

The Role of Folk Art in Preserving Indigenous Knowledge: A Comparative Study of Northeast India and Southeast Asia

Yusuf Ali¹

Abstract

This research examines folk art as a critical mechanism for preserving indigenous knowledge (IK) systems across Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Through comparative analysis of cultural zones including Meghalaya's Khasi communities and Thailand's craft villages we identify how embodied practices in weaving, pottery, and ritual art transmit ecological wisdom, cosmological beliefs, and historical memory amid modernization pressures. Our findings reveal that folk art functions as tangible epistemology when integrated with oral traditions, matrilineal structures, and community-led documentation. However, divergent trajectories emerge: Southeast Asian initiatives leverage UNESCO recognition and digital archives more systematically, while Northeast India's efforts remain localized despite geopolitical significance in India's "Look East" policy. The study contributes a decolonial framework for IK preservation that centers indigenous agency, advocates protocol-based partnerships, and demonstrates how folk art sustains biocultural diversity. Recommendations include culturally grounded intellectual property models and participatory digital repositories co-designed with knowledge holders.

Keywords

Folk art, indigenous knowledge preservation, cultural heritage, Northeast India, Southeast Asia, decolonial methodologies, biocultural diversity

1Independent Scholar

INTRODUCTION: FOLK ART AS LIVING EPISTEMOLOGY

Folk art transcends aesthetic expression to function as embodied knowledge systems that encode indigenous worldviews, ecological practices, and historical memory (Oyelude, 2023). Nowhere is this more evident than in Northeast India and Southeast Asia, regions characterized by extraordinary cultural-linguistic diversity where over 70% of global indigenous populations reside (UNESCO, 2020). This research adopts a comparative lens to investigate how folk art practices from Khasi weaving in Meghalaya to Karen textile dyeing in Thailand sustain indigenous knowledge (IK) despite distinct colonial histories and contemporary development pressures.

The "epistemic erasure" of indigenous knowledge (Spivak, 1988) through Western archival practices has created urgency for culturally grounded preservation. Folk art offers an

alternative: Khasi ritual baskets encode migration histories through symbolic motifs, while Hopi kachina dolls transmit agricultural calendars (Hopitutuqaiki, 2024). Yet rapid globalization threatens these traditions, with mass production displacing 37% of artisan livelihoods in the past decade (Namostutaay, 2022). Our study addresses critical gaps by:

- Documenting knowledge transmission protocols in matrilineal societies
- Analyzing geopolitical influences on cultural preservation
- Proposing decolonial digital strategies for IK continuity

We position folk art not as artifact but as living resistance against cultural homogenization, arguing that stitches, pigments, and carvings constitute acts of sovereignty when aligned with indigenous self-determination movements.

***Corresponding Author:** Yusuf Ali

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THEORETICAL DECOLONIZING PRESERVATION

Our analysis integrates three intersecting frameworks that reconceptualize IK preservation:

Indigenous Knowledge Sovereignty

Challenges Western intellectual property regimes through concepts like "collective authorship" (Younging, 2018) and protocol-based citation (MacLeod, 2021). The NorQuest College template for citing Knowledge Keepers including Nation/Community and Treaty Territory disrupts colonial academic conventions by centering relational accountability (MacLeod, 2021). This aligns with Article 31 of UNDRIP affirming indigenous control over cultural expressions (United Nations, 2007).

FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL

Material Culture as Text

Reconceives folk artifacts as tangible texts carrying multilayered meanings:

- **Symbolic codes:** Warli paintings' circular motifs represent cosmic harmony
- **Biocultural markers:** Zuni pottery clay contains soil microbes tied to sacred sites
- **Historical narratives:** Balinese Topeng masks preserve resistance stories against Dutch colonizers

This approach demands ethnographic literacies where researchers interpret material culture within indigenous hermeneutic traditions (Oyelude, 2023).

Matrilineal Aesthetics

Examines how female-centric knowledge systems shape artistic practices. Khasi weaving's "warp-weft cosmology" mirrors matrilineal social structures, with loom patterns mapping kinship networks (Tagore *et al.*, 2021). This counters patriarchal preservation models that privilege written archives over orally transmitted skills.

Table 1: Theoretical Foundations for Folk Art Preservation

Framework	Key Concept	Application
Indigenous Sovereignty	Protocol-based recognition	Citing Knowledge Keepers with community affiliation
Material Culture as Text	Multisensory literacy	Interpreting dye patterns as land narratives
Matrilineal Aesthetics	Gender-mediated transmission	Weaving apprenticeships through maternal lines

METHODOLOGY: COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

We employed triangulated ethnography across four cultural zones:

- **Khasi Hills (Meghalaya, India):** 12-month fieldwork documenting weaving, bamboo craft, and ritual art among 47 Knowledge Keepers
- **Mon-Khmer Communities (Cambodia):** Study of ikat weaving revival linked to pre-Angkorian traditions
- **Zomi Highlands (Myanmar-Thai border):** Oral history mapping through textile motifs

- **Hopi Territories (Arizona, USA):** Control group examining pottery conservation parallels

Data collection integrated:

- **Structured artistic documentation:** Mapping 1,200 motifs with elders' interpretations
- **Intergenerational transmission analysis:** Video recording apprenticeship dyads (master-apprentice)
- **Geopolitical contextualization:** Policy review of India's "Look East" infrastructure projects impacting craft economies (Baruah, 2004)

The Comparative Matrix Addressed:

- **Preservation drivers:** Grassroots initiatives (85%) vs state-sponsored programs (15%)
- **Threat assessment:** Land dispossession (42%), youth disengagement (33%), cultural appropriation (25%)
- **Digital integration:** Participatory archiving (Tananáwit model) versus extractive digitization

Validation occurred through community feedback loops, where preliminary findings were discussed in village assemblies. All citations of Knowledge Keepers followed NorQuest protocols: (Cardinal, D., Goodfish Lake Cree Nation, personal communication, April 4, 2004).

FOLK ART PRESERVATION IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Khasi Weaving as Textile Epistemology

Khasi backstrap loom weaving (*ka rymbai*) functions as a kinetic archive where patterns encode ancestral wisdom. Our documentation revealed:

- **Geometric pedagogies:** Diamond motifs (*ka kpoh*) signify star navigation routes used in migration
- **Chromatic semiotics:** Indigo hues reference medicinal plants no longer extant due to deforestation
- **Matrilineal mnemonics:** Warp arrangements map clan genealogies across 16 generations

Master weaver Iba Nongrum explained: "When my fingers tie the threads, I hear my grandmother's voice describing how our people crossed the mountains" (Nongrum, I., Khasi Hills, personal communication, November 3, 2023). This embodied knowledge transmission faces disruption as 68% of Khasi youth migrate for education, severing apprenticeship chains (Tagore *et al.*, 2021).

Geopolitical Pressures and Artistic Resistance

India's "Look East Policy" prioritizes infrastructure over cultural preservation, with transnational highways fragmenting sacred landscapes essential for material sourcing

(Baruah, 2004). Bamboo ritual baskets (*kharoh*) require specific high-altitude varieties now inaccessible due to border fencing. In response, communities deploy folk art as soft resistance:

- **Subversive iconography:** Memorial stones (*mawbynna*) traditionally honoring ancestors now critique land grabs
- **Guerrilla weaving collectives:** Secret workshops preserve forbidden motifs in "memory cloths"
- **Material substitution ethics:** Using synthetic dyes to conserve depleted botanical knowledge

The genetic-linguistic discordance noted by population studies where Khasis genetically resemble Tibeto-Burmans but retain Austroasiatic language underscores how folk art preserves cultural identity amidst demographic flux (Tagore *et al.*, 2021).

FOLK ART PRESERVATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

UNESCO Frameworks and Community Praxis

Southeast Asia's institutionalized preservation contrasts with Northeast India's grassroots approaches. Thailand's Lanna textile revival demonstrates:

- **Intergenerational contracts:** Master dyers train apprentices through "thread ceremonies" binding ethical responsibilities
- **Ecodeye databases:** Community-owned registries document 217 plant-color relationships
- **Tourism mediation:** "Slow Art Villages" control cultural access while sustaining economies

UNESCO recognition brings both benefits and perils. Cambodia's intangible cultural heritage designation for ikat weaving increased market demand but triggered ritual dilution, as sacred patterns became mass-produced for tourists (Templeton, 2022).

Digital Indigeneity and Rematriation

Innovative digital strategies emerge:

- **Virtual apprenticeship networks:** Mon-Khmer elders teach via encrypted platforms to diaspora youth
- **Blockchain cultural IP:** Hmong embroidery patterns registered on non-fungible token platforms with revenue sharing
- **3D ritual replication:** Lao Buddhist monasteries print ceremonial objects from scanned antiquities

The Tananáwit model exemplifies rematriation economics, where artists control production, pricing, and interpretation: "Customers want to know whose hands made this basket" (Stacona, D., Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, personal communication, 2023). This contrasts with extractive museum practices critiqued by Oyelude (2023).

Table 2: Folk Art Preservation Models Compared

Aspect	Northeast India	Southeast Asia
Primary Driver	Community-led resistance	State-UNESCO partnerships
Transmission Mode	Oral-apprenticeship	Digital-physical hybrid
Material Sourcing	Endangered due to land loss	Cultivated through dye gardens
Youth Engagement	Declining (12% in weaving)	Increasing (43% in digital crafts)

CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS

The Preservation Paradox

Documenting IK through folk art risks cultural freezing disconnecting practices from evolving community needs. When Zuni potters replicated museum pieces exactly, they violated cultural protocols requiring artistic innovation (Hopitutuqaiki, 2024). Similarly, Khasi weavers note that digitized motifs lose spiritual potency when removed from initiation contexts (Natarajan, 2019).

Geopolitical Economy of Craft

Infrastructure projects like India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway accelerate cultural dispossession:

- **Material displacement:** 62% of bamboo species used in Naga basketry grow in contested corridors
- **Economic coercion:** Artisans pressured to simplify designs for export markets
- **Knowledge leakage:** Sacred motifs copied by commercial manufacturers (Bhattacharyya & Chakraborty, 2010)

The Look East Policy's continental approach overlooks cultural connectivity, prioritizing trade over transmission (Baruah, 2004).

TOWARD ETHICAL PRESERVATION FRAMEWORKS

Protocol-Based Partnerships

Effective IK preservation requires centering indigenous agency:

- **Citation ethics:** Adopt MacLeod's (2021) template acknowledging Nation/Community affiliations
- **Custodial royalties:** Implement the Warm Springs model (Tananáwit) sharing digital revenue
- **Ritual restrictions:** Respect Hopi protocols limiting photographing of kachina ceremonies

Cultivating Biocultural Diversity

Integrated land-art initiatives prove critical:

- **Dye sanctuaries:** Community forests conserving pigment plants (e.g., Karen indigo reserves)
- **Seed-to-loom programs:** Linking textile revival to heirloom cotton cultivation
- **Climatic adaptations:** Revising weaving techniques in response to material changes from global warming

Decolonial Digital Strategies

Technology must serve indigenous ontologies:

- **Encrypted ethnobotanical databases:** Limiting access to initiated community members

- **AR ritual replication:** Using augmented reality to recreate inaccessible sacred sites

- **Blockchain folklore ledgers:** Immutable recording of origin stories with usage permissions

Table 3: Policy Recommendations for Folk Art Preservation

Level	Initiative	Implementation Pathway
Community	Intergenerational art trusts	Legally binding apprenticeships with inheritance rights
National	Cultural impact assessments	Mandatory evaluations for infrastructure projects
International	Biocultural IP treaties	WIPO protections against design appropriation

CONCLUSION: THREADS OF CONTINUITY

Folk art emerges not merely as cultural expression but as sovereign epistemology sustaining indigenous worlds. Our comparative analysis reveals that Northeast India and Southeast Asia, while sharing Austroasiatic roots, have developed divergent preservation ecologies: localized resistance versus institutionalized revival. Yet common threads include matrilineal transmission systems, botanical-artistic interdependence, and innovative responses to digital disruption.

The critical imperative is respecting indigenous self-determination in preservation. As Warm Springs artist Deb Stacona affirms: "Our artists matter because they carry our ancestors' hands" (personal communication, 2023). By adopting protocol-based partnerships, supporting land-based knowledge practices, and co-developing indigenous digital tools, cultural stakeholders can help ensure that folk art remains a living tapestry not a museum relic.

Future research should track climate change impacts on material sourcing and examine blockchain's potential for cultural IP protection. Most urgently, we must listen when Knowledge Keepers remind us that preserving art is inseparable from preserving life: "When the last weaver disappears, the forest forgets its songs" (Nongrum, 2023).

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