



Sacred Meaning and Tourism Branding in Khasi Festival Logos, Meghalaya, India

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Abstract

Tourism branding across the tropics often extracts Indigenous symbols for exotic appeal, but also provides spaces for communities to assert cultural self-representation. This study examines three Khasi tourism festivals in Meghalaya, subtropical Northeast India, analysing how festival logo designs communicate Indigenous identity while navigating the tensions between sacred meaning and tourism economies. Using a blended methodology that combines semiotic and iconological visual analysis with an emic ethnographic approach informed by interviews with designers and cultural knowledge-holders, the paper decodes symbols from three major festivals: the Monolith Festival, the Na Thymmei Festival, and the Tri Hills Ensemble Festival. Symbols such as monoliths, textile patterns, traditional instruments, weapons, rice and sacred landscapes operate as Indigenous signifiers that embed ancestral knowledge into contemporary design. However, as they enter commercial tourism circuits through branding and merchandise, they risk commodification and reductive interpretation. The findings demonstrate that Indigenous festival branding operates as a critical site of cultural continuity and adaptation, where symbols are reinterpreted and circulated within tourism economies. It shows how cultural visibility can be sustained while managing the pressures of tourism consumption. Overall, the study positions festival logos as spaces where sacred meaning and public consumption are balanced, advancing debates on decolonizing Indigenous festival graphic design.

Keywords: tourism branding, Khasi festival logos, Indigenous identity, Meghalaya, decolonizing design, tropical tourism, tourism ethnography

Introduction

Meghalaya in Northeast India experiences a humid subtropical climate (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2014) and is promoted as a destination of ecological and cultural richness (Langstieh, 2025). In 2025, Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, emerged as India's most searched tourist city, with cultural festivals among the strongest attractions (The Times of India, 2025). This area is home to the Khasi community, whose cultural identity is rooted in oral traditions and matrilineal kinship (Bareh, 1991; Lyngdoh, 2009). Although the origin of the Khasi remains debated, many scholars trace them to the Mon–Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic family (Lyngdoh, 2009). This Austroasiatic lineage not only informs Khasi cultural practices but also situates their semiotics within a wider regional framework of cosmologies and symbolic traditions.

Festival tourism has become a well-defined component of international tourism, contributing experiences that combine escapism, social connection, and cultural learning (Dychkovskyy & Ivanov, 2020) while also serving as “spaces of site identity” and instruments of territorial branding (Ye Zheleznyak & Korelina, 2021). Meghalaya's indigenous festivals similarly pursue both cultural preservation and tourism development (Indrajit Dutta, 2024). As festival tourism grows, Khasi cultural symbols have become increasingly visible in public and commercial spaces. However, when these symbols are relocated from ritual contexts into logo designs, merchandise, and tourism media, they employ a dual role of cultural preservation and commercial representation. This creates a critical tension between cultural meaning and tourism economies, where symbols risk losing depth through commodification but also gain new pathways for cultural continuity. Thus, the core issue addressed in this paper is how festival branding can balance cultural visibility with the protection of Indigenous meaning in an expanding tourism marketplace, moving analysis beyond surface aesthetics to questions of representation, value, and agency.

Scholars argue that Indigenous graphic design serves as a marker of continuity, an assertion of identity, and a form of resistance against colonial legacies, enabling both preservation and adaptation narratives (Cole & Brooks, 2017). Studies such as the Tapiskwan Project demonstrate how participatory design sustains cultural ownership (Leitão & Marchand, 2017), while critiques further emphasise the need to move beyond Western pictographic dominance by embedding Indigenous semiotic structures in branding (Pinto et al., 2024). Collectively, these perspectives highlight the power of branding and visual identity to shape cultural representation and foster collective belonging (Kelly, 2017). At the same time, tourism branding in Asia often mobilises cultural difference as symbolic capital, transforming “Asian-ness” into a marketable identity (Chon et al., 2020). This leads to the oversimplification of visual

symbols, reducing them to exotic spectacle, and risking cultural flattening (Maydell, 2020; Ruhanen & Whitford, 2019; Dabezies, 2020). Reading logos as polysemiotic icons therefore becomes crucial, as they are embedded with ancestral philosophies, cultural narratives, and collective memory (Papadaki, 2023), carrying spiritual value (Zhao, 2021) and strengthening regional identity narratives (Rowley & Hanna, 2020).

Despite this recognition, the Indigenous creators' perspectives remain underrepresented in scholarship on branding and design, leading to interpretations detached from community intent. Addressing this gap requires not only semiotic and iconological methods but also attention to the agency of designers and festival organisers who actively reshape symbols for contemporary contexts.

Guided by these insights, this study combines semiotic analysis (Chandler, 2022) and Panofsky's three-level iconology (Kalkanis, 2018), with an emic ethnographic approach informed by interviews, enabling us to decode both surface symbols and their deeper cultural meanings. The empirical focus is on three Khasi tourism festivals: the Monolith Festival, Na Thymmei Festival, and Tri Hills Ensemble. Using boundary extraction and morphological analysis (Liao & Chen, 2014; Monroy et al., 2014), symbolic elements such as monoliths, crowns, rice motifs, musical instruments, rain shields (Knup), and sacred landscapes are identified and interpreted. As tourism branding adapts cultural roots into contemporary visual forms that engage both tradition and public audiences (Zhao, 2021), these visual insights were then contextualised through interviews with designers and festival organisers to ensure that cultural meaning remains grounded in Indigenous knowledge rather than externally imposed interpretations (Curtin & Bird, 2022). This blended approach ensures that interpretation is rooted in lived experience and community epistemologies while still being communicated through globally recognized academic frameworks.

Methodology

While the dual framework of Panofsky's iconological and semiotic analysis helps organise the interpretation of visual elements, the cultural meanings are rooted in Indigenous knowledge. As the lead author of this article is part of the Khasi community, insights come from lived experience, oral traditions, and discussions with cultural practitioners. Western methods are used only to communicate the analysis clearly to broader academic audiences, while ensuring that Indigenous perspectives remain central.

Data Collection




This study employs an emic ethnographic approach, grounded in and centred on insider perspectives on Indigenous cultural symbols. The empirical focus is on the branding of the following festivals: 1) the Monolith Festival, 2) Na Thymmei Festival, and 3) Tri Hills Ensemble Festival. These festivals take place in the vicinity of Shillong, Meghalaya, and were selected for their indigenous symbolism, cultural significance, and growing visibility in the state's tourism economy. Each festival has distinct objectives that shape the symbolic structure of its branding.

Monolith Festival: The Monolith Festival, organised by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), celebrates Khasi–Jaintia megalithic heritage and ancestral traditions. It was first launched in 2013, revived in 2016 after a three-year gap and returned in 2024 following another eight-year gap. (The Telegraph, Mar 31, 2016; East Mojo, Mar 8, 2024). This festival is held at the Khasi Heritage Village in Mawphlang, directly opposite the sacred groves. The festival aims to commemorate the 54 traditional Khasi chieftainships traditionally called *ki Hima*. This festival showcases a wide spectrum of cultural life through dance, theatre, music, cuisine, crafts, sports, and exhibitions, including displays of Neolithic tools from the sacred mountain peak *U Lum Sohpetbneng*, which translates as “the navel of heaven”. It emphasises the significance of documenting Khasi ways of life for future generations. (The Telegraph, Mar 31, 2016; The Highland Post, Mar 8, 2024; The Shillong Times, Feb 14, 2024; EastMojo, Mar 8, 2024).

Na Thymmei Festival: The term “Na Thymmei” translates to “*From the Root*” or “*From the Origin*”, and was launched in 2022 by Seng Khasi Kmie with support from the Department of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya, at the Weiking Ground, Shillong. The Seng Khasi Kmie is a socio-cultural body established in 1899 to protect and promote local traditions. Rooted in the 125-year legacy of Seng Khasi Kmie, this festival celebrates indigenous heritage through traditional dances, music, theatre, film screenings and workshops on ancestral practices held by the community's elders. This festival aims to foster youth engagement, cultural pride, and economic opportunities for artisans and performers. Over the years, this festival has become a cornerstone event, reinforcing continuity between tradition and contemporary cultural expression (India TodayNE, Oct 28, 2024; The Shillong Times, Oct 28, 2024; The Meghalayan Express, Oct 29, 2024).

Tri Hills Ensemble Festival: The Tri Hills Ensemble Festival, initiated in 2022 by the Department of Arts and Culture, brings together the cultures of Meghalaya’s three tribes—the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo¹. Hosted at Shillong’s State Central Library and U Soso Tham Auditorium, the festival showcases indigenous cuisine, crafts, music, theatre, and fashion, alongside international collaborations with Welsh harpists and Vietnamese folk artists. Furthermore, literary events included a conclave on Khasi identity, a panel on women’s perspectives in tribal literature, and the conferring of the State Literary Award. The festival also honours achievers in fields such as indigenous cuisine, crafts, fashion, and filmmaking. The festival highlights culture as a form of “soft power” that strengthens identity, connects communities to their roots, and fosters tourism development (The Shillong Times, November 19, 2024; Highland Post, November 22, 2024; Times of India, November 21, 2024).

Table 1. The Festival Logos

| Festival | Origin, Location | Logo Design | Organizers | Objective of the Festival |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Monolith Festival | Launched in 2013, revived in 2016 after a 3-year gap and returned in 2024 following 8-year gap, at the Khasi Heritage Village, Mawphlang. |  | Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC). | Commemorate 54 Khasi chieftainships; showcase cultural heritage through performances, cuisine, crafts, and exchanges. |
| Na Thymmei Festival | Launched in 2022, rooted in a 125-year legacy of Seng Khasi Kmie (founded 1899) at Madan Weiking, Shillong. |  | Seng Khasi Kmie, with support from the Department of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya. | Celebrate and preserve indigenous Khasi heritage; foster youth engagement; economic platform for artisans. |
| Tri Hills Ensemble Festival | Initiated in 2022 by the Department of Arts and Culture at the State Central Library & U Soso Tham Auditorium, Shillong. |  | Department of Arts and Culture, Government of Meghalaya. | Showcase Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo cultures; celebrate diversity; promote indigenous cuisine, crafts, literature, and music. |

¹ Aspects of these cultural and mythological traditions in relation to their tropical landscapes are discussed in Swaraj and Mishra (2023), Langstieh (2025), and Brighenti (2017).

The primary dataset consists of 3 festival logos enriched by ethnographic observations collected over two years of direct engagement with the festivals (Table 1):

Semiotic–Iconological Analysis

To examine the structure of visual signs and the interpretation of the logos' cultural meanings, we employ a dual theoretical framework combining semiotic analysis with Panofsky's iconological method. This follows a three-level analysis:

(a) Pre-iconographic Analysis and Signifier Recognition


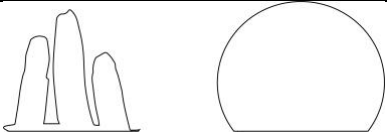

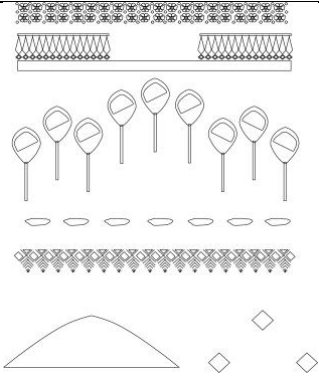

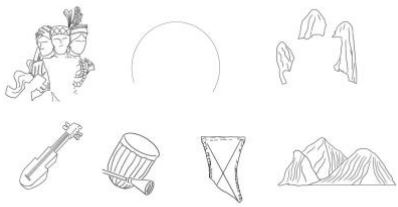
In this first level, the logos are examined in their elementary sense by investigating the configurations of lines, shapes, and form (Kalkanis, 2018; Panofsky, 1980). This level corresponds to the Signifier, which is the material presentation without implying meaning (Chandler, 2022). To achieve this, a Typological Extraction method is applied to extract the shapes and contour lines (Liao & Chen, 2014), followed by Morphological Analysis, which distinguishes the structural components of the logos and maps their interrelationships. This aids in the classification of their basic forms and their symbolic meaning in visual design.

The Process for Morphological Analysis is discussed below :

- **Identification:** Identify the object of study, in this case, the logos and its cultural referents (Belaziz et al., 2000).
- **Extraction:** The basic forms, outlines, shapes, contours, and motifs are extracted (Hsun & Jie, 2022) and distinguished based on the visual characters (Fajardo et al., 2016).
- **Grouping:** Clustering similar visual shapes together, this step aids in the Iconographic Analysis stage to identify distinct shapes and patterns within the image or product (Monroy et al., 2014)
- **Annotation:** Noting down any labels, tags, mottos, or distinct features on the logos that help us with their identification (Salgado-Montejo et al., 2014).
- **Interpretation:** This last step corresponds to the final step of Iconological Analysis, where, in artistic studies, it helps visualize historical influences and creative modifications in images (Monroy et al., 2014).







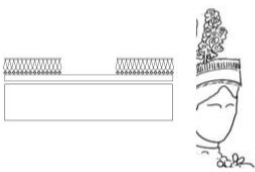

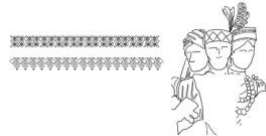
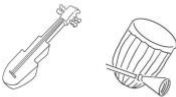

This stage gives the concrete forms of the objects, their structural relations, and a baseline for further cultural interpretation. The table below shows the logos with the extracted symbols:

Table 2. *Extracted Symbols*

| Logo | Festival | Extracted Symbols | Name of the extracted symbols |
|---|-----------------------------|--|---|
|  | Monolith Festival |  | The 3 Monoliths, The Sun |
|  | Na Thymmei Festival |  | The traditional rainshield "Knup", Parts of the Khasi Crown called Pansngiat, 7 Grains of Rice, Hill, three square-shaped dots, and Textile patterns. |
|  | Tri Hills Ensemble Festival |  | Human figures, Sun, Monoliths, Musical Instruments, Shield, Hills |

The following step is the grouping or categorisation of similar shapes and symbols together for semiotic analysis. Table 3 below shows the groups with schematic drawings of the extracted symbols.

Table 3. Extracted Symbols Grouping

| Group | Extracted Symbols | Group | Extracted Symbols |
|-------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
| Monolithic Structures |  | Grains of Rice |  |
| Sun |  | Hills |  |
| Knup (Traditional Rainshield) |  | Three square-shaped dots |  |
| Khasi Crown |  | Garo, Khasi, Jaintia people |  |
| Textile Patterns |  | Musical Instruments |  |
| Shield |  | | |

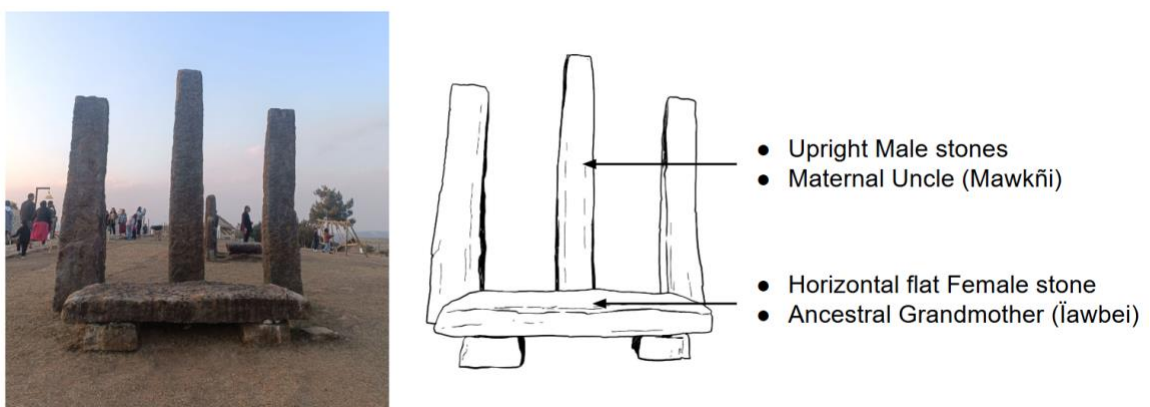
(b) Iconographic and Signified Analysis

At this second level, the perceptible form of the sign is analysed in relation to its meaning, as studies suggest that the form and its content make a sign (Bergström et al., 2010). This corresponds to the Signified in Semiotic Studies (Chandler, 2022) and Panofsky's second level of iconographic analysis, which involves interpreting subject matter through recognition of visual motifs, texts, and accompanying symbols. At this stage, logos are interpreted not only as visual configurations but also as cultural carriers, materialising practices or identities absent in the present moment (Chandler, 2022). Additionally, Panofsky addresses the iconographic level, where the comprehension of the meanings is achieved through familiarization with the existing

literature (Kalkanis, 2018). Furthermore, iconography aims to identify images, narratives, and allegories, and explore how specific themes or concepts are visually represented (Panofsky, 1980) which connects its visual elements to symbolism and decorative trends (Chan, 2020). In our study, this step aids in the identification of the meanings in relation to the representation of the community's ancestral ideologies (Wahidiyat & Carrollina, 2023). Through literature, extracted symbols reveal the Indigenous meanings and semiotics behind them:

- Monolith structures:** Monoliths and table stones, found abundantly across the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, are central to Khasi identity and hold layered meanings of commemoration (Fig.1), rest, cleansing, human representation, kinship, and power (Roy, 1963; Gurdon, 2023; Meitei & Marak, 2013; Mawlong, 2020). As commemorative structures, *Mawniam*, *Mawbah*, and *Mawshyieng* serve as ossuaries. At the same time, *Mawbynna* stones, also called *Mawpynbna* or *Mawnam*, proclaim social memory, are often erected in odd-numbered groups, with the tallest at Nartiang reaching 27 feet. Resting stones such as *Mawlynti*, *Mawkjat*, and *Mawshongthait* function as seats for travellers or spirits (Mawlong, 2020). Stones like *Mawumkoi* and *Mawtyrut* mark purificatory tanks for cleansing after unnatural deaths (Gurdon, 2023). Symbolically, upright stones (*Mawshynrang*) represent men, flat table stones (*Mawkynthei*) represent women, with the maternal uncle (*Mawkñii*) and ancestral grandmother (*ĭawbei*) occupying foundational positions within the *longkur–longkha* kinship system (Sawian, 2020; Bareh, 1991; Gurdon, 2023). In the Jaintia Hills, monoliths erected within the *Ka Niamtre* worldview embody collective memory and ritual responsibility, with accounts such as that of the Moolong Syiem (26 ft 11 in) emphasising ancestral guidance and ritual processes rather than purely physical feats (Meitei, 2020).

Figure 1. Monolith at the Monolith Festival



Source: Author

- **Sun:** The Sun is a female entity regarded as the Queen who reflects divine light. She is a halo of the Creator and the Sustainer of Life (Sawian, 2020). The Sun is an important character in the folktales of the Khasi community; she is illustrated as a powerful being that brings light to the world, guiding a person's way of life and also as the queen of the celestial realm (Nongkynrih, 2007). The sun symbol appears on the monolith of Twah Longwar, a lost village in the Khasi Hills. Known as *Maw Sngi* or "The Sun Stone," it is described by H. Bareh (1991) as the tallest among three stones, bearing two concentric circles joined by 18 spatulate spokes. S. S. Sawian (2020) records the inner circle as 15 cm and the outer as 52 cm, interpreting the sun symbol as a maternal figure.
- **Knup (Traditional Rainshield):** The Knup is a traditional rainshield woven from bamboo and palm leaves and worn on the head, extending down the back and resting at the waist (Bareh, 1991). This form is also observed in traditional architecture, which resembles the inverted boat shielding from torrential weather, similar to the typology of the Knup (Sawian, 2020).
- **Khasi Crown:** The Khasi Crown, called "The Pansngiat", is a "supreme sign of the best gift of life," playing a vital role as a cultural emblem of dignity and beauty (Roy, 1936). At the Nongkrem festival, maiden priestesses wear the golden pansngiat kshiar, and dancers wear the silver pansngiat rupa, both adorned with *Lasubon* flowers, symbolising purity, beauty and embodying the grace and sanctity of Khasi womanhood in ritual performance (Sawian, 2020; Diengdoh, 2016). The "*pansngiat*" functions as a powerful gendered symbol, embodying female chastity and virginity while simultaneously marking a maiden's ritual role and signifying women's visibility within Khasi cultural identity as well as media representations of matrilineality (Wahlang, 2023).
- **Textile:** The patterns embody Khasi cultural narratives, beliefs, and identity; they adorn ceremonial garments and festive attire, thereby linking the wearer to community heritage, rituals, and collective meaning. The nature of the dresses in Meghalaya is related to its humid subtropical and cool mountainous geographical conditions, from daily wear to ceremonial wear (Sawian, 2020). The turban called ka Spong, worn by men, comes in various colours—orange, red, yellow, purple (Bareh, 1991)—and has motifs of the elephant and roosters (Sawian, 2020). Furthermore, a bunch of feathers (from a bird called Rynniaw) stick out of the back of the turban, which symbolizes wisdom and bravery (Sawian, 2020).

- **Rice:** Rice holds deep cultural significance in Khasi society featuring in rituals, festivals, marriages, and social events through rice cakes (*kpu*) and in child-naming ceremonies where rice is placed in a gourd bottle (*skaw*) and served as *pujer*, a fine powdered rice offered to guests (Umdor et al., 2016; Sawian, 2018). Beyond its ritual use, rice is revered in Khasi mythology as a divine gift, as told in the tale of Ka Lukhmi, symbolizing sustenance, prosperity, and cultural continuity. The ritual dance *Ka Kroh Lukhmi* reenacts the goddess spirit's blessing of abundance (Kharmawphlang, 2005).
- **Hills and Peaks:** Hills are not merely geographical landscapes but sacred embodiments of ancestral memory, ancestry, and identity. For example, the peak called *Lum Sohpetbneng* in *Desmond Kharmawphlang's Poems: In The Heritage of Hynniew Trep*, is framed as the revered origin point of the Khasi, described as the "navel of heaven" where seven families descended to earth (Chakraborty, 2025). Another observation is the rituals performed at the Peak called *U Lum Shillong*, the highest peak in Meghalaya, which is regarded as the abode of *U Shulong*, the deity of nine springs—*U Lei ki khyndai umdih ki khyndai umtong* (Warjri & Nongkhlaw, 2015)—and is symbolically represented by the nine knup motifs in the Na Thymmei Festival logo.
- **Three square-shaped dots:** The concept of the number three occupies a central place in Khasi indigenous thought functioning as both a philosophical and cultural marker. Architecturally, this symbolism is evident in the erection of monoliths arranged in triads of upright stones (Gurdon, 2023). Philosophically, it encapsulates the three foundational tenets of Khasi belief: to earn righteousness, to know man and God, and to recognize one's kith and kin, embracing both paternal and maternal relations (Sawian, 2018). This triadic principle is also embedded in domestic space, where the hearth, which is considered the centre of the household, is constructed with three stones. A young man's ability to arrange these stones metaphorically signifies readiness to establish a new home and begin a family (Sawian, 2020).
- **Human Representation in Megalithic and Memorial Forms:** In Khasi tradition, monoliths embody human representation through upright stones (*Mawshynrang*) signifying males and flat stones (*Mawkynthei*) signifying females, with the central upright stone representing the maternal uncle (*Mawkñi*), flanked by stones denoting maternal brothers and nephews, thereby reflecting matrilineal kinship structures (Gurdon, 2023). Among the Garo community, human representation takes the shape of wooden memorial posts

known as *kima*, carved in the likeness of the deceased and adorned with personal belongings, signifying continuity of life after death and serving as ritual embodiments of the dead (Marak, 2019; Marak & Sharma, 2023).

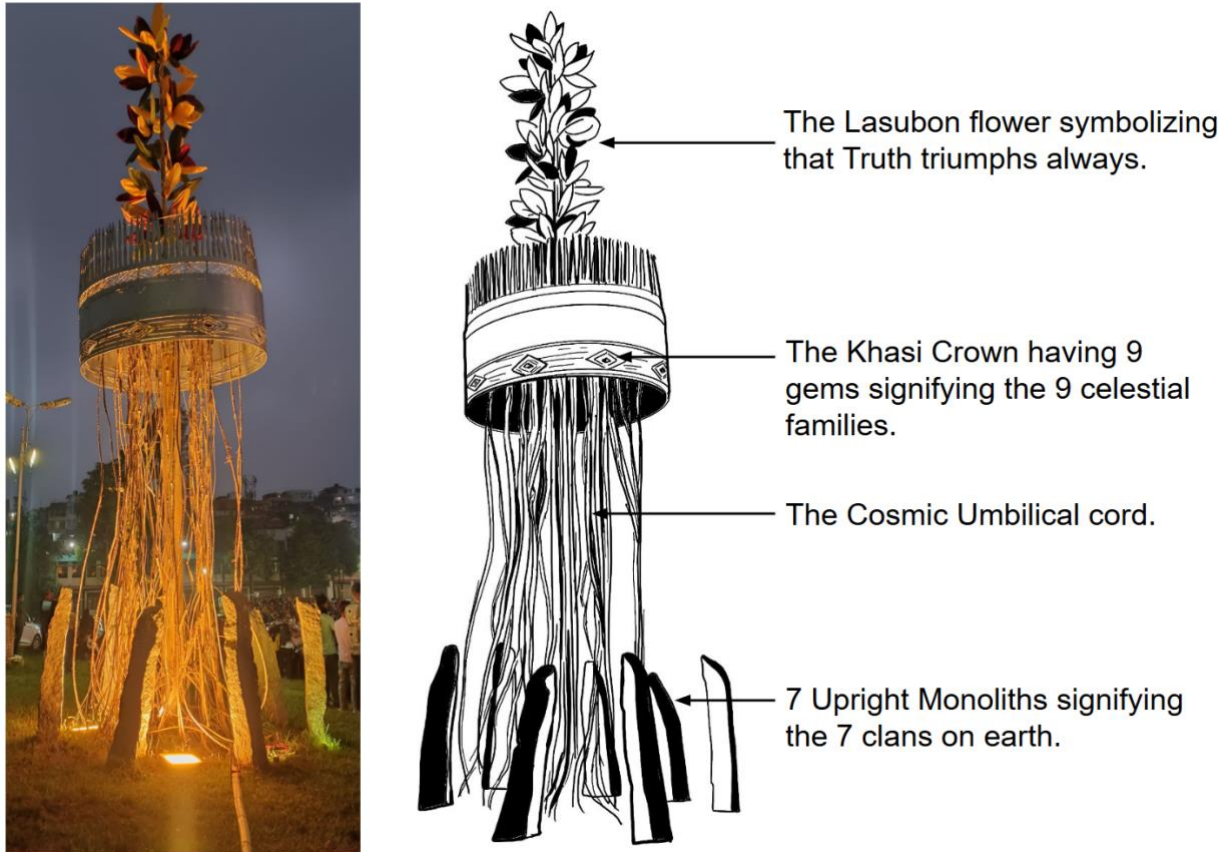
- **Musical Instruments:** The Tangmuri is a wind instrument/flute (Hadem & Dohling, 2020) which is of high importance at Khasi festivals, dances, and processions (Bareh, 1991), and is regarded as the queen of musical instruments (Sawian, 2020). The musician known as “Duhalia” prays and pays obeisance to the Deity of Musical instruments and arts and crafts, “U Biskorom”, before he plays the Tangmuri (S. S. Sawian, 2020). The Bom or the Nakra is a large standing drum placed on the ground, with two clubs used to beat it (Bareh, 1991; Hadem & Dohling, 2020). It is used in dances, and also for making announcements in the region (Hadem & Dohling, 2020). It is carried on the back of a man by fastening it to the person’s brow with a bamboo belt, while a second man beats the drum from behind, accompanied by third man making the announcements (Bareh, 1991). The Bom signifies the role of maternal uncle and father and their duties within the interrelationship between matrilineal and paternal aspects of culture (Hadem & Dohling, 2020; Sawian, 2020).
- **Shields (Weaponary):** In Garo culture, the shield called Sepi symbolises protection, a cultural emblem of strength, safeguarding, and continuity; it reinforces the role of young men as clan protectors, embedding the symbolism of defence into their initiation and social training (Marak, 2016).

(c) Iconological Interpretation and Cultural Semiotics

On this third level, Panofsky’s iconological interpretation draws parallels with Roland Barthes’ notion of Myth, where symbols are examined for their intrinsic cultural meanings (Kalkanis, 2018). In this study, the logos in the festival branding are situated within the worldview of their creators, acknowledging how cultural, historical, and political contexts shape symbolic design choices. Graphic design is approached as a symbol system for ideologies (Schindler & Müller, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with festival organisers, brand creators, and designers to understand the deeper meanings behind these symbols. This provided context on the design process and its intended usage of the symbols. The interviews were important given that misappropriation of Indigenous representation can be avoided only by critically acknowledging cultural ownership and examining how design and design history have been shaped by historical events, colonial encounters, and intercultural exchanges (John, 2018). The interviews are discussed in detail as follows:

- **Monolith Festival:** The concept was inspired by Khasi landscapes and the identity of the “*Mawbynna*”, which is the monolith. As one of the organisers, Allan West Kharkongor, explains: the Monoliths are attributed to the identity of commemoration where intergenerational tales are recorded, passed on, and preserved. The festival commemorated the first-ever of its kind in the region, hosting 54 *Himas* or traditional provinces in one event, which provided a platform to showcase their dances, music, cuisines, arts and crafts. (Personal Communication, Sep 22, 2025, Shillong). The design initially had various other elements like people, musical instruments, and weapons in front of the graphical representation of the monolith; however, the refined version has only the three monoliths with a hint of the horizontal slab below. As the designer of the festival logo, Dipankar Sinha co-founder and designer of Alienleaf Studio, explained, the design drew inspiration from local monoliths. The incorporation of the rising sun and the monoliths’ silhouette forms a monogram of the letter “M”, noting that it took considerable effort to perfect the silhouette, which could authentically resemble the monoliths of Meghalaya (Personal Communication, Sep 2, 2025, Shillong).
- **Na Thymmei Festival:** The concept behind the branding of the Na Thymmei Festival was explained by Hammarsing Kharhmar, Cultural Secretary of the Seng Khasi Kmie and the designer of the logo. According to Kharhmar, the festival is rooted in the sacred origin narrative of the *Hynniew Trep Hynniew Wasa*, centred on *Lum Sohpetbneng* (the Navel of Heaven). The overall form of the logo references the *pansngiat*, a ceremonial crown worn by Khasi women, which, for him, expresses the centrality of women within Khasi cultural life. In Kharhmar’s interpretation, the green hill represents *Lum Sohpetbneng*. He further explained that the Logo embeds the widely shared narrative of the “sixteen heavenly families”, in which nine remain above symbolically expressed through the nine upper Knup motifs, and seven (*Hynniew Trep Hynniew Wasa*) descend to earth, represented by seven grains of rice at the bottom of the logo. Kharhmar also linked the three dots in the logo to the three ethical principles articulated by the Seng Khasi: *ka kamai ia ka hok* (to earn righteousness), *ka tip briew tip blei* (to know man and God), and *ka tip kur tip kha* (to know kinship), aligning with the three hearth stones (*Mawbyrsiew*) found in every Khasi home. (Personal Communication, Oct 26 2024, Madan Weiking, Jaiaw, Shillong).

Figure 2. *The Khasi Crown (Ka Pansngiat), Na Thymmei Festival*



Source: Author

- Tri Hills Ensemble Festival:** The Tri Hills Ensemble Festival is a state festival in which Allan West Kharkongor played a role in its conception, especially with the visual symbols of the logo. The term “Tri” reflects the three hills of the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia communities. Historically, the Khasi and Jaintia are one tribe, but in this case, the term three denotes not the tribes but the geographical regions of the three main hills of Meghalaya. The visual has the background as the three Monoliths, which signify commemoration. There are three human figures: a man from the Jaintia region, a Garo man (centre), and a Khasi woman. They represent the people of Meghalaya. The Garo man has the shield called Sepi in front of him, signifying protection from extinction. The three musical instruments are the ancient ways of indigenous communication among the people, where music and dance are part of the culture. The logo encapsulates the motive of the festival to promote arts and crafts. Peter Mawlong and Dipankar Sinha assisted with the logo design. (Allan West Kharkongor, Personal Communication, Sep 22, 2025, Shillong).

Insight and Discussion

The symbols embedded in festival logos carry deep ancestral meaning, yet they are increasingly presented within public and commercial environments shaped by tourism. This shifting context raises questions about how sacred value is preserved, how cultural continuity is supported, and what responsibilities arise in the visual communication of Indigenous identity. The following discussion examines these issues through three interconnected themes: the circulation of sacred symbols in profane tourism markets, the role of branding in strengthening cultural continuity, and the futures of Indigenous design accountability in festival tourism.

Sacred–Profane Circulations in Indigenous Tourism Festival Branding

The Indigenous visual symbols are embedded in ritual as sacred carriers of cultural memory (Pink, 2004). A key insight of this study is the shifting role of sacred Indigenous symbols as they circulate through contemporary design and tourism economies. The symbols used in the Festival logos draw from ancestral knowledge systems: monolithic structures, sacred landscapes, traditional crafts and textiles, musical instruments, architectural spaces, ritualistic items; but at the same time, these symbols appear in branding contexts (logo designs and graphic design) that are vastly different from their original ritual settings. Logos, posters, merchandise, souvenirs, and tourism media become part of the profane world of consumption and visual marketing. This translation produces a dynamic tension. On the one hand, sacred meaning risks dilution when symbols become detached from the ceremonies and landscapes that give them meaning. On the other, festival branding opens new channels for cultural continuity: motifs gain visibility among young Khasi audiences and domestic and international tourists. While this diffusion raises concerns of commodification, it also demonstrates the adaptability of Indigenous identity in modern economies. The challenge lies in retaining sacred value within profane circulation. The tension between sacred and profane is not new; however, its scale is amplified by the growth of tourism and global markets. Branding, therefore, becomes a tool of cultural presence in public and tourist spaces. Rather than a passive adaptation to tourism, these design choices demonstrate community agency. Through visual identity systems, Indigenous organisers reclaim cultural space, emphasising that their symbols remain rooted in lived memory and collective belonging. Festival logos thus operate as sites of negotiation where sacred value and market visibility are constantly requiring balance.

Figure 3. Commodification of sacred symbols in souvenirs.



Source: Author

Cultural Continuity in Tourism Festival Branding

Indigenous festivals in Meghalaya have long served as expressions of cultural identity and continuity. Historically, in the early 20th century, events such as *Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem*, the Dance of the Blissful Heart, were discouraged by Christian missionary institutions—yet the tradition persisted (H. Roy, 1982). Today, the same festival spaces host large, inclusive events where local communities and tourists come together. Presently, design and branding play an increasingly vital role in shaping Khasi cultural identity within these tourism landscapes. A shared motivation was observed in the interviews with festival organisers: to strengthen cultural pride, particularly among the youth who are increasingly drawn to global cultural influences such as Korean and Japanese pop culture or highly commercialised tourism events like the Cherry Blossom Festival. Branding these festivals thus becomes a strategic tool to affirm belonging, communicate heritage, and ensure that cultural continuity is embraced by the next generation while still engaging with global modernities.

Cultural Futures and Design Responsibilities in Tourism Branding

As Indigenous symbols are embedded in festival tourism branding, concerns emerge that require ethical attention. Indigenous designers and organisers play a crucial role in maintaining cultural ownership by shaping their own visual identity rather than relying on externally imposed imagery. However, festival tourism graphic design

frequently features familiar symbols, while lesser-known signifiers remain unexplored, risking uneven representation of cultural diversity. Hence, opportunities exist for design-led revitalisation of these lesser-known signifiers by integrating them into future visual design branding. This offers a meaningful pathway for sustaining a broader cultural repertoire, aligning with decolonizing approaches that centre Indigenous philosophies (Swaraj & Mishra, 2023), and extending them to design practice.

The expansion of festival tourism in Meghalaya also introduces environmental and cultural responsibilities. Over tourism places pressure on landscapes that hold sacred value, and the transformation of ritual spaces into tourist viewpoints risks pollution, erosion, and the dilution of cultural significance. These concerns emphasize the need for tourism development guided by Indigenous knowledge and environmental stewardship. Ensuring that branding strategies balance visibility with cultural respect, and tourism growth with community well-being, will allow festival design to remain a powerful means of cultural continuity while adapting to evolving tourism environments.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Indigenous festival branding in the humid subtropics of Meghalaya has become a key site for sustaining cultural identity within tourism environments. Through visual design, sacred symbols continue to express ancestral heritage while circulating in contemporary media and markets. The findings show the resilience of Indigenous design in maintaining cultural continuity and visibility, offering valuable insights for other tropical Indigenous communities navigating similar contexts.

However, these processes also introduce emerging concerns. As sacred motifs are transferred into branded merchandise as home décor and keychains, questions arise about how cultural value is maintained once symbols enter tourism consumption. Likewise, increasing visitor traffic risks altering the very landscapes that are regarded as sacred within Khasi knowledge systems. These dynamics underline the need for ethical and community-led tourism practices that prioritise ecological stewardship and cultural responsibility.

This research is limited to tourism festivals in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya and does not encompass perspectives from other Indigenous communities in the region. Future research could expand to include diverse sub-tribes and endangered visual traditions, ensuring a more representative understanding of Northeast India's cultural identities. By highlighting both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of festival branding, this study contributes to broader discussions on Indigenous festival tourism and the role of visual design in strengthening cultural agency in the global tropics.

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