


# Orality as Dramaturgy in the Khasi-Welsh Performance Exchange: Performing Journeys by the Khasi-Cymru Collective

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## Abstract

This article, written in two voices, one Khasi, one Welsh, revisits the process of devising *Performing Journeys*, a theatre production that toured India and Wales in 2019–20. It approaches the practical methodology for making work, reached between Khasi and Welsh practitioners, as a dramaturgy of orality. The performance explored the historic relationship between the Welsh and the Khasi peoples that is rooted in the presence of the Welsh mission in North East India. As such, it brought together the Khasi oral tradition and archival information pertaining to the interaction between the Welsh and the Khasi peoples, a contact that is rooted in the cataclysmic introduction of literacy to a culture that was hitherto entirely oral. The article explores the significance of oral performance for making theatre between two cultures currently exploring the implications of their intercultural entanglements in relation to contemporary postcolonial identities.

**Keywords:** Khasi, Welsh, oral tradition, memory, archive, transcultural theatre, embodied performance

*Performing Journeys*, a devised performance which toured India and Wales in 2019 and 2020, explored the effects of the cultural exchange between Khasi and Welsh peoples stemming from the presence of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission in the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills in North East India between 1841 and 1969.<sup>[1]</sup> This complex exchange profoundly affected Khasi culture and was to influence the ways in which Welsh people came to understand India as a whole.

This article is written by two members of the Khasi-Cymru Collective responsible for devising *Performing Journeys*: Khasi performer, Lapdiang Syiem and Welsh director, Lisa Lewis. Both authors are responsible for leading specific elements of the article (for instance, the writing on the Khasi oral tradition was led by Lapdiang and the writing on the how the archive was performed was led by Lisa). Some passages arise from us both; some sections are thoughts relayed by one individual. However, in line with the collaborative nature of the project and the devising process itself, our voices interweave and offer comment on each other throughout.

The Khasi-Jaiñtia people, one of the indigenous communities of the state of Meghalaya, belong to a matrilineal culture. While English is the official language of the state, Khasi is one of the most widely spoken indigenous languages with 1.4 million speakers. The

people of Wales (*Cymru*), one of the four countries that currently comprise the United Kingdom, also inhabit a bilingual context; Welsh, of the Celtic language family, has official status in Wales and is spoken by 29% of the population. Between 2015 and 2019, Indian, Khasi and Welsh artists collaborated on a practice-research project, funded by The Leverhulme Trust, investigating the transcultural relationship between both cultures. The co-devised work *Performing Journeys*, one of the project's outputs, was performed by Khasi and Welsh practitioners and attempted to unravel some of the historic cultural entanglements between our cultures and explore their implications for us today in a postcolonial context.

Postcolonialism is unambiguously understood in relation to the history of Indian independence, though North East India has a troubled relationship with pan-Indian ideas of nationhood. Wales has a more problematic claim on historical postcolonialism (having been both colonised and a participant, within a British context, in acts of colonialism). This claim is more easily understood in relation to a postcolonial condition, described by Kirsti Bohata as “a structure within which the past can be interrogated with the aim of (re)constructing the present. It is a strategic methodology. . . rich with possibilities for peoples whose stories and histories have been suppressed, neglected, untaught” (Bohata 15).

Fundamental to this process, in relation to *Performing Journeys*, was the necessity of acknowledging the struggle between the prevalence of the oral tradition in Khasi culture and that of literacy as a marker of colonial modernity. In the Khasi-Welsh connection, literacy was introduced into a culture that had hitherto been entirely oral. Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionary Thomas Jones arrived in the Khasi Hills in 1841, and he operated within a comparatively small field across North East India. Jones, and the Welsh missionaries that followed, learnt Khasi and began the process of translating the Bible, using the Roman alphabet and Welsh language orthography to transpose the sound of the oral Khasi.

English language literacy and education was introduced to India (as in Wales) as a “developmental” project central to the advancement of the colonial project. Welsh missionaries were part of its delivery in North East India, though their primary objective was to translate the Bible into Khasi and advance literacy in the Khasi language as crucial steps in the process of Christian conversion. The written form, an incursion into the oral worldview of the Khasi, travelled via the Welsh missionaries on the coattails of the imperial self-improvement agenda. The colonial desire to “make literate” according to the structures of Anglophone literature and education has haunted the Welsh imagination too and created a split in the Welsh psyche (in the nineteenth century, when England was attempting to unify what was never to become a fully “united kingdom,” there was a concerted effort to remove indigenous minority languages by force, a process which had deleterious effects for Scottish Gaelic, Irish and Welsh language communities).

From this point of view, both Khasi and Welsh participants shared a similar, though contextually different experience of the centrality of English literacy. Literacy (as well as nonconformity) became a marker of liberal respectability in Welsh society following the

publication of the British Government's Report into the State of Education in Wales in 1847 and its denigration of Welsh people, culture and society as depraved and ignorant. This report followed the same premise as T. B. Macauley's Minute on Indian Education of 1835, which formed the basis of making English the language of education in Indian schools (Roberts 53–56).

How, then, to conceive of a devised performance addressing this fraught relationship between the oral and the literate (of being literate and of the centrality of literature, culturally and socially) in a historic (inter)cultural exchange that has profoundly affected cultural identities? What does thinking dramaturgically about the possibilities of the oral entail?

### **The Khasi Oral Tradition**

One of the main aspects defining the Khasi community is its oral tradition and culture that predates the introduction of the written script by the Welsh missionaries. In recent decades there has been an attempt to understand the pivotal role that the oral tradition plays, and its implications in a contemporary world. Esther Syiem writes, "The oral nature of Khasi society has never been completely broken even in the face of the cultural and religious invasions that brought with them the power of the written script" (Syiem 75). Whilst challenging the written, the oral tradition actively works to shape Khasi identity:

Through the decades, orality has manifestly achieved a status of power within Khasi society. It looks to a future that can attain authenticity only through absolute acceptance of its sway over the private and the public. The folk as being inextricable from the oral, and as it enhances the Khasi's knowledge of his past is a primary dimension of the larger domain of Khasi life. It cannot be trimmed off from the main body of Khasi thought.

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Thus, as we attempt to articulate Khasi thought and philosophy, we return to reinterpret the significance of the oral in our history and our present. In performance, Khasi folktales, myths and legends operate by reminding us of the centrality of the oral tradition—they are part of cultural performance and seek a way of authenticating themselves in the present. Interrogating their relevance and reinterpreting the stories in a contemporary framework allows us to reframe Khasi culture in a postcolonial and decolonising context. It disrupts the hierarchies of memory, in which written/recorded history is privileged above all other forms of memory; it validates individual and collective memory as history, signifies the passing on from one generation to another and reminds us that the spoken word is a viable and valid tool.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/Zc6VLLNn-KI>

*Performing Journeys*—U Lum Sohpetbneng, the Khasi Origin Myth (Chapter, Cardiff, Wales, 2019). Performer: Lapdiang Syiem

The centrality of the spoken word and its embodiment is captured in the tale of the lost manuscript, which explains how the Khasi community became an oral culture. It tells of the provision of a script of teachings from god to all peoples and languages. The story is remembered as follows: a representative from each community was called by *U Blei* to collect the scripts containing his teachings in their respective languages. On returning home after receiving the scripts, the Khasi and the Plainsman find themselves caught in a flood and must swim across the river to safety. The Plainsman tied his script to his ponytail and swam with his head above water, whilst the Khasi kept his script in his mouth and accidentally swallowed it. It is an event interpreted as empowering by Khasi writer Bevan Swer (1995); a reminder that the teachings are internalised and preserved in memory.

It is implicitly understood in Khasi culture that the oral is not one-dimensional; it provides multiple perspectives of a single story. The stories belong to everyone in the community and are kept alive and in constant interaction with each generation with retellings and reinterpretations. The oral thus links memory to alternate history with its different perspectives, challenging us to look beyond the literal and the static (Kharmawphlang; Ngap Kynta; Singh and Lyngdoh; Syiem).

As we navigated this historical and cultural exchange in dialogue with each other as practitioners, we attempted to look deeper into how these two cultures and their histories influenced one another. *Performing Journeys* allowed us to counterpoint memory documented in the written archives with memory that is alive as it passes from one

generation to another. By doing so we created an understanding of history that is inclusive of minority voices that define their own place, within their own context, without being in thrall to the dominance of a specific worldview.



*Performing Journeys* (Chapter, Cardiff, Wales, 2019). Performers: Lapdiang Syiem and Rhys ap Irefor. Photo: Andy Freeman

### **The Dramaturgy of *Performing Journeys***

As we were making work based on an embodied understanding of culture, we sought a method and, ultimately, a dramaturgy that would enable us to acknowledge and represent difference and similarity, revealing the complexities of cultural contact emerging from historic cultural exchange.

Workshops in Meghalaya and in Wales (2017–19) revealed that both performers shared similar backgrounds in theatre training (Lapdiang at the National School of Drama in New Delhi and The Commedia School in Copenhagen, and Rhys at Aberystwyth University). There were distinct cultural differences but also a shared pedagogy stemming from European performance practices post-Grotowski that positioned us on similar ground as contemporary performers. We also found points of contact in our respective cultural traditions, assimilated from a degree of cross-cultural exchange over centuries, for instance, through chapel culture and its performances. Initial workshops focused on ideas of home, land and habitual actions and the words used in Khasi and Welsh to describe them. Through movement, we shared our somatic understanding of these keywords, revealing our embodied experience of land, landscape and home (reflected also by the film images projected in performance). Differences and similarities in expression, in cultural and environmental circumstances and in concepts related to home and place

were revealed through these movements, as were social and political power structures such as gender, race and national identity. These (sometimes contradictory) movements were used throughout *Performing Journeys*.

We decided very soon that the overall structure would be comprised of the telling of three Khasi stories—the origin myth of U Lum Sohpetbneng, the mount of heaven’s navel; the tale of the lost manuscript (or how the oral culture came to be); and the story of Lapalang the stag, who against his mother’s wishes climbs up to the Khasi Hills in search of green herbs. There, he is caught and slayed by Khasi hunters. His mother finds his corpse being carried away by the hunters and gives a lament so sorrowful that it taught *ki Khasi* how to mourn.<sup>[2]</sup>

In *Performing Journeys*, the Khasi oral tradition was applied as a dramaturgy; it became an over-arching driver for the performance structure and rooted the performance in the Khasi worldview. In the devising process, the oral tradition became the structural mainstay, while the placement of missionary archive material enacted an interruption to it resulting in an emotional upheaval. In juxtaposing both elements dramaturgically, we were acknowledging the Khasi worldview as one that was deeply affected by colonial modernity, which included the work of the Welsh mission.

The Khasi oral tradition is uncompromising in its directness; it does not negotiate or seek to persuade, rather, it relays with immediacy, and spectators are compelled to listen, the relentlessness of delivery charging them to be fully present. The oral tradition is not scripted and emerges directly from the performer’s repertoire, an instantaneous relaying of the oral in relationship with the listeners. The archival documents, on the other hand, were carefully selected to present moments in the history of cultural exchange, and their presentation within the Khasi oral world was often dissonant to the point of being obstructive breaks in trains of thought and feeling.

The imagined space of the oral tradition in Khasi culture is circular: indicative of the overlap and interplay of memory and non-hierarchical structures of thought. In *Performing Journeys*, we chose to highlight this by a circular ring of earth that continues to get disrupted by the linear invasion of writing—by books and letters positioned or spoken by Rhys literally breaking the circle of earth and making the playing space a square or grid. In response, I continued to attempt to recircle the space of the oral as each narrative is performed in an organic repositioning of the oral culture, reinstating its power in a process of encircling and voicing. Walking the circle repeatedly reiterated its form and “over-wrote” the placement of the literate in the space. In performing the oral narratives, I found that the stories resonated with metaphors of how *ki Khasi* position themselves apart from the archival record of the historical relationship dominated by the mission. The oral births a voice, potent and brimming with possibilities of a dramatic, emotional but nonetheless critical recollection of history.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/aqZ4W0n5GQg>

*Performing Journeys*, arrival (Chapter, Cardiff, Wales, 2019)

### **How the Archive Was Performed**

The long Khasi-Welsh connection is little known and the history that is written has been dependent on archival information—a vast body of writings, correspondence, personal letters, notes, diaries, creative writing (poetry, plays, music, hymns), translations, guidelines for translations, folk tales, anthropological writing, travel writing, photographs, films, audio recordings, radio and television broadcasts, magic lantern lectures and slides, deeds to land and property, maps and building plans.<sup>[3]</sup> This is a “record” told from a particular point of view, that of the Welsh mission. Through *Performing Journeys*, we wanted to situate the lived embodiment of culture alongside the prevalence of documented artefacts, to privilege the tacit experience of culture as a key which could be used in practice to interpret the cultural exchange between Welsh and Khasi. In this way, embodiment was a key to consider the construction of postcolonial identities in complex transnational exchanges between minority (or so called “peripheral”) peoples.

The Welsh missionaries arrived in the Khasi Hills with the certainty of not only their religious convictions, but the audacity of the literary worldview. Historian Aled Gruffydd Jones refers to the activity of the Welsh mission as a “written act” orchestrated through the correspondence between mission headquarters in Liverpool and the missionaries living in North East India (85). In *Performing Journeys*, this is represented by declarations from written records performed verbatim. The arrival of the missionary figure became a literal incursion into the performance circle, which is ruptured by pushing books through its perimeter to form four “corners.” These become cornerstones of a chapel, conjured up in spoken word and physical action by Rhys following a detailed description of its building materials and structure, as written in a missionary letter from 1887. If Lapdiang’s performance of the oral is circular, the archival material leads Rhys to linear and angular

vectors of movement, following the line of writing—of the catechism, of the rules and regulations delineating behaviours and beliefs, of learning by rote, of conjugating verbs, and of copying parrot fashion—“*Yr wyf fi yn pechu/Nga pobp* [I sin]; *Mae efe yn pechu/Oo pobp* [sic] [He sins]. . . .” (*Y Drysorfa* 135).

This merging of archive and repertoire in the performance space, via the performers’ own embodiment of oral and literate traditions, whilst not inherently antagonistic, as Diana Taylor points out (36), nevertheless physically emphasises the framing of Khasi oral culture as non-literate and the emergence of an all-encompassing Western literate world view represented by the archival documents spoken. This sometimes had a problematic effect regarding the differences of Welsh (as opposed to British) involvement in Khasi culture. It was difficult to situate the Welsh voice as anything other than the archival; missionary memoirs are written, and even the Welsh folk tradition is incorporated into written hymns. This was less problematic before a Welsh audience, where the archival, for the most part, was relayed in Welsh, setting it apart from the Anglophone imperial voice. What little there was in English, selected because of its colonial meaning, could be subverted by Rhys’s intonation and accent as imperial rhetoric. In India, however, the translated archival material, largely performed in English, meant that representations of Welshness and Britishness merged in Rhys’s performance of the missionary archive. In this way the performance existed on a linguistic continuum and cultural nuances relating to Welsh, Khasi, Indian and British shifted according to context of performance. Inevitably, the Welsh contingent is laboured with connotations of the literate, historically, socially and culturally, and in performance the Welsh figure arrived literally laden with and tethered to his books:





*Performing Journeys* (Chapter, Cardiff, Wales, 2019). Performer: Rhys ap Irefor. Photo: Andy Freeman

The dramaturgy of *Performing Journeys* was placed under duress with the introduction of the archive in performance, which changed the sense of space from entirely person-centred—from a *place* defined by the oral narrative built between performer and the close group listening in—to a *site* (Casey 184), which through the enunciation and reading of the archive, word for word, is a space to be analysed, measured and mapped.

Walter J. Ong writes that oral cultures, in which words have existed solely in sound, understand the world of sound as having an all-encompassing quality that “enters deeply into human beings’ feel for existence” (72). Sound has a quality of interiority which is related to the interiority of human consciousness, with memory and feeling. In oral cultures, sound profoundly affects a person’s sense of place at the centre of the cosmos, as “the *umbilicus mundi*, the navel of the world” (Eliade 231–35; Ong 72).

In performance, listeners enter the interior space of the person telling the tale, and we share their interior space. We also encounter the sound of the performer’s voice as carrier of knowledge, which works in a dual sense to deliver a vocal and psychic imprint for those of us listening. Interestingly, Ong sees the shift from oral to print (specially to maps) as one that fundamentally alters this experience, so that the world is understood primarily as visual surface “ready to be ‘explored’” (Ong 72). In this context, the dramaturgy of the oral is a radical tool that stands in opposition to an understanding of the world as objectified visual surface (as commodity).

In *Performing Journeys*, the oral produced an interiorizing space wrought by sound, in which the speaker and listeners were co-present. The literate worldview, present in books and papers declaimed in performance, cut across the sense of place established by the oral. The inscription, the word as a visual entity, demanded a different sense of theatrical space. The performance of the authoritative archive continuously fractured the dramaturgy of the oral by a different register and way of meaning.



*Performing Journeys*, Chapter, 2019. Performer: Rhys ap Irefor. Photo: Andy Freeman

Early Welsh missionary writings reveal attempts at capturing sounds and meanings that are part of the embodied repertoire of the oral in order to transform them into the finite inscription. Welsh language orthography was used to transpose the sounds of Khasi into an alphabet and the written form eventually became part of the archive from which authoritative historical discourse is constructed. Performance allows a space to mitigate against this definitive history that removes the agency of the individual voice/speaker; it forms a level playing field of sorts for both literate and oral forms, as the emphasis is always on the spoken. Moreover, the ideological prejudices of imperial history, encapsulated in writing, were up ended by what Gilbert and Tomkins refer to as “counter-discursive versions of the past” (110). In *Performing Journeys*, these versions of the past were rooted in the oral and were of direct relevance in the present. This was strongly felt in the climactic moment of the telling of the story of U Sier Lapalang, the stag killed by the Khasi. Lapdiang’s performance of the doe’s lament for her son, in Khasi, is a moment where the full extent of the mother’s grief transcends the story, is directly conveyed and allows us into the presence of the oral tradition and its relevance to the contemporary community, as seen in this performance extract:



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/jz3RUfHeqU4>

*Performing Journeys*—The Story of U Sier Lapalang, Lapdiang Syiem  
(Chapter, 2019)

### **A Dramaturgy of Sound and Feeling**

*Performing Journeys* presented a dramaturgy of the oral; it demanded that we trust the thoughts and the feelings stemming from embodied knowledge. In terms of composition, it was situated between oral tradition and devised theatre and was true to the feelings of the performers and their cultural contexts. In the midst of space, light, film, sound, music, movement and the performers' bodies, all elements that converge to create meaning—the archival text is but one layer and spoken aloud it is the sound of the official document, of hegemonic knowledge, of power located in the written, of the archive resounding through time, of authoritative history. It is heard as barrage of text in performance. It must be listened to, digested.

The oral, on the other hand, has immediate agency; it impels us to think of the power relationships inherent in the Welsh-Khasi exchange according to the feelings conveyed as it is spoken. Flemish dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven speaks of dramaturgy as always dealing with “the conversion of feeling into knowledge, and vice versa” (140). In *Performing Journeys*, the structure of the stories mediates the Khasi experience. The stories provide the emotional mainstay, against which the authoritative history of the mission is an incursion; they enable an empathetic and perhaps uncomfortable encounter with the memory of Welsh-Khasi contact.





*Performing Journeys* at Sohra, Meghalaya (site specific performance), location of the first Welsh mission in the Khasi Hills (February 2020). Photo: Kerme Lamare

### **Towards a Poetics of the Oral**

*Performing Journeys* ends with a different way of telling, as both performers speak the final part of Khasi poet, Esther Syiem's "U Sier Lapalang: A Trilogy" (73–85). In its several voices—stag, mother, warrior and poet—the poem reveals a multi-perspectival view of the events around the death of the stag and brings out the political and communal undertones at play in the oral narrative. The last section, "Warrior's Recall," spoken by both performers, moves beyond the dichotomy of the oral and the literate into a broader consideration of other complex categories such as outsider/insider and coloniser/colonised. It reveals the desire for and the cost of the "border crossing," addresses existing conflict and enables a re-examination of identity within the community: "Dialogue with him you say?/ What dialogue?/ . . . Do Khasis dialogue?/ Our homeland/ *ka ri umsnam*,/ must be/ defended at all costs" (81).

Spoken as the performers pushed, jostled and balanced against each other within the circle, the ending revealed an interdependency and interchangeability of roles and power relationships. In this moment, the performance demanded that we decipher the dynamics played out as we, performers and audience, address and reframe our (postcolonial) identities. Syiem's poem presents a continuously shifting point of view between insider and outsider and a host of standpoints in-between. The performers' multi-vocal rendering of the poem, in which the sole identification of each performer as either Welsh or Khasi is collapsed, saw them working through the poem's protagonists and reaching a final

conclusion together as general inquisitors of the premise of the Khasi-Welsh contact. The final section of the poem speaks to the necessity for dialogue and was spoken by both performers, as seen in the following video:



[Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/2nYJ2rjE0DM](https://youtu.be/2nYJ2rjE0DM)

*Performing Journeys* – “Warrior’s Recall,” Lapdiang Syiem and Rhys ap Trefor; Gareth Bonello on duitara (Chapter, 2019)

### **Conclusion**

Variations in responses to and readings of the performance in India and Wales led to the question of whether the dramaturgy of *Performing Journeys* operated in different ways for different audiences. For some in Meghalaya, the performance was a step towards giving voice and a narrative to themselves as Khasi people. In Wales, it was discomforting—many referred to the moment when the circular performance space is forcefully broken as a troubling episode, an act of excessive force, both literally and symbolically. In terms of the oral dramaturgy, this rupture is a moment of crisis and Khasi audiences understood its implication. Many felt that the performance encouraged introspection in relation to contemporary understandings of colonial relationships. An audience member in Shillong said that the performance spoke “of that which is betwixt and between . . . in the liminal tract of past and present, colonial and postcolonial, the oral and the script, the symbolic and the literal.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Ananda Lal, reviewing in the *Times of India* said: “Unconventional performance allows artists to explore subjects in ways that mainstream theatre often cannot” (Lal). *Performing Journeys* was unconventional in its use of the oral tradition as dramaturgy. Oral memory has a somatic aspect which sets it apart from textual memory; its performance via oral narrative is deeply affecting because of the audiences’ proximity to the performer as architect of the dramaturgy—we are witness to the dramaturgy being made in the moment, and from collective memory. Emotionally, this enables a deep communal

experience. Within the oral dramaturgy of *Performing Journeys*, the archival text, despite its assumed authority, could not compete. The dramaturgy allowed us to bring discrete experiences and understandings of the Khasi-Welsh cultural exchange to bear on each other, in a space that allows for paradoxes of feeling and all the nuances of fraught transcultural histories.

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### Endnotes

[1] *Performing Journeys* Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff (Wales); Khasi National Dorbar Hall, Shillong (India), 2019; in 2020, centres in Shillong, Jowai, Sohra, Kolkata, Delhi in India and Clydach, Holywell, Cardiff, Aberystwyth, Caernarfon, Carmarthen in Wales. Core team: Rhys ap Irefor, Gareth Bonello, Helen Davies, Benedict Hynñiewta, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Lisa Lewis, Aparna Sharma, Lapdiang Syiem.

[2] See "The Death of Lapalang, The Stag," in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*, pp. 84–89.

[3] Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission archive, National Library of Wales; North Eastern Hill University Library, Shillong; Presbyterian Church of India; Presbyterian Church of Wales missionary collection, Amgueddfa Cymru: National Museum Wales.

[4] Personal correspondence with audience member, Amanda Tongper, April 2019, quoted with her permission.

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