

# Oral Traditions as Ecological Archives: Cultural Preservation and Spiritual Stewardship in Northeast India

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## ABSTRACT

"Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of human life." (Campbell & Moyers 2011, p. 5). Viewed from this lens, the folktale traditions of the northeastern tribal communities are found to preserve ecological knowledge, collective memory and ethical systems through oral narratives. By employing mythopoeic, archetypal and structural approaches, this paper argues that folklores of Northeast India serve not merely as decorative storytelling but as an indigenous knowledge system. Through this system the communities articulate origins, regulate conduct, narrate suffering and maintain relationships with rivers, forests, mountains, animals and ancestral presences. Within the selected corpora, recurring narrative patterns associate moral disorders with ecological disruption, grief with memorial landscapes and ritual practice with the restoration of social and cosmic balance. Water emerges as a particularly significant symbolic and ethical medium, as rivers, springs and waterfalls and pools preserve memory, mark transgression, regulate movement and connect communal life to a morally responsive environment. By interpreting northeastern folktales as oral historiographies rather than isolated tales, the study illustrates that cultural preservation in these traditions is intrinsically linked to spiritual stewardship, where ecological care is embedded in reciprocity, restraint sacred accountability and more than human relations.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Indigenous Knowledge System, Ecological Disruption, Spiritual Stewardship, Oral Histography

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## INTRODUCTION

Folktales in many indigenous communities are not merely narratives intended for entertainment. They function as repositories of collective memory, ethical frameworks and communal identity. Folklores in Northeast India must be read as major system of cultural memory, indigenous knowledge and ethical world-making rather than mere ornamental oral residues. Within this framework stories, myths, ritual narratives and place-based tales emerge as primary media through which communities sustain relations

with land, water, kinship networks, sacred power and historical continuity. This argument is especially significant for the present paper, as its thematic focus on cultural preservation and spiritual stewardship presupposes a framework in which oral tradition is understood simultaneously as archive and as practice.

This paper analysis selects folk tales from Khasi, Adi, Nyishi and Galo traditions to illustrate how each community constructs a distinctive ideological universe through or oral narrative. They further demonstrate that ecological thought in these communities is inseparable from cosmology and social life. Rivers, forests, stones, mountains, springs and animals recur as moral actors, witnesses, judges or bearers of memory, suggesting that the environment is not conceived as passive matter but as a responsive field of relations. What modern discourse tends to separate into ecology, ethics, religion and law is held together in these folktale traditions through narrative form. These communities preserve ecological knowledge by encoding principles of coexistence, use, restraint and environmental consequence within memorable narrative structures. Second, this ecological knowledge remains durable because it is grounded in spiritual stewardship, understood here as the obligation to maintain right relations among humans, nonhumans, ancestors and sacred landscapes.

## **Folklore as Ecological Knowledge**

The Oral traditions of Northeast Indian tribal communities preserve a profound ecological awareness and an intricate spiritual relationship with forest, rivers and mountains. Stories, songs and ritual narratives, function as primary media through which ethical values and ecological knowledge are transmitted across generations, shaping how communities perceive, inhabit, and care for their environment. This proposition is further elaborated in folklores where conceptualization forms an integral part of oral historiography and works as a “living curriculum” that instructs community on how to inhabit the world through movement, cultivation, hunting, mourning, ritual practise and social reciprocity. In this sense, oral tradition operates not only as record of the past, but also as pedagogical and normative framework for ongoing collective life.

This ecological knowledge is not abstractly systematised in the manner of formal scientific discourse. Rather it is embedded in narrative matrices organised around themes such as migration, kinship, reciprocity, ecological balance, spiritual accountability and collective ethics. These matrices structure practical understandings of how landscapes are inhabited, how scarcity is negotiated, how responsibilities to kinship and neighbours are enacted and how violence against humans and non-humans reduces communal consequences. They also articulate how violations of balance reverberate through water, crops, animals, weather and memory, thereby linking environmental disturbance to moral failure and social disorder. Narrative thus becomes a key technology of environmental governance, translating cosmological principles into everyday practises of restrained care and repair.

Within this broader archive, the riverine framework is especially central. Brahmaputra or Siang is simultaneously presented as deity, ancestor, judge, lover, guardian and prognostic force, foregrounding the river as a sentient presence that observes, remembers and responds. Dreams of crossing, fishing, flood and hearing the river's sound are interpreted as signs of prosperity. Danger, conflict or success and thus enter into communal decision-making and risk perception. The river is therefore not merely a physical waterway but an episematic structure through which environment, emotion, morality and collective life are interpreted together. By reading about the Brahmaputra or Siang in this way, it is demonstrated how indigenous riverine imagine unsettled modern separations between nature and culture, infrastructure and kinship, hydrology and ethics and instead foreground relational ontology in which water, land, spirits and humans co-produce both knowledge and history.

### **Spiritual Stewardship**

As discussed in the previous section That folklore preserves ecological knowledge but it does so because the natural world is imagined as spiritually and ethically animated. The folktales across Khasi, Adi, Nyishi and Galo traditions repeatedly demonstrate that nature listens, remembers, punishes, mourns and transforms, thereby rendering the environment a participant in ethical life, rather than a silent background in human action. Within this framework, spiritual stewardship may be defined as the obligation to sustain balance among human, ecological and sacred orders, such that moral conduct is always already environmental conduct.

In the folktales several recurrent narrative structures can be identified, that support the reading where ethical casualty, symbolic mediation, the moral animation of nature, the public conversion of private emotion and folklore as a mode of convergence are seen. Taken together the structure shows that ecological disorder is consistently narrated as the consequence of moral excess, greed, betrayal, neglect, failures or reciprocity. Environmental crisis is thus framed not simply as disruption of natural processes, but as the outcome of damaged relationships among humans, non-humans and spiritual forces. The implication here is clear that stewardship is not an optional environmental virtue but a cosmological demand embedded in everyday conduct.

This is visible in the narrative regulation of behaviour. Folklore functions as a form of law without formal institutions, because stories authorise limits on hunting, greed, violence, inheritance, secrecy and misuse of communal resources, while also preserving ritual means of restoration when balance has been broken. Through warning exemplarity and ritual instruction, such narratives map the boundaries of permissible action and outline procedures for repair. Spiritual stewardship thus operates through narrative authority rather than through abstract environmental doctrine, binding cosmology, ethics and resource use within a shared imaginative frame.

## **Khasi Narratives**

The Khasi folktales disclose a narrative world in which the environment records moral life with striking intensity. Foundational narratives such as “The Seven Clans” and “The Purple Crest” construct a cosmos in which social disorder threatens both ecological and cosmic equilibrium, whereas humility, reciprocity, and ritual mediation restore balance. These stories already configure stewardship as a precondition of coexistence, rather than as a supplementary or belated environmental concern, by presenting care for land, water, and nonhuman beings as intrinsic to the maintenance of social and spiritual order.\_

This logic becomes more intimate and affective in tales such as “Ka Likai”, “U Manik Raitong”, and “The Death of Lapalang the Stag”. In these narratives, grief is transmuted into waterfall, injustice into spring and tree, and the killing of an animal into a communal catastrophe marked by mourning rather than triumph. Landscape is thus shaped by emotion and wrongdoing, and the traces of suffering are materially inscribed in rivers, rocks, and forests. Khasi ecological knowledge is preserved through stories that teach that water remembers, land bears witness, and nonhuman life cannot be violated without destabilising the moral fabric of the community. The environment becomes an archive of injury and care, in which every alteration in topography potentially encodes an ethical history.

The Khasi corpus is especially important for the theme of spiritual stewardship because it demonstrates how emotional, social, and ecological registers become inseparable. What is ethically suppressed or disavowed by institutions reappears through landscape, and what is done to animals or rivers remains active in memory through named sites, springs, waterfalls, and sacred stories. Preservation, in this context, is not a matter of static remembrance or nostalgic reference to the past; it is a continuing moral habitation of a storied geography, in which movement through place entails constant encounter with narratives of responsibility, loss, and repair. Folklore thereby sustains an ongoing practice of accountability in which the land itself participates in monitoring, recalling, and reorienting human conduct.

## **Adi Narratives**

The Adi understanding of the Siang “as the heart of all rivers” foregrounds a cosmology in which water is not merely a natural resource, but the primary medium through which power value and judgement circulate. River lore among the Adi links judicial practise, dream-belief, beauty, strength and moral testing, such that the Siang becomes at once a place of adjudication, a source of visionary knowledge and an aesthetic and effective presence. In this framework the river is both lifeline and tribunal as it sustains agricultural cycles, travel and everyday livelihood, while simultaneously functioning as a moral witness that registers, remembers and responds to human conduct. Ecological knowledge is therefore preserved not as abstract information, about hydrology or resource management, but as a

lived and narrated awareness that water is aesthetically powerful, spiritually charged and ethically responsive. The river's flow, clarity, turbulence and seasonal transformations are read as signs of its disposition towards the community, indexing the quality of ritual, observance, social harmony and ethical restraint. Adi folklores thus illuminate a form of stewardship in which the river occupies the centre of communal order, symbolic value and ethical judgement. To act against the river in form of polluting it, ignoring its ritual prohibitions which governs its use or to fail in offerings and respect, is not simply a damage an ecosystem. It is to disrupt the very matrix that organises justice, dreams, kinship, obligations and collective well-being. Transgressions against the river threaten to withdraw its protection, diminish its fertility and invites forms of misfortune that are simultaneously ecological and moral.

In this sense Adi's spiritual stewardship is fundamentally riverine. It binds legal practise, visionary experience and ecological care, into a single flowing moral field in which social authority, spiritual sanction and environmental processes are mutually implicated. Stewardship emerges as a relational discipline that humans must continuously negotiate with a sentient river that can bless, warm or chastise and whose sensuality to Adi life ensures that questions of law, memory and survival are always already questions of how one inhabits and honours the Siang.

## **Nyishi Narrative**

Nyishi narratives, by contrast, foreground polluted abundance, scarcity, famine, and the fragility of communal survival as central moral and cosmological concerns. The chapters show that water in Nyishi folklore is consistently figured as condition, witness, and test: it is the material ground of life, the observing medium that registers human conduct, and the site at which ethical character is tried and revealed. Rivers and streams nourish, irrigate and connect dispersed settlements, enabling subsistence, mobility, and communication across a challenging terrain. Yet the same waters also expose the ethical state of the community when greed, contamination, or ritual neglect disturb ecological balance. Fluctuations in water quality, flow, and availability are not treated as merely climatic or accidental; they are interpreted as responses to human actions, thereby binding hydrological change to moral accountability.

Within this representational frame, scenes of overfishing, careless disposal of waste, or failure to perform requisite rites do not merely result in physical degradation. They precipitate famine, illness, and social breakdown that lay bare the fault-lines of communal life—revealing who has hoarded, who has neglected obligations, and where relations between humans, nonhumans, and spiritual forces have been strained or broken. Environmental crisis thus becomes a diagnostic medium for ethical disorder. Narratives repeatedly emphasise that suffering does not fall randomly but follows from cumulative

acts of excess, indifference, or ritual abandonment, and that restoration requires not only technical adjustment but moral and ritual repair.

In these tales, stewardship is inseparable from restraint, because the misuse of shared waters constitutes both a social and a spiritual violation with long-term communal consequences. Water is a shared and sentient commons whose degradation signals a breakdown in reciprocity—between households, between generations, and between humans and the spirits who also claim the rivers and streams. Nyishi spiritual stewardship is therefore framed in terms of limits and vulnerability: the community's survival depends on its capacity to curb extraction, observe taboos, and maintain ritual attentiveness to the agencies inhabiting water. To respect water is to acknowledge that its generosity is conditional and revocable, that abundance can harden into scarcity when disrespected, and that ecological security is always precariously held within an ethical economy of self-limitation, remembrance, and care.

## **Galo Narrative**

The Galo corpus preserves ecological knowledge through a dense network of narratives concerned with clay creation, dangerous appetite, scarcity, environmental devastation, and ritual mourning. Stories such as *Takam Unga*, *Tangu Tar*, *Tani and Yapom*, and *A Worthy Father's Worthy Son* consistently link ecological disturbance to ethical excess, failed reciprocity, and inherited responsibility, thereby framing environmental crisis as the consequence of moral and relational breakdown rather than as a merely natural event. Creation from clay already signals a world in which humans and earth share material kinship: bodies are formed from the same substance that constitutes the wider landscape. Within such a cosmology, environmental harm is not simply external damage to a backdrop or resource base, but a form of self-injury that fractures the very conditions of human existence and continuity.

Subsequent tales of hunger, overconsumption, and defiance elaborate this premise by tracing how desire, when unregulated, leads to the depletion of resources, the disruption of social order, and the suffering of future generations. Episodes of insatiable appetite, refusal of advice and transgression of prohibitions dramatize the ways in which individual or familial choices reverberate across temporal and ecological scales. The land responds to such excess by withdrawing its fertility, altering its abundance and rendering formerly dependable environments hostile and barren. In this narrative universe, scarcity and devastation are not random misfortunes; they are legible as outcomes of cumulative failures in restraint, reciprocity, and intergenerational responsibility.

At the same time, these narratives do not foreclose the possibility of moral renewal. Ritual response and communal memory are imagined as crucial modalities through which damaged relations might be acknowledged and partially repaired. Mourning rites for lost

children, kin, or landscapes, commemorative practices that recall specific transgressions and their consequences, and didactic storytelling that repeatedly rehearses these episodes all work together to name the wrong, articulate shared complicity and imagine forms of restitution. Such practices transform grief into a pedagogical resource, ensuring that suffering is not forgotten but mobilised to cultivate vigilance, humility, and care in subsequent generations.

Galo stewardship is therefore both disciplinary and reflective. It is disciplinary in that the environment is represented as capable of withdrawal, retaliation and mourning in response to human wrongdoing in form of crops failure, animals' disappearance and familiar terrains become threatening when ethical limits are ignored. Yet it is also reflective, insofar as the community's continued existence is shown to depend on its willingness to narrate its relation to those limits again and again, subjecting its own desires, histories and modes of use to sustained scrutiny. Spiritual stewardship here takes the form of an ongoing dialogue with a responsive landscape that both punishes and teaches. Through this dialogic relationship, ecological care is inseparable from moral self-examination and the work of living with the land is cast as a continuous process of remembering, recalibrating and renewing the obligations that bind humans to the earth from which they are made.

### **Comparative discussion**

A major strength of the uploaded chapters lies in their comparative argument that Khasi, Adi, Nyishi, and Galo traditions remain distinct while participating in a broader symbolic grammar of spiritual stewardship. In the Khasi materials, this grammar appears through the intimate binding of emotion, landscape, and moral consequence: waterfalls, hills and animals become enduring records of loss, injustice, and restored balance. In the Adi corpus, the same grammar is articulated through river-centred imaginaries in which the Siang functions simultaneously as source of life, juridical authority and medium of visionary knowledge. Nyishi narratives foreground the precariousness of abundance, making water the site at which the ethics of restraint and the dangers of contamination are most starkly staged. Galo stories, finally, elaborate a clay-based ontology in which environmental devastation is inseparable from dangerous appetite and intergenerational responsibility, and in which ritual mourning enables partial restoration.

Across these traditions, a shared symbolic grammar emerges that includes recurrent relations between moral disorder and ecological crisis, between landscape and memory, between suffering and transformation, and between story and governance. Moral failures like greed, betrayal, neglect and refusal of reciprocity, are consistently narrated as precipitating environmental disturbance, whether in the form of receding rivers, polluted streams, infertile land and grieving animals. Conversely, acts of humility, ritual mediation

and renewed reciprocity restore or at least recalibrate relations among humans, nonhumans and spiritual forces. Yet such recurrence does not flatten difference. Instead, it reveals how multiple traditions articulate related philosophies of coexistence through different tonal and narrative emphases: Khasi tales privilege the affective and memorial dimensions of storied landscapes; Adi narratives elaborate riverine jurisprudence; Nyishi stories underscore scarcity, pollution, and the ethics of restraint; and Galo accounts centre on creation, appetite, and mourning. Together, they demonstrate that spiritual stewardship in Northeast Indian folklore is not a marginal or modern overlay on “nature,” but a fundamental cosmological condition organising law, emotion, and ecological knowledge.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TRIBAL FOLKLORES

Taken together, the four tribal folklore traditions demonstrate that each develops a distinct ecological locus of Khasi landscape, Adi river, Nyishi shared water and Galo clay/forest and extreme weather, as the primary theatre in which spiritual and ethical questions are staged and negotiated. These are not interchangeable “natural” backdrops but carefully differentiated media through which moral life is imagined, tested and remembered. The spiritual and ethical logics that emerge across the corpus within restraint, reciprocity, accountability and mourning, are broadly shared and are consistently inflected by the particular ecological medium through which they are expressed. In the Khasi materials, for example, landscapes and animal life are configured as affective archives that record grief and repair; in Adi narratives, the riverine environment functions as juridical forum and visionary channel; Nyishi stories locate ethical crisis and discipline at the site of shared and polluted waters; and Galo accounts mobilize clay, forests, and climatic volatility to index appetite, loss and ritual renewal. The “narrative results” identified in the matrix thus trace how stories convert these ecological loci into what might be termed moral technologies: landscapes become archives, rivers operate as courts, ecological collapses serve as diagnostic instruments of communal failure, and storms or scarcity act as disciplinary reminders of moral limit.

Across these traditions, folklore can therefore be understood as performing at least three interrelated preservative functions. First, it stores environmental knowledge in highly memorable, affectively charged forms like details about rivers, forests, weather patterns, animal behaviour and agricultural risk which are embedded within plots, characters and motifs that facilitate intergenerational transmission. Second, it legitimizes ethical conduct by linking it to a sacred or cosmological order, such that practices of restraint, sharing, ritual observance and mourning are not merely pragmatic adaptations but obligations grounded in relationships with deities, spirits, ancestors and nonhuman others. Third, it transmits communal hermeneutics for reading ecological disturbance as socially meaningful rather than random or merely “natural” events. Droughts, floods, pollution and species withdrawal are rendered interpretable as indices of moral imbalance, failed

reciprocity and neglected ritual responsibility. On this view, “cultural preservation” cannot be reduced to the protection of discrete identity markers, aesthetic forms and textual artefacts. It entails the survival of a narratively sustained ecological consciousness which is a lived repertoire of stories, interpretive habits and affective orientations that continually rearticulate how communities understand the entanglement of spiritual order, social conduct and the more-than-human world.

## CONCLUSION

The paper thus demonstrates that the folklore of the Khasi, Adi, Nyishi, and Galo communities preserves far more than discrete mythic motifs or ethnographic detail. Taken together, these narrative traditions operate as indigenous knowledge systems in which ecology, spirituality, ethics, law and memory are structurally intertwined rather than analytically separable. Ecological knowledge persists because it is narratively embedded in stories of rivers, forests, animals, grief, scarcity and ritual accountability along with spiritual stewardship, which in turn, secures this knowledge as a continuing moral obligation within collective life, rather than as inert information about the past.

The central implication here is that cultural preservation in Northeast Indian tribal contexts cannot be equated with documentation or textual collection alone. Any serious account of preservation must also address the oral, ritual, performative, and landscape-based conditions through which ecological knowledge is enacted, interpreted, and renewed across generations. To preserve folklore, in this sense, is to sustain a mode of dwelling in the world in which nature is encountered as living, relational, sacred, and ethically consequential. This study therefore argues that attention to Khasi, Adi, Nyishi and Galo storytelling practices is not simply a matter of cultural or literary interest, but a necessary component of understanding and supporting the narratively sustained ecological consciousness that underlies indigenous philosophies of coexistence in Northeast India.

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