




Research Article

Performing Selfhood: Gender and Identity in Folk Narrative and Practice

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Abstract

Communication is a process driven by cultural dialectics. Folk media, a complex system of oral tradition, customs, and rituals, has served as a primary vehicle for propagating messages precisely because it is rooted in the cultural framework that deciphers meaning. For tribal communities such as the Khasis of Meghalaya, folk media is more than communication; it is a repository of ethnic knowledge and a manifestation of cultural ideology. Even as modern media pervades the public sphere, indigenous media retains its significance. This study delves into Khasi folk forms to explore how they conceptualise gender and identity. The unique matrilineal structure of Khasi society makes it a critical case study. Through an analysis of narratives, rituals, and performances, this paper investigates the construction of gender roles and tribal identity, particularly as they confront forces of globalisation and new media hegemony.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Of all relations, the most universal is that of identity, being common to every being whose existence has any duration.” - **David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1738**

This study examines how folk media, gender, and identity intersect in the Khasi community. Today’s focus on gender in academia is mostly due to the growth of feminist movements, especially in India after independence. Understanding gender is closely linked to how people and groups see themselves. Folk media, as a source of cultural knowledge, helps us understand the complex relationship between gender and identity.

The term “identity” derives from the Latin word “idem,” which means the same, but, as simple as the literal meaning may be, the concept of identity is as complex. The vast scholarship on identity has, over the years, reinstated that understanding identity relies on both its similarities and differences. “So identity need not mean an absolute or perfect identity” (Dundes, 1989, p. 4). There has always been a conflict in conceptualising identity, and the dichotomy centres on the distinction between personal and group identity. That is to say, for an individual or a group, it is not enough to simply assert an identity. “It also needed to be validated (or not) by those with whom one had dealings” (Jodhka 2001, p. 19). Merely conveying a message about the uniqueness of one’s identity is not enough; considerable others must acknowledge the message before it is established. “Identities were therefore to be found and negotiated at the boundaries of the internal and external” (p. 20). Furthermore, the awareness of having a personal identity is founded on two overlapping realms.

- 1) the perception of selfsameness and continuance of one’s existence in time and space,
- 2) the perception that others acknowledge this sameness and continuance of existence.

“No one has an identity on an uninhabited island; one has it only insofar as one is ‘with others’” (Dundes, 1989, p. 5). Sociologists Mead and Cooley stressed that meaningful communication is key to social life because it helps people develop a sense of self. They showed that others play a big part in shaping personal identity, highlighting that self-formation is relational. In this view, identity connects a person to their community’s values and history. Shared identity comes from having important traits in common with others.

To grasp the foundational character of identity and its role in self-formation, the concept of the ‘folk’ is essential. According to this perspective, identity is rooted in an individual’s conviction that they personally belong to what certain symbols represent. The critical question, then, is how these symbols are transmitted. The folk—or the community—serves as the communicative medium through which these symbols are expressed, shared, and sustained across time.

What is Folk Media?

Folk media, understood as traditional cultural forms rooted in indigenous societies, constitute enduring channels of communication that have developed organically across diverse cultures. Historically employed for moral, religious, and socio-

political instruction, these forms are intrinsically linked to a community’s cultural dialectics. As culture provides the framework for interpreting messages, folk media remain potent vehicles for dissemination. Prior to contemporary print and electronic systems, both humans and animals developed rudimentary communication methods—such as drumbeats to warn of danger or cave paintings—which are widely recognised as early folk media. The significance of folk media lies in its function as an expression of collective ethnic and religious identity, encompassing oral traditions, customs, and ritual practices.

Defining what ‘folk’ means is key. It covers many cultural expressions, such as dances, music, stories, myths, legends, proverbs, food, medicine, games, customs, and rituals. Max Weber, in *Economy and Society*, said that customs are a basic part of what makes up ethnicity and are the main element of folk life.

Furthermore, the concept of the folk can be understood in a broader sociological sense. As noted by Dundes (1989, P. 11), it refers to “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor,” indicating that shared practices or traits, however minimal, can form the basis of a folk community.

While individual members of a group may not be personally acquainted, they typically possess an awareness of the shared core traditions that unite the collective and contribute to the formation of a group identity. The ‘folk’ concept, therefore, transcends its function as a mere source of ethnographic data; it constitutes a fundamental mechanism through which individuals and communities define and affirm their identity.

Contemporary globalisation discourse highlights this dynamic, prompting critical inquiry into communication practices and identity formation within an interconnected world. In this context, indigenous media is increasingly recognised as a vital resource for comprehending cultural life and for establishing ‘person-centred’ channels of information dissemination. As a mode of communication that originates within and evolves within the community, folk or indigenous media represents a profoundly influential social force. It is an integral component of society, serving as the primary medium through which beliefs, rituals, and customs are learned and perpetuated. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of any society necessitates an examination of its communicative structures, with folk media occupying a central position within this analytical framework.

The Gender Question

Gender is a basic force that shapes how society is structured and how people live together. Studying gender helps us understand how society is organised and why it works the way it does. As Wharton (2005, p. 6) notes, “In virtually every culture, gender difference is a pivotal way in which humans identify themselves as persons, organise social relations, and symbolise meaningful natural and social events and processes.” Gender is not just a personal trait; it is a system of social practices that creates and maintains differences between

genders. This means gender is always being shaped and reshaped by what people do. It works on many levels, not just for individuals but throughout all parts of society.

In this view, important social processes—from daily interactions to the workings of large institutions—help maintain gender roles. Even though people today can have many and changing identities, gender identity is still one of the strongest factors shaping personal values, expectations, and social status. Using this approach, the study examines the Nongkrem dance to see how cultural symbols support gender as an important part of identity and strengthen group identity. This helps keep the tribe's unique identity alive over time.

The Context

The Khasi people are the indigenous inhabitants of Meghalaya, a north-eastern Indian state whose name derives from the Sanskrit for “abode of clouds” (*megh* meaning cloud and *ālaya* meaning home). “Khasi” serves as an umbrella term encompassing several subgroups, including the Khyntiam, Pnar (Synteng), Bhoi, War, and Lyngngam. Linguistically, Khasi belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family, with scholars positing a historical link to the Mon-Khmer group.

Khasi origin is rooted in mythology, most notably the legend of the *Hynniewtrep* (seven families). According to this narrative, U Blei (the Creator) initially dispersed humanity across sixteen celestial families. Permission was granted for the inhabitants of seven of these houses to descend to earth via a ladder placed on the Sohpetbneng peak (in present-day Ri-Bhoi district), thus establishing their settlement in the Meghalayan hills. This foundational legend exemplifies how folklore profoundly shapes the tribe's cultural identity, beliefs, and way of life. Further ancestral veneration is accorded to Ka Iawbei Tynrai (the root ancestress), her husband U Thawlang, and her brother U Suidnia.

A defining characteristic of Khasi society is its matrilineal, casteless, and classless structure. Descent and lineage are traced through the mother, though this does not equate to matriarchal dominance. As reflected in the saying, “from the woman springs the kin, from the father comes the stature,” the system emphasises complementary roles rather than female supremacy (Giri, 2012, p. 8). The *Kur*, or maternal clan, forms the nucleus around which all cultural, social, and political organisation revolves.

Historically, the Khasis adhered to the traditional faith of *Niam Khasi*, a religion without dedicated temples or pagodas. Religious rites were performed within the context of the *Kur*, emphasising a personal connection with the creator. The establishment of physical places of worship, such as churches, occurred only with the advent of Christianity. As a primarily oral society, the Khasi have preserved their history not through written records but through traditions, religion, and culture, with the spoken word maintaining a central and enduring significance. The Khasis believe in three core tenets, which they have been adhering to ardently for centuries now—

Tip Brier Tip Blei- Know man (*Brier*) know god (*Blei*)

Tip Kur Tip Kha- Know your maternal (*Kur*) and paternal (*Kha*) kins

Kamai Ya Ka Hok- Earn (*Kamai*) righteously (*Hok*)

These foundational ideologies have been transmitted intergenerationally through oral traditions such as stories and fables. They constitute the bedrock upon which Khasi social norms, values, and worldview have been constructed. Renowned for their narrative skill, the Khasi people have adeptly captured the essence of oral literature. Storytelling has served a profound social purpose, functioning to “articulate Khasi philosophical thought on all facets of their culture and to ensure its dissemination, captivating even the most unsophisticated listener” (Nongkynrih, 2007, ix).

It is notable that the Khasi people have sustained a matrilineal social structure despite being surrounded by predominantly patrilineal societies. Significantly, the core principles governing this matrilineal system are themselves transmitted and reinforced within Khasi culture through oral tradition and discourse.

Some of these ideologies are-

- *Long Jait Na Ka Kynthei*- From the women sprang the clan.
- *U Kpa Uba Ai Ka Long Rynieng*- The father provides stature and form to the child.
- *Ka Kmie Kaba Ai Ia Ka Doh Ka Snam*- The mother provides flesh and blood to the child.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses both primary and secondary data to build its analysis and arguments.

Primary Data: Primary data was gathered through personal interviews with key respondents. A combination of structured and unstructured questions was used. Respondents were selected via random stratified sampling from the target population to ensure representation across relevant categories, including elders and participants in the dance. Furthermore, direct observation was undertaken at the annual Pomblang festival in Smit, Shillong.

Secondary Data: The secondary research included a thorough review of literature, including academic books, journals, magazines, newspapers, previous research, published articles, e-journals, and government records. This existing work gives important context and supports the analysis based on the primary data.

The point of the Study

It is widely acknowledged that tribal cultures possess a dynamic and vibrant character, a quality evident in the tribes of Meghalaya. A central element in the festive calendar of the Khasi tribe is the Pomblang Festival (derived from *Pom* meaning ‘to cut’ and *Blang* meaning ‘goat’), an annual harvest thanksgiving ceremony held in November at Smit, the traditional capital of the Khyrim Syiemship (a *Syiem* being a chief or king). The entire community participates with fervour

in this weeklong celebration, which comprises a series of rituals predominantly conducted within the sacred confines of the *ling Sad* (the King's house). Access to this space is strictly restricted to members of the Syiem's lineage and the *Bakhrav* (priestly figures), who offer prayers before the sacred *Rishot Blei* (oak pillar). It is only during the final two days of the festival that specific rituals enter the public domain.

The festival's nomenclature directly references its core sacrificial rite, wherein offerings are presented to the Goddess Ka Blei Synshar to solicit bountiful harvests and communal prosperity. Consequently, on the penultimate day, a ceremonial procession departs from the *ling Sad* towards a proximate hilltop. There, a series of prescribed rituals is performed, culminating in the sacrifice of a cock and a goat. This segment of the festival is characterised by a procession led by *Dhulias* (traditional musicians) and male dancers. The atmosphere becomes highly charged through the resonant sounds of traditional drumbeats and the *Tangmuri* (pipes).

The last day of the festival draws the biggest crowd, including visitors from India and abroad, as well as officials. This day features a community celebration, highlighted by a dance performed by both women and men, which is the main event. The dance is so important that the festival is often called the *Nongkrem Dance*.

The dance is performed predominantly by commoners until dusk, at which point maidens from the royal family join the performance, shaded by a ceremonial umbrella. A significant religious distinction governs participation: all performers and ritual participants are adherents of *Niam Khasi*, the indigenous faith. Christian Khasis are welcome as spectators but do not take part in the dance or its associated ceremonies.'

• Position of the dancers

The choreography spatially encodes gender roles, with female dancers positioned centrally and male dancers forming a perimeter. Their movements are sharply contrasted: the men's dance is vigorous and energetic, while the women's is sombre, elegant, and restrained. The women's movement is confined to the feet, executing a deliberate, elliptical pattern with a grounding step. Their unhurried and premeditated motion, performed with downcast eyes and an expression of serene composure, is richly symbolic.

The female dancers symbolise purity, and their movement of tilling the ground with their feet represents the struggles of childbirth and the pain inflicted on Mother Earth by farming. The woman is seen as the *Lukhimai*, the guardian spirit of the home and the source of good. As the clan's main support, she is highly respected, and her virtue and purity are considered essential.

Conversely, the men dance animatedly around them, brandishing yak-tail whisks and swords. This performance enacts the Khasi belief that it is men's duty to protect women, ward off evil, and safeguard the purity of the entire community. This dichotomy embodies the core Khasi aspiration, encapsulated in the saying *Ka jing im ka bakhuid ka ba suba*—

that attaining a life of pristine and untarnished virtue is the paramount goal.

• The Virgin Dance

An instructive feature of the Nongkrem dance is its designation as a virgin dance, which imposes a specific requirement of chastity exclusively upon the female participants. This ritual dance of the virgins, known as *Shad Kynthei*, functions as a thanksgiving performance and is mirrored by a corresponding male dance, the *Shad Mastieh*. Notably, no parallel criterion of virginity is applied to the male dancers.

According to Khasi elders, adherence to this norm is a matter of individual conscience for the participating girls. The community holds a strong belief that violating this tradition invites ill omens, a conviction supported by reported historical instances where portentous signs allegedly followed such breaches.

• The Attire

The participants are adorned in elaborate traditional attire and significant gold and silver jewellery, with each element serving as a repository of cultural history. The ornaments, crafted from gold, silver, and coral, hold symbolic importance. Coral is the sole stone used, likely selected for its durability and its perceived apotropaic qualities to ward off negative forces and treat infertility.

The young women wear long-sleeved, high-necked velvet blouses, silk wraps, and the *dhara*. Their key adornments include the *pansngait*, a crown traditionally embellished with the aromatic cactus flower *tiewlasubon*—a bloom valued for its rarity and associated refinement. A choker and the *khonopad* are worn around the neck, while the arms and wrists are ornamented with the *taad* and *mohu*. A long, multi-stringed silver sash is draped from shoulder to waist. The hair is styled in a chignon, from which the *saikhyllong* extends down the back. This complete ensemble, which drapes the female dancer from head to foot, creates a vibrant and culturally resonant presentation.

In contrast to the women's elaborate ensemble, the men's traditional attire is less ornate. It consists of an embroidered sleeveless jacket, a *jainphong* (dhoti), a *jainboh*, a *jainspong*, and a turban. The turban is distinctively adorned with *thuia*, or bird feathers. A prevalent belief holds that the feather is a potent symbol of masculinity, strength, and freedom, represented by the bird that soars high in the sky.

The quiver holds three symbolic arrows: the *Nam Blei* (God), the *Nam Thawlang* (the first paternal ancestor), and the *Nam Iawbei* (the first maternal ancestress). This triad represents the three most authoritative and protective forces in a Khasi man's life, believed to empower him to defend himself, his family, his clan, the wider community, his *hima* (chieftainship), and his country.

Commentary

While superficially appearing as a conventional tribal festival celebrating communal life, such folk practices cannot be

dismissed as mere spectacle; they function as vital signifiers of the Khasi belief system. It is critical to recognise that the Khasi tribe remains, in essence, an oral society in which the spoken word retains paramount importance. Their entire corpus of tradition, ritual, and belief has been transmitted intergenerationally through oration. Consequently, the presence or absence of a written alphabet is an inadequate metric for assessing the Khasi civilisation. Historically, theirs was a society characterised by profound wisdom and refined conduct during an era when brute force often predominated. Festivals such as Shad Nongkrem serve as a medium for the representation and reinforcement of enduring cultural values. Through the nuanced choreography of the dance, the Khasi ancestors encoded the societal norms governing gender roles. This codification is continuously recreated and reaffirmed through the ritual's annual performance. Significantly, these time-honoured values persist and are reproduced over time, demonstrating their resilience even amidst the transformative influences of modernisation and Westernisation on Khasi life and culture.

Another example of how folk symbols set social rules is seen in the way traditional drums are used. Khasi drums are called male (*ksing*) or female (*ka bom*), and each has its own gendered role. Male drums are used in ceremonies, while female drums are played during dances. This difference aligns with the broader Khasi custom, in which only men perform certain rituals, and women may not even be allowed to watch.

The symbolism also appears in the two main male drums, the *Ksing Shynrang*. One drum represents a man's role as a maternal uncle (*kñi*) in his mother's family, and the other his role as a father (*pa*) in his wife's family. This use of instruments supports the division of social roles by gender, as shown in the Khasi sayings *U Rang Khatar Bor* (a man has twelve powers) and *Ka Thei Shibor* (a woman has one power), making these roles seem natural.

Looking closely at festival ceremonies shows that men fill all the leadership and main ritual roles, such as priests, musicians, and lead dancers. Women mostly do preparation work or watch as spectators. This clear split in gender roles, common in many societies, is shown and spread through these folk practices.

While proponents argue that such defined roles ensure social synchronisation, a closer examination exposes deeply entrenched gender disparities. These inequities are rooted in cultural beliefs and customs that persistently marginalise women. Prejudiced norms are so thoroughly embedded in religion, family structures, social relations, language, and media that their pervasive inequality often goes unremarked or is internalised as a natural order where a woman's role is defined in relation to men. Historical frameworks, such as the

Manusmriti's doctrine of the "Three Obediences" (to father, husband, and son), illustrate this enduring paradigm, which subordinates women despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

This reflects a "protectionist approach to gender difference, in which women were understood to be weak and in need of protection" (Chandran 2010, p. 294), a notion that subtly endorses constructed gender roles.

Khasi folk media also shows a similar view of gender identity. Women are seen as caretakers of the home and family, while men are in charge of protection and public roles. This split is further strengthened by rules that prevent women from leading religious rituals or from joining the local council (*Dorbar Shnong*). All types of Khasi folk media help create and show these traditional roles.

At the same time, these old institutions and folk practices provide women with some social protection and help define the community's broader ethnic identity. So, folk media both supports gender hierarchies and helps keep the community united.

3. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Khasi folk media, as embodied in traditions like the Nongkrem dance, is a powerful mechanism for simultaneously constructing and conserving identity. While these matrilineal practices uphold a unique ethnic identity and provide women with a distinct social status, they also rigorously encode and reproduce a gendered hierarchy. The performance spatially and symbolically reinforces complementary yet unequal roles, positioning men as public protectors and women as domestic guardians. Thus, folk narrative and practice are not merely cultural expressions but active, dynamic systems that negotiate the tension between preserving communal identity and perpetuating entrenched social norms amidst modernising forces.

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