

Oral Traditions as a Form of Socially Constructed Knowledge in Tribal Societies

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Abstract: Oral tradition refers to the practice of passing down cultural knowledge, history, stories, and beliefs through spoken word or song, rather than written form. These traditions play a crucial role in the transmission and construction of knowledge within tribal societies. This paper explores how oral traditions function as socially constructed knowledge systems, ensuring cultural continuity, social cohesion, and identity preservation. By analysing storytelling, folklore, myths, proverbs, and songs, the study highlights how oral narratives encapsulate indigenous epistemologies and serve as repositories of wisdom. Furthermore, it examines the challenges these traditions face due to modernization, globalization, and colonial influences. The paper concludes by advocating for the preservation and integration of oral traditions in contemporary knowledge systems.

Keywords: Oral Traditions, Social Construction, Tribal Knowledge, Indigenous Epistemology, Cultural Preservation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge construction within societies is an inherently social process, shaped by interactions, collective experiences, and cultural frameworks. Tribal societies, in particular, rely on oral traditions to transmit knowledge across generations. Unlike written documentation, oral traditions exist in dynamic forms, evolving with social contexts while retaining core cultural values.

The oral traditions and expressions domain encompasses an enormous variety of spoken forms including proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, dramatic performances and more. Oral traditions and expressions are used to pass on knowledge, cultural and social values and collective memory. They play a crucial part in keeping cultures alive.

Some types of oral expression are common and can be used by entire communities while others are limited to particular social groups, only men or women, perhaps, or only the elderly. This paper explores how oral traditions function as socially constructed knowledge, their significance in preserving tribal identities, and the contemporary challenges they face.

II. DEFINITION

“Oral tradition is a system where knowledge, art, ideas, and culture are received, preserved, and transmitted orally from one generation to another.”(Britannica)

“Oral tradition is a community's cultural and historical traditions passed down by word of mouth or example from one generation to another without written instruction.”(Dictionary.com)

For example, Oral literature is a valuable resource of the Bodo people. The Bodo oral literature is not lagging behind to the literature of any other community. Various branches exist in the oral literature; there are a good number of folk songs such as Baisagu songs, marriage songs, love songs, ballads and nursery rhymes or lullaby. Apart from the folk songs there are myths, legends and tales which are known as prose narratives in oral literature. The proverbs and riddles, the two branches of oral literature are also found in large numbers among the Bodos. The oral epics are till now in the oral forms which are sung the whole night. The Siri of Tulu language and Dhalamaru of North India are the best examples of oral epic. In China epics are divided into two types - epic of origin and heroic epic. The former is related to the origin of the Chinese and human beings, immigration and the reaction of culture, battles against other tribes and demons or monsters. The heroic epic reflects tribal alliances and conflicts and a struggle for existence. There are similarities of Gibi Bithai with either Semi literary epic or epic of origin. Bodos have lots of prose narrative tradition. It still exists among the people in oral form. Gibi Bithai is culmination of such oral narratives. The myth, customs and traditional textures of the Bodos are found in the Gibi Bithai. Gibi Bithai contains details accounts of Bathou Brai as well as his powers and functions, the origin of Sibrai, Brahma, Vishnu and other deities. Origin of worldly matters and living beings and about the customs and fairs and festivals of the Bodos have been dealt at length in the oral derived epic by Bihoram Boro. (Rajendra Kumar Basumatary, 2010)

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

The concept of socially constructed knowledge is rooted in sociological theories that emphasize the collective nature of understanding and meaning-making. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that reality is constructed through social interactions, and knowledge is shaped by cultural, historical, and environmental contexts. In tribal societies, oral traditions serve as a primary medium for this knowledge construction, embedding historical narratives, moral values, and societal norms within communal storytelling.

Social constructivist theories, such as those proposed by **Vygotsky (1978)**, highlight the role of social interaction in learning and knowledge transmission. According to Vygotsky, knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and shared experiences, a principle that aligns with the mechanisms of oral traditions. Through storytelling, elders and knowledge keepers engage younger generations in interactive learning, ensuring that tribal knowledge is contextualized and understood within the community's cultural framework.

Foucault (1972) extends the idea of socially constructed knowledge by exploring the relationship between knowledge and power. He argues that knowledge systems are often shaped by dominant discourses that influence what is considered valid or authoritative. In tribal societies, oral traditions act as counter-discourses to dominant written epistemologies, preserving indigenous worldviews and resisting epistemic erasure imposed by colonial and modern influences.

Another important perspective comes from indigenous epistemology scholars such as **Battiste (2002)**, who argue that indigenous knowledge systems are holistic, relational, and interdependent. Oral traditions not only function as knowledge repositories but also reinforce social bonds and ethical responsibilities. This relational aspect of knowledge construction aligns with the principles of social constructivism, where meaning emerges through shared cultural practices and communal participation.

Given these theoretical perspectives, oral traditions can be seen as dynamic processes that continuously shape and reshape knowledge within tribal communities. They are not merely passive carriers of historical facts but active sites of meaning-making, adaptation, and cultural resilience.

IV. FORMS OF ORAL TRADITIONS IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES

Oral traditions manifest in diverse forms, each serving unique functions within tribal communities. These traditions not only transmit knowledge but also reinforce social structures, cultural values, and spiritual beliefs. The key forms include:

Storytelling and Folklore: Storytelling is a fundamental component of oral traditions in tribal societies. Myths, legends, and folktales encapsulate historical events, cosmologies, and ethical teachings. These narratives serve multiple functions, from entertainment to moral instruction and historical preservation. Storytelling is often interactive, with audiences encouraged to ask questions and interpret the story's lessons. In some tribal communities, storytelling occurs in specific seasons or ceremonial contexts, reinforcing the cultural relevance of the practice.

For an example, In Khasi oral traditions, the children's rhymes explicitly convey meaningful representations and values that reflect the quintessential elements of culture and tradition. The mode of performance of the rhymes also validates the children's expression and ability to develop their verbal skills in rhyming and poetry. Children's rhymes are often designed to provide an entertaining means of teaching children about their culture, other cultures, good behaviour, facts and skills. (**War Sohlang, Sharailyn, 2022, ch-11, pg-267**)

Proverbs, Sayings, and Idioms: Proverbs and idiomatic expressions are compact yet profound ways of transmitting wisdom, social norms, and moral guidance. These linguistic devices are deeply embedded in everyday conversations and are used to offer advice, resolve disputes, and reinforce societal values. Many proverbs draw upon natural metaphors, reflecting indigenous ecological knowledge and worldviews. Since proverbs are easily memorized, they ensure the longevity of cultural wisdom even in changing social environments. In *Proverbs: A Handbook*, Wolfgang Mieder discusses how proverbs encapsulate societal values and wisdom. For instance, in the introduction, he states that proverbs offer a concise record of folk wisdom and have appeared in oral tradition, literature, art, and popular culture for centuries (**Wolfgang Mieder, (June 30, 2004)**)

Rituals, Ceremonies, and Songs: Songs, chants, and ritualized speech form a significant part of oral traditions, particularly in religious and communal ceremonies. These oral forms encode spiritual beliefs, agricultural knowledge, and social customs. Rituals often include invocations, prayers, and poetic recitations that link the present generation with ancestral spirits. Songs may also serve mnemonic functions, helping to preserve genealogical records and historical narratives. **UNESCO** highlights that oral traditions, including songs and chants, play a crucial role in passing on knowledge, cultural values, and collective memory within communities. (**UNESCO, 2006**)

Oral History and Genealogies: Oral histories provide a continuous record of past events, community origins, and leadership successions. Unlike written histories, which are fixed, oral histories evolve with each retelling, allowing adaptation to contemporary circumstances while retaining core truths. Genealogies, often recited by designated elders, establish kinship ties and social hierarchies. In many indigenous communities, the ability to recall ancestral lineages is a mark of wisdom and social responsibility. W. H. R. Rivers (1900) revealed the importance of genealogy in social and cultural studies and depicted the technique of drawing up genealogical data.

Performance-Based Knowledge Transmission: Dramatic re-enactments, dances, and theatrical performances are another medium of oral tradition. These performances are used to depict historical battles, migration stories, and moral parables. By engaging multiple senses—speech, movement, music—performance-based oral traditions enhance memory retention and create a communal experience of learning. (**E-gyankosh, unit 2, pg. 18**)

Naming and Oral Contracts: In many tribal societies, naming ceremonies carry significant oral traditions. Names are often imbued with historical, spiritual, or ancestral significance and may convey personal or communal responsibilities. Similarly, oral contracts and customary laws—often witnessed by elders—govern land ownership, trade agreements, and social obligations. These contracts rely on communal memory and social trust rather than written documentation.

Traditional Healing and Medicinal Knowledge: Indigenous medical knowledge is frequently transmitted through oral traditions, including the use of herbal remedies, spiritual healing practices, and diagnostic techniques. Healers and shamans acquire knowledge through apprenticeships and oral instruction, ensuring the continuity of holistic medical traditions that have been refined over generations. (E-gyankosh, unit 2, pg.30)

V. FUNCTIONS OF ORAL TRADITIONS AS SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge Transmission and Education: Oral traditions serve as a dynamic and immersive educational system in tribal societies. Unlike formal education, which relies on structured curricula and written texts, indigenous learning is deeply embedded in lived experiences, communal interactions, and environmental engagement. Knowledge transmission occurs through multiple mechanisms, ensuring that cultural wisdom, survival skills, and moral teachings are passed from one generation to the next.

Intergenerational Learning: Knowledge keepers such as elders, shamans, and storytellers play a crucial role in mentoring younger community members. This mentorship often takes the form of direct oral instruction, guided practice, and participatory learning, where young learners observe and imitate experienced members. This experiential form of education ensures that knowledge remains practical, contextually relevant, and aligned with community needs.

Apprenticeship-Based Knowledge Transmission: In many tribal societies, specialized knowledge—such as healing practices, craftsmanship, hunting techniques, and spiritual rituals—is transmitted through apprenticeship. Young learners undergo prolonged, immersive training under the guidance of experienced practitioners. For instance, traditional healers learn medicinal plant usage, diagnostic methods, and ritualistic healing through verbal instruction, observation, and hands-on experience.

Narrative-Based Pedagogy: Storytelling is not merely a form of entertainment but a critical pedagogical tool. Myths, legends, and historical narratives are used to teach ethics, survival strategies, and social responsibilities. Through repeated exposure to these stories, listeners internalize complex knowledge systems that guide decision-making and behaviour.

Memory and Mnemonics: Since oral traditions rely on memory retention, tribal societies employ mnemonic devices such as rhythmic chants, repetitive phrasing, and symbolic imagery. These techniques enhance recall and ensure the longevity of knowledge across generations. Songs, for example, encode agricultural calendars, genealogies, and ceremonial rites in easily remembered formats. (Coraiola, et.al., 2018, p. 53).

Communal Learning Environments: Education in tribal societies is not confined to a specific institution but takes place in communal settings, including gatherings, ceremonies, and work environments. Learning is participatory and collective, reinforcing social cohesion while fostering a shared knowledge base.

Adaptive Knowledge Transmission: Oral traditions allow for flexibility in knowledge construction, adapting to changing environmental, social, and historical conditions. Knowledge is updated and contextualized through continuous retelling and reinterpretation, ensuring that it remains relevant to contemporary challenges. By functioning as an integrated system of knowledge transmission, oral traditions provide holistic education that aligns intellectual, spiritual, and practical dimensions of learning within tribal societies.

Identity and Cultural Continuity: Oral traditions serve as a foundational pillar for preserving cultural identity and ensuring intergenerational continuity in tribal societies. These traditions function as living repositories of historical consciousness, linking past, present, and future generations through shared narratives, values, and collective experiences. By transmitting myths, legends, and genealogies, oral traditions reinforce a sense of belonging and community identity.

Cultural Identity Formation: Oral traditions provide individuals with a framework to understand their place within their society. Through storytelling and folklore, members of tribal communities internalize ethical principles, social roles, and cosmological beliefs that define their cultural identity. These narratives often emphasize kinship ties, territorial belonging, and spiritual connections to the land.

Collective Memory and Ancestral Wisdom: The preservation of collective memory through oral traditions ensures that historical events, migration patterns, and ancestral achievements are not forgotten. Elders play a crucial role in maintaining this knowledge, acting as custodians of wisdom and moral authority. By continuously recounting historical narratives, they reinforce a sense of continuity and resilience against external cultural disruptions.

Linguistic and Expressive Heritage: Language is a crucial component of cultural identity, and oral traditions help sustain indigenous languages by embedding them in everyday communication. Ritualized speech, poetic expressions, and ceremonial songs ensure the vibrancy of linguistic heritage, preserving unique linguistic structures, idioms, and worldviews.

Resistance against Cultural Erosion: In the face of globalization and external influences, oral traditions serve as mechanisms of cultural resistance. They provide a counter-narrative to dominant historical accounts, affirming indigenous perspectives and reinforcing epistemic sovereignty. Through oral histories and testimonies, tribal societies assert their historical agency and challenge colonial narratives that seek to erase their past.

Cultural Adaptation and Evolution: While oral traditions emphasize continuity, they also allow for cultural adaptation. Narratives evolve over time, incorporating new experiences and social realities while maintaining their core values. This dynamic nature of oral traditions enables tribal societies to respond to contemporary challenges while preserving their cultural essence. Through these mechanisms, oral traditions ensure that tribal societies retain a strong cultural identity and navigate historical transitions without losing their heritage. They remain an essential force in maintaining social cohesion, fostering resilience, and affirming indigenous knowledge systems.

Conflict Resolution and Social Order: Proverbs, folktales, and oral legal traditions are used to mediate disputes and maintain harmony. Elders often rely on historical precedents found in oral narratives to resolve conflicts and reinforce social norms.

Environmental and Ecological Knowledge: Oral traditions play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting environmental and ecological knowledge in tribal societies. These traditions encapsulate indigenous wisdom about land use, climate patterns, biodiversity, and sustainable resource management. Through myths, folktales, and proverbs, tribal communities pass down knowledge of natural cycles, animal behaviour, and agricultural techniques that promote ecological balance. For example, seasonal storytelling often coincides with key agricultural activities, reinforcing the importance of timing in planting and harvesting.

Indigenous narratives frequently emphasize the interconnectedness of all living beings, instilling a deep sense of environmental stewardship. Additionally, oral histories document environmental changes over generations, providing valuable insights into historical climate shifts, natural disasters, and adaptive survival strategies.

By embedding ecological knowledge within oral traditions, tribal societies maintain a dynamic, adaptive system of environmental management that aligns with their cultural and spiritual values. However, these knowledge systems face threats from environmental degradation, climate change, and external pressures, making their documentation and preservation increasingly important in contemporary ecological discourse.

VI. CHALLENGES TO ORAL TRADITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Despite their resilience, oral traditions face numerous challenges:

Impact of Globalization and Modernization: The spread of literacy and digital communication has reduced the reliance on oral traditions. Younger generations are increasingly adopting written and digital knowledge systems, leading to the erosion of oral cultural heritage. (UNESCO-Intangible Heritage Home)

Colonial Disruptions and Epistemic Suppression: Colonialism profoundly disrupted indigenous knowledge systems by marginalizing oral traditions, replacing them with Eurocentric epistemologies, and undermining the legitimacy of indigenous ways of knowing. Through various means—educational policies, religious conversion, legal frameworks, and direct suppression—colonial powers systematically devalued oral traditions, contributing to the erosion of tribal identities and cultural continuity.

Language Endangerment: Many tribal languages are endangered due to dominant linguistic influences. Since oral traditions are inherently tied to language, linguistic decline threatens their survival. Language endangerment is one of the most significant threats to oral traditions in tribal societies. Since oral traditions are deeply embedded in language, the decline of indigenous languages leads to the erosion of traditional knowledge systems, cultural identity, and intergenerational communication. Language loss is often a consequence of colonization, globalization, political marginalization, and socio-economic pressures. This section explores the causes of language endangerment, its impact on oral traditions, and efforts to revitalize endangered languages. Language endangerment poses a severe threat to oral traditions in tribal societies, as it disrupts the transmission of cultural knowledge, weakens social cohesion, and erodes indigenous worldviews. However, indigenous communities, scholars, and activists are actively working to revitalize endangered languages through education, digital archiving, legal advocacy, and cultural initiatives. Strengthening these efforts is crucial to preserving the linguistic and oral heritage of tribal societies, ensuring that traditional knowledge systems remain vibrant and resilient in the face of modern challenges. (Ahmed Kaamil, 2025)

Globalization and the Dominance of Major Languages: The spread of globalization has accelerated language shift, as dominant languages—such as English, Mandarin, and Spanish—are increasingly required for economic, technological, and social mobility. As younger generations seek educational and job opportunities, they often abandon indigenous languages in favour of languages that offer greater economic prospects. This shift is particularly evident in urban areas, where indigenous languages are less frequently spoken in daily interactions.

The rise of digital communication and media has also reinforced linguistic homogenization. Social media, entertainment, and digital content are predominantly available in major world languages, reducing the exposure of younger generations to indigenous languages.

Urbanization and Socio-Economic Pressures: Many tribal societies are experiencing rapid urbanization, with younger generations migrating to cities for employment and education. In urban settings, indigenous languages are often perceived as irrelevant or impractical, leading to their gradual abandonment. Over time, this language shift weakens the transmission of oral traditions, as younger speakers lose fluency in the linguistic nuances necessary for storytelling, ritual performances, and oral histories.

Intergenerational Language Transmission Decline: In many indigenous communities, older generations remain fluent in traditional languages, but younger generations increasingly speak dominant national or global languages. This generational gap

weakens the continuity of oral traditions, as younger members struggle to understand the historical, cultural, and ecological knowledge encoded in traditional storytelling, songs, and proverbs.

VII. STRATEGIES FOR THE PRESERVATION AND INTEGRATION OF ORAL TRADITIONS

Digital Documentation and Archiving: Efforts to record and digitize oral traditions can help preserve them for future generations. Audio recordings, video documentation, and digital storytelling platforms can bridge the gap between tradition and modernity.

Community-Based Revitalization Programs: Empowering indigenous communities to document and share their oral traditions strengthens cultural pride and identity. Programs that encourage storytelling in schools and communal gatherings help sustain these practices.

Policy and Legal Recognition: Governments and international organizations should recognize and protect oral traditions as part of intangible cultural heritage. Legal frameworks can safeguard tribal knowledge from exploitation and misappropriation.

Integration into Formal Education: Incorporating oral traditions into formal educational curricula can enhance cultural appreciation and interdisciplinary learning. Tribal schools and universities can introduce storytelling as a pedagogical tool.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Oral traditions remain a powerful form of socially constructed knowledge, fostering identity, education, and cultural resilience in tribal societies. While modern challenges threaten their continuity, proactive preservation strategies can ensure their survival. Recognizing the value of oral traditions alongside contemporary knowledge systems is essential in fostering epistemic justice and cultural sustainability.

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