



# Folktales as Repositories of Indigenous Epistemology: A Study Of the Khasi Folktales of Meghalaya

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## Abstract

*Indigenous epistemology is a distinct lens of indigenous peoples' perception and interaction with the world. It is a diverse, cumulative, and holistic knowledge system that represents the interconnection between humans, nature, and spirituality. Khasi folktales establish a fundamental agency through which Indigenous epistemology is preserved, dispatched, and recreated intergenerationally. The study aims to explore Khasi folktales as repositories of indigenous epistemology and cultural artefacts of Khasi identity. The result underscores the significance of Khasi folktales as instrumental in promoting symbiosis, veneration, and collective morality. They also serve as an active means of indigenous defiance against epistemic marginalisation. The study highlights their decolonial potential as epistemic texts and substantiates the view of verbal tradition as a legitimate and advanced form of knowledge generation. The paper reinforces the enduring significance of folktales as an outlook on the world of Khasi culture and history, and their indigenous knowledge system (IKS).*

**Keywords:** indigenous epistemology, khasi folktales, khasi identity, symbiosis, collective morality, indigenous defiance, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

## Introduction

Orally transmitted, Khasi folktales are evocative by nature and notably reveal the legends of the Khasi tribe and the Khasi people as great storytellers, thereby strengthening community bonds. Furthermore, it serves as moral allegories and parables instrumental in ethical guidance and conduct. Also, it satisfies their inquisitiveness about the natural world, animals, and humanity.

The epistemological principles of the Khasi people are ingrained in their indigenous knowledge system (IKS), emphasising the use of 'reason' (ka nia) and adherence to the divine commandment (ka

hukum), as entrenched in the Khasi narrative. These principles include nature, forefather souls, living things, and character archetypes. Khasi folktales include legends (Khana Pateng), fairytales (Purinam), fables (Puriskam), parables (Khana Pharsi), and sometimes factual accounts.

The oral tradition of indigenous community centres on themes of their social life, customs, and convictions. Oral traditions have often been marginalised by colonial and postcolonial epistemic frameworks and categorised as myth and superstition, causing the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS).



## Materials and Methods

This study analyses Dr Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's "Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends" and "Folktales of the Khasis" by K.U. Rafy. A detailed examination of journal articles and related blog posts has also been conducted to provide insight into the presentation and debates of Khasi folk narratives in literature and scholarly discussions. The symbolism, central themes, and ecological motifs of the selected folktales have been analysed to determine their significance in understanding cosmology, ecosophy, and moral values.

## Findings and Results

The folktales of the Khasi people are not mere relics of antiquity, but rather active and dynamic tools of cultural production and resistance. These multidimensional repositories of indigenous epistemology reinvigorate the community's self-esteem and continuity through narration of ancestral myths, legends, historical occurrences, genealogy, and specific unfabled anecdotes. Furthermore, Khasi folktales comprise traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), transmitted generationally.

Rather than mere idle rhapsodies, Khasi folktales are a significant cultural force shaping the backbone of Khasi identity and disseminating ethical and social values. The Khasi people's pivotal role in safeguarding ancestral wisdom is the foundation of the strength, longevity, and wisdom of their communities. Within the community, they narrate histories to younger generations to familiarise them with their community, generating a sense of kinship and oneness. Rooted in oral culture, storytelling in the Khasi tribe is considered an essential function, as it signifies the cultural background of the speakers. The context-specific analysis of folktales reveals the factors that influence their connotation. The Khasi legends are myths that serve as a repository of great wisdom and history about God, living beings, and nature. In Nongkynrih's "Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends," the chapter "The Lost Manuscript" talks about a manuscript lost by their ancestors, containing philosophical and religious teachings, that eventually became folk literature.

The stories began with an exposition showing how the world was created and how man came down from heaven to inhabit the earth and populate its wilderness. From here, they progressed the Khasi worldview, their concept of good and evil, their matrilineal social structure, their clan system, their democratic governance, and so forth. These constitute the creation myths or what the Khasis call "Khanatang, or sanctified stories (Nongkynrih ix)

The function of such stories is to elucidate the Khasi philosophical thought on every aspect of Khasi culture and make sure that it reaches and holds captive even the simplest of men. The stories are therefore invested with symbolic significance and deliberately rendered interesting to beguile listeners into believing that they are hearing a story and not listening to a sermon (Nongkynrih ix)

The Khasi people, realising the tremendous potential of storytelling, invented stories for everything, from a moral lesson to entertainment. Khasi folktales are artificially inclined and currently exist in both oral and written forms. Myths of tribal or indigenous communities can be categorised into "fundamental myths," which narrate incidents of daily social occasions and ritualistic practices, and "cosmological myths," which talk about astronomical events, including cosmic genesis and the earth's origin. Legends, however, are traditionally historical stories that usually involve valiant characters, heritage sites, milestones, etc. Through an ecocritical perspective nature has always been symbolic in Khasi folk narratives, expressing emotions, ideas and the indigenous worldview through stories such as "What makes the Eclipse", "How the Peacock got his Beautiful Features", "The Formation of the Earth", "The Origin of Betel and Tobacco", "What makes the Lightning" in "Folk-Tales of the Khasis" by K.U. Rafy.

## Interpretation and Discussion

The oral lore of the Khasi people embodies a holistic indigenous epistemology, reflecting the Khasi community's biophilia, their interconnectedness with the universe, profound ecological wisdom, sustainable practices, and spirituality. The Khasi



people derive their vitality and vibrancy from the ultimate truth symbolised in their God,” U Blei”. In contrast to the Western emphasis on written documentation, these folktales are adaptive and ensure cultural continuity through intergenerational transmission. Furthermore, Khasi folktales reflect the sacred relationship between Man and God, like that of a mother and child, symbolising the origin of humanity. As Nongkynrih highlights in the prelude of “Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends.”

And when they speak of the Mount of Heaven’s Navel, they only wish to illustrate their belief that the relationship between Man and God is like the sacred relationship between mother and child, with the navel and the umbilical cord as the central symbols (Nongkynrih x)

Khasi folk narratives encode epistemology dynamically as they teach about moral values and warn about the consequences of an unethical code of conduct. In the chapter, “The Peacock and the Sun”, the peacock, who is perceived as a deity, a symbol of abundance and fortune, an inhabitant of heaven, is forever doomed to earth when he left his wife, “the Sun”. This story teaches the consequences of selfishness, embodying the epistemological motif of moral equity. In another chapter, titled “The Man-eating serpent, U Thlen,” the snake (Thlen) is associated with negativity and considered a demon because of its murderous intent. Presently, the worshipper of ‘Thlen’ (a huge serpent) within the Khasi tribe is detested and accused of any crime or murder that occurs in the region where the Khasi community dwells. Knowledge conservation and transference have never been easy for tribal or indigenous people. However, the picturesqueness of anthropomorphic animals, deities, and mystical beings in Khasi folktales symbolises strength, resilience, and harmony.

### Conclusion

Khasi folktales are nowhere near mere simplistic or archaic folktales; they encapsulate sophisticated epistemological frameworks grounded in experiential learning, relationality, and community. It validates indigenous epistemologies as adaptive repositories,

exploring interdependence, mutuality, and fellowship, symbolising the interrelation between nature and humanity. The multifaceted roles of a storyteller, which include interpreting, teaching, and enthraling the audience, make learning a communal activity. Acknowledging folktales as repositories of indigenous epistemology, from a decolonial standpoint, challenges epistemic injustice and the knowledge hierarchy introduced by colonial governance. It asserts that Khasi folktales are not obsolete or primitive but remain pertinent and facilitate comprehension and evaluation of multifarious aspects of Khasi culture.

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