



## Review Essay

### Orality, Identity, and the Sense of the Past in the India-Burma Borderlands: A Review of Recent Studies<sup>1</sup>

Manjeet Baruah  
Special Centre for the Study of North East India  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India  
Email: manjeetbaruah@gmail.com

Orality remains a powerful idiom, a point of reference and meaning in the politics of ethnicity in the India-Burma borderlands. In a recent body of works on the area, the continued significance and meaning-bearing capacity of orality has been studied through departures from earlier colonial anthropological frameworks. For example, what constitutes the relation between oral form and social relations? Or is orality ideologically embedded? Or what would be some of the methods to read and understand orality beyond their popular representations in the societies? While highlighting the importance of these questions, this essay critically engages with this recent body of work on the above topics. At the same time, the essay also points to some of the limitations in the approaches applied, and indicates possible aspects that could be considered in this regard. The essay also argues that the relationship between orality, identity and the sense of the past needs to be studied beyond the framework of there being a necessary correspondence between form and context. In this regard, identifying the discontinuities in the relationship could provide further insights into the nature of the oral field.

*India, Northeast, borderlands, orality, ideology*

## Introduction

India-Burma borderlands comprise a large area that mainly encompasses north-eastern India, the eastern Himalayas, and the northern-western borderlands of Burma.<sup>2</sup> Inhabited by a range of communities, mostly classified in state lexicon as 'tribes', the area once comprised the frontiers of British India, British Burma and China between the 19th and mid-20th century. In the post-independence period, the area came to be identified and studied through the conceptual lens of 'borderland'. Geographically, the area is constituted by valleys, hills and mountainous zones, crisscrossed by passes and routes through which mobilities of trade, people, religion, textual cultures, or soldiers historically took place. The area is comprised of diverse ethnic groups in terms of their histories of migration, religion (Buddhists, Christians, traditional religions, Hindus, and so on), and in terms of their material cultures (such as wood-

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank S. Seigoulien Haokip for his comments on an earlier draft of the essay. I am grateful to Deepra Dandekar for her suggestions and comments.

<sup>2</sup> Comprising areas of Eastern Himalayas, Northeast India, and northern-western and northern Burma-Yunnan (China) border, the term India-Burma borderlands has been used in this overview for lack of any established definite classification. To cite just two examples of the descriptions applied to the region over the years, Major S. Johri (Johri 1933) generally described the area as 'Where India, China and Burma Meet' when referring to Tibet-NEFA/ Assam-Burma border areas. Joy L.K. Pachuau and Willem van Schendel (Pachuau and Schendel 2022: 1) on the other hand have described it as Eastern Himalayan Triangle', referring to the 'triangular region' between the 'eastern Himalayas and the Indo-Burma Arc', and the basins formed by rivers that flow through them.

or bamboo-based economies, cotton- or wool-based ones, or defined by shifting cultivation, or settled wet rice cultivation, etc.). Tibeto-Burman is the dominant language family of the area, although Austro-Asiatic and Indo-Aryan language families are also present in the region. This essay mainly looks at a particular thematic concern that has found a place in a recent body of works on the area that is deemed one of the most interesting analytical developments of recent times with regard to the region. This theme pertains to understanding the oral field and how it gets structured with regard to identity and ideology while configuring itself to building a sense of the past. This thematic concern is moreover important because it comprises a departure from earlier studies that approached orality as tradition or only as a form of literature. In contrast, published mainly between 2008 and the present, the broad concerns of these recent works range between folklore, history, religion, and identity studies. But despite such disciplinary diversity, a common concern has invariably engaged with understanding the structuring of orality. An important outcome of this has led to widening the scope of orality, both in terms of theory and method, and studying orality in ways that go beyond the earlier framework of tribal-oral societies of the borderland. Further, while in the case of most communities, writing became the dominant medium during the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, this did not reduce the significance of orality. In fact, as studies show, orality (such as mythology) continues to remain a dynamic site that produced and made the articulation of identity, ideology, and sense of the past in borderland areas possible. In this regard, the basic problems that researchers have faced lies in explaining the relationship between orality and a sense of the past. For instance, if the sense of the past or 'pastness' (Handoo 1998: 1-17, also cf. Halbwachs 1992 that Handoo draws), is not per se about past historical periods of a given community, but about how the past is conceptualised and socially remembered, then how would one investigate the capacity of oral registers that contain these processes, to structure the social relations of a given present community in different ways. It is with this understanding kept in mind that some recent studies have worked more closely on oral mythology and legends. Notably, in taking such a line of enquiry, they are faced with two issues. One: is the relationship between orality and sense of the past a more general phenomenon in the borderlands? For example, can it be found across the ethnic diversity of the borderlands? Two: if the relationship between orality and a sense of the past is real, then how would one explain its salience in contemporary times? Regarding the two issues, the argument in recent works is not that different local communities share (or need to share) the same narrative of the past. Rather, the sense of the past that is common across local communities exhibits certain similar underlying conditions. This makes it possible to study the relationship between mythology and historicity as a more general phenomenon that is common across the ethnic diversity of borderlands. But then, what comprise these underlying conditions? There are broadly two things to note, and both hinge on the place and role of orality in community life: (a) orality is a distinct field of culture through which communities continue to produce meaning, and (b) ideology through orality is a crucial underlying factor that constitutes a sense of the past and the idea of the self within the community. In other words, a sense of the past needs to be seen as fundamentally connected to the (re)production of the oral field which continues to be meaningful, and the perpetuation of an ideological construct vis-à-vis the production of political identity. The various works on the subject differ in their argument, with some focusing more on one or the other underlying factors outlined above, yet when considered together, what emerges is that even if questions of the oral field or ideology are conceptually different, the two cannot be treated as water-tight compartments. For example, researchers have pointed to how oral forms can be found as bearers of a twin character. On the one hand, oral forms are found to exist as bearing reference to the past, and on the other hand, they also exist as bearers of their powerful relevance in the present. In this regard, the question for researchers has been to ask what this kind of meaning-bearing capacity of orality explains? What makes it possible for orality to get meaningfully positioned in a dynamic range between the past and the present, especially a present which is concretely

contextually located within the dominance of writing? In terms of research, one of the outcomes of raising such analytical questions is an increasing emphasis placed in recent works on the need for more systematic examination of the oral data. The discussion below is not really a survey of all the recent works on the subject of orality or identity in the India-Burma borderlands. It is a limited overview of a few select works that have generally engaged with the above-stated research questions. However, these surveyed works are important when considered together, as they bring forth an issue, or rather, two inter-related issues, which have not received adequate attention (see Dutta 1995). These two issues are namely: what constitutes orality as a textual system (something that is much more than genre, and types of essential relics)? And under what conditions can orality become part of contemporary political and ideological practices? Second, these works have highlighted that researchers studying orality need to be careful and systematic in their understanding of oral data. For example, consider how the given nature of space can produce certain patterns in myths, or how myths or ballads, rather than being seen as pre-given or essential, can actually be viewed as constructions under given historical conditions. When the above points are considered, it is evident that these scholars not only take the study of orality beyond the colonial anthropological framework (isolated, kinship-based oral societies, or of the 'tribes'), but also highlight why finding meaningful answers to their continued salience is important to understand contemporary social and political processes in the area.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first section discusses some recent works that have engaged with the question of oral text, social relations, and ideology. The second section engages with some recent works that have examined how approaching the oral text also involves methodological questions. There is a common dimension to the works discussed in these two sections, namely, their underlying premise about the presence of a correspondence between text and context. Correspondence here means that a text represents the context of its production, or that a text can 'speak' about its context, especially because a given context (whichever way context is conceptualised) has a corresponding oral form. The third section, in a manner of conclusion, argues that the meaning-bearing capacity of orality also needs to be examined in terms of discontinuities in the relation between oral text and the context of its production. Discontinuous relations here means that an oral text is unable to represent or reformulate the context of its production. In other words, there can be situations when a given context does not have a corresponding oral form. In such cases, it is the ruptures and silences within the oral text that provide clues about its meaning.

### **The Oral Text, Social Relations and Ideology**

Tradition and the idea of pre-modern wisdom (that continues to be relevant) have generally been the considered recurring themes through which the orality of the area is studied. For example, as Desmond Kharmawphlang (Kharmawphlang 2022: 364), who works on Khasi folklore has pointed out, "The ethnic diversity of Northeast India is observed and felt through the stock of folklore materials, especially of the verbal kind which embody the process, resource, and responsibility of tradition. They are a testimony to the thousands of years of accumulated knowledge." However, in some of the recent works, one can see a shift in the way this research problem is framed. Rather than looking into questions of tradition and pre-modern wisdom (on pre-modern 'wisdom' see Bourdieu 1979), the emphasis has shifted to examining whether there is a difference or an inter-relation between orality as textual system on the one hand and the conditions under which orality can become part of contemporary ideological practices on the other hand. Either way, the emphasis has shifted focus to uncovering the structure of the oral text, its relationship with social relations across communities, and to how political ideology also plays a role in the construction of oral texts. It is also in this context that the role of space is examined. In other words, the relationship

between orality, identity and the sense of the past is not self-evident; it has to be looked for in the complex relations between oral forms, social relations, ideology and geography. Nevertheless, what is notable is that different scholars would view this factor from different vantage points. For example, the folklorist Stuart Blackburn (Blackburn 2008), in his study of the Apatanis (the Apatanis mainly inhabit the central parts of Arunachal Pradesh in India), has demonstrated that oral forms (such as mythology and folktales) cannot be explained as unique and primordial productions of a given community. Stories or motifs that constitute such oralities are geographically distributed across communities, regions, or even globally. For example, myths such as the stories of the Sun and Moon, or tales of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine prevalent among the Apatanis are not only found across the 'extended eastern Himalayas',<sup>3</sup> but also globally. However, Blackburn also shows that at another level such regional or global elements would still need to undergo a process of interpretative appropriation at the local level so that the regional or global elements of such folklore would become meaningful at the local level. This diversity manifests itself in the different organisation of similar motifs across cultures. For example, the three basic motifs of the Sun-Moon myth (excessive heat of multiple suns and moons/ the shooting down of one or more of the suns and moons to cool the heat / mortality or death due to the shooting down of the sun and moon) are found to be differently distributed. Blackburn shows that while the first motif is globally found, the second motif is mostly found in central Arunachal Pradesh, upland Southeast Asia and south west China. The third motif is confined to central Arunachal Pradesh and Yunnan, the different combination and arrangement of these motifs being dependent on local mediation. In terms of the local mediation of Apatanis, Blackburn indicates that mythology among the Apatanis is mainly part of the (re)production and expression of social relations, organised across four categories: *tanii* (Apatanis themselves), *misan* (neighbouring communities, like the Nyishis), *manyang* (ceremonial friends), and *halyang* (the outsider). This would mean that the specific arrangement of motifs in Apatani myths is meaningful only when seen in terms of (re)production of such social relations. Similarly, in the case of the tale of the *Kokii Yamu* (Innocent Persecuted Heroine), the specificity of its meaning is not merely in the motifs per se (which is globally found) but in how the arrangement conceptualises and simultaneously reproduces the dynamics of social relations across categories.<sup>4</sup> Blackburn terms this process as being 'between culture and inside culture'. With regard to social relations, Blackburn's analysis is interesting, even though Blackburn himself does not really foreground the point. His analysis reveals that social relations are not merely about 'tribal' and the kinship-based organisation of society. When the fourfold classification (*tanii*, *misan*, *manyang* and *halyang*) that Apatanis practice is taken into account, kinship is hardly unimportant. Rather, the point is that neither social relations comprise of a closed structure, nor does kinship alone determine the nature of social relations. Instead, if social relations are understood in terms of the above-described fourfold classification, one can see how the Apatani social structure is dynamic, providing us clues regarding the nature of orality i.e., the oral text being between culture and inside culture. Blackburn indicates that the Apatani social categories of *tanii*, *misan*, *manyang* and *halyang* are abstractions and not fixed in practice. Under given conditions or situations/ events, who is seen as a component of a specific category can vary. This dynamic relation between abstraction and practice comprises what is socially remembered as the history of social relations, or a sense of the past. It is in such

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<sup>3</sup> Blackburn's 'extended eastern Himalayas' comprises of eastern Himalayas, India-Burma border and upland Southeast Asia/ south west China.

<sup>4</sup> Versions of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine were collected from the Angami Nagas (the tale of Hunchibili by Hutton 1921: 280-282), the Sumi Nagas (the tale of Muchupile by Hutton 1921: 257-260) and the Assamese (the tale of Tejimola by J. Barooah 1915: 59-71) in the colonial period. However, unlike Blackburn's analysis of the tale of Kokii Yamu, these early collections did not analyse the problem of motifs and social relations that explain the nature and context of a particular version in the overall group of motifs.

processes that one would discover several configurations: motifs, events and memories that take the form of mythology. One such example in Blackburn's work that pertains to the myths is of the first colonial contact of 1897 (Blackburn 2008: 129-133). Blackburn argues that though orality, mythology and social relations are not the same, they are mutually bound in their meaning and hence dynamic, and not closed systems. If orality articulates as well as is part of social reproduction of the same process, oral forms become the signifiers of ethnic identity, i.e., orality acquires an idiomatic political value of being the signifier of a discrete political community that is marked off from others. Based on Blackburn's analysis, orality can be considered an idiom of social relations as well as an idiom in social relations. This possibility is already present in how orality and social relation are bound together in their meaning. But the politics of ethnic identity is not the same as traditional social categories. It is a field that has emerged through an encounter with the modern colonial and postcolonial state. In the same way, orality as an idiomatic signifier of ethnic identity is also an aspect that denotes the emergence of a new field of identity. In other words, the idiomatic political value of orality comes from a different field, namely the role of politics and the production of 'tribal' or ethnic identity through it;<sup>5</sup> and it is the need of that process to seek representation that now endows orality with idiomatic value, or hold within it the capacity to reference and come to mean an ethnic identity. In studies such as Blackburn's the departure from one of the basic premises of colonial anthropology constitutes a notable point that challenges the traditional notion of isolated, disconnected, and primordial communities as the bearers of pristine culture and its forms. Besides Blackburn, Tibetologist Toni Huber (Huber 1999) in his earlier studies on the eastern Himalayas, or anthropologist Marion Wettstein (Wettstein 2012: 213-238) with regard to the Nagas have also shown that to analyse orality as a primordial feature of a given community is to overlook how orality is part of negotiating diffusion, culture contact, and the actuality of exchange relations prevalent across communities. Recognising such negotiations, they argue, also analytically opens up orality to a process of time, and thereby enables researchers to identify its dynamism in social relations. As in Blackburn's work, Huber and Wettstein in their works also distinguish the idea of given and primordial oralities that are considered to constitute a unique representation of ethnic identities. The latter is a different field of modern politics that seeks symbols and markers for its expression. As evident, distinction needs to be drawn between orality and ideology, since ideology in terms of a political discourse of identity does not internally constitute orality, i.e., the production of an oral text. It is more a matter of orality becoming appropriated by ideology to represent identity.

However, there are a few other recent works which suggest that orality cannot be explained by separating it from ideology. In fact, it is through ideology itself that orality becomes explicable. For example, Mandy Sadan (Sadan 2013) in her historical cum anthropological work on the Singphos/ Kachins (stretching from the borders of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in India, through northern-western Burma to the borders of Yunnan in China) have examined how spirit cults (*nats*) that are orally expressed by possessing mediums, can mainly be explained as an ideological complex. Sadan here is referring to an interesting phenomenon. While the production of such spirit cults can be an expression of ideological agency, the location of the cults at the interstices of inter or intra-ethnic relations produce multiple ideological agencies out of its form and practice. One such case she examines is that of the *tawn nat* (chair or throne spirit). Sadan shows that while such *nats* were part of the production of Burmese kingship as a pan-ethnic phenomenon in the 19th century, "Most of these *nat* had

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<sup>5</sup> Blackburn (Blackburn 2003: 143-177) in his earlier studies on South India argues that the field of modern politics and nationalism is external to folklore. In his later studies of the Apatanis, his more nuanced position appears to be that modern politics is still to be conceived as a field external to folklore, but something that is able to produce a connection with folklore due to an already existing structural possibility of doing so that is ingrained within folklore.

biographies in which they died following some degree of encounter with Burmese kingship and, significantly, many were of non-Burman origin” (Ibid: 123). By *nats*, Sadan here refers to figures after whom (after their death) cults emerge. But through the agency of these spirit cults, non-Burman elements also become incorporated and rationalised into the pan-ethnic ‘pretension’ of Burmese kingship. The *tawn nat* cult too also pertains to an encounter between Tsumkha Duwa (an important Lahpai chief near Swegu, close to Yunnan) and King Mindon (1853-1878). Through the *tawn nat* cult, the Singpho chief Tsumkha Duwa could now be represented as one of the elements that comprised the pan-ethnic geopolitical body of King Mindon’s kingship. In effect, this came to mean the Burmese ‘national geopolitical body’. However, Sadan argues (Ibid: 127) that if a Singpho chief is a participant in the ritual narrative of the *nat* that acknowledges Mindon’s kingship, that participation cannot be merely explained as “a sign that Jingphaw communities in this region had become integrated into the Burmese cosmological, cultural and political order.” On the contrary, Sadan shows that while the ritual narrative acknowledge Mindon’s kingship, it does not acknowledge Mindon’s authority per se, or that the Singphos were in a tributary relationship with the Burmese king. This is because the motifs that constitute the ritual narrative, such as marriage and kinship, obligations of gift, lower ritual rank of the king as a wife-taker from the Singphos, or the king’s ill-treatment of his Singpho wife Wa Htao Tsumkha Nang (in the ritual narrative, the *tawn nat* cult emerged in relation to Wa Htao Tsumkha Nang after her death), these various motifs were mainly about how the Singphos subverted their integration into Burmese cultural and political order through a witty re-interpretation of signs. Sadan’s work exemplifies how ritual narratives such as of the *tawn nat* cult expresses two different ideological agencies. One, of Burmese (kingship) as a pan-ethnic ritual and political order and the other that critiques and subverts it. However, one may also argue another interesting point in this regard that Sadan does not foreground: why should the same motifs and the same ritual narrative serve two different ideological uses at the same time? The answer to this problem, one may argue, lies in the fact that the two orders, Burmese and Singpho, exist in an interrelationship with each other, even if this is a relation of contradiction. The meaning of the motif pattern thus lies in its ability to articulate this relation of contradiction. This is a point not recognised by Sadan.

Nevertheless, approaches such as Sadan’s are deeply nuanced and develop earlier discussed approaches that ontologically bind orality and social relations in terms of meaning. But what they do not look at is how, at given historical moments, such meanings become ideologically constituted, highlighting the role of ideology embedded in the production of meaningful orality. Therefore, what one might find in an oral form is also the construction of representation (on representation as construction, see Hall 1984: 3-17), even if these are figurative or encoded in nature. Returning to Sadan, there is also another level at which ritual narratives, such as those of *tawn nat* cult reconstitute a complex ideological interplay among two different classes of the Singphos themselves. Sadan shows how Tsumkha Duwa was a *gumsa* chief (i.e., a chieftain-based Singpho polity) in an area surrounded by *gumlao* rebellions, (i.e., popular Singpho rebellions against their chiefs, and chiefly authority since the mid-19th century due to various transregional and colonial factors). In other words, it is a ritual narrative about a *gumsa* chief but also the narrative about an area where the same chief is surrounded by the *gumlao* context of his times. This complexity, as Sadan argues, is expressed in the motif pattern as well as in the practices of the ritual narrative. The chief subverts the authority of the king, while in the process endowing himself with authority. In effect, the authority of the king is signified as a ‘pretence’, which the chief is able to cleverly expose through his alternative interpretation of signs and customs. However, at the same time, the motifs that are used in the ritual narrative to do so are nevertheless drawn from popular practices. The motifs reflect the Singpho commoners’ way of life (such as, disposal of leaf platters, etc.), and does not necessarily concern chiefs and chiefly lineages. As a result, this signification of motifs also subverts the ‘pretence’ of authority invested in the *gumsa* chief. Sadan formulates the problem

conceptually as that of mimicry and alterity. Further, because the *tawn nat* is a spirit of food and stomach ailments, it has been one of the popular rituals of the Singphos to invoke the cult on occasions that entail shared food and eating. Ritual practices in relation to the *gumsa* chief have therefore been historically connected to *gumlao* egalitarianism. To reiterate the earlier comparison between Blackburn and Sadan, both argue how orality and social relations are ontologically bound together in their meaning. But for Blackburn, this condition of being bound in meaning embeds a possibility in orality to intervention and interpretation by politics of identity. For Sadan, the possibility itself exists in the first place because of the ideological embeddedness of orality. Therefore, if one views the matter through Sadan's framework, without taking into account the ideological embeddedness of orality, what enables the political use of orality remains inexplicable. Nevertheless, it is not clear from Sadan's analysis whether ideology is to be viewed as an originary moment in the production of orality.

Besides Sadan, there have also been a few other recent works which have highlighted the ideological basis of orality. For example, Arkotong Longkumer (Longkumer 2010), an anthropologist of religion, in his study of the Heraka religion among the Zeme Nagas (North Cachar Hills of Assam, India) shows how constructing new ritual meanings (such as, dealing with the 'renewal' of a village, or changing the *hezoa*: the ritual centre of village) play a crucial role in (re)producing a break between the present and the past of the Zemes. What one can find in Longkumer's work is that it is the ideological embeddedness of orality (rituals and worldview) that produces its capacity to both effect and express the change that a community has undergone. It is not a case of ascribing ideology to orality. As emerges from Longkumer's study, the community's sense of the past become analytically accessible to the researcher through its orality.

### **The Researcher and Oral Data**

An interesting body of recent scholarship has emerged on borderlands that begins with the premise of a basic distinction between how people perceive and represent orality and how researchers handle that representation. In effect, the discussion hinges on the researcher's relation to a basic question: what is oral data? For example, in his study of the Dimasas (North Cachar Hills of Assam, India), anthropologist Phillipe Ramirez (Ramirez 2007: 91-107) points out that if one is trying to examine oral tradition, how people view it can be different from its underlying structural nature. For instance, Ramirez shows how *daikho* in Dimasa society is a ritual-religious complex with a territorial sense (i.e., a ritual arrangement of clan, area/ locality, and deity/ worship). However, when the Dimasas are asked about the *daikho*, there is no uniformity in the way the ritual elements are to be arranged. In other words, while the idea of *daikho* and its various constitutive elements can be configured in different arrangements, the arrangement itself could vary, with different combinations of the above elements depending on who is providing an account of it. This is because ritual, clan, locality, area, and worship do not exist or are not thought of in a neat, well-defined pre-given and ordered format. But such multiplicity in practice, Ramirez points out, cannot exist without the general principle or ideal of *daikho* as a ritual-religious complex with a territorial sense. After all, it is this ideal or norm which makes the actuality of practice a meaningful tradition. In the process, it provides the Dimasas their social structure, the concept of ancestry or time, and also the basis of their identity. It also means that *daikho* has to be approached both as a construction as well as a pre-given tradition at the same time. It is an interrelation between the two that explains what *daikho* is for Dimasa society, as well as what it can mean for the Dimasas in a given context. To put it another way, the unconscious is not cognitively represented in, or by consciousness, but it is in their interrelation that the structure as and in practice can be identified. What Ramirez tries to demonstrate is how people cognitively represent their actions and thoughts. But this alone does not necessarily explains what makes their actions and thoughts meaningful.

In the case of orality, the implication therefore is that when a researcher is approaching orality as data, a lot depends on the researcher's own conceptual framework about what that form is representing. The meaning of representation entailed in an oral form is not self-evident. In another work, Ramirez (Ramirez 2014) interestingly extends the above point to examine how people perceive and represent their reality, and how the researcher's abstraction of that process would lead to different interpretations vis-à-vis a particular type of borderland space. For example, in his study on the foothills between the Assam plains and the Meghalaya highland, Ramirez outlines how the myths of the Jayantias and the Tiwas (two ethnic groups) identify their ancestors as brothers. In fact, as Ramirez shows, brotherhood is a widely prevalent mythical motif across communities of the foothills that communities themselves attest to. However, a structural analysis of the motif expresses and reproduces something else, namely, a pattern of inter-ethnic social relations (to be seen in kinship or village organisation) that a particular form of space like the foothills, engenders. In short, though Ramirez does not formulate it thus, one may argue that the foothills engender a dialectical tension across ethnic identities: one's difference from the other is also due to one's mediation by the other. This dialectical tension then gets expressed through the brotherhood motif that distinguishes one group from the other while also tying them into brotherhood of lineage, with the different brothers under different series of events going and settling in different directions. The important point here is that this overall nature of the myth becomes explicable only through a conceptual framework (foothill space). This, moreover, depends on the researcher's point of analysis, and not on what myths communicate at face value, or on how myths are popularly perceived and represented. It is thus that the researcher makes the oral data meaningful.

In recent times, works on Mizo mythology (generally covering Mizoram in India and the Chin State of Burma) have engaged with the epistemic of oral data. For example, Joy L.K. Pachuau (Pachuau 2014) in her historical and anthropological work on the Mizos points to the production of Mizo as a political identity (re-imagining of the community through the concept of nationhood and Christianity) in the early 20th century. This reimagination impacts Mizo mythology too, seen mainly in the re-arrangement of the order of myths. For example, a set of mythical accounts are selected and rearranged in a particular sequence, with this new arrangement (the complex of *chhinlung* myth) providing its audience with a linear past of the Mizos. That is, the sequence of the myths allows for a construction of the history of origin and migration of the Mizos over the centuries. Notably, this sense of a historical past also makes it possible to construct the past of the Mizo nation. The myth complex has now become a traditional 'source' for the narrative history of the Mizo nation. Further, on the other hand, these myths that have found place in the arrangement also simultaneously correspond to Biblical myths. This correspondence in turn allows Christianity to shape the concept of nationhood. As Pachuau points out, these developments in the field of myths are connected to the arrival of print culture in society in the 1890s, made possible through the introduction of the Bible and Christianity. In other words, it is in the writing of orality, and not orality per se, that demonstrates the above arrangement and locates the place of religion in it. Pachuau shows that this arrangement of selected and sequenced accounts becomes meaningful for an account of Mizo origins and for their migration myths. Further, it is also through this arrangement that not only social and geographical diversity are now negotiated (such as, what constitutes agnatic, adoptive, or unrelated groups among the Mizos), but the negotiation itself that can now be plotted in time vis-à-vis the group's agnatic, adoptive, or unrelated character (i.e., to understand when given groups become agnatic, adoptive, or unrelated in the course of migrations). While such linear plotting of myths comprises the introduction of a new teleological re-structuring of the myths, it is also what allows myths to now be perceived as historical 'sources'. In this process, Pachuau's analysis can take one to an important conclusion. Namely, if the very character of oral data is inseparably tied to historical processes, then it is not necessarily possible to recover what is 'traditional' about myths from that body of



oral data, with 'traditional' here meaning cultural forms or practices that carry an essential character deemed inherent across time to a given community.

In a somewhat different line of argument, folklorist and literary scholar Margaret L. Pachuau (Pachuau 2018: 172-194) argues that such arrangements, as noted above, can also be examined in a different way. The interpretation of orality now exists as part of an entirely different medium in the Mizo culture, namely writing. It is through writing that the modernity of the interpretative act and that of the political community is established. The sense of modernity is important here as it is through this lens that the present is distinguished from 'primitive' past. Therefore, if orality is taken on board in the process of political community making, then it is through a logic of a sociality which is different from whatever tradition was earlier. As Pachuau shows, if orality finds a place in the act, it is nevertheless relegated to the periphery of modern sociality, and it is through this location of marginality that the modernity of the present is reinforced and reproduced. At the same time, orality is also transformed into a symbol or as an identity marker, rather than being the literary means or the articulation of an oral society. As symbol, orality now reinforces and reproduces the political community (i.e., ethnicity and nationhood). Reading Margaret L. Pachuau shows us that an expression of this complexity is the peculiar position that the idea of 'tribe' came to occupy in this regard. Tribe as an idea is dialectically positioned in a state of tension between a state of being that draws on orality and the past (through mythology) to produce the present, while at the same time, also peripheralizing the relevance of orality as symbolic of the present and its modern sociality, centred on the rationale of writing. Therefore, unlike in the case of Joy L.K. Pachuau's research, the problem that Margaret L. Pachuau engages with can be framed in the following manner: it is not whether oral data can (or cannot) provide the researcher access to the 'traditional'. The point is that oral data, when viewed thus, allows one to capture a cultural logic in the making of communities in an area constituted by a dialectical tension between the oral and the written.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Reconsideration for Future Research**

In each of the preceding sections, a body of recent works has been discussed. Though the specific communities of the borderlands that these works have studied are different, it is possible to highlight certain general points. In the first section, the issue was whether or not, analytically speaking, the problem of ideology can be considered external to the oral field. In the second section, the issue was how to approach orality in terms of data, and what would analytically entail considering orality as beyond how it is perceived and represented by the communities themselves. As is evident, there is an interesting difference between the works reviewed in both the sections. In the first section, an underlying premise of the works focuses on the recovery and nature of consciousness to uncover the meaning of orality in the area under study. Even Blackburn's interpretation about the localisation of regional or global folk elements hinges on this premise. In the second section, the review has attempted to cover works that read orality as being beyond questions that revolve around the subject of consciousness. Nevertheless, there is one premise that still runs through both kinds of works, namely, the idea that there is a correspondence between orality and the context of their occurrence, which the researcher needs to identify. The question then is, is this premise of a correspondence necessarily always correct? For example, a genre of oral peasant ballads

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<sup>6</sup> G. Kanato Chophy's work (Chophy 2019) on Sumi Nagas can be read as an interesting rejoinder. Chophy's analysis brings out the problem of existing dialectical tensions between the oral (pre-Christian) and the written (Christian-Biblical). But he argues that if the written is the norm in which the oral has to find its place and not the other way around, then it is also due to the presence of the oral in the written that the written gets interpreted in more than one way, thereby giving rise to sects among the Christian Sumi Nagas.

emerged in 19th century colonial Assam (*Barphukanar Geet*, *Moneeram Dewanar Geet*, *Doli Purana*) dealt with historical events or historical figures of the 19th century (Saikia 2012: 37-72, Baruah 2018: 195-216). A peculiarity of these ballads is that, while they portray the violent and disruptive aspects of colonialism, they nevertheless do not provide an ideological critique of colonialism. It is a peculiarity evident in all the ballads of this nineteenth-century genre in Assam. In this regard, a study of the ballads in question would show that its constitution was based on certain literary features, such as, formulaic language, terms used for social groups, agrarian imaginaries, styles of representing authority and other factors borrowed from pre-colonial genres. While features of pre-colonial genres lacked the capacity to deal with colonialism, the ideological contexts of pre-colonial genres were also different. As a result, one may argue, while its features allowed for the portrayal of violence and disruption to peasant life in general, they could not formulate that same condition ideologically, in order to critique colonialism. Their articulation was anachronistic to the general colonial condition.

The case of the ballads is interesting for two reasons. First, it highlights that dealing with orality requires researchers to deal with the specificity of oral form. The emergence of the ballads during the colonial period demonstrates how oral forms need not be deemed primordial. Rather, they are historical. At the same time, they are not a straightforward case that is ideologically constituted. Neither do they constitute a form that is appropriated or used to interpret, or become interpreted through a political field (identity discourse) external to itself. Second, the case of the ballads also highlight that the methodological shifts of recent times needs to take into account the possibility of discontinuous relations between the oral form and its context. In fact, the problem of discontinuous relations has not attracted enough attention with regard to the study of orality in the Northeast. The problem of discontinuous relations between the oral form and the context of its production is a pertinent question vis-à-vis uncovering the ontology of orality. If a text is not able to ideologically formulate on a condition even while it is dealing with it or being produced in it, then what is it that the text is speaking (cf. Macherey 1978)? For example, unlike the cases discussed in the previous two sections, there is little correspondence between the text and the context that it seeks to reflect. That is, a text produced in a context of peasant insurrection against colonialism (which was widespread in colonial Assam) does not ideologically contribute to the discourse of that context, even figuratively. But this in turn raises another question. Why should the peasant then return to such a form repeatedly (in different ballads) to deal with that context? In this regard, what we have is the following. The peasants articulate themselves through an oral form, but the textual features of the same form are from pre-colonial genres. In other words, the features are anachronistic to the colonial context. But in the process, something else is simultaneously taking place at the level of text. Namely, a particular and specific genre is getting produced through a series of opposite or inverse textual relations that include the breakdown of existing order despite the lack of its ideological critique, and the description of events but in figurative narrative (on opposite or inverse relations at the textual level [relations of contradictions], see Levi-Strauss 1955: 428-444). The series of opposite or inverse relations is actually both produced in, as well as is a sign of the discontinuity between an oral form and its context. However, once a form becomes possible through a discontinuous relations, different kinds of events or experiences can be accommodated in that form. Thus what gets produced in the process is an oral genre. But in all this, the fact of the discontinuity remains same, which is also the basis for the genre's persistence. When viewed thus, an important point that emerges about the meaning bearing capacity of orality that needs to be looked for in the discontinuous processes of its constitution. This would also mean that orality is not only about how peasant consciousness speaks; it is as much about how a genre speaks. In turn, one may find that questions of identity and sense of the past can have more complex relations with the oral form; and with regard to India-Burma borderlands, such an approach may provide

new understandings for the complexity of the oral field and its persistence as a significant site of identity, politics, violence and hope in the area.

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