

**The Role of Oral Literature and Folklore in Preserving Cultural Identity: A Case Study of the Paite People in the North-East India.****Dr. Chingbiakmawi<sup>1</sup> & Dr. Manglien Gangte<sup>2</sup>****DOI: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2025-77483563/ADEDJ/V2/I2/CMG>****Review: 03/06/2025****Acceptance:13/07/2025****Publication:03/08/2025****Abstract:**

This study explores the critical role of oral literature and folklore in preserving cultural identity, focusing on the Paite people of Northeast India. It positions oral traditions as more than mere storytelling, framing them as autobiographical ethnographies that offer deep insights into cultural self-perception. By analyzing the Paite's folklore, the research examines how migration, patriarchal social organization, and the advent of Christianity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reshaped their traditional beliefs and social structures. The study further contextualizes these transformations within the broader socio-political landscape of Northeast India, where ethnic identity and inter-tribal relations remain dynamic and contested. Through this exploration, the paper underscores oral literature's role as a repository of historical consciousness and a crucial medium for navigating cultural continuity amid change.

**Key words:** Oral literature, Paite, History, Cultural identity, colonialism.

**“Oral Literature and Cultural Identity: A Living Tradition**

*"To become what we want to be, we have to decide what we were." — John Harley*

Oral literature is a crucial component of cultural heritage, encompassing literary traditions that have been transmitted primarily through spoken word across generations. These include folktales, riddles, proverbs, folksongs, myths, and legends, which collectively form what is commonly referred to as folklore. Given their shared function in preserving cultural memory, the terms **oral literature** and **folklore** are used interchangeably in this study. Contrary to the assumption that written records hold greater legitimacy, oral literature is by no means an inferior form of knowledge transmission. Tilottoma Misra challenges this perspective, asserting that, **“The concept of written word, especially in its printed form, being equated to modernity and progress, and the ‘oral’ being associated with a primitive, traditional, magical world, is a Western one”**.

This viewpoint reflects a Eurocentric bias that often disregards the intellectual and historical significance of oral traditions. In many indigenous societies, oral literature has served as the primary means of recording history, codifying moral values, and fostering a sense of communal identity. A defining characteristic of oral literature is the absence of fixed authorship. This feature allows narratives to evolve over time, adapting to different audiences and historical contexts. While variations may arise in the retelling of folktales or songs, the core elements of reality embedded in these stories remain true to the social, historical, and moral dimensions of the community. Oral traditions, therefore, serve as dynamic cultural artifacts that preserve a people's worldview and lived experiences. Highlighting the value of oral history, Lynwood Montell observes that he **“was able to set down in print an account that could never be written by most historians who are accustomed to doing research solely in libraries and archives”** (qtd. in Georges, 84). This statement underscores the limitations of conventional historiography and emphasizes the indispensable role of oral literature in capturing narratives that might otherwise be lost.

Oral traditions do not merely complement written records; they provide unique, firsthand perspectives that offer deeper insights into cultural and historical transformations. Thus, oral literature is not simply an artistic expression but a powerful repository of cultural identity. For societies with limited written records, it remains an invaluable medium for preserving history, transmitting collective wisdom, and reinforcing a shared sense of belonging across generations.

**Rational of the study:**

The study on the role of oral literature and folklore in preserving cultural identity is crucial in understanding how traditional knowledge systems contribute to the resilience of indigenous communities, specifically the Paite people of Northeast India. In a

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rapidly modernizing world, where the influence of globalized media and formal education systems often diminish the relevance of oral traditions, it is vital to explore how these cultural practices sustain community identity. Folklore and oral literature carry the collective history, moral values, customs, and spiritual beliefs of a community, and they play a pivotal role in passing down knowledge across generations.

For the Paite people, these traditions serve as the foundation of their unique cultural identity. By documenting and analyzing these oral forms, the study aims to highlight the importance of preserving them in the face of modernization and to encourage their continued relevance in contemporary society.

**Objectives of the Study:**

- a. Examine the Role of Oral Literature in Cultural Preservation** – To analyze how oral traditions, including folktales, myths, and legends, contribute to maintaining the cultural identity of the Paite people.
- b. Investigate the Impact of Modernization on Folklore Transmission** – To explore how modernization, formal education, and digital media have influenced the transmission and relevance of oral literature among the Paite community.
- c. Document and Analyze Key Folklore Elements** – To collect, document, and interpret significant folktales, songs, and oral narratives that reflect the historical, social, and moral values of the Paite people.
- d. Assess the Role of Oral Literature in Community Cohesion** – To evaluate how folklore and oral traditions foster a sense of belonging, social unity, and intergenerational knowledge transfer within the Paite community.

**Statement of the Problem:**

The Paite people of Northeast India, like many indigenous communities, face the challenge of preserving their cultural identity in the face of rapid modernization, urbanization, and the widespread influence of digital media. Oral literature and folklore, central to their heritage, are at risk of fading away as younger generations increasingly turn to formal education systems and technological advancements. This erosion of traditional practices threatens the loss of cultural values, beliefs, and communal history embedded in these oral traditions. The problem lies in the diminishing transmission of these oral narratives, which are vital for maintaining the Paite community's collective identity. This study seeks to examine the role of oral literature and folklore in safeguarding cultural identity and ensuring its continued relevance in the modern world.

**Folklore as Autobiographical Ethnography:**

**The Case of the Paite People:** According to Alan Dundes, folklore serves as “**autobiographical ethnography**,” meaning it represents a people's own description of themselves (Dundes 55). Folklore has long been a medium for preserving national heritage, as seen in the work of the **Grimm brothers**, who collected German folktales in the early 19th century with the aim of safeguarding their nation's cultural distinctiveness. Similarly, pioneering folklorists have studied oral traditions across different societies, recognizing their value in uncovering **historical roots, cultural uniqueness, and national identity**. Folklore, as an embodiment of cultural heritage, offers profound insights into a society's worldview. It serves as a **mirror of culture**, illuminating areas of particular concern within a community. Dundes explains: *Folklore reflects cultural values and concerns, offering insight into what matters most to a society. Analyzing folklore allows individuals to understand a culture from within, unlike the external perspective typically adopted by social scientists or educators.*

For cultures like the **Paite**, which lacked a written script until recent times, folklore plays an essential role in reconstructing their historical and cultural past. Today, the Paite are found in the northeastern Indian states of **Manipur, Mizoram, and Assam (Karbi Anglong)**, as well as in **Myanmar's Chin State, Kalay, Kabaw, Mandalay, and Yangon**. In Manipur, they are recognized as a **distinct tribal group**, whereas in other states of India, they are classified as sub-tribes of the **Mizo and Kuki** communities. The Paite possess a **rich oral tradition**, including folktales, myths, legends, and songs that reflect their **traditional social structure, belief systems, and moral values**. Their history is difficult to trace due to their **semi-nomadic lifestyle**, which resulted in a lack of permanent historical records or monuments. During their migration, the Paite gradually developed a well-organized **village administration system**, with a village chief as the **supreme authority**. Each village functioned autonomously, governed by the chief, whose word was considered **law**.

**Patriarchal Structure and Indigenous Beliefs in Paite Society:**

The Paite society is fundamentally **patriarchal**, with rigid gender roles. The household was the smallest unit of society, where the **father held absolute authority**, and women had **no formal role in decision-making**. The cultural perception of women's status is reflected in some common Paite proverbs, such as:

“Wives and rags can be replaced.”

**“Women and crabs have no religion.”**

- **“The wisdom of a woman is within the vicinity of the village.”**

These expressions indicate the **subordinate position of women** in traditional Paite society, where **cooking and housekeeping** were regarded as their primary responsibilities. Paite society was also deeply **anthropocentric**, with their **indigenous faith playing a central role** in shaping their worldview. Their belief system dictated **social norms, rituals, and daily practices**. The ultimate aspiration of a Paite man was to attain **paradise in the afterlife**, a realm where labor was unnecessary, and food and meat were in **endless supply**.

#### **Folklore as a Cultural Repository:**

The **rich oral traditions of the Paite** serve as a vital link to their historical past. Their folktales, myths, and legends provide insights into their **migratory history, social hierarchy, gender dynamics, and religious beliefs**. Through these oral narratives, the **values, struggles, and aspirations** of the Paite people continue to be passed down across generations. By studying Paite folklore, one can **gain a deeper understanding of their cultural evolution, identity formation, and the impact of historical transitions** on their community. As such, folklore remains **a powerful medium of historical preservation** for societies that lacked a formal written tradition. The conversion of the Paite to Christianity in the early twentieth century marked an unprecedented transformation in their culture and society. Having lived in near isolation from external influences, the Paite experienced profound changes with the arrival of Christianity. The new faith replaced negative aspects of traditional life, such as superstitions and slavery. Within a century, the entire Paite population adopted Christianity. However, this transformation also introduced certain undesirable elements.

Christian missionaries introduced education to the Paite after gaining authority from the British administration, which recognized their efficiency in spreading education. With education and British rule, Paite society moved towards modernization, bringing rapid transformations. Traditional customs, beliefs, and moral codes that conflicted with Christian teachings were gradually abandoned. In traditional Paite society, social structure, indigenous faith, and village community were closely interwoven, shaping their worldview. These customs aimed to foster better community relations and collective survival in a challenging environment. Stith Thompson highlights the profound impact of Christianity on the Paite's traditional belief system.

Doctrines about the afterlife and the next world profoundly shaped religious beliefs and traditions. Organized Christian teachings, over centuries, modified or displaced older concepts once universally accepted. Surviving beliefs were often dismissed as fiction, and their followers viewed as gullible. However, literary and popular tales still feature motifs of the dead's return, hinting at a richer past tradition. Paite history was primarily reconstructed by British administrators, historians, and scholars through interviews, observations, and surviving traditions. Consequently, studying oral traditions and folklore is crucial in defining the cultural history of the Paite people.

The introduction of Romanized script by white missionaries in 1904 marked a significant milestone in Paite history. During the colonial period, Paite culture underwent profound changes, embracing the 'new culture' of the white man while rejecting their own 'old culture.' The traditional Haam, or male dormitory, gradually faded, giving way to modern school education. The belief system, particularly those rooted in fear of spirits, was replaced by Christian teachings, reflecting the community's transformative shift towards modernization. The impact of modernization, colonial influence, and religious conversion on indigenous oral traditions, particularly in the Paite society of Northeast India. It underscores how Western education and Christianity led to the neglect and even rejection of native folklore, replacing it with biblical narratives and Western literature. The reference to Herodotus suggests that cultural groups inherently value their own traditions, yet in this case, external influences have altered these perceptions.

The failure of *"The Great Penglam"* film due to societal criticism further illustrates the shift in cultural values, where indigenous stories are deemed inappropriate compared to Western narratives. This phenomenon raises concerns about the erosion of cultural identity and the challenges of preserving oral traditions in a rapidly modernizing world.

As a matter of fact, folk artifacts have gradually become irrelevant and lost their value in the modern society and this in turn suggests that a very important component in defining cultural identity is missed out. India's rich diversity, particularly focusing on the North-East region, which is known for its varied terrain, cultures, languages, and religious practices. Despite being geographically smaller compared to other parts of India, the North-East is home to multiple ethnic groups, many of whom share physical similarities and religious beliefs yet maintain distinct identities. The passage also touches upon the complexities of ethnic identity in the region, where overlapping cultural and religious affiliations sometimes lead to tensions and ethnic violence. This underscores the challenges of maintaining harmony in a region where identity politics play a significant role in shaping social and political dynamics. The



historical and cultural evolution of ethnic identities in Churachandpur district, Manipur, particularly among the Zo tribes. It highlights how the fragmentation of ethnic groups began during migration, long before their arrival in the Indian subcontinent.

According to B. Lalthangliana, the Zo/Mizo people once lived in the Kabaw Valley, where their culture had reached an advanced stage. However, due to external pressures—such as the advancing Shan people—they migrated westward to the Chin Hills, which led to a cultural decline. The shift to a rugged and challenging terrain may have forced them to prioritize survival over cultural advancement, resulting in what Lalthangliana describes as a "regressive change." This perspective sheds light on how migration, geography, and external threats shaped the socio-cultural dynamics of the Zo tribes, influencing their present-day struggle for individual ethnic identity. The rugged terrain of steep mountains and deep gorges made it challenging to find sufficient land to sustain the entire population. This forced the Paite to split into smaller clan-based groups, settling in separate villages, which led to their isolation. Clan loyalty gradually replaced broader kinship ties, sparking inter-clan wars during their stay in the Chin Hills. These conflicts often arose over jhoom lands for cultivation, reflecting the struggle for limited resources in a harsh environment.

This explores the historical migration and settlement patterns of the Zo/Kuki tribes, categorized as "New Kukis" and "Old Kukis" by colonial administrators. While these groups remained geographically close, they maintained distinct villages and communities. Initially, their separation was driven by survival needs, but later, government policies—particularly the schedulization of tribes and the benefits of reservation—encouraged them to assert distinct identities.

This assertion of individual identity, often linked to religion and community settlements, has contributed to ethnic tensions and conflicts. It highlights how external influences, such as government policies, have shaped intra-tribal relationships, sometimes exacerbating divisions that lead to violence and discord among historically connected communities. This examines the historical and socio-political factors influencing the identity and settlement patterns of the Kuki tribes. Originally, their migration and settlements were based on clan divisions, leading colonial administrators to categorize them as "New Kukis" and "Old Kukis." While they remained geographically close, they lived in separate villages, a practice initially driven by survival needs. However, with the introduction of tribal schedulization and reservation policies by the Indian government, these groups began asserting distinct identities to access socio-political benefits. This shift has led to fears of assimilation and the erosion of traditional ethnic identities, fueling tensions and antagonism among related tribes. It highlights how government policies, though intended for tribal welfare, have inadvertently contributed to intra-ethnic divisions and conflict.

This critically examines the ongoing ethnic conflicts in Northeast India, highlighting the lack of effective policy changes to address the root causes of these disputes. It points out that official narratives often frame these conflicts in terms of "ethnic insurgencies," "cross-border terrorism," and "proxy wars," but such terminology has not led to meaningful conflict resolution (Baruah 2). They also critique the role of government policies, arguing that promises of welfare and development often escalate demands for autonomy. While the central government may suppress violence, it does not necessarily address the underlying antagonisms, leading to questions about whether agencies like the Ministry of Tribal Affairs are unintentionally perpetuating a "divide and rule" strategy.

#### **Significance of the Study:**

**For Scholars** – The study offers valuable insights into the intersection of oral literature, cultural preservation, and indigenous knowledge systems. It deepens the understanding of how oral traditions contribute to cultural resilience and identity in the face of external influences.

**For Academicians** – This research provides a foundation for further studies in folklore, anthropology, and cultural preservation. It can serve as a reference for comparative studies on the role of oral traditions in other indigenous communities across India and globally.

**For the Paite Community** – The study underscores the importance of oral traditions in sustaining cultural heritage. By documenting and preserving these narratives, it encourages the community to continue valuing and practicing their oral storytelling traditions.

**For Policy Makers** – The study highlights the need for policies that protect and promote indigenous cultural practices. It can guide the development of educational and cultural programs that integrate oral literature and folklore into contemporary education.

**For Global Audiences** – The research contributes to broader conversations about the preservation of indigenous cultures and languages worldwide, offering lessons on how communities can safeguard their unique traditions amidst globalization.

This concludes by advocating for a return to folklore and historical heritage as a means of fostering unity among kindred tribes. Folklore, when used as a historical source, can help reconstruct past events and offer alternative perspectives on tribal identities, potentially mitigating divisions and promoting reconciliation.

**Conclusion:**

Oral literature and folklore play a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity of the Paite people in Northeast India. Through storytelling, songs, myths, and rituals, traditional knowledge and historical narratives are passed down across generations, reinforcing a sense of belonging and continuity. These oral traditions not only serve as a repository of collective memory but also provide a means for cultural resilience amid modernization and external influences. Despite challenges such as globalization and the decline of oral transmission, the Paite community continues to safeguard its heritage through cultural practices and community initiatives. Recognizing and supporting these traditions is essential for maintaining their unique identity in a rapidly changing world.

**Research Findings:** The Role of Oral Literature and Folklore in Preserving Cultural Identity – A Case Study of the Paite People in Northeast India

**Oral Literature as a Repository of History and Identity:**

The oral traditions of the Paite people serve as a living archive, preserving historical narratives, ancestral lineage, and cultural values. Folktales, myths, and songs reinforce collective identity and ensure the transmission of historical consciousness across generations.

**Folklore as a Moral and Ethical Guide:**

Paite folklore is deeply intertwined with social values and moral teachings. Stories about bravery, honesty, and communal harmony shape societal norms and guide behavior, ensuring cultural continuity and ethical responsibility.

**Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge through Oral Traditions:**

Oral literature transmits indigenous knowledge related to agriculture, herbal medicine, and survival strategies. Elders play a crucial role in educating younger generations about traditional practices through storytelling.

**Language Preservation and Linguistic Identity:**

Folklore and oral traditions help sustain the Paite language, reinforcing linguistic identity amid external influences. Songs, proverbs, and oral poetry contribute to language retention and revitalization.

**Folklore as a Medium of Resistance and Resilience:**

During colonial rule and post-independence conflicts, oral literature became a tool of resistance, helping the Paite community assert their identity and cultural distinctiveness against external forces.

**Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission:**

Storytelling remains a vital medium for passing down cultural knowledge, connecting the older and younger generations. This ensures continuity in traditions and prevents cultural erosion.

**Influence of Christianity on Oral Traditions:**

With the spread of Christianity, some traditional oral narratives have been adapted or replaced by Christian themes. However, elements of indigenous folklore continue to coexist with biblical storytelling.

**Challenges and the Need for Documentation:**

Modernization, migration, and digital influences pose threats to oral traditions. Without systematic documentation and community-led initiatives, valuable folklore may be lost, necessitating efforts for preservation through recording, archiving, and education.

These findings emphasize the essential role of folklore in sustaining Paite cultural identity and the urgent need for its protection in the face of modernization and cultural shifts.

**Suggestions**

1. **Documentation and Digital Archiving:** Initiatives should be undertaken to record and digitize Paite folklore, myths, and oral histories to ensure their preservation for future generations.
2. **Educational Integration:** Schools and local institutions should incorporate folklore into curricula to encourage younger generations to learn and appreciate their cultural heritage.
3. **Community Participation:** Cultural festivals, storytelling sessions, and workshops should be organized to promote active engagement with traditional oral literature.
4. **Government and NGO Support:** Policies and funding should be directed toward research and preservation programs focused on indigenous folklore and oral traditions.

5. **Collaboration with Scholars and Linguists:** Academics and researchers should work closely with the Paite community to document and analyze their oral traditions in a respectful and authentic manner.
6. **Media and Social Platforms:** Utilizing digital media, podcasts, and social platforms can help promote Paite folklore to a wider audience and keep traditional storytelling alive.
7. **Intergenerational Transmission:** Encouraging elders to actively share stories with the younger generation will help sustain oral traditions within families and communities.

By adopting these measures, the rich oral heritage of the Paite people can be safeguarded and celebrated, ensuring that their unique cultural identity remains vibrant for generations to come

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