996). In a community where written expressions do not exist, the oral tradition forms the vital epistemological system. This oral epistemology entails cultural memory and indigenous values. The cultural historian and anthropologist Ruth Finnegan demonstrates how an epistemological ideation is made possible through orality. Through her groundbreaking work *Oral Literature in Africa*, Finnegan argues that orality entails a unique aesthetics and the components like music, rhythm, and pitch contribute to meaning (Finnegan, 1970).

### **Methodology**

The study takes up interpretive methodological tools to analyse the text vis-à-vis oral tradition theories. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Jan Vancina and Walter J. Ong, an attempt is made to lay out Khasi legends as a repertoire of cultural memory having epistemological significance. A close reading of the Khasi legends is undertaken in relation to kinship practices, values, world views, and recurring motifs inherent in the tales. Taking cues from the socio-cultural theories of Jan Vancina and Walter J. Ong, it is argued that a vast cultural memory and a performative knowledge are encoded in the narrative. The study tries to validate oral narratives as potent cultural texts where memory and meaning get synthesized.

### **Discussion**

The creation myths have indispensably been explored in the storytelling tradition of Khasis. In the Prelude to the book *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*, Nongkynrih enumerates the seven sub tribes of the Khasi- Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam and Diko- and speculates on the reason why does all Khasi tales invariably begin in a uniform pattern: “When man and beasts and stones and trees spoke as one...” (Nongkynrih, 2007, p. viii). This is because of the Khasi world view, which perceives the universe as an interconnected entity deriving its exuberance and energy from the divine truth embodied in their God, U Blei. The paramount function of Khasi narratives lies in illuminating the profundity of Khasi philosophical ideation encompassing the entirety of Khasi heritage, thus ensuring its resonance with the most unassuming individuals. Connecting the Khasi world view and its narrative function with Malinowski’s Functionalist approach yields a very insightful framework of analysis. The interconnected universe and divine truth encompass Functionalist ideas of social cohesion and educational function. Their worldview serves to unite the Khasi people under a shared cosmology, strengthening community bonds. Moreover, these narratives serve as vehicles for transmitting complex philosophical ideas to all members of society. Consequently, these tales are meticulously fashioned to charm and enthrall their recipients, camouflaging their didactic

nature and disguising them as mere tales rather than earnest expositions. The tales are not meant for passive recital, instead, encompassing vast cultural memory and meaning, the tales are transformed into a shared experience between the teller and the heeders. “The Seven Clans”, the first segment of the anthology *Khasi Legends*, commences as follows:

In the beginning, there was nothing but a vast emptiness on Earth. God had created only two beings- Ramew, the guardian spirit of Earth, and her husband Basa, who later came to be identified with the patron god of villages. The two lived happily enough for a time, but one thing began to plague their minds: they had no children. They wanted children, wanted them intensely, because Ramew and Basa realised life without them would be terribly lonely and monotonous. They prayed to their God, U Blei, to bless them with at least a child-or two-so that their line could continue. (Nongkynrih, 2007, p. 1)

The fervent plea of Ramew led the benevolent deity to grant her wish to proliferate across an inhabitable world. In keeping with the celestial edict, seven out of the sixteen heavenly clans were hand-picked to descend on the earth, shouldering the pivotal roles of farming, reproducing rapidly across the uninhabited wilderness, exerting power, and positioning themselves at the peak of creation.

In the compendium *Around the Hearth*, there is a recalling of the hallowed Khasi legend known as “The Lost Manuscript”. According to the legend, one of their forefathers faced a terrible misfortune when he irretrievably lost a manuscript of great significance. Constructed with an intensely fragile substance, this manuscript contained the most sagacious and informed moral principles, as well as the script used to conserve and impart these invaluable teachings. The person, after an enlightened encounter with God atop a steep mountain peak, could attain a thorough understanding of the annals of their race and was exposed to some customary rites and spiritual dictums which dealt with every facet of their community life. In a particular situation, a deputy from the plains of Surma joined forces with the divine emissary. Together, they carried smoothly the precious manuscripts, a divine gift, to promulgate the doctrines of God. However, their journey faced an unexpected obstacle- a wide and tumultuous river blocked them up. Undaunted by the obstacle, the Surma native, accustomed to raging waters, skilfully fastened his document to a tuft of hair on his head and deftly swam across. The Khasi companion took a daring step. Against his better judgment, he held his manuscript between his teeth and ventured into the tumultuous currents. Unfamiliar with swimming in such torrents, the hillman soon found himself gasping amidst the river. In the act of gulping to save himself, he inadvertently swallowed the manuscript, reducing it to a pulpy mass. On his return, the hill man disclosed his traumatic experience to the disappointed people. However, he instantly responded to their apprehensions by assuring them that the divine revelations remained fresh in his memory. He swore to pass on the teachings through the spoken word, commencing a rich tradition of storytelling among the Khasis. From this amazing episode, the legacy of orality among the Khasis was believed to have begun, where the dynamic and spirited texture of their cultural artefacts continues to thrive.

To make a precise connection between the legend “The Lost Manuscript” and the Functionalist approach in anthropology, the specific aspects such as social function, cultural continuity, and integration of belief systems are to be reckoned with. The social function seeks to explain how the legend serves to validate the importance of oral traditions in Khasi culture. The significance of oral storytelling in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations can

ensure cultural continuity. Finally, the integration of belief systems searches for how the legend might reinforce the potential aspects of Khasi world views or social structures.

The Khasis displayed pride and delight in their role as educators, and they imparted wisdom through an effectively enrapturing method. Led by veterans, young Khasis found themselves attracted to an enriching learning experience, one that gets them to unwind around the hearth. After a day of slog, they would flock together, drawn by the enchanting dance of flames and the brilliant narratives that accompanied them. These legends, however, carried a didactic purpose that extended beyond mere delight. They were the threads that interlaced the cultural fabric, stood the test of time as they carried along orally, from the gifted storytellers of the clan to the ardent young minds in the community. In this symbiotic relationship between wisdom and delight, the Khasis realised the tremendous power of stories to mould, stimulate, and connect. The tale “Peacock and the Sun” is a good case in point. With an air of delightful whimsy, the story begins thus:

It was said that in the beginning, when the world was very young, the Peacock and the Sun lived together in heaven as husband and wife. And theirs was a paradise of warmth and love, a fairyland of never-ending joy- until one clear winter morning when the sun, sovereign of the universe, was alone in the sky, unveiling marvellous scenes and faraway lands. While the Sun was thus busy presiding over the affairs of heaven and earth, distributing warmth, light, and vitality to all sorts of beings, the Peacock, her husband, was languidly strolling about his celestial garden, which darkness never touched and where birds sang continuously to ever-blooming orchids. (Nongkynrih, 2007, p. 31)

The tale proceeds with Peacock whose heart yearned for a dancing virgin queen he had witnessed on the plains of Earth. Without a moment of thought, he stretched out his dazzling feathers, and graciously set about his descent from the stellar domain. But deluded by the expansiveness of space, the Peacock soon found to his dismay that the dancing virgin queen was nothing but the mustard plants swaying in the wind. With deepest regret, he mourned his impetuous decision to forsake his celestial partner. The story comes to an insightful conclusion where the Peacock is found extremely humbled and craving for the paradise he once knew. The moral of the story remains perverse desires and the repercussions of impulsive actions. Thus, the tale serves an illustration of oral epistemology wherein the moral and the message merge as the cultural truth.

The literary as well as the cultural distinction of Khasi legends unfurls in great depth, especially in the tearful tale of Lapalang, the Stag. As the only son of a caring mother, an aged deer, Lapalang’s departure fetched great woes that shook her thoroughly. The way he was trapped and killed can even tug at the heartstrings of those mothers who have faced such a comfortless phase in their lives. At the moment of great grief, the Khasis departed from inarticulate lament and momentary exclamations, instead adopting a mode of bewailing evolved out of the inconsolable agony of a mother. It is within the structure of these funeral songs that the Khasis let out their most poetic and elegiac expressions. Here is an instance of Khasi melody echoing the deepest sentiments:

O Sier Lapalang! Jewel of my heart!  
I told you do not go  
to Ri Khasi, an alien land.  
Let us live in the plains

and feed on the reed.  
 But you said,  
 my dearest pledge,  
 I must look for jangew,  
 my favourite food.  
 But now, Jewel of my heart!  
 Dark are the skies! Dark, too, the earth!  
 The curved bow  
 mounts your body,  
 its rusty arrow  
 dealing you a death blow.  
 Man finds his sport,  
 has his fun,  
 But for me, there's nothing more  
 under the sun. (Nongkynrih, 2007, p. 88)

Woven with intense emotional sequence, the verse creates a fusion of desolation and longing that resounds through the ages, connecting all in the depth of their shared sorrow. Through the potential power of their elegiac verses, the Khasis try to convey the universal experience of maternal warmth and pain, leaving behind the charm of their oral culture. It touches on the multiple aspects of Khasi society- emotional, cultural, and familial- illustrating the interconnected nature of social institutions.

### Conclusion

Khasi legends and tales are not mere fantastical oral transmissions from an exotic ethnic folk. They explore the reciprocity of humanity and wilderness, yielding an enhanced world view vis-à-vis the notions of sanctitude, vice, and virtue, social hierarchy, and other cultural aspects. Deeply structured, the Khasi social system gets a synthesised reflection in the tales, where pedigree and kinship are of paramount importance. Nongkynrih's compendium of fascinating stories serves as a vantage point to the world of Khasi culture and history. The expedition through the Khasi folklore is an insightful reaffirmation of the narratives that have been conveyed through generations after generations, conserving the flames of an indigenous culture. These stories, replete with picturesque descriptions of gods, goddesses, diligent heroes, and other mythical souls, serve as monuments of their inner strength and harmony, highlighting vibrant imagination and moral uprightness. From the woody hills to the thronging fairs and festivals, from the solemn ceremonies to the mirthful celebrations, *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* lays out an engrossing narrative that reinvigorates the values, beliefs, and convictions treasured by the Khasi kinfolk. From the admonishing tales that promulgate moral lessons to classic exploits that uphold valour, all the legends in this volume evoke universal questions sustaining the unique Khasi crest. To conclude, *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* is an amazing cultural monument that not only leaves behind a wonderful reading experience but also serves as a significant aid in comprehending and evaluating the multiple facets of Khasi culture. Nongkynrih's imaginative explorations on the Khasi identity prove to be a creative output in the form of a compendium, *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*, which, in turn, becomes

a cultural artefact capturing the spirit of Khasi that values an embodied knowledge where meaning emanates from interaction, involvement, reflection, and metaphor.

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