

## Echoes of Ancestors: Comparative Analysis of Selected Folktales with Specification to the Monsang and Meitei Communities

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### Abstract

This research paper explores the comparable folk traditions of the Monsang (*Sirti*) Naga tribe and the Meitei community of Manipur, arguing that their oral narratives are a means of transmitting ancestral knowledge, wisdom, and identity. The folktales are not mere entertainments but systems that maintain a moral, cultural and epistemological tradition, defining for the communities their origins, their moral values and their cosmology. Building upon ethnographical and literary sources such as *An Ethnographic Profile of the Monsang Tribe* (Monsang and Kumar), this analysis takes a comparative textual and anthropological approach using elements from Alan Dundes' structural folkloristics, Ruth Finnegan's work on oral literature, Walter J. Ong's theory of orality, Albert Lord's study *The Singer of Tales*, and Jan Vansina's work *Oral Tradition as History*. Comparing similar themes and narrative motifs (such as "The Two Brothers"), human-animal transformations, and the moral dualism between characters, this research highlights how the continuum of the tales serves as collective memory as well as a source of guidance for both hill and valley communities in Manipur.

**Keywords:** Oral Tradition, Comparative Folkloristics, Monsang and Meitei, Ancestral Identity, Collective Memory

### Introduction

The State of Manipur has traditionally been split between two contrasting terrains and hence between two distinct cultures of hill and valley, which hold certain values and archetypes in common. The Monsang (*Sirti*) Naga tribe in the hills and the Meitei in the Imphal valley are two such culturally diverse but interlinked groups. While they possess distinct traits, they share their belief in the traditional and enduring role of oral narratives in transmitting ancestral morals and wisdom (Finnegan 3). Both these traditions serve as frameworks to transmit the moral, spiritual and cultural values that shape them; for the Meiteis oral narration of stories, called Phunga Wari (or hearth side stories) served a dual purpose: to perpetuate knowledge of tradition and to instill social values and morality. The stories of the Monsang are centered on hunting morals, myths

concerning animals, ecological facts, and mythic genealogies and the genesis of humans. Through the analysis of such common threads, it can be understood how both cultures communicate with themselves through oral tales as what Finnegan calls a “living dialogue” (Finnegan 2-3); thus, oral narration not only serves the purpose of remembrance, it helps both groups to forge their identities in the contemporary world and keep them firmly connected with their past.

### Methodology

This is a qualitative textual and anthropological study employing the narrative tradition of both the Monsang and the Meitei, drawing information from the ethnographic compilation by Sh. Francis Monsang and Rajesh Kumar (2020) titled *An Ethnographic Profile of the Monsang Tribe*, locally circulated booklets, and the comparison of the folktales of these communities. A comparative analysis is based on the existing corpus of both traditions, a collation from the Wikipedia entries on “Meitei Folklore” and “Monsang Naga” respectively, and additional ethnographical and narrative collections of the two communities where possible. Information is gathered through oral-literature theory, using concepts like “oral performance” (Finnegan), “oral communication” (Ong), structural analyses (Dundes), oral formulas and type-themes (Lord), and the historicity of oral tradition (Vansina). Themes and structures in folktales are identified and contrasted between the Monsang tales (*Hemon and Hesing, Juung Themin, Jurapa and Juranuw, Rangam Themin*) and Meitei tales (*Keibu Keioiba, Sandrembi and Chaisra, Tapta*) by comparison of narrative patterns such as sibling duality and transformation.

### Literature Review

There is a wide body of work which addresses various aspects of the relation between anthropology and folklore. This research contributes to this debate by examining the two disparate traditions of oral storytelling in the Indian context and the underlying continuity of narrative tradition between them.

Oral literature and the nature of its performance was for a long time neglected as unimportant when compared to written texts. The notion that oral traditions are a part of a society’s collective memory is now widely accepted thanks to the research of scholars in the field of oral tradition. Ruth Finnegan in *Oral Literature in Africa* (2012) argued that oral stories function as living dialogues a formulation that highlights the dynamic and contextual nature of stories that are retold continuously and are therefore a direct manifestation of the culture and identity of a people (Finnegan 2–3). This approach is applied in this study to understand how these stories are used as a living tradition within both cultures. The theory of orality developed by Walter J. Ong is significant as it argues that the absence of writing makes the spoken word more fluid, contextual, additive, and cumulative; this explains how various folktales possess multiple versions which have always adapted over time to meet the evolving needs of society (Ong 31-77). The Monsang myth of *Juung Themin* exemplifies Ong’s description of oral language as a patterned, formulaic phenomenon, as the narratives often consist of recurring formulas and refrains that help the narrative and the moral it propagates be easily memorized and transmitted across generations. *The Singer of Tales* by Albert Lord proposes the concept of the creation and transmission of oral

stories by oral singers who reproduce these tales each time through formulaic construction and improvisation, which mirrors the process by which the Monsang and Meitei folktales are narrated over generations. Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition as History* states that oral tradition is indeed a source of historical knowledge and is thus an essential element in the historical reconstruction of a community. This idea is particularly pertinent to the tribal mythologies of origins and migrations as it holds crucial ancestral data within its structure. The story of the origin of the Monsang people, told in a multitude of myths, is believed to represent the ancestral history of the Monsang moving from Burma into Manipur, and these stories in the oral narratives still hold memories of this trans-border movement (Monsang and Kumar 243). Therefore, the value of folktales is two-fold: it contains both historical knowledge and moral guidance.

An influential model for the study of folkloristics comes from Alan Dundes' structural interpretation of folktales. Dundes argues that folktales are autonomous cultural texts and, like other forms of literature, they have structures based on narrative patterns and motifs that are universally recurrent across different cultures (Dundes 1-20). These patterns and motifs have been classified by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson in the *Motif-Index of Folk-* (Aarne and Thompson). By studying characteristic motifs such as human-animal transformation, the relationship between two brothers, divine justice, and the exploitation and distribution of natural resources, this research demonstrates how similar narrative structures are prevalent in the folktales of both the Monsang and the Meitei communities. This has been analysed through the application of Dundes' structural approach to a comparison of folktales such as the Monsang *Hemon and Hesing*, which presents a tale of a younger sibling and an elder sibling in a conflict based on envy, and *Sandrembi and Chaisra*, a Meitei folktale which reiterates the victory of the virtuous sibling over an envious one, emphasizing the morality of siblingship. Thus, folktales are devices used to transmit values related to social ethics and morality, reflecting Dundes' argument in *Interpreting Folklore* that the primary function of folklore is didactic: to encode and transmit social norms and moral values across generations. This view also resonates with the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who studied the binary opposition patterns in myths (Lévi Strauss 206-231), which can be seen reflected in the two-dimensional portrayal of characters, such as *Thangnhang* (the good spirit) and *Umle Puwrthang* (the evil spirit) in the Monsang belief system and Sanamahí (the life principle) and *Haraba* (chaos) in the Meitei cosmology.

The ethnographic details of the Monsang people are well presented by Sh. Francis Monsang and Rajesh Kumar (2020) in *An Ethnographic Profile of the Monsang Tribe*, where they have documented several folktales such as *Juung Themin*, *Buling*, and *Hemon and Hesing*. These narratives are indicative of the value that the community places on courage, humility, and adherence to community norms. In contrast, the folktales widely available as representative of Meitei lore of the valley are varied in subject matter and include tales such as the story of *Keibu Keioiba* (the man-tiger hybrid), the narrative of *Sandrembi and Chaisra* (illustrating a moral dilemma), and *Tapta* (The Tiger and the Chil). Both communities thus utilize their narratives to convey moral codes; while Meitei narratives predominantly serve to reinforce Sanamahí cosmologies and are didactic in purpose, Monsang narratives, with their tribal specificity, have remained less transformed by religious ideology and more connected to ancestral memories and indigenous cosmologies.

## Theoretical Framework

The comparative analyses make use of concepts from oral performance (Finnegan); primary orality (Ong); the motif-index approach and analysis of folktales as cultural texts (Dundes); oral formulas and composition in performance (Lord); and oral tradition as historical source (Vansina). Combining the aspects of structure, context, and oral communication, we can view the narrative traditions of the Monsang and the Meitei as having shared characteristics in transmitting stories of ancestral origins and human morals.

## Comparative Analysis

**Man-Animal Transformation:** In both traditions, the boundaries between human beings and nonhuman beings become blurred. The Meitei *keibu keioiba* (man-tiger) tale parallels the Monsang story *Juung Themín* (monkeys transformed from lazy people). In both, animal transformation becomes a divine or moral punishment, serving as proof of the consequences of violating the rules of nature. This conforms to Dundes's structural argument that mythic metamorphosis encodes social deviation in symbolic narrative language (Dundes 43-62).

**Tale of Two Brothers:** In the Meitei tale "Two Brothers" and the Monsang tales *Hemon and Hesing*, sibling rivalry occurs between the virtuous and the transgressive brother. This motif is well-known in world literature and folklore, from Genesis to African folktales. Finnegan observes in her comparative study of oral African narratives that dualistic sibling archetypes recurrently function as vehicles of moral instruction, contrasting virtuous with selfish behavior (Finnegan 109-115).

**Feminine Figure and Justice:** The Meitei story *Sandrembi and Chaisra* and the Monsang story *Buling* show that female-centered narratives reaffirm community justice: perseverance and righteousness are rewarded in the female protagonists. This confirms Vansina's argument that oral societies encode and preserve moral and social norms through narrative, transmitting these across generations as a form of communal jurisprudence (Vansina 3-28)

## Religious and Cosmological Contexts

The Meitei folktales are deeply imbued with the ideas of Sanamahism, an indigenous religion worshipping house deities and believing in a duality of good and evil as the balance of the cosmos. Ritualized oral telling of folktales by maibas (priests) formed part of morning and evening religious ceremonies, thus integrating storytelling into the religious practice of the followers of Sanamahism.

On the other hand, although the Monsang narratives have adopted Christian cosmologies, there are traces of pre-Christian animism. The deity Thanghang (creator) and the devil Umlé Puwrthang (evil) can be related to the Christian idea of heaven and hell (Monsang and Kumar 245-247). Thus, even after conversion, Monsang folklore preserves old values and cosmologies

in new contexts and hence represents what Ong terms “secondary orality” the re-emergence of oral modes of thought and expression within a community already shaped by literacy and print culture (Ong 134-138).

### Ecology and Geography

The Monsang folktales grew out of a mountainous environment; tigers, caves, rivers, and birds are commonly found, representing transformation from the spiritual to the material realm. The story of *Thumpungpa*'s rise from the underworld cave (Monsang and Kumar 244) signifies the genesis and also the memory of migration of the Monsang.

In contrast, Meitei folktales originate in an agricultural valley with lakes, fields, and sacred groves. The relationship between human beings and nature is united by cycles of fertility and rebirth. *Tapta* tells us that tigers and men exist in symbiotic relationship, resonating with Scott's analysis of how the interdependence of upland and lowland ecologies has historically shaped culturally adapted communities in Southeast Asia (Scott 43).

### Function and Performance of Oral Narratives

Following Lord's oral-formulaic theory, Meitei and Monsang stories also include formulaic elements and repetitious performance. In the Meitei Phunga Wari, the oral stories always use repetitive chant and audience-participation refrains (e.g., “*Ei nungai!*”) to create rhythmic performance. The old storytellers of the Monsang tradition similarly create the atmosphere of narrative telling by reciting tales with chanting, calling, and singing refrains.

This type of performance exemplifies what Finnegan describes in her analysis of African oral traditions: the continuity between song, recital, and prayer as modes of performance that cannot be sharply separated (Finnegan 24-32), Ekam Laam (storytelling performance in festival dancing) and Riikhii Lha (marriage song) in the Monsang tradition all represent the confluence between narrative, ritual and morality, and reveal what Dundes argues: that folklore exists as a social act performed within community, not merely as a text to be read (Dundes 1-5).

### Interpretation: The Moral Compass of Oral Tradition

Communal good, restraint, effort, and relation to nature are strengthened through this shared moral universe of narration among both peoples. For example:

Work and greed: The reward for diligence in *Jurapa and Juranuw*, where divine justice rewards hardworking farmers, stands in contrast to the penalty for envy and deceit in *Sandrembi and Chaisra*.

Faith and ancestor worship: The Monsang myth of *Thumpungpa* and the Cave (khor) confirms trust in divine providence, in similar lines as the Meitei folktale *Khamba and Thoibi* affirms faith and determination.

Mediation by spiritual guides: The Monsang *Ethiim* (priest) is the functional equivalent of the Meitei *maiba*, connecting the visible and invisible worlds.

Narration serves as moral pedagogy and brings equilibrium to both cultures. Vansina argues that oral tradition functions as a disciplined form of social memory, preserving moral order alongside historical knowledge across generations (Vansina 3-28) Even with the arrival of new religious and technological forces, the folktales maintain their role in community consciousness.

### Discussion: Syncretism and Transformation

Both Monsang culture has been modified by Christianisation and Meitei culture by modernization of traditional ways. However, the folklores remain the cultural links.

In the Monsang case, Christianity reinterprets *Thanghang* as the Christian God while the old animistic foundations remain present, producing folk epics and biblical vernacular songs. This is consistent with what Ong describes as “secondary orality” a condition in which electronic and print-mediated culture coexists with and reshapes older oral traditions without wholly displacing them (Ong 134-138).

For the Meitei, the encounter with modernity has been a long negotiation between erasure and resilience. The most historically significant rupture came in the eighteenth century when King *Pamheiba*'s conversion to Vaishnavism led to the burning of sacred puyas and the replacement of Meitei Mayek with the Bengali script, severing the community from its indigenous heritage for nearly two centuries. This rupture set the context for the Meitei Revivalist Movement, which beginning in the early twentieth century sought to restore indigenous religious practice, the Meitei Mayek script, and oral traditions that had survived the colonial and Vaishnava periods (Potshangbam 15273). The Sanamahi Movement emerged as a formal rejection of Hinduism as a foreign imposition, giving birth to cultural organisations dedicated to reviving rituals, language, and performance. Crucially, this revival was not merely religious but profoundly narrative: the restoration of Sanamahism entailed reclaiming the Phunga Wari, the *maiba*'s recitations, and the cosmological genealogies of deities like Sanamahi and Pakhangba as active cultural texts.

The pressure of digital modernity has since added a further dimension. Caesar and Sanasam note that globalisation and commercial entertainment pose a real threat of extinction to Meitei oral practices, as the intergenerational household once the primary site of storytelling has increasingly dissolved (Caesar and Sanasam 29). Yet modernity has also provided new platforms for survival: Meitei Sankirtana was recognised as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013, and the Meitei Mayek script, now standardised in Unicode and integrated into school curricula and digital fonts, represents traditional knowledge migrated into modern communicative infrastructure. Folktales such as *Keibu Keioiba* and *Sandrembi and Chaisra* have been adapted for contemporary theatre and school textbooks, demonstrating that, as Dundes argues, folklore continuously adapts to the social contexts in which it is performed, retaining its function as a living cultural resource even as its media change. These efforts are not without internal tensions particularly the divide between Meitei Hindus and committed Sanamahists, and the continuing dominance of the Roman script in informal digital communication among youth

but they demonstrate that the response to globalisation can be one of strategic adaptation rather than passive erosion.

For both communities, syncretism is therefore not a settled condition but an ongoing negotiation. In the Monsang case, old moral frameworks are rehoused within new theological structures without fully surrendering their ancestral content. In the Meitei case, Sanamah practice is being extended through digital media, institutional recognition, and educational reform. What persists across both traditions is the fundamental function of the folktale: to serve, as Vansina argues, as a form of social memory disciplined by moral purpose (Vansina 3-28), a function no degree of modernisation has yet dissolved. Moreover, comparative analysis of these narratives confirms that oral tradition remains a means of building empathy and shared understanding between communities.

### Conclusion

The folktales of both the Monsang and the Meitei can be called oral memorials to Manipur's total personhood. Social ethics, nature consciousness, and intergroup understanding are embedded within these stories, and through the stories both cultural traditions meet on a point of human realization: in remembering ancestors, humanity is not lost. Scholarship on folktales Dundes's structural theory, Finnegan's notion of oral literature as performative dialogue, Vansina's model of oral tradition as history tells us that stories are not simply relics but active philosophical treatises which have constantly been imparting virtues of righteousness, harmonious existence, and moral legacy to communities. Amidst the crisis that the modern world has posed to language and ethnicity through the spread of modernization and digitality, the preservation, narration, and performance of these stories have been responsible for maintaining the pluricultural integrity of the communities of Manipur.

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