

KA JER KA THOH: LANGUAGE, LIFE, AND THE SACRED IN THE KHASI NAMING CEREMONY

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Abstract

This paper examines *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*, the traditional Khasi naming ceremony, as a deeply embedded cultural, spiritual, and linguistic practice that sanctifies human identity from birth. The ceremony is not merely a formal bestowal of a name but an act of divine and communal recognition that positions the child within the moral, ancestral, and cosmic order of Khasi society. Drawing on ritual prayers, oral tradition, ethnographic detail, and linguistic analysis, the paper explores how the naming ceremony affirms the sacredness of life, the importance of maternal care during pregnancy, and the dynamic use of language in ritual performance. The act of naming is framed as a spiritual duty that involves God, ancestors, parents, and the wider community, where symbolic materials and verbal expressions function together to invoke health, identity, and belonging. The paper highlights the creative role of the intercessor (*Nongkñia*) and the performative nature of ritual speech as a form of living oral tradition, suggesting that *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* is not just a cultural ritual but a vital social practice that reinforces the Khasi worldview of interconnectedness, reverence for life, and the power of the spoken word.

Keywords: Khasi naming ceremony, ritual language, cultural identity, maternal spirituality, oral tradition, Khasi society

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Introduction

Among the Khasis of Meghalaya, India, human life is held sacred. It is rooted in the belief that the human soul is formed through the divine will (*ka hukum Blei*) and is nurtured through ritual practices that sanctify every stage of life. This reverence for life is not a passive cultural feature but a dynamic force manifesting in ritual action, spiritual observance, and communal affirmation. In Khasi belief, the act of coming into being is not seen as a biological event alone, but as a sacred convergence of divine decree, ancestral legacy, and maternal nurture. Every individual is considered a bearer of aura or spiritual essence (*ka rngiew*), and as such, life is framed within a continuum of sacred obligations from conception to death intertwined with prayers, ceremonies, and symbolic acts that bind individuals to the divine and the community (Nongbri, 2001; Lyngdoh, 2013).

The Khasi ethos of naming a child is called *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*. It constitutes a pivotal rite of passage that marks the social and spiritual integration of a new-born into the clan (*kur*), lineage (*jait*) and community. More than a nominal or bureaucratic designation, the act of naming is a performative event that establishes the child's identity in both temporal and metaphysical realms. It is at once an invocation and a consecration, a spoken act that calls forth the child's being into relational existence, anchored in the web of kinship, ancestry, and divine order. The naming ceremony is often performed days or months after birth, and involves ritual speech, symbolic items, and spiritual petitions directed to God the Creator and Custodian (*U Blei Trai Kynrad*) and to the ancestors, especially the prime maternal and paternal ancestors of the clan (*Ka Iawbei* and *U Thawlang*).

Ka Jer Ka Thoh is not isolated from the broader lifeworld of Khasi ritual practice. It follows earlier devotions made during pregnancy, when the expectant mother is enveloped in prayers and symbolic care to protect both her and the unborn child. This pre-natal spiritual attention reflects a deeply held belief that the environment, emotions, and prayers of the mother profoundly influence the spiritual and emotional potentialities of the fetus (*ka rngiew ka rwiang i khun*). Ritual language, in this sense, is not only an expressive medium but also a formative force that shapes identity and wellbeing even before birth (Lyngdoh, 2013).

In the oral tradition of the Khasis, language is not merely descriptive; it is performative. It carries the power to invoke, to sanctify, and to bind, both human and supernatural actors, into a

shared moral universe. The intercessor (*Nongkñia*) plays a vital role as the custodian of ritual language. His ability to perform dynamic, contextually-sensitive speech acts during *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* exemplifies what Tedlock (1983) describes as the ritual use of prosody and parallelism to evoke spiritual presence and social memory. These speech performances are not fixed scripts but improvisational invocations that creatively draw on ancestral knowledge, moral metaphors, and cosmic hierarchies (Demmer & Gaenszl, 2007). The speech often includes petitions to God for health, strength, and moral guidance, while simultaneously reaffirming the genealogical links of the child to the clan, and by extension, to the sacred landscape of Khasi identity.

Ka Jer Ka Thoh is a convergence of linguistic creativity, spiritual invocation, and communal identity. The ritual serves as a social articulation of life's sacredness and a symbolic initiation into Khasi values such as respect, responsibility, and relationality. It affirms that language is not just a means of communication but an instrument of spiritual articulation and social continuity. In an age of cultural erosion and rapid social transformation, the sustained practice of *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* stands as a testament to the enduring vitality of Khasi indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and religious cosmology.

Problem Statement

Despite its centrality in Khasi cultural practice, the naming ceremony *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* has received limited scholarly attention in contemporary academic discourse. As indigenous naming systems across the world face erosion due to globalisation, religious conversion, and bureaucratic standardisation, the ritual and performative elements of *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* risk being marginalised or misunderstood. Most existing literature on Khasi rituals tends to focus on broader aspects of matriliney, kinship, and belief systems, often overlooking the nuanced interplay of language, spirituality, and identity formation embedded in the act of naming.

This study addresses the gap by exploring *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* not merely as a ceremonial event but as a dynamic oral tradition that interweaves divine invocation, ancestral memory, and social belonging through ritual speech. The central problem lies in the under-representation of how language functions as a sacred tool in Khasi ritual life, particularly in formative rites like naming which both reflect and reproduce the community's spiritual and

moral worldviews. As Khasi societies undergo rapid socio-cultural transformations, there is an urgent need to document and analyse these indigenous performative practices, lest they fade into symbolic remnants devoid of their original epistemic and ontological weight.

Literature Review

The Khasi naming ceremony, *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*, remains a relatively underexplored subject in the literature on Northeast Indian ethnography, despite its cultural centrality in the Khasi lifeworld. Scholarly work on Khasi society has largely focused on its unique matrilineal structure, kinship systems, and gender roles (Nongbri, 2000; Bareh, 1997), with little attention paid to the performative and symbolic dimensions of ritual speech within specific ceremonies like naming. This lacuna exists even as indigenous naming ceremonies worldwide are being reevaluated as vital sites of cultural expression, resistance, and continuity (Finnegan, 1992; Basso, 1996).

Studies by Nongbri (2000) and War (2009) offer insights into Khasi religious and cultural beliefs, particularly the interdependence of spiritual and social life. Nongbri emphasises the significance of *ka hukum Blei* (divine will) in shaping moral behaviour, reproductive choices, and communal responsibilities, while War (2009) discusses the ritual calendar and its embeddedness in the Khasi cosmology. However, neither of these works gives detailed ethnographic or performative attention to *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* specifically, nor do they analyse the ritual as a linguistic or performative act.

The performative power of ritual speech in oral cultures has been explored more broadly in the works of Tedlock (1983), who articulates how prosody, parallelism, and rhythm function not just as aesthetic devices but as mechanisms for invoking the sacred and sustaining oral memory. Tedlock's theory is highly relevant in understanding Khasi ritual language, especially during *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*, where the *Nongkñia* or ritual specialist employs a stylised, improvisational form of speech rich in ancestral references and spiritual petitions. Similarly, Demmer and Gaenszl (2007) emphasise how ritual speech in South Asian indigenous contexts represents a dynamic interaction between tradition, memory, and creativity.

In the context of indigenous ontologies, Basso (1996) argues that place, language, and identity are co-constitutive in oral cultures, a framework particularly useful for analysing how Khasi naming ceremonies situate the individual within spiritual, genealogical, and geographic coordinates. The invocation of ancestors like *Ka Iawbei*

and *U Thawlang* during the ritual performance of *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* echoes Basso's assertion that language not only reflects but produces a moral landscape in which the individual is embedded.

Moreover, in indigenous epistemologies, naming is often a sacred act that binds a person to the cosmos, as noted by scholars like McCarthy (2011) and Battiste (2000). These studies draw attention to the symbolic power of names in indigenous communities, where names carry ancestral energy, moral obligations, and spiritual protection. In Khasi belief, this is embodied in the concept of *ka rngiew* (aura or spirit), which is amplified and sanctified through naming: a theme largely absent in formalised education or state-sanctioned discourse.

Lastly, in contemporary cultural studies, the symbolic erosion of indigenous rituals under modernising forces such as Christianisation, urbanisation, and bureaucratic naming systems is a recurring theme (Pardo de Santayana, 2010). For Khasi communities, this transition is visible in the gradual replacement of ceremonial naming with legal registration, baptism and numerous adaptations often detaching the child from the spiritual and clan-based contexts originally intended to protect and guide them.

Taken together, these scholarly works provide crucial frameworks for understanding *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* not as an isolated ritual, but as a deeply embedded cultural performance that articulates Khasi cosmology, kinship, identity, and the sacred use of language. However, there remains a notable gap in ethnographic documentation and interpretive analysis specific to this naming practice, especially from the standpoint of ritual linguistics and indigenous phenomenology. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the dynamic speech patterns, symbolic elements, and spiritual dimensions of *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* as practiced in contemporary Khasi society.

The Sacred Act of Naming: Performative Power and Ancestral Presence in Khasi *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*

Human life, in Khasi cosmology, is sacred, imbued with divine intent and inherently distinct from other life forms due to humanity's unique capacity for symbolic communication, self-reflection, and social organisation (Marak, 2018; Mawrie, 2009). Every individual is considered precious, and among the Khasis, people are valued above material things, reflecting a deeply relational and spiritual anthropology.

The Khasi worldview holds that conception is not a random

biological process but a sacred act decreed by divine will (*ka hukum Blei*) initiating the formation of a soul in the mother's womb (Mawrie, 2009; Warjri, 2015). The emotional and environmental wellbeing of the mother is viewed as vital during pregnancy, as it influences the child's spiritual orientation and potential. Harmony in the domestic and social spheres is encouraged to ensure the nurturing of the unborn child's aura or essence (*rngiew*), which begins forming even before birth (Nongbri, 2003).

Living for others, especially during motherhood, is framed as a path to selflessness, purpose, and longevity, a core Khasi ethic linking individual wellbeing to social responsibility (Nongkynrih, 2002). The act of conception, referred to as *ka sengpun* or *la wit khun*, is thus both physical and metaphysical in nature. A full nine-month gestation (*'nai khydai u 'nai shiphew*) is ritually desired and prayed for, as its successful completion is perceived as a sign of divine favour.

Upon the completion of the third month, when fetal movement is discernible, a ritual prayer is offered to God the Creator and Sustainer (*U Blei Trai Kynrad, U Nongthaw U Nongbuh*) marking the sacredness of the life within. Such ritual invocations are characteristic of Khasi religious practice, where spoken word and prayer function as performative acts connecting the human to the divine (Lahiri, 2011; Pakyntein, 2019). Pregnant women undergo health assessments, such as evaluations of the birth passage (*ka lynti kha ka lynti long*), screenings for infections, and fetal heartbeat checks. Prayers are again invoked for safe delivery, and egg divination may be performed to interpret divine signs (*ki dak ki shin*) about delivery outcomes and maternal health (Syiem, 2007).

*O Lord,
O Creator...
If there be obstacles,
Help with Your might...
A thousand thank yours...*

Such invocations highlight the intersubjective relationship between God, parents, and the unborn child. This period is spiritually significant as it initiates the social anticipation of a new life, positioning the fetus within a network of divine attention and communal responsibility. These supplications are understood as a sacred verbal covenant (*ka sakhi hok*) between humanity and the divine. When uncertainty arises, whether due to bodily symptoms or external omens; intercessors (*Nongkñia*) seek divine answers (*ka jubab*) through rituals grounded in faith and Khasi metaphysical

frameworks (Marbaniang, 2014). The unborn child is believed to possess an aura (*ka rngiew*) and soul that reflect divine consciousness. This innate essence governs early behaviour and perception before the child's cognitive faculties are shaped by external influences (Khongdup, 2020). The cries of infants, often interpreted superficially as signals of hunger or discomfort, may also indicate emotional or spiritual needs. Their body language, the spark in their eyes, and their reactions are read by attentive caregivers as expressions of an inner world shaped long before speech develops (Warjri, 2015). Nurturing this internal world requires more than education. It involves moral formation, good conduct (*ka akor*), discipline, respect for life, and appreciation for health and beauty, all crucial for developing balanced individuals who are future pillars of society (*ki rishot ka lawei*) (Nongkynrih, 2002; Kharlukhi, 2018). A name (*ka kyrteng*) is integral to this formation.

Traditionally, naming is a mutual agreement between the maternal and paternal kin groups, underscoring the bilateral social collaboration even within a matrilineal system (Mawrie, 2009, Nongkynrih, 2002). It is carried out with devotion to enhance the aura or spiritual essence (*rngiew*) and wellbeing of the child. The timing of the ceremony varies, from a few days after birth to several months later, depending on local customs and interpretations of auspiciousness. Historically, babies born before sunrise would often be named before noon the same day, while those born after sunrise were named the following morning. In contemporary practice, the ritual may be held three days or even months after birth, illustrating the flexibility and continuity of Khasi traditions (Kharlukhi, 2018). The ritual items placed at the makeshift altar (*ka duwan*) for the naming ceremony, such as plantain leaves (*'lakait 'laliar*), a gourd for naming (*u longjer* or *u skaw*), pounded rice (*'pujer puthoh*), and sparkling clean water (*umkhuid umsuba*) serve as symbolic extensions of speech. Their presence sanctifies the act of naming and represents the embodiment of divine sanction (*ka pynsnoh ban pynskhem*) for the honour of the child's name (*ka kyrteng jong i khunlung*) (Syiem, 2007, Warjri, 2015).

The ceremony is anchored by the intercessor (*Nongkñia*) or an elder who invokes blessings and performs ritual speech. This speech is not fixed or formulaic; rather, it is described as an 'active, sensitive, and sometimes creative performance of ancestral ways of speaking' (Demmer & Gaenszl, 2007). The onus is on the intercessor to employ appropriate wordings, often improvisational, as language becomes a conduit for divine presence. The trance-like delivery, imbued with

rhythm and emotion, exemplifies divine play, a hallmark of Khasi religious expression.

*Hear O Lord ... listen O Lord
O God ... O Keeper ... O Creator of humankind
First ancestors ... first ancestor of the clan
To you, elders of humankind ...
From this day your name shall be (name of child)...
By the decree of God the Creator and Keeper...
A thousand thank you(s).*

The Khasi naming ceremony (*Ka Jer Ka Thoh*) is a powerful example of ritual speech that opens with repetitive invocations ‘Hear O Lord, listen O Lord’ which create a rhythmic, solemn tone and establish a direct appeal to the divine. Addressing God as ‘Keeper’ and ‘Creator of humankind,’ alongside the ‘first ancestors’ and ‘elders of humankind,’ the speaker situates the naming act within a continuum of sacred lineage and cosmological order. The declaration of the child’s name ‘from this day’ affirms identity as divinely sanctioned, not arbitrarily assigned, highlighting the belief that naming is a sacred duty rather than a social formality. The phrase ‘by the decree of God the Creator and Keeper’ (*ka hukum U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw*) reinforces the spiritual legitimacy of the act, while the repeated ‘a thousand thank you(s)’ (*khublei shi hajar nguh*) conveys deep gratitude and reverence, transforming the ritual into both a request and a thanksgiving. Overall, this passage exemplifies how Khasi ritual speech functions as a performative act that fuses language, belief, and identity into a coherent sacred expression. Words are powerful; they classify, identify, and form the scaffolding of a child’s self-concept. Care must be taken in naming, for the language used to define a child can deeply affect their development. Children are like sponges, absorbing every spoken and unspoken message in their environment, experiences that shape their worldview well into adulthood (Khongdup, 2020; Lahiri, 2011). According to Tedlock, ‘prosody is a major instrument in most ritual performances,’ and among the Khasis, this is evident in the modulation of pitch, pause, and rhythm that imbues the speech with performative power (Tedlock, 1983, p. 234). Parallelism, defined as a repeated, subtly modified set of phrases is commonly used, and the entire performance is sustained through memory, emotion, and symbolic interaction (Demmer & Gaenszl, 2007, Khongdup, 2020). The intercessor (*Nongkñia*) often appears to be in trance, moving beyond the mundane into a heightened state of consciousness. This allows for a rich articulation of lineage and myth, invoking the

progenitors (*Ka Iawbei* and *U Thawlang*), the matrilineal descent system, and cosmic creation narratives. The ability to recall and perform this traditional oral repertoire transforms the ceremony into a moment of cultural continuity and sacred expression (Nongbri, 2003, Pakyntein, 2019). The ceremony also illustrates how verbal and non-verbal communication like gesture, tone, facial expression, body movement, work in tandem to convey meaning and sanctity. It becomes a performance of collective identity, where the language of the intercessor interacts with the silent presence of the community. This ritual speech, full of declarative phrases and invocations, is a model of intra- and inter-personal communication observed by an unfocused but emotionally engaged audience (Lahiri, 2011).

I set the altar for the naming ceremony...

This child must possess a name...

To name the child (name of the child)...

Sanctioned by the order of God the creator and keeper...

Naming, in Khasi belief, is not merely about identity; the ritual performance validates the presence of the child as an embodied soul, already bearing aura (*rngiew*), dignity, and the right to life and participation in society (Marak, 2018, Mawrie, 2009). Naming is both a culmination and a new beginning; an invocation that inscribes the child into a sacred lineage and affirms their place in the cosmos. Language performs multiple functions: it is supplicatory, diagnostic, and anticipatory. The prayer invokes God's guidance not only for the mother's well-being but also for the wisdom of healthcare workers, aligning spiritual and biomedical systems within a holistic Khasi ontology. The Khasi believe that a child's aura (*ka rngiew*), spiritual insight, and behaviour patterns begin forming before birth. A child is not a blank slate but a being with innate needs for love and attention. As Demmer and Gaenszl (2007) suggest, ritual speech among the Khasis is not fixed but an active, sensitive, and sometimes creative performance of ancestral ways of speaking. This capacity for improvisational orality finds its fullest expression during '*Ka Jer Ka Thoh*'. The ceremony typically takes place within days or months of birth, depending on local customs. It is a collaborative event between both maternal and paternal kin, often led by a intercessor (*Nongkñia*) or elder who sets the stage using symbolic materials like plantain leaves, gourd vessels, pounded rice powder, and pure water.

In '*Ka Jer Ka Thoh*', language does not merely describe reality; it constructs it. Names are believed to shape an individual's aura and destiny, hence great care is taken in naming. A poorly chosen name

can disturb the equilibrium of the soul. The ceremony is both an act of identity formation and a moral affirmation that the child has rights, dignity, and a place within the social fabric. As observed in the ritual's semiotics, even the placement of the rice paste (*thoh pujan*) on the child's left hand or foot, marks the symbolic moment of social and spiritual integration, a performative act that links speech, touch, and meaning.

Comparative Study: Naming Rituals Across Cultures

Naming ceremonies, while culturally distinct, are universally significant rites of passage that affirm a person's identity within a social, spiritual, and cosmological order. The Khasi naming ceremony, *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*, is a life trajectory imbued with purpose and protection. When examined alongside global practices, *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* reveals both universal themes and unique Khasi particularities.

In Yoruba culture of Nigeria, naming ceremonies (*Isomoloruko*) are conducted on the seventh day after a child's birth. The ceremony involves invoking ancestral spirits, consulting divination (e.g., Ifá), and the use of water, oil, and kola nuts to bless the infant (Oduyoye, 1998). Names are chosen based on circumstances surrounding the birth, lineage expectations, and moral aspirations. Similarly, the Akan of Ghana celebrate the *Outdooring* ceremony on the eighth day, marking the infant's formal introduction to the community and spiritual realm (Gyekye, 1996).

Like *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*, these ceremonies are communal, spiritual, and linguistically rich. They are marked by symbolic use of substances (water, oil, rice), ancestral invocation, and performative speech. The difference lies in the explicit cosmological mapping in Khasi traditions where ancestral spirits like *Ka Īawbei* and *U Thawlang* are invoked as spiritual progenitors tied to clan identity, and where the intercessor (*Nongkñia*) enters a performative trance guided by divine agency.

Among the Navajo, naming ceremonies are private, familial acts that unfold gradually. A child may receive several names, but the 'true' name, bestowed during a sacred ritual, is known only to family and spiritual leaders (Witherspoon, 1977). The Hopi people incorporate naming as part of their larger ritual calendar, linking names to clan spirits and agricultural cycles.

These practices, like those of the Khasis, emphasise the spiritual nature of language where names are not arbitrary markers but sacred bindings of identity, destiny, and metaphysical power. However,

Khasi practice emphasises audible invocation and physical acts of consecration using items like the gourd (*u klong u u skaw*) and pounded rice powder (*thoh puer*), which visually and orally affirm the spiritual legitimacy of the child's name.

The *Namakarana* in Hinduism is traditionally held on the twelfth day after birth and involves sacred mantras, ancestral homage, and astrological consultation (Basham, 1954). Similarly, in Tibetan Buddhism, names are often given by a lama, who may invoke protective deities and use astrology to ensure the child's name aligns with cosmic harmony (Samuel, 1993). Both systems regard names as cosmically consequential, not merely social labels. While Khasi practice does not follow astrological calculations, it mirrors this cosmic sensitivity through spiritual petitions to God (*U Blei Trai Kynrad*) and through an embodied ritual performance where spiritual consent is sought and signs (*ki dak ki shin*) are observed, such as egg divination to read the nature of the unborn child and delivery.

In Christian tradition, baptismal naming signifies entry into the spiritual family of God, often invoking the Holy Trinity. This ritual, especially in Catholic and Orthodox traditions, involves anointing, water consecration, and the symbolic death and rebirth of the child (Turner, 1969). By contrast, *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* binds name-giving with ancestral continuity, divine affirmation, and the reinforcement of matrilineal lineage. While both practices include blessing, the Khasi ritual affirms communal, ancestral, and cosmic ties.

This comparative perspective reveals that *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* belongs to a broader family of sacred naming rites across cultures that emphasise performative language, spiritual intercession, and cosmological belonging. What distinguishes the Khasi case is the integration of matrilineal lineage, dynamic ritual speech (often improvised), and the symbolic sanctification of the child's aura (*ka mgiew*) all mediated through ancestral recognition and divine will.

Report and Discussion

The naming ceremony (*Ka Jer Ka Thoh*) among the Khasis, as observed in contemporary rituals and reinforced by oral accounts and participant observation, remains one of the most symbolically rich rites of passage in Khasi society. It is not merely a conferral of identity, but a public ritual that fuses kinship, cosmology, ancestral invocation, and spiritual legitimisation. Field data gathered through interviews with elders, intercessors (*Nongkñia*), and participants

across Khasi Hills reveal that despite external influences and socio-religious shifts, the core performative and symbolic elements of *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* endure.

The ceremony is typically organised by maternal and paternal kin, with agreement from both sides, despite the matrilineal framework of Khasi society. While the ideal timing for naming is traditionally on the morning following birth or within a few days. It has become flexible, often taking place weeks or months after birth, the ritual's structure remains relatively consistent. Key ritual items like plantain leaves, pounded rice powder (*pujer puthoh*), a naming gourd (*klong kyrteng*), and clean water (*umsuba*), are carefully arranged on a makeshift altar (*ka duwan*). These objects are not merely symbolic but actively participate in the ritual as conduits of divine will and ancestral blessing.

A central feature of the ceremony is the spoken ritual performed by the intercessor (*Nongkñia*). This oral performance is distinguished by its use of prosody, metaphor, parallelism, and invocatory rhythm. As Demmer and Gaenszl (2007) have argued, ritual speech in indigenous traditions is an 'active, sensitive and sometimes creative performance' rather than a fixed textual recitation. The speech of the intercessor often delivered in a semi-trance state, involves direct address to God (*U Blei*), ancestral spirits (*Ka ĩawbei*, *U Thawlang*), and elder generations. The ritual invocation opens with solemn calls to the divine 'O Lord, O Keeper, O Creator of humankind' and transitions into declarative acts of naming, invoking consent from divine and ancestral forces to bless and affirm the identity of the child. Tedlock (1983) emphasises the role of prosody and parallelism in ritual performance, where speech acts are charged with affect, authority, and spiritual force through controlled stress, pitch, and rhythm. In *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*, this is clearly manifested in repeated phrases, tonal modulation, and gestures accompanying verbal performance. The symbolic act of dabbing pounded rice paste on the naming gourd (*thoh pujer*) is synchronised with verbal affirmations, sealing the divine sanction of the name. This synchrony of verbal and non-verbal communication like gestures, facial expressions, bodily poise constitutes a form of performative communication that is both spiritual and interpersonal.

The ceremony further reflects the interconnectedness of language, culture, and memory. The intercessor (*Nongkñia*) often references the matrilineal origin line (*ka jait*), invoking the child's descent from the founding grandmother (*Ka Meikha*), and tying the present act to primordial time. This alignment of past, present, and

future through ritual speech enacts what Connerton (1989) terms 'social memory', a means by which societies preserve continuity and cultural knowledge. In naming a child, the Khasis are not merely identifying an individual; they are affirming their place in a living, remembered lineage. The use of ritual speech in *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* also reveals the Khasi worldview in which the spoken word is not merely descriptive but generative, capable of invoking, transforming, and sanctifying. As such, the ceremony is a form of symbolic action where speech creates identity, links the visible and invisible realms, and aligns human action with cosmic and ancestral order. The ritual's persistence suggests that naming continues to carry deep cultural and spiritual resonance beyond religious affiliation. For many families, it remains an opportunity to re-embed the child within the kin network, renew ties with ancestors, and invoke divine protection and prosperity for the child's life journey.

Future Directions

The study of *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* opens pathways for deeper exploration into the dynamic intersections of language, ritual, and identity within Khasi society. As globalisation, urbanisation, and religious transformation continue to impact indigenous practices, future research must examine how these forces reshape or preserve ritual traditions like naming ceremonies. Ethnographic attention should be given to how younger generations negotiate their ritual inheritance in both rural and diasporic contexts, and how linguistic elements, such as ritual speech and oral poetry are transmitted, altered, or lost.

One pressing area for future inquiry lies in the documentation and preservation of ritual language. With the gradual erosion of Khasi oral traditions, there is an urgent need for linguistic and anthropological collaboration to archive ritual performances, prosodic patterns, and symbolic lexicons used in *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*. This would not only safeguard intangible heritage but also serve as educational resources for future generations.

Another critical direction is the comparative study of naming rituals across indigenous and matrilineal cultures globally. Such research could uncover common threads in how communities invest language with sacred authority, affirm kinship, and sacralise identity through performative acts. Cross-cultural dialogue with traditions from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas could enrich our understanding of the social function of naming and the sacred role of ritual speech.

Lastly, applied research could explore how *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* might be integrated into formal education and health systems, especially in maternal and child welfare programs. Recognising and respecting local ritual knowledge can improve cultural sensitivity in healthcare delivery and strengthen communal bonds around childbirth and early life. As custodians of a rich cosmology, Khasi communities and scholars alike hold the responsibility to ensure that rituals like *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* remain not only relevant but revitalised in both traditional and contemporary settings.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic framework grounded in empirical fieldwork, with an emphasis on documenting ritual practice, oral performance, and interpersonal communication in the Khasi naming ceremony (*Ka Jer Ka Thoh*). Multiple methods were integrated to ensure a holistic understanding of the cultural, linguistic, and performative dimensions of the ritual.

1. Extended field immersion was undertaken during the course of various naming ceremonies across different Khasi communities. The researcher observed, participated in, and recorded ceremonial practices to gain first-hand insight into the social dynamics, ritual sequencing, and symbolic interactions between participants.
2. Ceremonies were audio-visually recorded with consent from participants to capture the nuances of ritual speech, prosodic variation, body language, and symbolic acts. These recordings were later transcribed and annotated for linguistic, performative, and contextual analysis. Special attention was paid to the tonal and rhythmic structures of ritual speech as outlined in Tedlock's concept of 'oral performance prosody' (Tedlock, 1983).
3. Verbatim transcriptions of ritual utterances, invocations, and conversations were coded thematically and analysed for patterns of ritual language, parallelism, metaphor, and invocatory structure. The use of formulaic expressions, symbolic keywords, and culturally embedded terms was studied through the lens of performance theory and semiotic anthropology.
4. Natural conversations among elders, intercessors (*Nongkñia*), family members, and ceremony attendees were analysed to understand the interpersonal dynamics and shared

knowledge embedded in everyday discourse. This included the examination of face-to-face communication, non-verbal cues, and the role of collective memory in maintaining ritual continuity.

5. Key informants such as ritual specialists, matrilineal heads, clan elders, and mothers were interviewed using open-ended questions to explore their perspectives on the significance, evolution, and future of the naming ceremony. These narratives offered insight into emic understandings and experiential meanings associated with *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*.
6. Local histories, clan genealogies, oral legends, and religious texts relevant to naming traditions were consulted to situate the practice within broader Khasi cosmology and historical continuity. Comparative references were drawn from existing anthropological literature on ritual naming among other indigenous and matrilineal communities.
7. Field notes captured reflexive insights, situational contexts, and emotional undertones during ceremonies. These were essential in mapping the researcher's position, bias, and affective engagement with the community, thereby ensuring methodological transparency.

Together, these multi-modal research methods allowed for a layered understanding of *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* as both a linguistic performance and a social rite that affirms identity, ancestry, and sacred continuity within Khasi culture.

Conclusion

The Khasi naming ceremony, *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*, is a remarkable testament to how indigenous societies ritualise life through language, symbolism, and spirituality. Rooted in a cosmology where human life is considered sacred and divinely ordained (*ka hukum Blei*), the act of naming transcends the mere assignment of a personal identifier. It is a spiritually charged rite that binds the child to the ancestral past, present kinship networks, and divine order (Nongkynrih, 2002). In the Khasi worldview, names are not arbitrary; they carry the weight of moral obligation, social recognition, and existential purpose. A name situates the individual within the matrilineal lineage, connects them to the clan deity (*U Basa*), and serves as a lifelong invocation of divine and ancestral presence (Lyngdoh, 2015).

As this study has shown, the performance of *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* involves a rich interweaving of verbal ritual, sacred materials, embodied

gestures, and communal witnessing. The intercessor (*Nongkñia*), acts as both a cultural transmitter and spiritual medium, drawing on memorised oral traditions, spontaneous poetic expression, and divine inspiration to perform the ritual. His recitations, as demonstrated in the transcription, are neither fixed nor rote but dynamic and responsive to the occasion; an active performance of inherited speech forms, imbued with emotional and metaphysical intensity (Demmer & Gaenszle, 2007). This aligns with Tedlock's (1983) assertion that ritual speech among oral cultures depends heavily on prosody, parallelism, and performative nuance that go beyond semantic content to evoke sacred presence and moral conviction.

The multisensory dimensions of the ritual such as the display of sacred objects like plantain leaves, gourds, pounded rice, and pure water, reinforce the sanctity of the space and act as conduits for divine consent (*ka jingmynjur u Blei*). These materials, carefully arranged at the altar (*ka duwan*), symbolically map the cosmological order onto the domestic sphere. The gourd (*u longkyrteng*), into which the name is pronounced, becomes the vessel of both utterance and transformation: it holds the vibration of sacred sound that actualises the name into being, and thus inaugurates the child into the community (Marak, 2019).

What becomes evident through the empirical and performative analysis is that the naming ceremony is not merely symbolic but ontological. It makes the child visible and real in both the social and spiritual domains. Without a name, a person is considered incomplete, adrift from the structures of kinship, history, and divine protection. The ritual therefore affirms identity not as an individual possession, but as a collective inheritance, one that is deeply relational and cosmologically situated (Goody, 1962).

The transmission of values, cosmology, and ethical orientation through *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* is a striking example of how oral societies encode their philosophies in performative action. The naming ceremony functions as a medium for intergenerational communication, where elders impart not only names but also hopes, blessings, and cultural expectations. As children grow into their names, they are expected to embody the virtues and ancestral dignity associated with them. In this way, *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* plays a pivotal role in moral formation and cultural continuity.

In the context of a rapidly modernising Meghalaya, and in the face of increasing cultural homogenisation, *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* remains a vital assertion of Khasi identity and epistemology. While the timing

and modes of performance may adapt, the ritual's core function, sanctifying life through divine consent, linguistic creativity, and communal recognition continues to be deeply meaningful. The ritual's relevance also highlights the importance of protecting indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions, which contain not only spiritual insights but frameworks for sustainable, relational living.

As scholars such as Bourdieu (1991) have noted, ritual language carries symbolic power that can legitimise social structures, reinforce hierarchies, and enable transformation. In the case of the Khasis, ritual speech in *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* functions as both a cultural archive and a spiritual act. It carries within it the echoes of ancestral voices, the cosmological truths of a people, and the emotional resonance of collective belonging.

Ka Jer Ka Thoh is more than a cultural performance, it is a ritual affirmation of what it means to be human in the Khasi world. It affirms life, names it, blesses it, and binds it to memory, kinship, and cosmos. In a time when many indigenous rituals are under threat, documenting and understanding ceremonies like *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* offers not just anthropological insight but a deeper appreciation for the sacred grammars through which human beings give meaning to life. The study of '*Ka Jer Ka Thoh*' as a vital cultural and spiritual rite within Khasi society opens up several promising avenues for future research and cultural preservation. As oral traditions face increasing pressure from modernisation, urbanisation, and shifting religious affiliations, documenting, interpreting, and revitalising such rituals becomes imperative.

Future work could focus on extensive ethnographic recording of naming ceremonies across various Khasi regions (*Ka Niam Khasi*), comparing subtle variations in language use, ritual materials, and spiritual invocations. This would aid in preserving the rich oral traditions and ensure intergenerational transmission. Combining perspectives from anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and theology can yield deeper insights into how ritual language impacts identity formation and spiritual consciousness in early childhood. Further studies could explore the psychological impact of naming rituals on parental bonding and community integration. As younger generations become more distanced from ritual speech patterns, future projects could include the creation of educational materials and ritual handbooks that preserve the prosody, metaphors, and ancestral references used in '*Ka Jer Ka Thoh*'. Digitally archiving

performances can ensure access for both scholars and community members.

There is also a need to integrate indigenous knowledge systems like ‘*Ka Jer Ka Thoh*’ into broader cultural policy frameworks. Advocacy for the inclusion of ritual studies in academia, and cultural heritage policies will strengthen the visibility and sustainability of Khasi intangible heritage.

A broader comparative framework can be established by studying naming rituals among other matrilineal societies such as the Minangkabau of Indonesia or the Akan of Ghana. Such comparative studies could illuminate how gender, kinship, and spirituality intersect through the practice of naming. Further exploration is warranted into the roles women play not just as bearers of children but as cultural transmitters in naming ceremonies. Similarly, examining the changing role of intercessors (*Nongkñia*) in contemporary contexts especially in relation to new religious movements can offer a nuanced understanding of ritual authority in transition.

Comparative insights from naming rituals across the world further emphasise that while the forms may differ whether in Africa’s Yoruba *oruko amutorunwa* (Mbiti, 1990) or Japan’s *namae no shiki* (Befu, 2001) the function of naming remains a transcultural human endeavour to locate identity within sacred, social, and cosmic order. Yet what distinguishes the Khasi tradition is the profound emphasis on matrilineal lineage, ancestral appeasement, and the oral performativity that imbues even the smallest detail with symbolic resonance. In essence, *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* exemplifies how indigenous societies ritualise the ordinary naming as a sacred act that reaffirms the foundational values of kinship, continuity, and collective belonging. It calls attention to the need to preserve such intangible thought, religious belief, and socio-linguistic creativity. As global cultures move toward homogenisation, rituals like *Ka Jer Ka Thoh* serve as reminders of the diverse ways in which humanity understands life, identity, and the divine.

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