

IAF SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)  
Space Culture – Public Engagement in Space through Culture (9)

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## THE MYTH OF THE COSMOS: KHASI COSMOLOGY THROUGH ARTISTIC PRACTICE

**Abstract**

Whether it was the pulse and bloom that is the lunar cycle, the iridescent swirls of dust that span across the Milky Way, the shimmering clusters of constellations that pinprick against the inky depth of the night sky. The vast canopy of space has had civilizations' straining their necks skyward, seeding origin mythologies amongst the heavens, straining to make journeys that lay the horizon at their feet long before the existence of the nation state or the modern institution that is the corporation. Indigenous people the world over have a distinguished provenance of origin stories that invoke the cosmos. They have evolved centuries of rich cosmology and star knowledge that relate to space and its exploration. This rich cosmology and its implication for future discourse on Space exploration was the subject of the paper, 'Myths of the Cosmos: Alternative Indigenous Narratives for Space Exploration' presented at the 70th International Astronautical Congress (IAC), Washington DC.

This paper explores ongoing work with one such community, The Khasi people, who trace their ancestry back to the stars. Hailing from the North eastern state of Meghalaya in India, the Khasi's are famous for having evolved a synergistic technology of weaving living architecture by braiding tree roots into architectural structures, like bridges, platforms and stairs. Their origin mythology is replete with allusions to the cosmos, their origin mythology abound with stories of space travel to meet their sister tribes in the sky. Rich in oral tradition, the Khasi cosmology offers compelling narrative accounts of how the tribes settled the earth, entered into kinship relations with the sky, the land, the creatures and other non-human entities. Tales of a tree whose roots sank into the very depths of the earth and whose trunk was so tall that its canopy reached the heavens, a tree that was a celestial stairway for space exploration, arising from the very navel of the earth, called Sophtehpenanang forms the fulcrum of their oral histories. This paper illustrates the methodology and outcome of working closely with the Khasi community to develop an artistic piece that engages complex nuanced questions about space exploration's relationship to the environment and climate change as well as explores what indigenous participation in space exploration might look like.