

Heritage Craft and Community Division

Murti-Making Traditions of the Northeast Region

Murti-Making Tradition of Meghalaya

The murti-making tradition of Meghalaya finds its roots in the ancient animistic belief systems of the state's indigenous tribes, the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo. Long before the arrival of organized religions like Christianity, these communities lived in close harmony with nature and believed that all natural elements, trees, stones, rivers, mountains, and even the winds were living entities inhabited by spirits.

Their worldview was deeply eco-spiritual, where the divine was not distant or abstract but present in the surrounding landscape. This belief formed the foundation of their ritual art practices, including the making of effigies and murtis. These figures were not idols of worship in the conventional sense, but spiritual vessels or mediums through which humans could communicate with the invisible world of deities, ancestors, and guardian spirits.

Among the Khasi and Jaintia tribes, the crafting of wooden and stone effigies held profound ritual importance. These figures often symbolized ancestral protectors, fertility deities, or spirits of the forest and river, believed to guard the village from illness, misfortune, or natural calamities. They were placed in sacred groves (Law Kyntang) or at community altars known as 'Law Lyngdoh', spaces where rituals, sacrifices, and offerings were performed.

The Khasi clans in particular revered their ancestors through such murtis, as they believed that after death, the spirits of their forebears continued to watch over the living. These ancestral figures represented a continuum between the human and the spirit world, ensuring the well-being of the clan and the fertility of the land.

Similarly, among the Jaintia people, effigies were often associated with local deities who controlled natural phenomena like rainfall, harvest, and fertility. The figures, carved in wood or stone, were

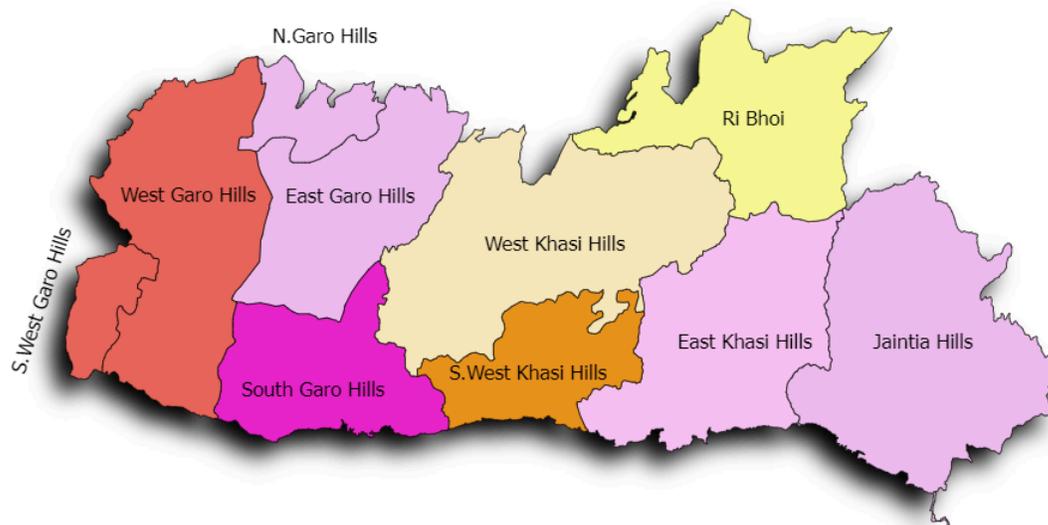
sometimes left in sacred forests or near megalithic monuments, blending the sculptural tradition with the region's famous megalithic culture.

In the Garo hills, the tradition took slightly different forms but carried the same spiritual essence. The Garo people carved wooden figures and posts, which were integral to rituals dedicated to guardian spirits (known as 'Misi Saljong' or 'Tatara Rabuga') and ancestors. These effigies were used during ceremonies to invoke blessings, ward off evil, or commemorate the dead. The act of carving itself was viewed as a sacred way of inviting the spirit to inhabit the form created by human hands.

Thus, in all three communities, the murti or effigy was a living symbol of spiritual presence, not merely an artistic creation. It served as a focal point for communal worship, storytelling, and moral memory reminding the people of their inseparable relationship with nature, ancestry, and the unseen world.

About the Region

Meghalaya



Meghalaya, meaning “abode of clouds” in Sanskrit, is a picturesque state in northeastern India, bordered by Assam to the north and east and Bangladesh to the south and west. Nestled in the heart of the Shillong Plateau, Meghalaya is renowned for its rolling hills, deep valleys, dense forests, and abundant rainfall, which makes it one of the wettest places on Earth.

The state is divided into three major regions: **Garo Hills**, **Khasi Hills**, and **Jaintia Hills**, each with its own distinct topography, climate, and cultural practices. The terrain is predominantly hilly, with fertile valleys and numerous rivers, waterfalls, and caves, contributing to its rich biodiversity and unique ecosystems.

Meghalaya’s population is primarily composed of indigenous tribal communities, including the **Khasis**, **Garos**, and **Jaintias**, each with its own language, customs, and social structures. The state is known for its matrilineal society, particularly among the Khasis and Garos, where lineage and inheritance pass through the female line, reflecting unique cultural practices.

The region’s climate is largely temperate and humid due to heavy monsoon rains, which support lush forests and abundant flora and fauna. These natural conditions have historically influenced the traditional crafts, architecture, and agricultural practices of the people.

Meghalaya’s rich cultural heritage is expressed through its music, dance, festivals, oral traditions, and crafts. The state is also renowned for its traditional building techniques, handwoven textiles, bamboo and cane crafts, and indigenous rituals, which together create a vibrant tapestry of living traditions.

In essence, Meghalaya represents a harmonious blend of natural splendor, cultural diversity, and community-centered living, making it a unique region in India’s northeastern landscape.

People and Culture



Meghalaya is primarily inhabited by **indigenous tribal communities**, the major ones being the **Khasis, Garos, and Jaintias**, each with distinct languages, customs, and traditions.

- The **Khasis**, mainly in the central and eastern parts, follow a **matrilineal system**, where lineage and inheritance pass through women. Their culture emphasizes folklore, oral traditions, and nature-based rituals. They are skilled in weaving, bamboo and cane crafts, and celebrate festivals like **Shad Suk Mynsiem** and **Nongkrem Dance Festival** with music and dance.

- The **Garos**, mainly in western Meghalaya, also practice matriliney and have close ties to agriculture and forests. They are known for their folk music, dances, and the **Wangala harvest festival**, featuring drum music and community celebrations.
- The **Jaintias**, concentrated in the Jaintia Hills, have rich traditions in weaving, woodcraft, and pottery. Festivals like **Behdienkhlam** showcase their agricultural and spiritual customs.

Meghalaya's culture is deeply connected to nature, with music, dance, crafts, and rituals reflecting both spiritual beliefs and practical life. Community living, respect for nature, and preservation of heritage are central values among the people.

Materials and Techniques

The murti-making tradition of Meghalaya is deeply intertwined with the region's **natural environment**. Blessed with vast stretches of lush forests and a wealth of natural resources, the artisans and ritual specialists of the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes drew directly from their surroundings — using materials that were considered both **sacred and alive**.

Choice of Material

The most commonly used medium for sculpting was **wood**, a material that symbolized life and continuity. The forests of Meghalaya provided **fine-grained hardwoods** such as teak, sal, and jackfruit, which were not only durable but also spiritually significant. Before a tree was cut, it was customary to perform **a small ritual of permission** offering betel nut, rice, or rice beer to the forest spirits, acknowledging that the tree was a living being whose essence would now inhabit the form of the murti.



In some cases, **stone, bamboo, and clay** were used as well, each chosen for specific ritual purposes.

- **Stone effigies** were typically used for permanent installations near sacred groves, megaliths, or burial grounds — their endurance symbolizing the eternal nature of the spirit.
- **Bamboo** was employed for temporary ritual figures or festival decorations, reflecting the transient connection between humans and spirits during seasonal ceremonies.



This thoughtful use of natural materials reflects the tribes' **ecological sensitivity** and deep respect for the landscape that sustained their spiritual and daily lives.

Tools and Craftsmanship

The tools used for carving were simple yet skillfully handled — chisels, knives, mallets, and hammers, often hand-forged by local blacksmiths known within the community. These tools were not merely instruments of work but held ritual significance; they were sometimes blessed before the carving began, acknowledging that creation involved both human effort and divine guidance.



Unlike classical Indian sculpture, which often followed prescribed iconographic rules, the tribal artisans of Meghalaya worked through intuition and inherited memory. Each artisan learned by observing elders, absorbing the oral traditions that described the posture, form, and gesture of each spirit or ancestral figure. This informal yet precise process ensured that the spiritual essence of the murti was faithfully expressed, even without formal templates or written manuals.

Form and Aesthetic Philosophy

The resulting murtis were minimalist in form but profound in meaning. The artisans deliberately avoided intricate detailing or surface polish believing that the divine essence was already present within the material and need not be embellished.

- The surfaces were often left rough, sometimes retaining the natural curves or grain of the wood. This texture was not seen as imperfection but as a manifestation of nature's own design,

enhancing the murti's sacred power.

- Carvings were typically geometric and stylized, with bold lines and simplified features — elongated bodies, oval faces, and deep-set eyes that suggested spiritual alertness rather than physical realism.
- Occasionally, natural pigments or soot were applied to emphasize facial features or to mark the idol as ritually active, but vibrant coloring or ornamentation was rare.

The beauty of these murtis lay in their restraint, in the way they bridged the material and spiritual worlds through simplicity and symbolism. To the people of Meghalaya, art was not about decoration but about invocation — the act of giving form to a spirit, a memory, or a force of nature.

Cultural Context and Significance

In the traditional belief systems of the **Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes** of Meghalaya, the world was perceived as a living, breathing cosmos — a space where every element of nature possessed its own soul and consciousness. Before the advent of Christianity, these communities practiced **animism**, an ancient worldview that recognized the presence of divine forces, known locally as **U Ryngkew, U Basa** among the Khasi and Jaintia, and **Misi Saljong** among the Garo, in every aspect of their surroundings.

For them, **mountains, forests, rivers, and stones were not inert objects** but living entities imbued with spiritual energy. Every hill or grove was believed to have its guardian spirit, and every clan or family traced its ancestry to sacred natural landmarks. Within this deep ecological spirituality, the creation of **murtis or effigies** emerged as a sacred act — a way to **honor, invoke, and communicate** with these unseen powers that governed life, fertility, and well-being.

Mediums of Communication with the Divine

The making of these effigies was not intended as idol worship in the formal religious sense but as the **construction of spiritual vessels**. Each murti was believed to become a temporary abode for the spirit it represented. During certain rituals or festivals, the effigy would be **“activated” through offerings, chants, and invocations**, allowing the spirit to inhabit it. This sacred embodiment enabled the community to establish a direct connection with the divine realm to seek blessings, protection, and guidance.

The **Khasi and Jaintia** communities, for instance, crafted effigies representing **ancestral guardians, fertility deities, and spirits of rain or harvest**, reflecting their dependence on natural cycles. The **Garo**, on the other hand, created carved wooden figures of **protector spirits and departed ancestors**, especially during agricultural festivals or commemorative ceremonies for the dead. These acts not only invoked spiritual aid but also reaffirmed the people’s bond with their lineage and land.

Sacred Spaces and Ritual Landscapes

The effigies were rarely kept within homes; instead, they were installed in **sacred groves (Law Kyntang), village altars (Law Lyngdoh), or near burial grounds**. These sites, often surrounded by towering trees and stones, were considered thresholds between the human and spirit worlds. Offerings of rice, meat, or rice beer were made at these spots, accompanied by rhythmic drumming and chanting, to awaken and please the spirits.

In Khasi and Jaintia villages, such spaces also served as **communal gathering points**, where rituals strengthened the collective identity of the clan. The effigy thus stood as a **symbolic bridge** — connecting the visible, material world with the unseen spiritual dimension. In these rituals, art was never separate from faith or community; it was an extension of both.

Philosophy of Harmony with Nature

At its core, this practice expressed the tribes’ **philosophy of coexistence and balance with nature**. By creating effigies that represented forces of the earth and sky, the people acknowledged their dependence on — and responsibility toward the natural world. These figures embodied the

understanding that **divinity is not confined to temples or scriptures**, but woven into every element of the landscape: the whisper of a forest, the flow of a stream, or the stillness of a stone.

Through this worldview, the act of murti-making became more than a ritual—it was a reaffirmation of their **cultural identity, ecological ethics, and spiritual humility**. It reminded each generation that human life is part of a larger cycle shared with the ancestors, the spirits, and the land itself.

Ornament Traditions in Meghalaya

Connection to Murti and Ritual Aesthetics

While the effigies (murtis) of Meghalaya were mostly **minimalist and unadorned**, the **ornamental traditions of the people themselves** reflected similar spiritual ideas of identity, purity, and ancestral lineage.

- During rituals, when effigies or ancestral figures were installed, **participants wore special ornaments** made of metal, glass, or beads to **honour the spirits** and mark the sacredness of the event.
- In some rare instances, **ritual effigies were decorated with simple beads, feathers, or cloth**, especially among the Garo tribe during festivals or funerary ceremonies — not as decoration, but as **offerings symbolizing vitality and respect** for the spirit represented.



Thus, even if the murti itself remained austere, **ornamentation surrounded the ritual context** — through the attire and jewellery of the people involved.

Khasi Ornaments

The **Khasi tribe** is particularly known for its exquisite and symbolic jewellery, often made from **natural and locally available materials**.

- **Materials:** Coral, glass beads, silver, gold, amber, and even fossilized pine resin.
- **Signature ornament:** The “**Kynjri Ksiar**” – a gold necklace made of hollow cylindrical beads worn by Khasi women during ceremonies and festivals.
- Other popular pieces include:
 - “**Paila**” – a layered necklace of red coral and golden beads, considered auspicious.
 - “**Rigit**” – silver or gold chain worn across the chest.
 - “**Jainsem**” attire is often complemented by these ornaments, especially during rituals related to ancestral worship or harvest festivals.





These ornaments symbolized **prosperity, purity, and protection** and were believed to carry ancestral blessings. The red coral, for instance, was associated with vitality and life force — themes also central to the tribal spiritual worldview.

Jaintia Ornaments

The **Jaintia people**, closely related to the Khasi, shared many ornament-making traditions but developed their own stylistic variations.

- Their jewellery featured **fine silver work** and **multi-strand bead necklaces**, often worn in layers.
- Women traditionally adorned themselves with the “**Paila**” and “**Kynthei Ksiar**”, while men sometimes wore simple silver amulets or talismans believed to guard against evil spirits.

- Ornaments were also **part of ritual exchange** — gifted during clan feasts, marriages, or religious ceremonies to strengthen social and spiritual bonds.

The making of these ornaments was traditionally done by **local goldsmiths and silversmiths**, often hereditary artisans who were respected for their craftsmanship and ritual knowledge.

Garo Ornaments

The **Garo tribe**, living primarily in the western hills of Meghalaya, had a distinct ornament style — **vibrant, earthy, and symbolic**.

- **Common materials:** Brass, copper, silver, beads, shells, feathers, and bamboo.
- **Notable ornaments:**
 - **“Nekgapa”** – a brass necklace made of coin-shaped pieces.
 - **“Ripok”** – bead necklaces in multiple layers, worn by both men and women.
 - **“Jaksil”** – ear and hair ornaments made from feathers or metal wire.
- These ornaments were often **crafted for ceremonial dances and spirit-invoking rituals** like *Wangala*, the post-harvest festival celebrating Misi Saljong, the Sun-God.

In some Garo villages, **ornaments were even offered to the effigies** or placed near sacred posts as **tokens of gratitude** to the spirits.

Techniques and Symbolism

The ornament-making process in Meghalaya, though simple, was imbued with **ritual purity and symbolic meaning**:

- Artisans worked mostly by hand using **local tools**, and the crafting process often began with a **blessing or offering**.
- Every colour and material carried significance — **red coral for vitality, gold for divine purity, silver for moonlight and peace, and beads for fertility**.
- The designs were rarely ornamental in a modern sense; they were **encoded with clan identity, status, and spiritual protection**.

Cultural Significance

These ornaments were not merely decorative accessories; they served as visual markers of identity and spirituality.

- They connected the wearer to their ancestors and the natural world, much like the murtis connected the community to the divine.
- In festivals and rituals, the **gleam of gold, coral, and silver symbolized light and life**, warding off darkness and evil forces.
- Ornamentation also played a role in **community storytelling**, with each piece reflecting generations of inherited tradition and craftsmanship.

While the murtis of Meghalaya reflected austere spirituality and natural minimalism, the ornament-making traditions showcased the vibrant, living culture that surrounded these practices.

Together, they reveal a harmonious balance — the murti as a symbol of silent divinity, and the ornaments as an expression of living beauty, continuity, and reverence for nature and ancestry.

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