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## FOLK SONGS AS LIVING HERITAGE: DOCUMENTATION AND PRESERVATION OF TANGKHUL SOCIO-CULTURAL TRADITIONS

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Oral tradition plays an essential role in preserving and transmitting the cultural identity of the Tangkhul community, an indigenous group from northeast India. Among the most significant forms of oral tradition is the folksong, which serves as both a repository and a medium for the transmission of historical, social and spiritual knowledge. Tangkhul folksongs or Hao Laa, encapsulate stories of ancestral lineage, myths, rituals and communal values, thereby ensuring the continuity of cultural memory across generations. These songs not only convey the community worldview but also foster a sense of identity and belonging among its people. As agents of transmission, folksongs are instrumental in maintaining the language, customs and moral principles of the Tangkhul, especially in the face of modernization and external influences. They act as living documents, passed orally from one generation to another, thus reinforcing the community's distinct cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary contexts. This paper makes an attempt to explore the enduring significance of Tangkhul folksongs as a vital force in the preservation of their cultural identity through oral tradition.*

**KEYWORDS:** Tangkhul, Cultural, Folksong, Community, generation.

## INTRODUCTION:

The Tangkhul community inhabiting in the Northeastern region of India is renowned for its rich cultural diversity, vibrant traditions and deep-rooted legacy. Comprising various other tribes with distinct languages, customs and belief systems, the Tangkhul people have cultivated a unique identity shaped by generations of history, interaction and experience. Central to the preservation and transmission of this cultural tapestry is the tradition of oral literature, which serves as a timeless repository of Tangkhul cultural identity.

Oral tradition has long been a cornerstone of cultural preservation, particularly among indigenous communities where it serves as a primary means of transmitting knowledge, history and values. In the case of the Tangkhul community an indigenous group from Manipur in northeast India, oral tradition is a vital mechanism for preserving their rich cultural identity. Central to this tradition is the folksong known locally as Hao Laa, which played a multifaceted role in the community. These folksongs are not merely artistic expressions but are deeply rooted in the social fabric of the Tangkhul people encapsulating their worldview, customs and historical narratives.

Ningreishim K. Shimray mentioned that in a society without a written script, oral tradition becomes the primary means of preserving and transmitting knowledge of the community. The absence of a written script among the tribes of many communities including the Tangkhul has led to the transmission of information from one generation to the next through folksongs, folktales and various traditional practices of the customs. In such societies, every individual serves as a vital repository of oral information. Consequently, understanding the community past relies mainly on the memories of the oldest living person and other elders.<sup>1</sup>

Tangkhul folksongs serve as living archives, preserving stories of ancestral lineage, myths and spiritual beliefs. Through these songs, the key cultural knowledge is passed from one generation to the next ensuring that the community history and values remain intact even in the absence of written records. In an era of rapid globalization and cultural homogenization, the folksongs of the Tangkhul people continued to be a resilient force for safeguarding their unique identity.

This explores the role of Tangkhul folksongs as vibrant agents of cultural transmission, emphasizing their function in sustaining the community identity amidst changing times. It will examine how these songs reflect Tangkhul history, language and social norms, and how they contribute to a collective sense of belonging within the community. The work Presented here is a selection of the folksong that have gathered in preserving Tangkhul cultural identity. However, it is important to note that this article cannot encompass the full extent of the cherished oral traditions.

## ORAL TRADITION AS A CULTURAL REPOSITORY:

A study in historical methodology by Jan Vansina is an important methodological intervention that explains how oral traditions might help recreate a society for which there is little written evidence. Vansina stated that oral sources of history are just as valuable as written documents. Sources such as "oral traditions" and "oral history" represent an abundance of historical knowledge. The purpose of gathering them is to prevent sources from being forgotten and to provide an initial evaluation of the events that took place.<sup>ii</sup>

Oral tradition is a custom or practice that is passed down from generation to generation and is typically spoken orally or through speech. Although oral traditions are eventually written down, it can reveal a great deal about the society and the individuals who created them. They also enable groups that do not or will not have access to writing to preserve and communicate the history. It was an excellent method of preserving important information for other members of your community and would enable both literate and illiterate individuals to share it. Myths and legends from oral tradition can shed light on the origins of communities social, political and economic institutions as well as their taboos, totems, social conceptions and customs.<sup>iii</sup>

Sadananda Mayanglambam and Chirom Rajketan mentioned that oral tradition serves as the primary source for reconstructing and comprehending the past. Since it lacks a script or written record of its own therefore the folksong described the origins, migration, settlement and way of life of the Tangkhul people. Every incident or event was documented in a narrative form so that future generations might learn about the people history. even the smallest sort of social custom which may not be important for others is found in the folksong.<sup>iv</sup>

For many communities worldwide, oral tradition continues to be an essential cultural archive, especially in areas where written records were previously rare or non-existent. It preserves a people common knowledge, values and identity while acting as a link between the past and present. Maintaining cultural continuity and variety as the cultures has been modernized it required developing strategies to appreciate and preserve oral traditions.

## FOLKSONGS AS AGENTS OF TRANSMISSION:

Tangkhul folk songs serve as powerful agents of cultural transmission, preserving the community's history, values and traditions through generations. These songs deeply rooted in oral traditions, encapsulate stories of origin, love, festivals and spirituality offering a timeless connection to the Tangkhul identity. Being agriculturists the Tangkhul cultural life and festivals are reflected to and reckoned by the season of cultivation in keeping with their religious ceremonies. Due to the vast and diverse collection of folksongs that are integral part of the Tangkhul festivals, it's challenging to delve into the details of each one. Instead, it will highlight the significance

of specific events and songs that showcase the rich cultural heritage and traditions of the Tangkhul community. By exploring these songs and events we can gain a deeper appreciation for the Tangkhul people's unique identity and their significant contribution to the cultural tapestry of the region.

Tangkhul folk songs are traditionally sung to express a variety of themes, including the changing seasons, such as harvesting time, seed sowing and the celebration of the new year. These folksongs also played an important role in religious and cultural ceremonies particularly during festivals and weddings.<sup>v</sup>

### SONG OF ORIGIN AND MIGRATION(MIWURLUNGWUI LAA):

Folksong contributed immensely to reconstructing the origin of Tangkhul in various ways. The theory that the Tangkhul came out of the earth is reflected by a Tangkhul folk song. R.R Shimray refers to T. Luikham's book "*Wung (Tangkhul) Naga Okhot Mayonza*" and the folksong run as:

#### Tangkhul Free English Translation

O katatakashang-shang	O thou traveller
Na kachi eina shokli?	Whence thou cometh
O marilungvali shok	O I come through the deep holes and rocks
O chili mashok-akha	If not cometh from that,
O kazingsiralikanganalo,	O listen to the stars and sky
Laga unghang serlu. And come thou all to report. <sup>vi</sup>	

By the 2nd century AD, Tangkhul were living in Samsok (Thuangdut) in Myanmar. They began spreading and dispersing from Samsok after the invitation of Ko-LO-Feng in the last part of the 8th century.<sup>vii</sup> The Tangkhul migrated from Samsok is evidenced by the Tangkhul folk song, the song in the story runs thus:

#### Tangkhul: Free English Translation:

"Oh, milung kathui kaleid athuithoilo?	"Oh, whence cometh thou originally?
Oh, samshokmarokleidathuithoi	Oh, we originate from samsok in Burma,
Shokvaoaleidashokngavao. We call and gather all our kindred at	

Meichailunglimeishokngayarshokvao,

Rungatakleida mi unga yar

We make fire at Meichailung,

Hunphunwunga, kharar-a; we distribute at Ru-Ngatak,

Oh! Hunphunwungakharar-a

Oh, Hungphun chief, the eldest,

Oh! Ronra Shimray nawui

Oh, Ronra Shimray your tributes are

Shailunmashene-Au.... O”!

Everywhere, Au.... O”.<sup>viii</sup>

The elders belonging to the Kashung clan of Kabomi (Tangkhul Hundung village), narrated that their ancestors settled in Hakwang valley (the present habitat of Kachin) of Burma but had to migrate because of war and strife. Their statement is supported by folksongs among the people of Kabomi, which run as follows:

In Kabomi, the Tangkhul dialect

“Ninkpyran oh ninkpyran; Hakwangveininkpyran

Hakwangveininkpyran ana apri Taing ae

Mala thuithuilo, lailengkhualeithuifa ae,

Lailengkhualeithuifaaea, ashobokhengshomazyangsei

Ashong ashong (tui zingtuileimaphong ae) 2 times

Zchekho lei do keishaeng lei dongtuizhing tui

Oh, zyhengruizyhengruikabawlaveizyhengrui

Zchimikkapoothai

Oh, zcheimunaashinkphungleithoroi ae

Shaloineizhongphong ae

Oh, natinatimashiphengleibhyu ae

Mashi neirikaphaing

Oh, aphfeiaphfei (Rapheishongveiaphfei) 2 times

Kaczingkapfhuitha ae”

**Free English Translation:**

“Farewell Hakwang, we bid farewell to Hakwang

In the spring season when new bud sprouts out

Called out our maiden from their hideout

for it time to leave

and as our hordes cross the river (possibly Irrawaddy),

the water soaks the quiver hung above the waist.

sarong oh sarong of Kabaw (Kabaw valley in Burma)

that reflect like a bright shining sun

oh zaimuk (quail) as we pass by your dwelling place

our Buffalo's trample your cozy nest

oh, natinati how you balance (perch on the branch of the tree)

yourself in the breezy noon

oh mother, mother of Raphei, how can

one forgets your unwelcome gloomy face.

From the folksongs, we came to know that the ancestor of the Tangkhul who once settled in Samsok, migrated in hordes as their society is more or less organized where the hierarchy of some kind is established”.<sup>ix</sup>

Concerning the history of migration, the forefather sings a traditional folk song in this manner.

Tangkhul:

A, O, Mariangphai-le,

O! Ramphahanglai- ah,

O! Haori Haora nganinghange.

O! Nganing-le hang-e

O! Hangkao kaphungngaphren hang-e,

O! ngaphren hang-e,

O! ayemgkangkui vashunga,

O! Leishichumpringayaishang-e,

O! ngayaihang-e

O! khamlungphangayaikhak-a

Free English Translation:

“Eh, oh! From Mariangphai,

oh! We searched for the settlement,

oh! All the creatures moved along,

oh! Moved along, viewing the Hangkao hill.

Oh! Viewing Hangkao hill, reached AyengKangkui (present Harva Khangai)

oh! Reaching Ayengkangkai, we moved to leishiChampri (present leishi village).

Oh! From leishi, we reached khamLungpha (present Khambi village”.<sup>x</sup>

The folksong of the Tangkhul of Kabongram village makes it evident that they came from China with the hordes and settled in the Hakwang valley of Burma. Since their folksong does not refer to a specific time other than the spring, it is challenging to determine when they relocated. Archaeological excavations at the cave site of the current inhabitant of the hill tribes has found stone artefacts from the Palaeolithic, Microlithic, Hoabinhian and Neolithic periods even though not much work has been done.<sup>xi</sup>

### **FESTIVAL FOLKSONG:**

1. **LUIRA PHANIT** (seed sowing festival): before sowing the seed the Tangkhul celebrated a festival called Luiraphanit. It is the first and the biggest festival of the calendar year. It is the festival to commemorate

the first seed sowing of crops, fruits and vegetables of a year and is celebrated with dancing, singing and feasting with their best colourful costumes.

Below is an example of Hao Laa (folk song) which concentrates on the festive aspect of the people.

**a) Tangkhul Free English Translation:**

Luirasangaiuwa the people want to celebrate Luira

Hoksashaingaiuwathe people want to eat pork

Awungarukchanguwa the king performs his ritual

Shangreirukthangkazingon the public ritual performing day

Mathangngai ijiluiya. The day seems to refuse to dawn.<sup>xii</sup>

**b) Tangkhul:Free English Translation:**

Karing kumluiya, the spring season has set in

Liw thiwse; It's time to sow crops;

Thingphangjukluiya,Shoots and leaves have sprouted

Kapaiwon nao, Sahar maringa.Pear and cherry flowers are blooming.<sup>xiii</sup>

**2. YARRA LAA (youth festival song)**

Yarra Festival is a festival of youths and it is celebrated within April and May of every year. Before the start of tilling the field and transplantation of paddy.

a) O, Kongralitheotheo,

O, ilongnaovakhithingkaphato

O, ilongnaovalongthingkaphana,

O,meishumkapamnao,

O, Zangyo, pamkhongmaleiya,

O, alungliheineorazanglu.

**FREE ENGLISH TRANSLATION:**

O, what sound in the stream,

O, in what labour are you engaged,

O, It's for our social gathering  
 O, come and take your sit,  
 O, come and sit, but there is no room,  
 O, hug ourselves in through the middle.

- b) Iram yarrasaya (2x) Oh, yarrakasa, ram ngashan, kaya leishilo  
 Kaya leishikhalo, Ohmahonlumlaosadawonkhawonlathaya  
 Won khawonlathaya, Ohleingaphalithingreirakayarumraola?  
 Kaya rumraokhala? Oh, masatheilalangyaithei  
 Oh, poshon Shonda zimik katun matheiya, Katun matheimana  
 Oh, zingumkhanaohitharansamphangluinaosa.

**FREE ENGLISH TRANSLATION:**

Our village is celebrating yarra (2x)

Oh, celebrating yarra, our culture, how lovely it is

How lovely it is, Oh the song and the dance are like the blossom flowers

Like the blossom of flowers, Oh the tug of war in the open field, how enjoyable?

How enjoyable is the game? Oh, asking for masa fruit millet fruit

Masa fruit millet fruit, oh asking again and again forget the sun setting

Forget the sun setting, Oh let us meet again at this time next year.<sup>xiv</sup>

3. **MANGKHAP:** Following of the plantation, as the crop and weeds developed, the months of July and August are filled with hectic days spent removing weeds from the paddy field. By this time, the paddy is ready to expand and bloom of which Mankhap festival and bumper crop rites are carried out. One interesting aspect about this festival is that every family light up a resonant pine-wood in front of their home as a symbol of joy, indicating that the gloomiest, busiest, most laborious season is over and that a better future is ahead.
4. **CHUMPHA FESTIVAL** (festival of thanksgiving for the new harvest):  
 After harvest a new paddy was brought to the barn. According to R.R. Shimray, the chumphafestival celebration is carried out with great care and devotion to the Gods. The opening rite which involved removing the first basketful of fresh paddy from the granary was carried out at night. To enable the

women to finish the appropriate rites in their respective granaries and all the male members had to spend two nights in the fields.<sup>xv</sup>

The part of devotion that a women performed wasto invoke Ameowo (considered as their god during the ancient day) to give them enough wheat for the entire year. The forefathers firmly believed that their god possessed the ability to work wonders. The ladies pleading continues in these manners:

### **Tangkul Free English Translation**

Oh Ameowo, heiwunchumliOh ameowo, the barn is filled with paddy,  
Wungrorsang hairakholet this paddy last for the year,  
Ara zat hi zingcum peivamilo prevent us from going a- begging.<sup>xvi</sup>  
Mapozangasakmialo.

**LEISHAT LAA (Traditional love song):**The love story of Mr. Shimreishang and Ms. Maitonphi is a great epoch in the history of the traditional love of the Tangkul. The traditional folktale weaves together the themes of love, resilience and the tragic consequences of power and greed. It is more than just a romantic storyit captures the soul of its culture, blending its deep respect for nature with its celebration of human emotions. Passed down through generations the story of Maitonphi and Ameishang continues to resonate, reminding us of the profound beauty and sorrow that love can bring.Here is how the folksong runs:

### **FREE ENGLISH TRANSLATION: TANGKUL:**

Mummy and daddy o, donot object, Avayo avayoavayoavayo, o, makham alu  
Imust marry sweet Maitonphi,Maitonphi li rashesaka, rashayasakhangai,  
O, but you two objected and consequencerashayasakhangai.  
She’sgone to another. O, Sakhangaivamaitonphikharamthuihaowa  
O, let not our love die. Khaiam - o - thiihaowakharam - o Thuihaowa  
o but do come to my paddy field, O, Laishikhavai chi luyamlizang, ngaroka,  
O, let us meet there, o, Maitonphi o, Li Zang ngaroksa, o- lizangngaroksa,  
O there in my helpless dismay, o, coimarongtheireotakhuisingda lung ringa,  
I’ve cut the peaplant there in.o khuising lung ring O, khuisinglungringa  
O. wishful thinking, o. with unfulfilled.O, Maitonphiyomaitonphirasangaitheilo,  
Ameishang, I’d have been yours true.O, rasangaitheilo, o rasangaitheilo,  
Hut for the adverse circumstances, o, Ameishangaameishangirakachangli  
May I take your leave, dear Ameishangthuiulu, Ameishangpangusa, Maitonphi,  
Maitonphi. my love- let us past. o, pangthuihaosainilungchanmalaihaosa.<sup>xvii</sup>

## TANGKHUL:

Oh, leishisamhokchiphun, he ungshungmavashunglo? Ye, sam ha khangayeiHe, sam ha khangayei, I sunglirayile, Ali kongsangshatmiya, Kongsangshatmi, kaphungkanshouwa, oh, kaphungkhanikan, AshangshimlivachaoloOh, athanlamvahaowa, maitonlakhaleiram, marongtheitayorting, khuisingmalungringa.

## FREE ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

Oh, he sent her hair a hair of love, he did it reach or not? Ye, aton recognised the hair,

He, she knew, the bee came and stayed on my blossom, she adorned the bee a kongsang,

Adorned kongsang and cross the mountain, oh two mountains the bee crosses,

Go to Ashang's house without fail, oh she went in death the living place of maitonphi

Wild beans plant dies at one stroke; she sees it and was desperate.<sup>xviii</sup>

Sadananda andRajketanmentioned that the majority of the Tangkhul folksongs still exist in oral form. In written literature,T.Luikham recorded more than twenty folksongs of different topics in one of his works, Maiya Gachui recorded fourteen folksongs in his work and M. Horam recorded more than ten folksongs of different themes.<sup>xix</sup>

The Tangkhul oral traditions, dances, songs and folklore continue to be a crucial part of their cultural heritage, although much of it is now documented and written down, especially after the introduction of formal education systems by Christian missionaries.

## PRESERVING IDENTITY IN MODERN TIMES:

The Tangkhul folksongs are said to be classified into seventeen categories. Ningshimyao a cultural activist pointed out that all these lifestyles are portrayed rather vividly in our folk songs including of Our native folktales, chosen time to getting married, house construction, ploughing, planting, harvesting and marankasa (feast of merit), etc. Unfortunately, western missionaries outlawed the Tangkhul tribe traditional song, which led to a severe fall and the extinction of our ways of life. The foreigners misinterpreted our folk songs, believing them to be incompatible with their superior philosophy. In that way, the folk songs we have today are a collection of a select few that survived the onslaught of the Christian crusaders.<sup>xx</sup>

IGP IK Muivahwho is now promoted to the rank of Additional Director General of Police urged youths to preserve and revive the rich cultural ethos of the community. He also urged to introduce of cultural studies as a subject in the school curriculum. He further stated that “*Let us preserve the old folk song by recording it because in it we would find valuable contents about the lives of our forefathers what are called archaic words. There is no dearth of avenues with the government in the field of culture so let us make the best use of it and promote our culture*”.<sup>xxi</sup>

Guru Rewben also known as “*Bob Dylan of the Nagas*” described that “*Our folk songs from the villages are on the verge of extinction because of changing lifestyles and absence of written texts etc*”. He further mentioned that “*I tried my best to win the hearts of youngsters so that our folk music could be saved from extinction*”, Amukhomba Ngangbam again propounded that in an era where identity is in flux, Guru Rewben mission is to preserve folk songs for generations through his boundless creativity. At the age of 56, this Tangkhul folk guru is dedicated to reviving the 'dying' traditional tribal folk music of his own Tangkhul community in Manipur of which a community increasingly influenced by contemporary Western rock and pop music. On stage, he blends tradition with innovation, performing on the acoustic guitar adapted to folk rhythms as well as hand-crafted traditional instruments like the *Tingteila* (or Pena), a folk fiddle and the four-holed flute known as *Yangkahui*.<sup>xxii</sup>

However, modernization has threatened these traditions. Efforts are underway to document and archive folk songs to ensure they survive for future generations.

## CONCLUSION:

The role of oral tradition, particularly through Tangkhul folksongs is essential in the preservation and transmission of Tangkhul cultural identity. These songs are more than just melodies; they encapsulate the history, mythology, values and lived experiences of the Tangkhul community. Folksongs act as a bridge between the past and the present which allow each generation to inherit and internalize the cultural wisdom of their ancestors that are passed down through generations. Through their narrative and performative elements, the Tangkhul folksongs preserve significant aspects of the community tradition like ritual practices, agricultural knowledge, ancestral lineage and local tradition. These oral traditions serve as cultural repositories, storing and transmitting not only historical events but also the collective values of respect for nature, community solidarity and moral guidance. As agents of transmission, they play a central role in educating younger generations, imparting a sense of pride, identity and continuity. In the face of external influences, globalization and the growing dominance of digital media, Tangkhul folksongs continue to assert the importance of preserving indigenous identity. Despite the

challenges posed by modernization, the oral traditions have shown remarkable resilience, adapting to new contexts while retaining their core purpose of cultural transmission. However, the responsibility to ensure their survival now rests on the current generations effort to revitalize and promote these traditions, particularly in engaging the youth. Consequently, Tangkhul folksongs stand as a testament to the enduring power of oral tradition that provide an anchor for the Tangkhul people, rooting them in their ancestral legacy while it also offered a means to adapt and thrive in a changing world. By maintaining the practice and appreciation of these songs, the Tangkhul community preserves not just their past but also strengthened their identity for the future by ensuring that the rich cultural heritage remains vibrant and relevant for generations to come.

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