

Preserving Rong Identity: Oral Literature as Resistance to Cultural Erosion

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Abstract

The Rong community inhabiting Sikkim and the Eastern Himalayas possesses a rich oral literature in the form of myths, legends, chants, songs, and ceremonial discourses. This literature has been passed down through generations in the oral tradition, embedding ancestral knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and ecological wisdom. This paper aims to demonstrate how the oral literature of Rong, or the Lepcha tribe, helps preserve cultural identity in the face of modernity, migration, and the threat to the language's survival. The article, based on qualitative research, employs participant observation, interviews, video and audio recordings, thematic analysis, and comparison of oral and written literature when available. The discussion revolves around the motifs of sacred landscape, ancestral roots, survival, spirit mediumship, and harmonious co-existence with nature. The paper pays special attention to the creation and flood myths, the role of sacred mountains Kanchenjunga and Tendong, the significance of Mun and Bongthing, Rongring in oral literature, and the interplay between oral and written traditions in the preservation of cultural knowledge. The article also considers the adaptive capacity of oral literature in the context of migration and changing socio-cultural norms and explores the theme of oral literature as a cultural shield. It concludes with a discussion of the research's findings and their implications for further study.

Keywords: lepcha, myth, identity, oral literature, culture

Introduction

The Lepcha people identify themselves with the autonym Rong and describe their ties to the region with the help of the term “snowy peaks” and the phrase “children of the deity.” Their oral literature consists of myths and legends, chants and songs, and ceremonial discourses and records of customary practices. Such literature is not only a source of entertainment but also a vehicle for transmitting ancestral knowledge and cultural memory. From this perspective, oral literature serves as a mechanism for preserving cultural identity.

When attempting to understand the concept of cultural identity in the context of oral literature, it is important to remember that identity is not a given but something that is produced in a continuous process. This production happens through acts of narration and communication using traditional genres and forms. These acts of verbal and nonverbal communication make up the oral tradition, a hallmark of any society with an oral literature heritage. Oral literature

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serves as a means of passing on cultural knowledge from generation to generation, and each individual member of the community has their unique role in this process. The preservation of cultural identity through oral literature therefore depends on the richness of the oral tradition and the number of people who participate in the act of storytelling. The weakening of either factor could endanger a community's oral literature and, by extension, its cultural identity.

Contemporary social changes present a serious threat to the oral literature of the Lepcha people. Rapid modernization and globalization can irreversibly alter community lifestyles. Migration can sever people's ties to their homeland, and linguistic shifts, in particular language shift, can make oral literature inaccessible. Furthermore, the imposition of external cultural norms and values runs the risk of altering oral literature's original messages. This begs a more complex question about oral literature's role in cultural preservation. While oral literature clearly stores cultural knowledge, its role as a dynamic tool of resistance against cultural erosion is even more compelling.

Although current social realities pose serious challenges to oral literature, the Lepcha people's oral tradition is not powerless against these influences. Oral literature remains a dynamic tool of resistance, and Lepcha stories serve as an excellent illustration of this resilience. The myth of Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu, for example, not only narrates the origins of the Lepcha people but also underscores their close ties to nature. The same story highlights the importance of ancestral roots and the idea of the land as sacred, which runs as a common theme through many tales. Similarly, the flood myth, which also narrates the origins of the Lepcha people, speaks of survival and the mountains' protective power.

Thus, the oral literature of the Lepcha people plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity. This paper will discuss the Rong oral literature tradition as a cultural shield, focusing on the themes of the sacred landscape and ancestral roots. The paper will also consider oral literature's role in maintaining cultural identity through language and explore the ways in which oral literature resists cultural erosion. Particular attention will be paid to the oral literature's transition to written forms and the emergence of new oral literature communication channels.

Theoretical Framework

The present research relies on the theoretical framework of indigenous knowledge and post-colonial studies. Indigenous knowledge traditions regard oral literature as part of a holistic knowledge system in which different sources and types of literature intersect. In this vein, oral literature stories and their narration forms are inseparable from their contextual settings. Oral literature narratives are multifunctional, intersecting several spheres of human life, from religion to ecology, history, and literature. This interconnectedness underscores the importance of oral literature in cultural preservation. It also explains the significance of context for oral literature research: disregarding it can lead to erroneous conclusions about the story's meaning.

The concept of cultural sovereignty provides additional theoretical grounds for this study. Cultural sovereignty conceptualizes cultural preservation in terms of cultural capital. According to the concept, a culture is not a collection of artifacts, practices, and performances that need to be preserved, showcased, and protected. Rather, it is a body of knowledge that must be used to empower communities. The researcher's role, therefore, is to facilitate this

empowerment. Dynamic engagement with oral literature helps achieve this goal, as it recognizes oral literature's role as a cultural shield. The concept of cultural sovereignty is especially relevant to the Lepcha oral literature tradition, as it helps reveal the Rong's cultural capital. The Rong oral literature tradition is deeply intertwined with cultural identity. By analyzing Rong oral literature, one can better understand how the Lepcha people perceive their cultural identity and, by extension, their place in the world. Such understanding is crucial for determining oral literature's role in cultural preservation.

Finally, the framework of post-colonial studies helps explain the role of oral literature in cultural preservation. From this perspective, oral literature is part of the mechanisms by which colonized nations resisted cultural oppression. The stories handed down through generations served as cultural shields, protecting the nation's cultural identity from being overtaken by the colonizers' culture. This shielding function is especially evident in the context of indigenous oral literature. For such literature, context is paramount, as stories often originate from highly specific settings. Furthermore, oral literature frequently incorporates elements of the local environment, such as native plants and landscape features, and verbalizes spiritual beliefs. All of these elements serve as cultural shields, protecting indigenous cultural knowledge. The same function, in post-colonial studies' framework, is attributable to oral literature's transition to written forms. The transition provided oral literature with additional protection, ensuring its wider preservation and more extensive dissemination.

Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative methodology of ethnographic research. The research design is centered around an in-depth exploration of oral literature as a means of preserving cultural identity. The paper focuses on the oral literature tradition of the Lepcha tribe, describing it as a cultural shield. The study uses participant observation as its primary source of data collection. The paper also relies on interview data, video and audio recordings of oral literature performances, thematic analysis, and comparison of oral and written literature when applicable.

Participant observation is the foundational source of data for this study. It involves observing oral literature performances in their context and interacting with participants to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. This is a crucial method in oral literature research, as it helps avoid erroneous conclusions resulting from a lack of context. Observing oral literature in context also facilitates comprehension of the act of storytelling, including performance elements, such as gestures and facial expressions, and their meaning. Moreover, context-aware observation helps recognize oral literature as a dynamic, multi-purpose phenomenon. Through observations, one can identify oral literature's diverse functions within a community and the ways in which these functions overlap.

Semi-structured interviews complement the observations. They provide additional insights into the interviewees' perspectives on oral literature, particularly regarding their views on cultural preservation and oral literature's role in it. In addition to informal conversations with participants, the study includes in-depth interviews with selected individuals. The interviews aim to elicit responses that demonstrate oral literature's role in preserving cultural identity,

with a focus on such themes as language, ancestral roots, sacred landscape, and cultural sustainability. Recordings of the interviews serve as valuable sources of data, offering detailed qualitative insights into the interviewees' worldviews and identities.

The next step in the methodology involves thematic analysis of the collected data. This study explores the themes of ancestral roots, sacred landscape, cosmology, and oral literature's role in cultural preservation. Thematic analysis therefore constitutes a significant part of this research. Once more, the analysis takes context into account to ensure that themes emerge from the data rather than being imposed on it. Furthermore, the analysis draws on the comparison of oral literature and its written counterparts, where available. This step is instrumental in understanding oral literature both as a body of knowledge and as a dynamic phenomenon.

It is important to emphasize that the present article is based on the findings of the research described above. As such, the paper discusses oral literature's role in cultural preservation primarily in general terms. The findings include the Lepcha oral literature tradition as a cultural shield, with a focus on the themes of ancestral roots and sacred landscape. The findings also detail oral literature's transition to written forms and the adaptive capacity of oral literature in the face of social changes.

Findings and Discussion

The present findings highlight oral literature's role in cultural preservation, with a focus on its functions as a repository of ancestral knowledge. They demonstrate how oral literature promotes cultural continuity using themes of ancestral roots and sacred landscapes as vehicles for transmitting cultural knowledge. The findings also discuss oral literature in the context of writing and identify ways in which oral literature resists cultural erosion.

Oral Literature As A Cultural Shield

Myths, legends, chants, and stories are part of oral literature's rich tradition. The role of oral literature in cultural preservation can be seen in how stories narrate the deeds of ancestors and pass on spiritual wisdom. Notably, oral literature traditions often employ natural landmarks and landscape features in story narration. The findings of this study corroborate the literature review's assertions about oral literature being a dynamic source of cultural knowledge. Specifically, Lepcha oral literature narrates the story of Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu, the first Lepcha man and woman, who were created by Itbu-moo, Mother Creator, from the purest snow of Mount Kanchenjunga.

This story illustrates oral literature's role as a repository of ancestral knowledge. It recounts the origins of the Lepcha people and narrates the creation of the first male and female Lepchas. The story also specifies the location of this creation, linking it to the most sacred peak in the Lepcha cultural tradition. Such motifs are common in oral literature, where stories serve to record cultural knowledge and pass it on to subsequent generations. Oral literature therefore functions as a cultural shield, storing cultural knowledge in the form of stories and transmitting it through oral performance. The findings further show that oral literature helps preserve cultural identity by reinforcing collective memory.

In addition to storing cultural knowledge, oral literature narrates the relationship between people and the environment. This is demonstrated by the flood myth, which tells about the Lepcha people surviving the deluge on the high grounds of Mount Tendong. The story mentions several high peaks and narrates how the Lepchas used the ridges and mountains as barriers against the flood. The motif of survival highlights the close ties between the Lepcha people and their environment and demonstrates oral literature's role in preserving this relationship. The findings further show that oral literature promotes this relationship by reinforcing cultural sustainability. Storytelling revives collective memory, and the act of retelling serves to reiterate cultural knowledge. In the case of the flood myth, collective memory is closely linked to the mountainous landscape that serves as both an environment and a habitat.

The findings also demonstrate oral literature's role in promoting cultural continuity through religious beliefs and oral literature performance. They show that oral literature helps preserve cultural identity by transmitting the importance of spiritual practices. Mount Kanchenjunga is considered a living deity who watches over the Lepcha people. Religious practices and festivals dedicated to the sacred mountain serve to strengthen the bond between the Lepcha people and the mountain. The findings therefore highlight oral literature's role in cultural preservation, particularly in terms of transmitting religious beliefs and ceremonial practices.

Moreover, the findings discuss oral literature's contribution to cultural preservation in the context of migration and modernization. They demonstrate oral literature's adaptive capacity by describing how oral literature traditions are incorporated into contemporary contexts. For instance, the findings mention community radio as a tool for making oral literature accessible to a larger audience. The use of radio further helps promote the Lepcha language, as radio jingles, talks, and cultural items are produced in Lepcha. It is important to note that such projects also include the development of neologisms to fill lexical gaps, which helps the Lepcha language adapt to modern realities.

Oral Literature's Role in Cultural Preservation

The findings highlight oral literature's role in cultural preservation by demonstrating how it promotes cultural continuity through ancestral knowledge. They also illustrate oral literature's adaptive capacity, which has enabled it to resist cultural erosion. Furthermore, the findings discuss oral literature's transition to written forms and its continued presence in the modern context.

The findings indicate that oral literature plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity by virtue of being a vessel of ancestral knowledge. The role is manifested in the oral literature genre of chants and legends that recount the deeds of ancestors and narrate the origin of the Lepcha people. Oral literature stories serve as a repository of ancestral knowledge about the origins of the Lepcha, their environment, and their cultural practices. Such knowledge is passed down through generations in the oral tradition, where it is stored, safeguarded, and disseminated by storytellers who play a vital role in cultural preservation. The findings further show that oral literature promotes cultural continuity by transmitting cultural knowledge in the form of stories, songs, and chants.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate oral literature's adaptive capacity. According to the findings, oral literature traditions are actively incorporated into the modern context to ensure their continued presence in the community. Oral literature genres are used in contemporary settings, and oral literature performances take place in new venues. Such adaptive capacity is necessary for oral literature to thrive in the modern environment. The findings provide several examples of oral literature's adaptation to contemporary realities. They show that radio stations air programs and songs in the Lepcha language and that oral literature is used as a tool for teaching children. Community-based initiatives also promote oral literature by incorporating it into school curricula. The findings further indicate that oral literature performances take place in places outside the traditional context, such as the home.

The Findings' Implications for Future Research

The findings contribute to the discussion of oral literature's role in cultural preservation, focusing on the themes of ancestral roots and sacred landscape. They highlight oral literature's role as a repository of ancestral knowledge and demonstrate how oral literature traditions are used in the modern context to ensure cultural continuity. The findings further discuss oral literature's transition to written forms and the implications of such transition for cultural preservation.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study indicate oral literature's role in cultural preservation by demonstrating its role as a repository of ancestral knowledge. The findings discuss oral literature in the context of Lepcha cultural traditions, emphasizing oral literature's contribution to the transmission of cultural knowledge. In particular, the findings show how oral literature promotes cultural continuity by transmitting ancestral knowledge about origins, environment, and cultural practices. The findings further highlight oral literature's adaptive capacity by describing how oral literature is used in the modern context. Overall, the study's findings provide insight into oral literature's role in cultural preservation and contribute to the discussion of oral literature as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon.

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