



Culture, Orality, and Folk Songs: Storytelling and Cultural Memory in Galo Folk Songs

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Abstract

The Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh maintains a vibrant body of oral traditions in which folk songs play a central role as carriers of history, memory, and cultural values. These songs are more than artistic expressions; they are living vessels of memory passed on from generation to generation through the medium of oral tradition. These folk songs, although a form of entertainment, also serve the purpose of carrying the echoes of ancestral voices, tales of origin, rituals, kinship, love, conflict, and all the happenings of everyday life. The present study examines how Galo folk songs function as vehicles of storytelling that articulate indigenous identity while negotiating the challenges of modernisation and cultural change. The research problem addressed is the gradual decline of oral traditions due to inadequate documentation and the growing influence of external cultural forces. The study is grounded in qualitative analysis based on literature review, textual interpretation, and critical engagement with existing scholarship on oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems. The analysis highlights the importance of Galo folk songs in preserving cultural continuity, shaping collective memory, and providing alternative ways of knowing rooted in community participation. The paper argues for the integration of such oral traditions into broader cultural and educational discourses to safeguard their transmission to future generations.

Keywords: Galo tribe, Arunachal Pradesh, folk songs, oral traditions, cultural identity.

Introduction

In the ethnolinguistic landscape of Northeast India, the oral traditions of tribal communities have long sustained forms of

knowledge and cultural expression that predate literacy. Arunachal Pradesh is home to various indigenous tribes with a rich heritage of culture and tradition. What makes the tribes unique is

the mode of transfer of moral codes and conduct through the oral medium from generation to generation. Oral traditions have long been the foundation of indigenous societies, functioning as the primary medium for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and histories. Among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Galo community occupies a distinct position for its rich oral heritage, particularly its folk songs that encapsulate the essence of communal identity. The Galo community maintains a rich repertoire of literature, especially folk songs.

Galo folk songs are performed during rituals, agricultural festivals, marriage ceremonies and communal gatherings. They encapsulate the tales of origin, heroic deeds, moral principles and ecological wisdom. More than entertainment, they are forms of storytelling that embody the collective consciousness of the tribe. As Ong (1982) argues, oral cultures store knowledge through narrative and repetition; memory is socialised through performance. In societies where written records are limited, songs act as archives of lived experiences, ancestral wisdom, and social customs.

This paper seeks to explore how Galo folk songs act as instruments of storytelling and cultural preservation. It examines how these songs weave together memory, history, and emotion to express a collective way of life. Rooted in oral tradition, Galo folk songs not only recount tales of origin, heroism, and morality but also reflect the community's understanding of nature, kinship, and shared values. It looks at how folk songs shape the community's sense of identity and continuity, especially in a world where modern influences and changing lifestyles pose challenges to traditional modes of expression.

Orality and Storytelling in Galo Culture

Walter J. Ong, in *Orality and Literacy* (1982), posits that oral cultures preserve knowledge through collective memory and

performance rather than through written texts. In such societies, storytelling, songs, and rituals are not merely aesthetic acts but cognitive processes that structure thought and identity. Speech is inseparable from our consciousness (Ong 9). Orality lies at the heart of Galo cultural identity. In a preliterate society, storytelling is not a casual pastime but the foundation of social knowledge. The *nyibo* (ritual priest) and the elder members of the community occupy sacred roles as keepers of memory. Through their recitations, myths of creation, genealogies and moral narratives are kept alive.

Folk songs are songs sung by a folk or a group of people. It may serve varied purposes of entertainment, storytelling, recounting of genealogy, passing on moral values, etc. Each folk song is embedded with moral values, genealogies, and social commentaries that sustain the moral fabric of the community. The songs are often performed during agricultural festivals, marriages, or communal gatherings and any such occasion where performance and participation reinforce social cohesion. Through the oral transmission of these songs, cultural knowledge is renewed and adapted to changing circumstances without losing its foundational ethos.

In oral societies, the act of remembering is inseparable from the act of performing. As Ong (1982) observes, "in an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost" (33). This repetition is not mere recitation but a dynamic process through which a community continually renews its connection to its past. Galo folk songs embody this principle; they are performed and re-performed across generations, ensuring that cultural values, ancestral memories, and moral lessons remain alive within collective consciousness

Cultural Memory and Collective Identity

Cultural memory, as conceptualised by Jan Assmann (2011), refers to the social frameworks through which communities remember their pasts. In Galo culture, memory

is not recorded but enacted. Each performance of a folk song revives ancestral voices, reaffirming the community's sense of continuity. Through folk songs, the Galo tribe encodes its history: migrations, clan genealogies, and the relationships between humans, nature, and the divine. For instance, during the *Mopin* festival, which is a major agricultural celebration of the tribe, songs like *popir ponu* are sung to invoke prosperity and harmony. *Jajin ne ja* is another such song which deals with the creation and origin myth. It has mentions of the *Nyimes* (Tibetans) and the *Nypak* (people from the plains) coming to reside in the hills, and the place was so populated that it was difficult to accommodate every group, which led to the necessity of organising a meeting. Subsequently, "Nyipak moved towards the plain areas and the nyime towards the higher region" (Pandey 60). *Anne yo Anna*, another folk song, expresses the poetic conversation between a girl and her brother (Pandey 73). It highlights the journey of a girl from childhood till her adulthood when she has to leave her house and family to get married and start a new life. The brother consoles her and tells her about the norms of society. It provides a glimpse of the societal set-up of the old times. *Yaane* and *Kaben* are other major variant of folk songs that are sung or narrated during marriages or *nyida*. *Kaben* is usually sung by women to bid farewell to a bride going to the groom's house for the first time. It has a grief-stricken and nostalgic touch to it. It recounts the life of a woman from childhood till she reaches the age to marry. *Yaane* is narrated by men during *Nyida*. It narrates the story of two brothers and two sisters, namely Kaba, Karba, Kari and Karnya respectively. The brothers teach the importance of marriage to the sisters in the tale. The song is a window into the familial set-up of a Galo family. The song *Silo-ru-le* expresses that the custom of marriage was begun by the ancestors and is still followed today. It showcases the affectionate relationship between a mother and a daughter.

Thus, Galo songs preserve linguistic identity. The Galo language, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, carries nuances and idioms that resist translation. To sing in Galo is therefore to assert cultural selfhood. The oral mode ensures that even without written archives, the tribe's worldview remains embodied in performance. The invocation of ancestral spirits through melody and rhythm creates what anthropologist Paul Connerton (1989) calls "performative memory", where remembering is a bodily act, not an intellectual one. Through song, the Galo people do not merely recount history; they *re-live* it.

Modernisation and Cultural Erosion

Despite their vitality, Galo oral traditions are at risk. Modernisation, urban migration, and formal education have altered the social fabric that sustained oral transmission. Younger generations increasingly favour mainstream music and digital media, leaving little space for traditional learning. The introduction of print and television has further marginalised oral performance. Before the advent of modernisation and modern technology in the region, learning occurred through participation, listening to elders during rituals and communal feasts and festivals. With schooling conducted in English or Hindi, the younger Galo often lack fluency in their native tongue, making it difficult to comprehend traditional lyrics.

Furthermore, globalisation introduced homogenising cultural forms that erode indigenous aesthetics. As Thiong'o (1986) notes, language is the carrier of culture; when language dies, so does the worldview it embodies. The Galo folk tradition's decline thus signifies more than a loss of song; it represents a rupture in intergenerational dialogue. The challenge is intensified by the absence of systematic documentation. While some recordings exist, many songs remain orally preserved by ageing elders. The risk is that when the custodians pass away, the unrecorded corpus vanishes with them. Therefore,

revitalisation efforts require both community participation and scholarly intervention.

Community Efforts and Revitalisation Initiatives

Encouragingly, recent decades have witnessed a cultural awakening among the Galo people. Individuals such as David Angu and Dobom Doji have emerged as pivotal figures in the preservation and revitalisation of Galo folk traditions. While Galo songs have been historically transmitted through rituals and communal gatherings, they are also undergoing a dynamic process of renewal. David Angu and the Tribe, and Dobom Doji are reinterpreting the songs by blending ancestral melodies with modern instrumentation and styles. According to a recent article in *The Hindu*, their rendition of "Ho Delo" evokes themes of cultural roots and belonging, reminding listeners of their forefathers. It is a ballad that speaks of words of wisdom shared by the forefathers. The Dobom Doji Collective released a song titled "Melo Jajine", a Galo migration narrative song which was originally by Moge Doji. This highlights how the folk tradition remains alive and relevant, not frozen in time, but evolving. Another song by his band, "Jimi Ane", is a modern folk-fusion, which is dedicated to preserving and promoting Galo cultural heritage. Jimi Ane is considered a creator divine in the Galo tradition. Thus, the song appears to be a homage or invocation of the ancestral belief that reminds the listeners of their origin stories, recognising the creative divine principle, acknowledging the cosmic origin of beings, and perhaps reminding listeners of their cultural and spiritual roots. Such revitalisation work demonstrates that tradition is not static but dialogic. The initiatives undertaken by artists like them exemplify how cultural expressions can adapt to changing social contexts without compromising their intrinsic meanings. By adapting to new media while retaining core meanings, Galo folk songs are undergoing a process of cultural reauthorization. In doing so, the community not only maintains continuity

with its ancestral roots but also actively participates in redefining the ways in which that heritage is expressed and experienced in contemporary contexts.

Digital Media and the New Orality

The spread of digital technology, while often perceived as a threat to traditional forms of expression, also opens new avenues for cultural preservation and dissemination. Walter Ong (1982) refers to this phenomenon as "secondary orality," a return to oral modes of communication mediated by modern electronic and digital technologies. Unlike primary orality, which existed in pre-literate societies, secondary orality emerges in a literate and technologically advanced culture but recreates the participatory, communal, and performative dimensions of oral traditions. This concept becomes particularly relevant in the context of indigenous revitalisation movements, where digital platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram serve as contemporary spaces for storytelling, song transmission, and cultural education. Younger Galo artists now use YouTube, podcasts, and social media to record, translate, and disseminate folk songs. This digital recontextualization democratizes access and allows trans local audiences to engage with Galo culture. However, it also raises ethical questions about ownership and authenticity. Nevertheless, digital platforms can function as archives of the future. As Angu and Doji's digital recordings illustrate, technology can be harnessed to ensure that oral traditions remain audible and accessible, even in an age of globalisation. The challenge lies in maintaining community control over representation, ensuring that digital preservation aligns with cultural values rather than commodifying them.

Cultural Preservation as Resistance

For the Galo tribe, preserving folk songs is an act of cultural continuity and self-affirmation. It resists the gradual loss that often accompanies modernisation and asserts the community's right to sustain its own traditions.

The very act of singing becomes an expression of endurance. It becomes a way of keeping memory alive through voice and rhythm. In this sense, the preservation of folk songs is inseparable from the community's sense of identity. By documenting and performing their traditional songs, the Galo people ensure that ancestral wisdom, stories, and values remain part of their living heritage. Such efforts reaffirm that culture survives not only in archives but in the ongoing practices of everyday life.

Revitalisation also strengthens community cohesion. In collective performances, younger members learn not only the lyrics but the values embedded within them, such as reciprocity, respect for nature, and communal responsibility. Each song thus functions as a moral and social text, shaping ethical consciousness. Through such acts, the Galo demonstrate that preservation is not nostalgic but transformative. It involves reimagining the past to serve the future, ensuring that tradition continues to evolve within changing contexts.

Conclusion

Galo folk songs stand as eloquent testimonies to the power of orality in sustaining cultural identity. They are not frozen relics but living forms of memory, adapting to the rhythms of modern life while carrying the wisdom of ancestors. Through storytelling, they teach, remember and bind the community together. Yet, the survival of these oral traditions depends on the collective will to preserve them. Modernisation, language loss, and digital homogenization threaten to sever the link between past and present. Revitalisation will be possible only when it is rooted in community participation and sustained by a genuine sense of cultural pride, where members of the community take ownership of their traditions, transmit them to younger generations, and celebrate them as living expressions of collective identity. These efforts can further be supported by sustained scholarly

attention and systematic documentation that record, interpret, and transmit the cultural knowledge embodied in folk songs. Galo folk songs, therefore, remind us that orality remains one of humanity's most enduring archives of meaning.

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