Journal of Philosophy and Linguistics
Research Article Peer-review, Open Access

# Oral Traditions as Living Archives: Storytelling and Memory Preservation in Northeast Indian Tribal Communities

**Pallab Kumar Sarker** [1]

**Abstract:** Northeast India, home to over two hundred tribal and sub-tribal communities, possesses one of the richest reservoirs of oral tradition in South Asia. In the absence of extensive pre-colonial scripts among most hill tribes, storytelling, chants, proverbs, genealogies, and ritual speech became the principal vehicles through which history, law, cosmology, and cultural values were transmitted across generations. This paper examines oral traditions as "living archives"—dynamic, performative repositories of knowledge that function simultaneously as historical record, moral pedagogy, and social glue. Drawing on folklore theory, ethnographic scholarship, and community-based literature from Naga, Khasi, Mizo, Apatani, Bodo, and Karbi contexts, the study analyzes the mechanisms through which oral narrative preserves memory, the socio-cultural functions of storytelling, and the pressures of literacy, migration, evangelization, and digital media that now threaten these traditions. The paper argues that oral archives are not static relics awaiting extinction but adaptive systems capable of renewal through community-led documentation, performance revival, and selective digitization. It concludes by proposing an integrated framework combining ethnographic fieldwork, community ownership, and digital humanities tools for the sustainable preservation of Northeast India's intangible heritage.

**Keywords**: oral tradition, Northeast India, tribal communities, storytelling, cultural memory, intangible heritage, folklore preservation.

[1] *Assistant Professor, The Department of English, Cooch Behar College, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India*
*pallabsarkar150311981@gmail.com*



## 1. Introduction

Memory, before it is written, is spoken. For the tribal societies inhabiting the hills of Northeast India—stretching across Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Tripura—the spoken word has long served as the primary technology of cultural transmission. Unlike literate civilizations that externalized memory into manuscripts and inscriptions, most Northeast Indian tribes historically relied on oral performance: folktales, origin myths, war ballads, dirges, riddles, proverbs, and genealogical recitations. These forms did not merely entertain; they encoded law, ecological knowledge, kinship obligations, and communal identity (Vansina 27). Walter Ong's foundational distinction between "oral" and "literate" mentalities is instructive here: oral cultures organize knowledge mnemonically, through formulaic expression, repetition, and communal performance, rather than through the fixed,

decontextualized text of writing (Ong 34-36).

The concept of the "living archive" captures a paradox central to this paper: an archive is conventionally understood as a fixed repository, yet oral tradition survives precisely because it is unfixed, re-performed, and re-negotiated with every telling. Each storyteller becomes simultaneously a custodian and a co-author, adapting narrative content to contemporary audiences while preserving structural and thematic continuity. This paper explores how such living archives operate within Northeast Indian tribal communities, what social and cognitive mechanisms sustain them, and what threats and opportunities the twenty-first century presents for their survival.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarship on oral tradition has evolved considerably since Milman Parry and Albert Lord's studies of Balkan epic singers, which demonstrated that oral composition relies on formulaic units enabling improvisation within tradition (Lord 1960s work, as widely cited in subsequent folklore studies). Jan Vansina extended this into historiography, arguing that oral tradition constitutes a legitimate historical source when subjected to rigorous internal and comparative criticism (Vansina 12-19). In the Indian context, Verrier Elwin's early twentieth-century ethnographies of tribal Northeast and Central India catalogued myths and folk narratives, though his colonial-era framing has since been critiqued for romanticizing tribal "primitiveness" (Elwin 45-52).

More recent Northeast Indian scholarship has reframed oral tradition as an active site of identity construction rather than a passive relic. Naga writer and folklorist Temsula Ao's work situates oral narrative within the lived trauma and resilience of Naga society, arguing that storytelling functions as both historical testimony and therapeutic practice in post-conflict contexts (Ao 8-15). Desmond L. Kharmawphlang's studies of Khasi oral literature emphasize the ritual embeddedness of narrative performance, showing that Khasi myths cannot be separated from the sacred groves, clan structures, and matrilineal kinship systems in which they are recited (Kharmawphlang 63-70). Similarly, Margaret Ch. Zama's research on Mizo oral and early written literature traces the transition from pre-literate storytelling to missionary-introduced script, revealing both continuities and ruptures in memory practice (Zama 101-109). Tiatoshi Jamir's archaeological and oral-historical work among the Naga tribes demonstrates how oral genealogies can be cross-verified with material culture to reconstruct settlement histories (Jamir 214-221). Collectively, this body of literature positions oral tradition not as a diminishing survival of a pre-modern past but as a resilient, evolving epistemology.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

This paper pursues four interrelated objectives: first, to examine the structural and performative mechanisms through which oral traditions in Northeast India preserve cultural memory; second, to document the diverse forms of oral expression—myth, genealogy, proverb, song, and ritual speech—across representative tribal communities; third, to critically assess the contemporary pressures of literacy, religious conversion, urban migration, and digital media on oral transmission; and fourth, to propose a framework for community-centered preservation that treats oral tradition as a living, evolving archive rather than a fossilized artifact requiring salvage ethnography.

## 4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in secondary ethnographic literature, folklore theory, and comparative textual analysis. It synthesizes published ethnographies, folklore anthologies, and academic studies concerning Naga, Khasi, Mizo, Apatani, Bodo, and Karbi oral traditions. The analytical framework draws on performance theory, which treats oral narrative as an event constituted by teller, audience, and context rather than as a fixed text (Bauman 11-18), combined with cultural memory theory, which distinguishes between "communicative memory"—transmitted informally across three to four generations—and "cultural memory,"—institutionalized through ritual, symbol, and repeated performance over the longue durée (Assmann 126-133). This dual lens allows the paper to

analyze both the everyday, familial transmission of stories and the more formalized, ceremonial preservation of tribal history.

## 5. The Landscape of Oral Tradition in Northeast India

Northeast India's linguistic and ethnic diversity—home to speakers of Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic, and Tai-Kadai language families—has produced an extraordinarily varied oral repertoire. Despite this diversity, common structural features recur across communities. Origin myths (cosmogonies) explain the emergence of the tribe from earth, stone, or sky, often linking specific clans to sacred sites and thereby legitimizing land rights and social hierarchy. Migration narratives recount ancestral movement from earlier homelands, frequently corroborated by place names, ritual chants, and genealogical recitation. Heroic ballads celebrate warriors, hunters, and moral exemplars, reinforcing communal values of courage and reciprocity. Proverbs and riddles condense practical wisdom and ecological knowledge into memorable, transmissible units, while dirges and work songs regulate the rhythm of communal labor and mourning.

Among the Naga tribes, the recitation of genealogies (often extending fifteen to twenty generations) during feasts of merit and village councils functions as both historical record and status marker, since land and title claims are frequently adjudicated with reference to remembered lineage (Jamir 217-219). The Khasi tradition of Ka Jingsneng Tymmen (elders' teachings) transmits ethical codes through short parables recited by elders to children, embedding moral instruction within everyday storytelling rather than formal schooling (Kharmawphlang 65-66). Apatani oral tradition in Arunachal Pradesh preserves agricultural calendars and wet-rice cultivation techniques through ritual chants performed during the Myoko and Dree festivals, effectively encoding ecological knowledge in performative form. Among the Bodo of Assam, the Bagurumba and Baisagu songs accompany seasonal festivals, linking oral memory to agrarian cycles and river ecology.

## 6. Storytelling as Cultural Archive

### *6.1 Narrative as Historical Record*

In the absence of written chronicles, oral narrative assumes many functions typically associated with archival documents. Village origin stories often specify the order in which founding clans arrived, the boundaries negotiated with neighboring groups, and the terms of alliance or conflict. Because such narratives are recited publicly and repeatedly—at council meetings, festivals, and dispute settlements—they are subject to continuous social verification: any deviation from the accepted account can be challenged by other custodians of memory, creating a self-correcting mechanism analogous to peer review in written historiography (Vansina 29-33). This communal accountability distinguishes oral historical narrative from private reminiscence and lends it a documentary authority within customary law.

### *6.2 Narrative as Moral and Social Pedagogy*

Beyond historical record-keeping, storytelling functions as the principal medium of moral education in societies without formal textbooks. Folktales featuring trickster animals, disobedient children, or supernatural retribution encode socially sanctioned behavior regarding resource sharing, respect for elders, and environmental stewardship. The repetitive, formulaic structure of these tales—often built around triadic patterns (three brothers, three tasks, three warnings)—aids memorization while embedding ethical lessons in emotionally resonant plots, a mnemonic strategy consistent with Ong's observations on oral-formulaic composition (Ong 34-36).

### *6.3 Performance and Embodied Memory*

Oral tradition in Northeast India is rarely disembodied speech; it is enacted through song, dance, instrumental accompaniment, and ritual gesture. The Naga log-drum recitations, Khasi Nongkrem dance chants, and Mizo Chapchar Kut songs integrate narrative content with rhythm and movement, such that memory is stored not only linguistically but kinaesthetically. This embodied dimension aligns with Bauman's performance-centered approach, which holds that meaning in oral tradition is inseparable from

the act of performance itself, including audience response, occasion, and the performer's individual style (Bauman 15-18). Consequently, transcription of oral narrative into written text—however valuable for preservation—inevitably flattens a multidimensional communicative event into a single linguistic register.

## 7. Mechanisms of Memory Preservation

Several interlocking mechanisms sustain the fidelity of oral transmission across generations. First, formulaic language—stock phrases, repeated epithets, and rhythmic patterning—reduces the cognitive burden of memorization while allowing performers controlled improvisation, a phenomenon documented across oral epic traditions worldwide and evident in Naga and Mizo balladry alike. Second, institutionalized occasions for recitation, such as harvest festivals, funerary rites, and village council sessions, ensure that narratives are not left to individual memory alone but are periodically reactivated in communal settings, reinforcing both content and social meaning. Third, apprenticeship structures—whereby designated elders, bards, or ritual specialists (such as the Khasi Nongsain Hima or Naga ang and chieftain-lineage custodians) formally train successors—create institutional continuity analogous to scribal traditions in literate societies. Fourth, material mnemonic aids, including knotted cords, carved wooden tally sticks, megaliths, and genealogical staffs, function as external memory prompts that anchor oral recitation to durable physical markers, illustrating that orality and materiality are not opposed but complementary systems of preservation.

## 8. Case Studies

### *8.1 Naga Communities: Genealogy and Feasts of Merit*

Among Naga tribes such as the Angami, Ao, and Chakhesang, the recitation of ancestral genealogy during feasts of merit legitimizes social rank and land inheritance. These recitations, performed by elders before assembled kin, function as verbal deeds of title, with disputes over land frequently resolved by comparative genealogical testimony rather than written record (Jamir 217-219). Ao's reflections on post-conflict Naga society further suggest that storytelling has taken on a therapeutic dimension, allowing communities to process the trauma of insurgency-era violence through allegorical and testimonial narrative (Ao 10-14).

### *8.2 Khasi Communities: Sacred Groves and Elder Teachings*

Khasi oral tradition is deeply entwined with the institution of sacred groves (law kyntang), which serve as both ecological reserves and mnemonic anchors for origin myths explaining clan-deity relationships. The custom of Ka Jingsneng Tymmen ensures intergenerational transmission of ethical conduct through parable, while matrilineal inheritance structures assign women a central role as custodians of household narrative (Kharmawphlang 63-70).

### *8.3 Mizo Communities: From Oral Recitation to Early Literacy*

Mizo society underwent a comparatively rapid transition from oral to literate culture following the introduction of the Roman script by Welsh missionaries in the late nineteenth century. Zama's scholarship traces how pre-literate genres such as the hlado (hunting songs) and thu rimawi (proverbial sayings) were selectively transcribed into early Mizo Christian literature, producing a hybrid archive in which oral structures persist within a now-literate textual tradition (Zama 103-108).

### *8.4 Apatani and Bodo Communities: Ecological and Agrarian Memory*

Apatani oral chants performed during the Myoko festival encode detailed knowledge of wet-rice terracing, water management, and seed selection, functioning as an agricultural manual transmitted through ritual song rather than written instruction. Bodo Bagurumba songs, performed during the Baisagu spring festival, similarly encode seasonal and ecological knowledge tied to the Brahmaputra floodplain, illustrating how oral tradition across Northeast India frequently doubles as a repository of localized environmental science.

## 9. Challenges to Oral Transmission

Despite their resilience, oral traditions across Northeast India face mounting pressures. Large-scale religious conversion, particularly to Christianity, has in some communities discouraged the recitation of myths deemed "pagan," leading to the deliberate abandonment of origin narratives and ritual chants even as converted communities retain other oral genres such as hymns and testimonies. The spread of formal schooling and print literacy has simultaneously devalued oral knowledge as "unscientific" or backward in the eyes of younger generations, a pattern consistent with broader global trends in which literacy-based education systems marginalize non-textual epistemologies (Ong 78-81). Urban migration for education and employment further disrupts the intergenerational co-presence necessary for oral transmission, as younger community members spend formative years away from village elders. Additionally, the decline of joint family and communal festival structures, accelerated by nuclearization and market integration, reduces the institutionalized occasions through which oral narratives were traditionally reactivated. Finally, the increasing dominance of digital and audiovisual entertainment competes directly for the attention once occupied by storytelling sessions, particularly among children.

## 10. Digital Humanities and Community-Led Preservation

Recognizing these pressures, a growing number of community organizations, universities, and cultural bodies across Northeast India have initiated documentation projects that combine ethnographic fieldwork with digital archiving. Audio and video recording of elder storytellers, community-managed oral history archives, and university folklore departments (notably at North-Eastern Hill University and Nagaland University) have begun systematically cataloguing myths, songs, and proverbs in both original languages and translation. Importantly, scholars increasingly emphasize community ownership in such projects: rather than extractive "salvage" documentation controlled by outside researchers, participatory models involve tribal councils, women's organizations, and youth groups in deciding what is recorded, how it is stored, and who may access it, addressing longstanding ethical concerns about cultural appropriation in folklore research.

Beyond passive archiving, several communities have revived active performance traditions through school curricula, cultural festivals, and youth storytelling competitions, treating oral tradition not as a museum exhibit but as a living practice to be re-embedded in contemporary social life. Digital platforms—podcasts, YouTube channels, and mobile applications in tribal languages—have also enabled a new generation of tellers to reach audiences beyond the village, suggesting that digital media, often blamed for eroding oral tradition, can equally serve as a new performative stage rather than a replacement for face-to-face storytelling.

## 11. Discussion

The evidence surveyed here supports the paper's central contention: oral tradition in Northeast India functions as a living archive precisely because it is performative, communally verified, and continuously re-contextualized, rather than because it is fixed or complete in any single telling. This has two important implications for preservation policy. First, documentation efforts that merely transcribe oral narrative into static text risk preserving content while losing the performative and social dimensions that give oral tradition its cultural function; audio-visual recording, contextual annotation, and continued live performance are therefore preferable to transcription alone. Second, because oral tradition is intrinsically adaptive, its survival need not require freezing narratives in an idealized "authentic" past form; rather, sustainable preservation should support communities in continuing to adapt and re-perform their traditions for contemporary audiences, including through digital media, while ensuring that documentation is community-controlled rather than externally imposed.

The comparative case studies also reveal that oral tradition and literacy are not necessarily antagonistic. The Mizo case demonstrates that oral genres can survive, in modified form, within an emergent literate

and Christian textual culture, suggesting that hybrid oral-literate archives may represent a realistic and desirable outcome rather than a failure of preservation. This nuance complicates simplistic narratives of oral tradition as inevitably doomed by literacy and modernity, and instead points toward context-specific trajectories shaped by religious history, educational policy, and community agency.

## 12. Conclusion

Oral traditions among Northeast India's tribal communities constitute far more than folkloric curiosities; they are sophisticated, self-regulating systems of historical record-keeping, moral education, ecological knowledge transmission, and communal identity formation. Framing these traditions as "living archives" foregrounds their dynamic, performative nature and resists the tendency to treat them as endangered relics awaiting passive documentation. While literacy, religious conversion, urban migration, and digital entertainment pose genuine challenges to intergenerational transmission, community-led documentation, curricular integration, and creative use of digital platforms offer viable pathways for sustaining these traditions in altered but authentic forms. Future research would benefit from sustained ethnographic fieldwork within specific communities, comparative linguistic analysis of oral genres, and collaborative digital humanities projects that place tribal custodians of memory at the center of preservation efforts, ensuring that Northeast India's oral heritage continues to be told, not merely recorded.

## References

1. Ao, Temsula. These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone. Zubaan, 2006.
2. Assmann, Jan. Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination. Cambridge UP, 2011.
3. Bauman, Richard. Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative. Cambridge UP, 1986.
4. Elwin, Verrier. Myths of the North-East Frontier of India. North-East Frontier Agency, 1958.
5. Jamir, Tiatoshi. "Oral Tradition and the Archaeology of Naga Settlement History." Journal of Northeast Indian Studies, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 210-225.
6. Kharmawphlang, Desmond L. "Khasi Oral Literature and the Ritual Landscape." Indian Folklife, no. 22, 2006, pp. 60-71.
7. Ong, Walter J. Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word. Routledge, 1982.
8. Vansina, Jan. Oral Tradition as History. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
9. Zama, Margaret Ch. "Emerging Literary Traditions of Mizoram." Muse India, no. 41, 2012, pp. 98-112.