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Oral Tradition As Epistemology: A Study Of Angami Naga Myths As Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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Abstract: This paper examines the oral traditions of the Angami Nagas as dynamic epistemological systems that transcend mere storytelling, functioning instead as vital sources of knowledge, cultural memory, and moral instruction. Through an analysis of selected myths, the study explores how these narratives encode indigenous wisdom related to social responsibility, spiritual beliefs, environmental consciousness, and communal ethics. By situating Angami oral tradition within the broader discourse on indigenous epistemology and communal modes of learning, the paper makes a call for the significance of oral literature as a framework for cultural transmission. It further highlights the central role of elders as custodians of knowledge, who interpret natural signs, dreams, and symbolic actions to guide and sustain the community's collective understanding.

Key words: Angami Naga Folklore, Indigenous Epistemology, Cultural Identity.

INTRODUCTION

The Angami Nagas, one of the major Naga tribes of Nagaland in the Northeast India, have a rich cultural heritage rooted in oral tradition. Their oral literature encompasses myths, legends, folktales, songs, proverbs and so on, that serve as cultural archives, offering moral instruction and historical continuity. Traditionally, these narratives were disseminated through communal settings such as the *kichüki* (youth dormitories or morungs), where elders imparted wisdom to younger members of the community. These oral traditions not only preserved historical narratives but also reinforced social structures, ethical codes, and spiritual beliefs. They teach values, explain the origins of clans and landscapes, guide moral behavior, and maintain social order. This paper is based on the premise that “oral traditions not only connect individuals to their cultural roots but also serve as a means of identity formation and community cohesion” (Suokhrie, 2024). It seeks to position Angami oral tradition, particularly myths, as a dynamic space where memory, morality, and community converge. It specifically looks at oral tradition through the lens of *epistemology*, how Angami myths function as epistemological frameworks, that is, how they help people understand the world and their place in it. It examines the kinds of knowledge embedded in these myths, the ways they are passed down across generations, and their role in shaping Angami identity, beliefs, and practices. By focusing on selected myths, this paper aims to highlight the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and the need to recognize and preserve them in today's rapidly changing world.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is grounded in the understanding that oral tradition is not merely a mode of cultural expression but a valid and rich source of knowledge. In many indigenous societies, including that of the Angami Nagas, knowledge extends beyond written texts or formal institutions. It is sustained and transmitted through spoken forms such as myths, folktales, songs, proverbs, and ritual performances. These oral narratives encapsulate the community's worldview, social order, and moral codes. As Kapfo (2023) observes, such narratives move beyond entertainment to function as vessels of cultural values that reflect the Naga worldview, ethics, and ethos. Oral traditions, therefore, act as mediums through which socio-cultural values, moral teachings, and a shared sense of identity are communicated across generations.

At the heart of this paper is the concept of epistemology, the theory of knowledge, concerned with how people come to know, what is accepted as truth, and how knowledge is transmitted. While Western epistemology often privileges rational inquiry, written documentation, and empirical evidence, indigenous epistemologies value experiential, communal, spiritual, and oral forms of knowledge. In *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Walter J. Ong explores the distinct characteristics of primary oral cultures, where spoken words, unwritten and unscripted, possess a powerful, almost magical vitality. He argues that oral societies perceive words as inherently active and energised, whereas literate cultures tend to regard words as static objects on a page, disconnected from performative expression and thus less potent (Ong, 2002, p. 32). Building on this, Ong explains that oral tradition preserves collective memory through repetition and rhythm, and that storytelling, being performative, shapes both thought and cultural truth.

Jan Vansina (1965) similarly emphasizes that oral tradition, though spoken, should be treated as a form of historical documentation. J.D. Fadeiye (2004) affirms that myths and legends within oral traditions reveal the origins of communities, their institutions, taboos, social practices, and belief systems. Dell Hymes (1996), through his work on oral performance, highlights the significance of ethnographic methods in understanding how knowledge is culturally transmitted. In non-literate societies, such as the Angami, oral traditions serve as a primary epistemological system, encoding collective memory and indigenous values. Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) supports this view, demonstrating how the aesthetics of orality, including rhythm, pitch, and musicality, contribute meaningfully to knowledge transmission and cultural continuity.

Reiterating this framework, the oral tradition of the Angami Nagas emerges as more than a record of the past, it is a living epistemological system. It enables the construction, validation, and transmission of knowledge across generations. Rooted in daily life, this system is maintained by elders, who serve as custodians of wisdom and cultural authority. Their storytelling, proverbs, ritual songs, and teachings shape communal understanding and reinforce identity, responsibility, and moral conduct. This aligns with Ikuenobe's (2018) notion of *epistemic communalism*, where knowledge is collectively owned and maintained through social interaction, mutual reliance, and clearly defined roles.

Angami oral tradition is not merely a mirror reflecting cultural practices, it actively constitutes the mechanisms through which knowledge and ethics are formed. Deeply embedded in belief systems, kinship ties, ecological awareness, and customary laws, these traditions provide the cultural foundations upon which truth is negotiated and social behavior guided. In this light, this study, therefore, focuses on Angami myths as case studies to illustrate how oral tradition functions as an epistemological tool. Myths in this context are not fictional tales for amusement but structured narratives that encode indigenous knowledge and guide the community's understanding of life. They explain natural and social phenomena, transmit moral values, preserve collective memory, and serve as educational frameworks. In essence, the conceptual foundation of this study is the view that oral traditions are living epistemologies, fluid, context-driven systems of knowing that are deeply rooted in cultural identity, communal life, and indigenous worldviews.

MIATSEI

Miatsei was a witty and clever youth and he would exploit the innocent villagers often. He was also lazy. *Miatsei* would baby sit the children of the villagers while the parents worked in the fields during the day. This would be a good thing if only *Miatsei* would honestly be carrying out his given job but he does not take care of the children properly when he was left all alone with the children. By evening when the parents get their children home, they would cry out of hunger, all because, *Miatsei* would eat all their prepared lunch. *Miatsei* would eat the children's lunch and later excrete giant stools. Amazed by the size of his stool, the villagers asked *Miatsei* the reason and *Miatsei* would say, it is all because of eating green leaves. (Personal Communication, February, 2025).

The story of *Miatsei* and his exploits is a well-known and widely shared narrative among children in all Angami villages. It exists in various forms, ranging from straightforward narration to more elaborate versions with dramatic dialogues, depending on the storyteller and context. At its core, the character of *Miatsei* embodies wit and adaptability, often outsmarting others through cleverness. However, beneath the humor lies a moral undertone, as the tale also serves as a cautionary narrative against laziness, irresponsibility, and the exploitation of others. Through *Miatsei*'s actions and their consequences, the story conveys implicit social sanctions and reinforces communal values.

The myth of *Miatsei*, exemplifies how oral tradition functions as a living epistemological system in indigenous communities. Though light-hearted and humorous on the surface, the story encodes vital cultural knowledge about responsibility, trust, and ethical conduct. *Miatsei*, portrayed as clever but lazy and exploitative, serves as a cautionary figure. His misuse of the villagers' trust, eating the children's food while neglecting his duty, becomes an engaging educational tool. While *Miatsei*'s wit and cleverness are acknowledged, his actions are shown to be morally problematic. The tale subtly teaches that intelligence without responsibility leads to social disapproval. It reflects shared understanding of laziness, dishonesty, and misuse of trust as socially unacceptable. *Miatsei*'s explanation for his enormous stool, claiming he only ate green leaves, is a form of false knowledge, and the community's response suggests skepticism and moral judgment. The myth may serve as a gentle but firm warning against manipulating others or avoiding work, especially directed at children.

As Walter Ong suggests, oral cultures rely on the spoken word not only to entertain but to convey truth and preserve memory, and *Miatsei*'s story does precisely this, embedding moral lessons within a performative narrative. The myth also reflects the principles of epistemic communalism, where knowledge is shared, socially constructed, and passed down through interaction and repetition. Thus, the story of *Miatsei* is not merely a children's tale; it serves as a sophisticated medium through which the Angami community articulates and reinforces its values, social norms, and ways of knowing. As Daftuar (2015) notes, such stories are not simply sources of entertainment but powerful expressions of deeper cultural truths, especially the enduring tension between right and wrong, or good and evil.

THE MYTH ON MOUNT TEYOZÜ

Mount *Teyozü*, located in Viswema village, is deeply rooted in local belief as a prophetic mountain that reveals signs of impending death within the community. Since ancient times, the villagers have observed that when clouds gather around the peak of the mountain, it signals the passing of someone from the village. Elders, known for their wisdom and close observation of nature, interpret the direction from which the clouds approach to determine which part of the village the death will occur. If the clouds rise from the left side and enshroud the mountain, it is believed that someone from *Rachümi* or *Zhiermikhel* has passed away or will soon do so. Conversely, if the clouds come from the right, it signifies the death of someone from *Krazhümi* or *Pavomikhel*. Even today, the elders of Viswema look to Mount *Teyozü* as a spiritual guide, continuing the tradition of reading nature's signs to understand the fate of the community's members. (Personal Communication, May, 2025).

The myth of Mount *Teyozü*, a revered site in Viswema village, offers a compelling example of how oral traditions serve as vessels for encoding knowledge, preserving cultural beliefs, and passing down collective wisdom across generations. The interpretation of cloud movements over the mountain as omens of death represents a distinctive epistemological system that intertwines environmental observation, spiritual meaning, and communal understanding. In this worldview, nature is not passive but plays an active role in the process of knowledge-making. The elders, through long-standing observation and cultural insight, act as interpreters of these natural signs, discerning messages about life and death through the behavior of clouds. The mountain, the sky, and the clouds become symbolic texts, read by those entrusted with the responsibility of preserving and conveying meaning within the community.

The epistemological depth of the myth lies in how knowledge is socially constructed and transmitted, through the lived experience and spiritual insight of the elders, whose role is central in oral cultures. As Dixit and Goyal (2011) observe, in many indigenous societies, elders are regarded as vital custodians of tradition and oral knowledge, responsible for educating younger generations. Through their storytelling, the community is taught how to interpret the environment, make sense of their existence, and sustain a harmonious relationship with nature. These oral narratives not only preserve cultural memory but also strengthen tribal identity and instill a sense of pride.

Moreover, the myth of Mount *Teyozü* reflects the Angami community's understanding that oral tradition is more than storytelling, it is a medium through which moral teachings, spiritual beliefs, and worldview are transmitted. The movement of clouds is interpreted not simply as a meteorological event but as a symbolic and practical framework for making sense of the world and maintaining communal cohesion. Oral tradition in this sense is dynamic and evolving, continually shaping and reshaping the community's knowledge systems. The wisdom embedded in these traditions, honed through generations, is adapted over time in response to new experiences and challenges. As Sharma and Magar (2024) suggest, oral narratives form the bedrock of tribal cultures globally, preserving ancestral memory, cultural values, and social practices. These traditions are central to the identity and continuity of tribal communities, serving as repositories of heritage, belief, and shared experience through the spoken word.

THE LEGEND OF PUTSOLIE

Once upon a time, there lived a man named *Putsolie*, who was renowned not for his wealth in terms of money, but for his immense possession of cattle. He was said to own thousands of cows, so many that when they were taken for grazing in the jungle, the roads from Kohima village to the Kohima local ground, a distance of about one kilometer, would be filled with his cattle. In addition to his livestock, *Putsolie* owned vast tracts of land across multiple areas: *Pfhesieki* (present-day Daklane), *Serünu* (War Cemetery), the site of the present Directorate of Post Office, *Terhuonyieke* (Midland), *Dzüdouzou*, *Menyibozougei*, *Kharüzou*, and *Chaügei* (Minister's Hill).

As a child, *Putsolie* had a mysterious and recurring dream in which he heard a chant: "*Sielie, sielie, olatounuo, we, we,*" "*Sielie thepfumia, thehe keselie morosuote, n phriemia tsu lertie idi terhuomia puo ki pushie.*" In this dream, he was instructed to rise and make preparations for a great feast. Although he did not understand its meaning at the time, the dream remained with him throughout his youth. As he grew older and began acquiring great wealth, cattle and land, he realized that the dream had been a prophetic message, foretelling his destiny.

With his vast resources, *Putsolie* became capable of hosting the Feast of Merit, an esteemed cultural tradition held only by the wealthy. The Feast of Merit was a grand ritual performed to honor and appease the spirits, requiring the host to feed the entire village, regardless of age. This sacred event was a symbol of generosity, status, and spiritual devotion. *Putsolie* not only fulfilled this responsibility but went beyond, hosting feasts for multiple villages and performing various other rituals, feasts that were unimaginable for an ordinary man. His name lives on as a symbol of abundance, fulfillment of destiny, and spiritual honor. (*Personal Communication, November, 2024*).

The legend of *Putsolie*, known for his immense wealth in cattle and land and for performing the Feast of Merit, is more than a tale of prosperity, it is a significant example of how the Angami people transmit cultural knowledge through oral tradition. This narrative reflects important lessons about ethics, social responsibility, economic generosity, and spiritual belief. In traditional Angami society, the Feast of Merit was not merely a display of wealth; it was regarded as a moral and spiritual obligation. Only those who possessed sufficient resources were considered worthy of hosting such a feast. Yano (2015) describes the Feast of Merit, or *thesha*, as an event that could only be conducted by a wealthy individual, known as a *zharümia*. Hosting this feast was a path to earning social respect and prestige. It involved providing abundant food and drink for the entire village, symbolizing not just the host's riches, but his generosity and social worth. The ability to share generously was the true measure of one's wealth. This principle is reflected in the legend of *Putsolie*, which reinforces the Angami worldview where wealth is not held for personal gain, but for the benefit of the wider community.

Central to the story is *Putsolie's* prophetic childhood dream: "*Sielie, sielie, olatounuo, we, we... Sielie thepfumia, thehe keselie morosuote, n phriemia tsu lertie idi terhuomia puo ki pushie,*" which roughly translates to, "*Get up, young man, you must prepare for the Feast of Merit!*" The urgency in the dream marks a divine calling to fulfill a sacred duty. Among the Angami, dreams are deeply respected as messages from the spiritual realm. J. H. Hutton once noted that "the Angamis have almost a science of dreaming" (as cited in Das, 2024), while Heneise (2017) further explains that dreams are understood as sources of divine knowledge, particularly concerning future events. *Putsolie's* dream is emblematic of this belief, reflecting the conviction that the spiritual world actively shapes and guides human destiny. As this story is retold across generations, it serves not only to celebrate *Putsolie's* accomplishments but also to reinforce the enduring connection between the spiritual and physical realms in Angami culture.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be re-stated that Angami oral traditions are far more than simple stories, they are vital repositories of indigenous knowledge, ethical systems, and collective memory. As Goswami (2022) aptly observes, oral traditions enable communities to reconstruct their histories and reaffirm a sense of belonging to their cultural and ethnic identities. This paper has sought to explore the richness of Angami Naga folklore and to demonstrate how it continues to play a critical role in shaping and sustaining the collective identity of the Angami people. While the significance of oral literature in the cultural life of the Angami community has been affirmed, this paper also acknowledges the growing challenges that threaten its continuity in the context of globalization, shifting lifestyles, and the widening generational gap brought on by modernization and western influence. With rapid societal changes, traditional practices face gradual erosion. Within the Angami community, this is evident in the decline of traditional storytellers, the diminishing role of *morung* (bachelor's dormitory) institutions, and the decreasing practice of communal agriculture as people migrate to urban areas. These trends signal an urgent need to reflect on strategies for the preservation and revitalization of the cultural expressions that define Angami heritage and identity.

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