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RESEARCH ARTICLE**A-SONG KOSI—WHERE SPIRITS DWELL: A-CHIK INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IN THE GARO HILLS****Dr. Anitha Ch. Momin***Assistant Professor, Department of Garo, Captain Williamson Sangma State University, Tura, Meghalaya, India.*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13401>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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This paper examines *A-song Kosi* to investigate Indigenous ecological ethics among the A-chik of the Garo Hills, Meghalaya. It draws on A-chik oral narratives, written sources, and fieldwork in selected villages to explore relationships between land, ancestral settlement, spiritual guardianship, and human conduct. The discussion distinguishes stones that mark ancestral land and clan boundaries from those regarded as sacred places inhabited or guarded by spirits. It also considers accounts of Abet Rangge, Balpakram, and Jong-dik, which provide further insights into beliefs concerning forests, streams, spiritual presence, and restrictions on human access and resource use. The study uses Indigenous relationality, more-than-human approaches to place, and Indigenous ecological ethics to examine how these relationships involve responsibility, reciprocity, and restraint. Field accounts also reveal differences between the continuing recognition of ancestral places and changes in ritual practice. By examining these narratives, practices, and community memories, the study contributes to broader discussions of Indigenous ecological ethics by showing how place-based knowledge shows the ways to understand human–environment relationships beyond the nature–culture divide.

Keywords: *A-song Kosi; Indigenous ecological ethics; Indigenous knowledge; relationality; more-than-human worlds*

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INTRODUCTION

A-chik oral narratives and written sources contain stories, beliefs, and knowledge about the land, forests, rivers, and spirits. These sources describe ancestral beliefs and people's experiences with particular places. Some explain why certain places are considered sacred and why people avoid entering them. Passed down through generations or recorded from villagers' experiences, these accounts offer insights into how people understand particular places and conduct themselves toward them.

The A-chik (Garo) are an Indigenous community primarily inhabiting the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, Northeast India (Sangma, *Gimagimin A-chik A-dokrang* 25–30, 43; Aier 1–7; Playfair 1–12; Carey 1–3; Burling 9–10; Sangma, *Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs* 1–25). An account of A-chik history describes a customary oath in which people bit a lump of earth to affirm their commitment to the land they occupied and their resolve to defend it (Sangma, *Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs* 4–5). The act suggests a close attachment to the land, understood not merely as a place of settlement but as something worthy of protection.

Among the A-chik, *A-song Kosi* refers to ancestral stones which are connected with land, settlement, and spiritual guardianship (Sangma, *Ku-birong* 36). Some of these stones mark clan boundaries and ancestral land, whereas others are regarded as sacred places guarded by spirits. The spirits are believed to protect the forests surrounding these stones, and people may therefore avoid cutting trees or collecting forest products from the area. During fieldwork, local accounts also showed that knowledge of these places continues to exist,

although some people, particularly the younger generation, may know about a *Kosi* without knowing its exact location. Such accounts bring attention to ancestral memory, land, and present-day community life.

Some of the A-chik narratives explain how people understand and respond to the presence of spirits in the landscape. Abet Rangge, for instance, is believed to take care of forests and streams, and its presence depends on the availability of both forest and water (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 2; Marak, *Atchu Ambini Ku-bisring* 57). The stories about Balpakram and Jong-dik also tell about places where spirits dwell and restrictions on human access. In the account of the ancestors' arrival in the present Garo Hills, a spirit advised them to share food and resources with the forest spirits and respect the beings they could not see but could feel or hear (Sangma, *Noksik Nokbakniko* 1–3). These accounts contain knowledge of the places and ideas about how people should behave toward the beings they believe dwell there.

This paper uses Indigenous relationality and more-than-human approaches to place to examine the relationship between people and their surroundings. Ingold discusses how beings inhabit the world, while Salmón uses the concept of kincentric ecology to explain how humans understand themselves as part of a wider community of life. These ideas provide a way to discuss A-chik oral traditions in relation to land, spirits, ancestors, and other beings. The focus here remains on A-chik accounts and practices, including the responsibilities and restrictions observed in these places.

This paper examines *A-song Kosi* within the wider context of A-chik oral literature and Indigenous



ecological ethics in the Garo Hills. It draws on oral narratives, written sources, and fieldwork conducted in selected A-chik villages. The discussion considers how ancestral stones and other sacred places relate to settlement, spiritual presence, and community memory. It also examines customary restrictions on the use of land and forest resources, along with the ways knowledge of these places is passed down through stories, ritual practices, and the accounts of community members. By bringing oral literature and fieldwork together, the paper explores how relationships with land and more-than-human beings involve responsibility, reciprocity, and restraint in A-chik communities.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Oral Tradition and Indigenous Knowledge

Storytelling is a practice through which Indigenous communities pass down knowledge and culture. It “sustains communities and validates the experiences and epistemologies of Indigenous peoples” (Iseke 559). Indigenous peoples use oral traditions to examine present events and articulate Indigenous understandings. Hence, “storytelling is a central focus of Indigenous epistemologies and research approaches” (559). Vansina explains that oral tradition includes “both a process and its products” (3). He describes the process as the transmission of messages “by word of mouth over time” (3). Each telling is one moment in this continuing process (3).

Within Indigenous contexts, oral history is connected with the cultural worlds in which it is practiced. Understanding Indigenous oral history requires researchers to be “immersed in the oral worlds of the people” (Mahuika). Mahuika also

explains that Indigenous oral history is “tied to the land, ocean, and people” (171). He also discusses the importance of language, land, ocean, rivers, and mountains in understanding Ngāti Porou oral history (172). Archibald uses the term storywork for her approach to First Nations stories and storytelling. From the teachings of Coast Salish and Stóō Elders, she learnt seven principles: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. These principles form a Stóō and Coast Salish theoretical framework for making meaning from stories and using them in educational contexts.

In the A-chik context, oral tradition transmits ethical knowledge across generations. A-chik folktales preserve cultural knowledge, social values, and beliefs. Playfair notes that A-chik tales and songs have been “handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth” (138). Kroshnil D. Sangma also emphasises their role in preserving the knowledge and beliefs of earlier generations. Similarly, Assmann describes cultural memory as “the handing down of meaning” (6).

Relationality, More-Than-Human Worlds, and Place

Gould et al. state that “relational thinking is procedurally central to Indigenous epistemological ways” (2). They explain that it is foundational to fulfilling collective responsibilities and engaging with principles and meanings through everyday practices (2). The “collective” is referred to as extending beyond humans to include living beings (human and other-than-human) and non-living beings, such as rocks (2).

Ingold introduces the concept of inhabitation, stating that “beings are constituted within a



'relational field'" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 70). He describes the environment as "a domain of entanglement" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 71). Thus, "in the animic ontology, beings do not simply occupy the world, they inhabit it" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 71). In his earlier discussion, he explains that whatever surfaces one encounters, such as ground, water, vegetation, or buildings, are in the world, not of it (Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* 241). As Ingold puts it, "woven into their very texture are the lines of growth and movement of its inhabitants" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 71).

Kohn uses the term "ecology of selves" to describe the web of living thoughts in and around the forests of Ávila (80). He explains that this ecology includes the Runa, an Indigenous people of the Upper Amazon region of Ecuador, and other humans, the many kinds of living beings in the forest, as well as spirits and the dead (80).

de Maaker discusses a group of planted boulders known as *a-song-kusi*, also called *a-song-chiga kusi*, which he translates as "for the land and flowing water." According to the accounts he records, the boulders were initially arranged by the founders of a village. The largest boulder hosts a spirit of human origin, understood as a deified ancestor, while the other boulders support it. From the Songsarek perspective on the environment, humans inhabit a world created, inhabited, and maintained by omnipresent spirits. In this understanding, humans are among many agentive beings, including boulders, hilltops, rocks, and deep river pools (de Maaker). de Maaker further explains that relationships with spirits involve restrictions on human conduct, including taboos concerning harvesting crops prematurely,

hunting certain animals, and the excessive use of environmental resources. He observes that the kusi-boulders continue to command respect even in villages where the traditional Garo community religion is no longer practised. At Rongkinggre, the boulders remained connected with the founding of the village, and the surrounding forest was preserved. de Maaker interprets their continuing agency as having ethical implications because the boulders place limits on human conduct and contribute to the conservation of forest patches and their inhabitants (de Maaker).

N. K. Das's ethnographic research among the Naga tribes of Nagaland and Manipur also examines the relationship between cosmology, ecology, spirituality, stone culture, and ancestor veneration. Das discusses how stones and monoliths preserve ancestral memory and how they are associated with origin stories and ritual practices. Some Naga communities regard stones as living, while monoliths may be erected in memory of deceased ancestors (48–49). He also records that forests, streams, caves, and other places are regarded as dwelling places of deities and spirits. In some Ao-Naga areas, cutting trees, collecting forest products, and farming are prohibited in such places (50–51). Das further discusses *genna* as a set of customary prohibitions, rituals, and moral codes that connect people with their ancestors and living relatives (52). His research provides a comparative perspective for examining how spiritual beliefs, ancestral memory, and customary restrictions are connected with particular places in Northeast India. These practices are not identical to those associated with A-song Kosi, but this comparison connects A-chik beliefs with wider



Indigenous understandings of cosmology and the environment.

Blaser critiques the most established assumptions in the social sciences: “we are all modern and that the differences that exist are between cultural perspectives on one single reality ‘out there’” (547). He argues that stories are not only, or not mainly, denotative (referring to “out there”), but “partake in the performance of that which they narrate” (552).

Indigenous Ecological Ethics: Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Restraint

The discussion of ecological ethics considers how humans are expected to act toward the natural world. “Relational thinking is procedurally central to Indigenous epistemological ways: it is foundational to fulfilling collective responsibilities and engaging with principles and meanings through everyday practices” (Gould et al. 2). Romm also discusses Indigenous relational thought in terms of responsibility toward human and more-than-human beings. She argues that relationships involve reciprocity and accountability, and that knowing cannot be separated from participation in the world (812, 820–21).

Salmón’s concept of kincentric ecology sought to foster awareness that human beings must maintain a complex relationship with the surrounding natural world. Salmón observes that they, traditional Indigenous people, learn this awareness from listening to stories about the land. Salmón observes that “Indigenous people are affected by and, in turn, affect the life around them” (1327). They view both themselves and nature as part of an “extended

ecological family” (1327). Such relationships place human actions within a web of reciprocal ecological relations, where care, attentiveness and appropriate conduct are essential.

Similarly, according to Hird, responsibility is derived from “relational obligations to land, ancestors, community and more-than-human beings” (2272). He notes that Indigenous ontologies position land, water, and animal beings not as resources but as “relatives, teachers and legal subjects” (2272). He referred to Salmón’s kincentric ecology, which “recognises humans as embedded within the cycles, responsibilities and intelligences of the natural world” (2272).

A-CHIK AND THE LIVING LANDSCAPE

A-chik communities have long lived in forests and developed an understanding of them through everyday experiences. They regard forests not only as providers of food and raw materials for everyday use, but also as places inhabited by spirits (de Maaker). They respect these forest-dwelling spirits and sometimes perform rituals to please them and negotiate certain matters. For A-chik communities, forests are also a source of knowledge about the natural environment (Rongmuthu 32-45).

According to a narrative recorded by Kroshnil D. Sangma, when the A-chik tried to settle in the dense forests, they faced obstacles from the forest spirits. Community members died from spirit attacks, and only a few survived. The spirit who had led them to the present Garo Hills advised them to negotiate with the forest spirits. He suggested that whatever they acquired, including food and other resources, should be shared with the forest spirits. Following this



advice, the A-chik learnt to live with these forest spirits. They learnt to respect and share with forest dwellers whom they could not see but could feel and hear (Sangma, *Noksik Nokbakniko Chimonggipa Katta Wal-tim* 1–3).

The A-chik believe that Abet Rangge is one of the *mite* or deities whose presence keeps water sources alive. According to A-chik ancestral narratives, if Abet Rangge does not reside at a water source, the water will dry up, and the forests will no longer remain lush and green (Marak, *Atchu Ambini Ku-bisring* 57). The A-chik also believe that visiting places where Abet Rangge resides can cause illness and, in some cases, death. If someone becomes ill after visiting such a place, the A-chik perform rituals involving blood sacrifice to the spirit. The person is believed to recover if the illness results from visiting Abet Rangge's place. Mihir N. Sangma also describes Abet Rangge as a spirit who lives in virgin soil or at the source of water. Abet Rangge is also described as a spirit who takes care of forests and streams (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 2).

Marak discusses the preservation of sacred groves in Baghmara, South Garo Hills, Meghalaya, in her case study on decolonial existence. Her study also provides an account of how Indigenous knowledge continues to be practiced. In her discussion of the Simsang River, she describes a place known as Jong-dik as a "stretch of elevated land dreaded by the villagers", which is "tucked away from villagers' reach" (Marak, "Decolonial Existence"). This area is believed to be inhabited by organisms that can cause death by entering human skin. As a result, people avoid entering such places. These areas remain preserved, and people do not use

the trees or other vegetation found there (Marak, "Decolonial Existence").

In Bangsi Alda Nok, there is a place called Jong-dik, according to local accounts, Jong-dik is believed to be inhabited by tiny, invisible insects that can enter human skin and cause death. Before reaching Bangsi Alda Nok, one passes through thick forests, rivers, and streams. Jong-dik is a forested area with a small stream. Since the stream lies along the route to Bangsi Alda Nok and the villages beyond it, people travelling in that direction have to pass by it. Three or four elderly local people shared this account with me, recalling stories told by their forefathers (Dash Ch. Momin, Interview). According to the account, in the nineteenth century, the British came to this area, and one British officer and his family stayed at the station in Bangsi Alda Nok. One summer day, the officer's son unknowingly bathed in the stream, which local people avoid because it is believed to be a Jong-dik site. While bathing, the British officer's son was affected by Jong-dik, and he died within 24 hours. The residents warned people not to stay near this place for long. They also believed that if anyone heard a sound like the buzzing of bees coming from the area, it meant that the queen of Jong-dik was moving to another place. Anyone who encountered the queen while she was moving was believed to die from severe itching, as the affliction would consume the person's body. According to the villagers, Jong-dik guard their territory. For this reason, such places remain covered with thick forests, and people do not dare to enter areas where they believe Jong-dik reside (Dash Ch. Momin, Interview).



A-SONG KOSI: ANCESTRAL STONES, SETTLEMENT AND RITUAL PRACTICE

Kosi, Land and Ancestral Settlement

Kosi is an A-chik word for a stone boulder. There are different kinds of “*Kosi*”. One is erected by the A-chik to mark the area or region of land belonging to each Nokma. Another “*Kosi*” is erected to guard the land, and it is sacred to the A-chik, who perform rituals there by sacrificing animals’ blood (Sangma, *Ku-birong* 36). *Kosi*, which they regard as a sacred or spirit-dwelling place, is a place where no one cuts trees or collects other forest products. Till today, they preserve such *Kosi* by not allowing people to use the forest. These days, most A-chik people do not practise blood sacrifice at the *Kosi* but still respect such places. These places are also home to animals, birds and thick forests. *Kosi* may consist of a cluster of stones or sometimes a single stone.

Chenggan A-gitok Sangma discusses the meaning of the erection of *Kosi*, which is also called A-song *Kosi*. According to A-chik ancestors, places in Assam, Bengal and Bangladesh, such as Naltapara and Guhalkona, etc., are A-chik villages. These A-chik places, however, do not have A-song. Chenggan A-gitok Sangma argues that the meaning of A-chik is “A”, meaning “a-a” (land), while “song” means Nok (home). Ancestors who own the land perform “A-song *Kosi* songe” by erecting A-song *Kosi*. By trusting in the A-song *Kosi*, the A-chik people protect their land and forest. The author gives three details of A-song *Kosi*: firstly, A-songdam; secondly, Ranggadama; thirdly, Dalmang. When they moved from one place to another, they sacrificed blood to the *Kosi*, wrapped it in new white clothes, and moved

from place to place (Sangma, *Pagitchamni Ku-ringa Bidol II*).

Playfair (106) notes that sacrificial stones are erected at the entrance to or near villages. Playfair’s observation about sacrificial stones near villages can be considered alongside A-chik accounts of *Kosi* and forest protection. Mihir Sangma (*Maniani Bidik* 2–3) discusses the erection of *Kosi* in relation to *krita* and the A-song *tata* ceremony.

The place I visited in January 2026 is an erection of stones, but it is not an ordinary stone. Local tales and the Cheran clan told me that it is a figure like a human carved from stone. According to the Cheran Nokma and her family, the stone figure is believed to have been brought from Tibet by the ancestors of the Cheran clan (Hilton Cheran Momin, Interview). It was their ancestors who brought it with them when they migrated from Tibet to the present Garo Hills. They called it ‘Ambi’, and it has some magical power. This was revealed when I talked to them. As I pointed out, these days they do not perform rituals with this “*Kosi*”. However, they are still scared to touch the stone, as it will bring a curse to anyone who touches it. It has been taken care of by the Cheran Nokma and her relatives. *Kosi* is still important to them, and they respect this stone as their guardian (Hilton Cheran Momin, Interview).

Kosi and Ritual Practice

Since then, A-chik people who live in the hilly terrain have practiced “*krita*” once a year, during which they erect “*Kosi*” (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 2–3). So, “*krita*” is the word that A-chik people use for every ritual they perform. The sacrificial A-song *tata* ceremony is performed at an erected “*Kosi*”. It is their responsibility to maintain the relationship between



forest and human beings by not harming nature. In this way, they pay their respect to the spirits who dwell in the forest (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 2–3).

At the entrance to or near the villages, sacrificial stones are erected (Playfair 106). These stones are called “Kosi”, where A-chik people keep the forest free from cultivation. Chenggan A-gitok Sangma narrates the incident in which he encountered the A-chik worldview on the erection of Kosi. He mentions the place and date of the erection of Kosi. The date he witnessed was Tuesday, 17.10.2000, in Rongmakgre village. There are twelve Kosi (s) erected during the “A-song tata” ceremony. They observe this once a year, whereas there is also another ceremony called “A-song Den-a” or “A-song Krita”, which is observed once every two years (Sangma, *Pagitchamni Ku-ringa Bidol I* 209). The community keeps these places sacred, and trees are not meant to be cut down in this area.

Aldrich Ch. Momin states that the real meaning of A-song Den-a or A-song Krita is to give thanks to Goera, Kalkame, the gods of thunder and power, and to protect their land and water from their enemies. In ancient times, A-chik people had to fight with their enemies to protect their lands. After fighting, they kept the land where their god of power, Goera Kalkame, resides. This place is beside the village of the Nokma’s house. The forest where they believe Goera Kalkame resides is sacred, and nobody enters the forest, as they believe their god of power lives there. Only once a year do they perform a ritual, and on that day, they enter the forest (Momin, *A-chikni Ku-andik* 9).

A-CHIK INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL ETHICS

Place and More-than-Human Presence

A-chik oral traditions and written sources tell about their experiences and relationships with nature and spirits. They believe that spirits live in forests, guard water sources and remain associated with particular places. Abet Rangge, for instance, is described as a spirit who takes care of forests and streams (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 2). A-chik forefathers believed that if Abet Rangge did not live at a water source, the water would dry up and the forest would no longer remain lush and green (Marak, *Atchu Ambini Ku-bisring* 57). Ingold (Being Alive, 71) states that beings “do not simply occupy the world, they inhabit it”.

A-song Kosi is associated with ancestral settlement, land and spirits. Chenggan A-gitok Sangma (*Pagitchamni Ku-ringa Bidol II* 244) explains that the stones are related to land and home, and that ancestors erected them to mark and protect their land. Some of these stones mark clan boundaries, while others are regarded as sacred places guarded by spirits. Gould et al. discuss Indigenous relationality as involving human beings, other-than-human living beings and non-living beings, including rocks. de Maaker also discusses ancestral stones and spirits in Garo understandings of land and the environment (de Maaker). Thus, the stones have implications beyond the marking of land boundaries, as they also have a place in beliefs about ancestors and spiritual guardianship.

Boundaries, Restraint, and Human Conduct

A-chik have their own understanding of ecology, which can be seen in their everyday practices and customary restrictions. For centuries, their lives have



involved forests, rivers, mountains and animals. They use expressions such as “Asi Malja” to warn people against entering dangerous or forbidden places, including sacred forests and water sources. For A-chik people who grow up in their traditions and culture, these words can be enough to prevent them from entering such places. If somebody ignores the elders’ warnings, the person may become sick or die (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 67). These warnings are taught from childhood and passed down through generations.

The same practice can be seen when A-chik people seek permission from Abet Rangge before clearing land for jhum cultivation. They perform the “*jumang sia*” ritual, select a plot, clear a small portion of land, and put grass in a tree to ask permission from the spirit (Momin, *A-chikni Ku-andik* 10–11). They then seek a revelation in a dream. If the land is allowed for cultivation, the dream may contain signs such as sand or fish. If the spirit does not allow it, the dream may communicate the words “*Dadak beng-ako kangako manijaode jakbikpilgen*”, meaning “Don’t do it” (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 2). A-chik people accept this as a warning and leave the land untouched.

Major A. Playfair’s ethnographic account of the Garos provides an earlier record of customary prohibitions associated with agricultural activities and everyday conduct. He explains that *genna*, a term borrowed from the Naga tribes, corresponds to the Garo term *marang*, associated with the meanings of “unlucky” and “unlawful” (126). Although these prohibitions generally applied to individuals, Playfair records one that extended to the whole village. People were prohibited from visiting the fields on the

day a child was born, as the crop visited on that day was believed to become cursed and blighted (126). He also refers to the importance of having a favourable dream before clearing land for cultivation (127).

Such forbidden land is called A-song Raka in the hilly areas and Ranggadam in the plains (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 2). Permission is also sought before building houses on new land. If Abet Rangge does not allow it, people do not settle there. Leopold (204) writes that “land is a community” and argues that it should be loved and respected. In A-chik practice, restrictions on cultivation and settlement place limits on how people can use the land. Moreover, Oviedo and Jeanrenaud discuss the spiritual importance of sacred natural sites for Indigenous communities. Among the A-chik, respect for such places is maintained through customary expressions, oral accounts, and ritual practices. People learn from their elders about which places should be left untouched and how they are expected to behave there.

Another perspective can be found in Kugo’s discussion of place names and cultural ethics. She explains how place names can bring back memories of travel, experiences and cultural ethics tied to particular locations. She writes that “stories containing cultural ethics are intertwined with place names and remind community members to be conscious of the environment” (121). Although her study concerns Iliamna Lake Yup’ik knowledge, it offers a useful comparison with A-chik practices, where particular places are associated with restrictions on cultivation, settlement and entry. Furthermore, Hird discusses “relational obligations to land, ancestors, community and more-than-human



beings". In the A-chik context, these obligations can be considered in relation to the restrictions concerning Abet Rangge and sacred *Kosi*. People are expected to observe these restrictions because of their relationships with these places and the customary knowledge passed down about them.

Reciprocity, Responsibility, and Relationship

A-chik oral traditions and written sources also tell about sharing and respect between people and the spirits who inhabit the forest. According to a settlement account recorded by Kroshnil D. Sangma (*Noksik Nokbakniko Chimonggipa Katta Wal-tim* 1–3), the ancestors who arrived in the present Garo Hills encountered forest spirits. The spirit who guided them advised them to share food and resources with the forest dwellers. They learnt to respect and share with beings whom they could not see but whose presence they could feel or hear.

Salmón discusses kincentric ecology, in which humans understand themselves as members of an extended ecological family. He writes that humans "view the life surrounding them as kin" (1327). The settlement account can be considered in relation to this idea because the ancestors are advised to share with the forest spirits. The story presents the relationship with the forest as involving responsibilities toward beings other than humans.

A-chik people also have a saying that wherever they settle, there is no crisis of water (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 2–3). This saying expresses their understanding of the relationship between people, land and water. It can be read alongside the belief about Abet Rangge, whose presence at water sources is associated with the availability of water and the

condition of the forest (Marak, *Atchu Ambini Ku-bisring* 57).

A-chik's idea about ecological ethics can be considered in relation to Aldo Leopold's argument that ethics directs individuals to cooperate for mutual benefit (204–205). Leopold further explains that recognising land as a community is a basic concept of ecology, while loving and respecting the land extends ethics (204). He argues that land should be understood as a community, rather than merely as a resource for human use. Similarly, Taylor argues that human beings understand themselves as members of the Earth's community of life.

Haraway (13) writes that "Natures, cultures, subjects, and objects do not preexist their intertwined worldings". Her argument concerns how these categories exist in relation to one another. In A-chik oral traditions, people, forests, water, spirits and ancestral places are understood in relation to one another. Sharing with forest spirits, respecting water sources and observing restrictions on land use are among the practices through which these relationships are maintained. A-chik understandings of the forest can also be considered alongside Anna Tsing's discussion of how forests emerge through the activities of humans and other living beings. Tsing (152) argues that forests are not produced by nature or humans alone, but develop through the activities of different living beings, often without deliberate planning. This perspective is relevant to A-chik understandings of forest life, in which people, spirits, trees, animals and other beings inhabit a shared environment. The A-chik emphasis on sharing with forest spirits and observing restrictions on forest use



also indicates that human activities are understood in relation to the wider life of the forest.

Oral Narrative and Ecological Memory

A·chik oral traditions preserve knowledge about sacred places, spirits, forests, water sources and customary restrictions. This knowledge is passed down through word of mouth and continues in stories, sayings, rituals and everyday practices. Iseke (559) describes story as “a practice in Indigenous cultures that sustains communities”. Archibald discusses respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness and synergy as principles of Indigenous storywork.

The expression Asi Malja is one example of how this knowledge is taught within A·chik households and communities (Sangma, *Maniani Bidik* 67). Children learn from their elders that certain forests and water sources should not be entered. Similarly, the practice of seeking permission from Abet Rangge before cultivation teaches people to observe restrictions on the use of land. The knowledge is passed down through generations, even when younger members of the community have not visited or cannot identify the locations of particular sacred places.

Berkes, in *Sacred Ecology*, discusses the lessons that the lives of tribal and Indigenous peoples may offer modern societies in managing resources in forest, mountain and dryland ecosystems. He also discusses traditional ecological knowledge as knowledge accumulated through generations. Among the A·chik, oral traditions, customary sayings and ritual practices are among the ways this knowledge is transmitted and maintained. Similarly, Archibald

discusses respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness and synergy as principles of Indigenous Storywork. She also describes how stories can become the teacher. In A·chik oral traditions, stories about forest spirits, ancestral stones and sacred places can teach younger generations about customary restrictions and the ways they are expected to behave toward particular places. Likewise, Scalise Sugiyama et al. (50) discuss storytelling as one means of transmitting ecological knowledge. In A·chik communities, oral narratives convey ecological knowledge alongside rituals, everyday practices, observation and learning. Although stories are not the sole means of transmitting this knowledge, they communicate experiences and teachings.

CONCLUSION

A·chik Indigenous ecological ethics is grounded in relationships between people, land, ancestors and spiritual beings. These relationships also involve responsibilities toward the land and the beings that inhabit it. The discussion of A·song Kosi and related A·chik accounts shows how particular places hold ancestral histories and spiritual meanings. People are expected to respect ancestral land, observe restrictions on entering sacred places, and exercise restraint in using forest resources, water sources, stones, and settlements.

Here, A·song Kosi shows how a stone can connect people with their land, ancestors, forests, and spiritual beliefs. Its meaning goes beyond the stone itself, and it continues in the memories and practices passed down through generations. Accounts from the present also show that these



connections remain important, even when some ritual practices have changed.

The A-chik examples show that relationships with land and more-than-human beings involve expectations concerning human conduct. People may seek permission before cultivating land, leave certain areas untouched, observe restrictions on entering sacred places and refrain from collecting forest products around particular *Kosi*. The account of the ancestors' learning to "respect and share with forest dwellers" (Sangma, *Noksik Nokbakniko Chimonggipa Katta Wal-tim* 1–3) shows responsibility as part of living with beings already inhabiting the forest. These practices limit the use of the landscape and call for respect, restraint and reciprocity. The A-chik case shows that Indigenous ecological ethics is embedded in relationships with particular places and beings. A-song *Kosi* reveals an ecological ethic grounded in connections between land, ancestry, spiritual presence, and community.

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