Educational Administration: Theory and Practice
2024, 30(8), 913-918
ISSN: 2148-2403
https://kuey.net/

Oral Histories as Decolonial Knowledge: Indigenous Memory and Identity in Northeast India Sanathoibi Huirem

Sanathoibi Huirem*

*Research Scholar, Department of Political Science Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh (India) Sana.huirem21@gmail.com

Citation: Sanathoibi Huirem (2024). Oral Histories as Decolonial Knowledge: Indigenous Memory and Identity in Northeast India Sanathoibi Huirem, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(8) 913-918
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i8.11395

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Oral histories have long been marginalized within mainstream social science research due to the dominance of written archives, positivist methodologies, and Eurocentric epistemological assumptions. This marginalization has been especially pronounced in the study of Indigenous societies, where knowledge, history, and cultural memory are primarily transmitted through oral traditions rather than textual documentation. The present study critically examines oral history as a credible, rigorous, and decolonial qualitative research method, with particular reference to Indigenous communities of Northeast India—namely the Khasi, Naga, and Mizo. Grounded in a qualitative, interpretive, and non-empirical research design, the study is based entirely on secondary sources, including ethnographic works, oral history compilations, historical texts, and theoretical literature on memory, Indigenous epistemology, and decolonial scholarship. Using a thematic and comparative analytical framework, the paper explores the multiple social, cultural, and political functions of oral traditions within the selected communities. The findings demonstrate that oral histories operate as living archives that sustain kinship systems, customary laws, moral values, collective memory, and social identity. Among the Khasi, oral narratives underpin matrilineal inheritance and customary governance; among the Nagas, they preserve migration histories, conflict memories, and political consciousness; and among the Mizos, they mediate cultural continuity amid religious and socio-political transformation. Across all cases, oral traditions exhibit resilience and adaptability, challenging dominant historiographical narratives that have historically excluded Indigenous perspectives. The study also identifies persistent challenges related to language erosion, ethical complexities, commercialization of folklore, and limited institutional recognition of oral evidence. Despite these constraints, community-led documentation, digital archiving, and educational integration emerge as viable strategies for sustaining oral knowledge systems. Overall, the paper argues that integrating oral histories into social science research is essential for methodological pluralism, epistemic justice, and the decolonization of knowledge production, particularly in Indigenous contexts.

Keywords: Oral history, Indigenous knowledge, Decolonization, Collective memory, Northeast India

Introduction

Oral histories have historically occupied a marginal position within mainstream social science research, largely due to the dominance of written archives, quantitative evidence, and positivist epistemologies. Traditional historiography and social research have privileged textual documentation as the primary source of authentic knowledge, often treating orally transmitted accounts as anecdotal, unreliable, or methodologically weak. This bias has been particularly pronounced in studies of Indigenous and tribal societies, where systems of knowledge, memory, and historical consciousness are predominantly preserved and transmitted through oral means rather than written records (Portelli, 1991; Thompson, 2000). Scholars have long argued that this privileging of written sources reflects a Eurocentric epistemological framework

that systematically marginalizes Indigenous ways of knowing. Trouillot (1995) and Vansina (1985) contend that the exclusion of oral traditions from historical inquiry results in silences within the production of knowledge, reinforcing colonial narratives while erasing Indigenous voices. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) further critiques Western research methodologies for functioning as instruments of colonial power, emphasizing that Indigenous knowledge systems have been appropriated, distorted, or dismissed under the guise of academic objectivity. Within this context, oral history emerges as a critical methodological intervention that challenges hegemonic knowledge structures and reclaims Indigenous authority in the narration of history.

Oral history, as a qualitative research method, involves the systematic documentation and interpretation of personal memories, testimonies, and narrative accounts of lived experiences. Rather than aspiring to fixed or objective truths, oral histories foreground subjectivity, meaning-making, and the social contexts within which memories are constructed (Portelli, 1991). Thompson (2000) argues that oral testimonies democratize history by allowing marginalized groups to articulate their experiences and perspectives, thereby expanding the scope of historical and social inquiry. For Indigenous communities, oral traditions function as living repositories of collective memory, encoding moral values, customary laws, social organization, and spiritual beliefs that are inseparable from everyday life (Assmann, 1995; Vansina, 1985). In the Indian context, particularly in the Northeast, tribal communities such as the Khasi, Naga, and Mizo have relied extensively on oral traditions to preserve their histories, identities, and cultural practices. Myths of origin, migration narratives, ritual songs, folktales, and genealogies serve not only as historical accounts but also as frameworks through which social norms and collective identities are sustained (Bareh, 1997; Hutton, 1921; Pachuau, 2014). In societies where written documentation was historically absent or introduced through colonial intervention, oral narratives remain indispensable sources for understanding indigenous worldviews and historical experiences.

Recognizing oral histories as legitimate sources of knowledge is therefore essential for fostering methodological pluralism and epistemic justice in social science research. Integrating oral traditions into scholarly inquiry allows for more inclusive and context-sensitive reconstructions of the past, while also challenging the hierarchical valuation of knowledge that has long marginalized Indigenous epistemologies. This study situates oral history as both a methodological tool and a decolonial practice, emphasizing its significance in understanding Indigenous societies and diversifying the foundations of social science research.

Review of Literatures

The academic engagement with oral history has expanded considerably over the past several decades, particularly as scholars have questioned the epistemological dominance of written archives in social science research. Early foundational work by Jan Vansina (1985) established oral tradition as a legitimate historical source, arguing that orally transmitted narratives are structured systems of knowledge rather than informal or unreliable recollections. Building on this, Paul Thompson (2000) emphasized that oral history democratizes historical inquiry by enabling marginalized groups to articulate their lived experiences, thereby broadening the scope of social research beyond elite and institutional narratives. Critical scholarship has consistently highlighted the relationship between oral history and decolonization. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) provides a seminal critique of Western research traditions, arguing that academic knowledge production has functioned as an extension of colonial power by privileging Eurocentric modes of knowing. According to Smith, oral histories play a vital role in reclaiming Indigenous epistemologies by restoring authority to community-based knowledge systems that emphasize relationality, memory, and lived experience. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) similarly demonstrates how historical silences are produced through the selective validation of sources, reinforcing the exclusion of oral narratives from official historiography.

The interpretive and subjective nature of oral history has been explored extensively by Alessandro Portelli (1991), who argues that the value of oral narratives lies not in their factual accuracy alone but in their meanings, emotions, and symbolic representations. Portelli's work reframes memory as an analytical strength rather than a methodological weakness, a view echoed by Thomson (2007), who underscores the dialogical and co-constructed nature of oral testimony. These perspectives challenge positivist assumptions of objectivity and highlight the socially embedded character of historical knowledge. Theoretical contributions from memory studies further reinforce the significance of oral traditions. Jan Assmann's (1995) concept of cultural memory emphasizes how collective identities are sustained through ritualized storytelling and symbolic practices that transmit shared values across generations. Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) earlier work on collective memory also demonstrates that individual recollections are shaped within social frameworks, underscoring the importance of oral narratives in preserving group identity and continuity. Together, these theories situate oral histories as living archives that adapt to contemporary social contexts while maintaining connections to the past.

Empirical studies focusing on Indigenous societies further validate the centrality of oral traditions. Hutton's (1921) ethnographic documentation of Naga societies and Bareh's (1997) work on Khasi folklore illustrate how oral narratives encode histories of migration, warfare, kinship, and customary law. Pachuau (2014)

demonstrates how Mizo oral traditions negotiate colonialism, Christianity, and modernity, revealing the adaptive nature of oral memory in response to social change. These studies confirm that oral histories function not only as historical records but also as normative frameworks governing social behaviour and cultural belonging. Methodologically, scholars such as Dunaway and Baum (1968) stress the importance of ethical responsibility, preparation, and cultural sensitivity in oral history research. Frisch (1990) introduces the concept of shared authority, advocating participatory approaches that recognize narrators as co-creators of knowledge. Advances in audiovisual documentation, as discussed by Hajek (2014), have further enhanced the preservation of oral narratives by capturing performative and emotional dimensions often lost in transcription. Despite these advancements, scholars caution against persistent challenges, including issues of consent, representation, language erosion, and the commodification of folklore (Palmer, 2000; Borrows, 2001). Collectively, this body of literature underscores that oral histories are indispensable for inclusive, ethical, and decolonized social science research, particularly in contexts where Indigenous knowledge systems remain central to cultural survival.

Objectives

The present research aims to critically examine the significance of oral histories as a credible and rigorous qualitative research method within contemporary social science inquiry, particularly in contexts where written documentation remains limited or externally imposed. It seeks to analyse the role of oral traditions in preserving Indigenous knowledge systems, collective memory, and social identity, emphasizing their function as living repositories of cultural continuity. The study further explores oral history as a decolonial methodological alternative that challenges Eurocentric historiographical traditions and re-centres Indigenous perspectives in the production of knowledge. By focusing on selected Indigenous communities of Northeast India, specifically the Khasi, Naga, and Mizo, the research documents and interprets the diverse social, cultural, and historical functions of oral traditions within these societies, while also identifying shared patterns of memory, identity formation, and cultural resilience. Additionally, the study assesses the methodological, ethical, and practical challenges associated with oral history documentation and preservation, including issues of representation, consent, subjectivity, and the sustainability of oral knowledge in the face of modernization and socio-cultural change.

Materials and Methods

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and non-empirical research design grounded exclusively in the systematic review and analysis of secondary sources. The materials used for this research include published oral history compilations, ethnographic accounts, historical writings, and peer-reviewed theoretical literature on Indigenous epistemology, decolonial methodology, memory studies, and oral history scholarship. As the research is conceptual and analytical in nature, no primary fieldwork, direct interviews, or original oral history recordings were undertaken. A thematic and comparative case study approach is adopted to examine the structure, functions, and significance of oral traditions among selected Indigenous communities of Northeast India, namely the Khasi, Naga, and Mizo. The analytical framework integrates interdisciplinary perspectives drawn from history, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and oral history theory to ensure a holistic understanding of orally transmitted knowledge systems. Textual interpretation and critical discourse analysis are employed to identify recurring themes related to collective memory, social identity, cultural continuity, power relations, and resistance to dominant historiographical narratives. Ethical dimensions commonly associated with oral history research, including issues of informed consent, representation, subjectivity, and community ownership of knowledge, are addressed at an analytical level through engagement with existing scholarly debates. This methodological approach enables a rigorous and reflexive examination of oral histories as both a research method and a repository of Indigenous knowledge.

Analysis and Results

The analysis demonstrates that oral histories operate as dynamic and living archives within Indigenous societies, performing a wide range of social, cultural, and political functions that extend beyond mere recollection of the past. In the case of the Khasi community, oral traditions play a foundational role in sustaining matrilineal kinship structures, regulating customary land tenure, and reinforcing moral and social norms. Myths of origin, clan genealogies, and ritual narratives serve as authoritative sources through which lineage, inheritance, and social obligations are transmitted and legitimized. These orally preserved accounts continue to guide everyday social practices and customary governance, particularly in contexts where formal written records are either limited or secondary. Among the Naga communities, oral histories constitute the primary medium for preserving accounts of ancestral migration, warfare, headhunting practices, and encounters with colonial powers. These narratives are deeply embedded in songs, folktales, ritual performances, and commemorative practices, functioning simultaneously as historical memory and moral instruction. Importantly, Naga oral traditions continue to shape contemporary political consciousness by informing claims to territory, autonomy, and self-determination. The study finds that such narratives offer

alternative historical interpretations that contest colonial and state-centric representations, thereby reinforcing Indigenous agency in the construction of history.

In the Mizo context, oral traditions remain influential despite significant transformations brought about by Christianity, formal education, and the introduction of literacy. Oral narratives related to displacement, insurgency, and social change play a crucial role in shaping collective memory and cultural identity. Rather than being displaced by written forms, oral histories among the Mizos have adapted to new religious and political realities, integrating biblical themes and modern experiences while retaining indigenous modes of expression. This adaptability underscores the continued relevance of oral tradition as a medium of cultural negotiation and historical understanding. Across all three case studies, oral histories exhibit remarkable resilience and flexibility, enabling Indigenous communities to respond to colonialism, modernization, and globalization without severing ties to their cultural foundations. The findings also reveal that oral narratives challenge dominant historiographical frameworks by foregrounding Indigenous-centred perspectives that are frequently absent from archival sources. However, the analysis identifies persistent challenges, including language erosion, the commercialization and decontextualization of folklore, ethical complexities in documentation, and limited institutional recognition of oral evidence, particularly within legal systems. Despite these constraints, community-driven documentation efforts, digital archiving initiatives, and the incorporation of oral traditions into educational frameworks emerge as effective strategies for sustaining oral knowledge. Overall, the results affirm that oral histories are indispensable for understanding Indigenous epistemologies and social realities, while also contributing to methodological pluralism and the decolonization of social science research.

Discussion

The findings of this study strongly resonate with, and extend, existing scholarly debates on oral history as a legitimate, rigorous, and decolonial mode of knowledge production. Consistent with Jan Vansina's (1985) foundational argument, the analysis confirms that oral traditions among the Khasi, Naga, and Mizo communities function as structured systems of knowledge rather than fragmented or unreliable recollections. The evidence from these communities demonstrates that oral histories are governed by culturally embedded norms of transmission, performance, and validation, lending them internal coherence and historical continuity. This challenges positivist assumptions that privilege written documentation as the sole marker of historical credibility and reinforces Paul Thompson's (2000) view that oral history broadens the social base of historical inquiry by foregrounding marginalized voices. The discussion further aligns with decolonial critiques articulated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who emphasizes that Western academic traditions have systematically marginalized Indigenous epistemologies. The present study illustrates how oral histories actively resist this epistemic dominance by centering Indigenous worldviews, values, and social relations. In the Khasi case, the authority of oral narratives in regulating matrilineal inheritance and customary law exemplifies how Indigenous governance systems operate independently of colonial legal frameworks. Similarly, Naga oral traditions that sustain territorial memory and political consciousness echo Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1995) argument regarding the production of historical silences, revealing how colonial archives have excluded Indigenous perspectives while elevating state-centric narratives.

The interpretive richness of oral histories identified in this research supports Alessandro Portelli's (1991) assertion that subjectivity, emotion, and symbolism constitute analytical strengths rather than methodological weaknesses. Across all three communities, variations in narrative emphasis, metaphor, and performance reflect collective meanings and moral frameworks rather than simple factual recall. This observation reinforces Thomson's (2007) notion of oral history as a dialogical process, where meaning is co-produced through social interaction and cultural context. Rather than undermining historical validity, such subjectivity provides deeper insight into how communities understand and narrate their pasts. The findings also intersect significantly with theoretical contributions from memory studies. Jan Assmann's (1995) concept of cultural memory is evident in the ritualized storytelling practices observed across the communities, where oral traditions serve as vehicles for transmitting shared values and identities across generations. Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) framework of collective memory further explains how individual narratives are shaped within broader social structures, reinforcing the role of oral history in sustaining group cohesion and continuity. The adaptive incorporation of Christian themes into Mizo oral narratives particularly illustrates how cultural memory evolves in response to historical transformation without losing its Indigenous core.

Empirical parallels with earlier regional scholarship further strengthen the discussion. The present findings corroborate Hutton's (1921) and Bareh's (1997) observations that oral traditions encode histories of migration, warfare, kinship, and customary law, while also extending Pachuau's (2014) argument regarding the adaptive negotiation of colonialism and modernity within Mizo society. Collectively, these comparisons affirm that oral histories function not merely as records of the past but as normative frameworks guiding social behaviour, political identity, and cultural belonging. At the same time, the study critically engages with ongoing methodological and ethical debates. Echoing Dunaway and Baum (1968) and Frisch's (1990) concept of shared authority, the discussion highlights the need for participatory, community-entered approaches to

documentation. Persistent challenges such as language erosion, commodification of folklore, and institutional marginalization of oral evidence, particularly in legal contexts, underscore concerns raised by Palmer (2000) and Borrows (2001). Nevertheless, the emergence of community-led documentation, digital archiving, and educational integration suggests viable pathways for sustaining oral traditions. Thus, the present investigation reinforces the central argument that oral histories are indispensable to inclusive and decolonized social science research. By validating Indigenous epistemologies and challenging Eurocentric historiography, oral history not only enriches historical understanding but also redefines the ethical and methodological foundations of knowledge production.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine oral histories as a credible and rigorous qualitative method within social science research, with particular emphasis on Indigenous communities of Northeast India. Drawing upon a comparative and interpretive analysis of the Khasi, Naga, and Mizo societies, the research demonstrates that oral traditions are not residual or supplementary sources of knowledge but constitute dynamic and authoritative systems through which history, culture, and social order are produced, preserved, and transmitted. Oral histories emerge as living archives that actively shape collective memory, social identity, and normative frameworks, especially in contexts where written records are limited, externally imposed, or historically exclusionary. The findings emphasise that oral traditions perform multiple and interconnected functions across the selected communities. They sustain kinship structures, regulate customary practices, reinforce moral values, and articulate collective experiences of migration, conflict, adaptation, and change. Rather than remaining static, these traditions exhibit remarkable resilience and flexibility, continuously adapting to social, religious, and political transformations while maintaining continuity with Indigenous cultural foundations. This adaptive capacity highlights the enduring relevance of oral history as a medium of cultural negotiation and historical understanding in rapidly changing socio-cultural environments.

At a broader level, the study affirms the methodological significance of oral history in challenging dominant historiographical frameworks that have traditionally privileged written documentation. By foregrounding Indigenous-centred perspectives, oral narratives offer alternative interpretations of the past that contest externally constructed and state-centric accounts. In doing so, they expand the scope of social science inquiry and contribute to a more inclusive and plural understanding of history and society. The research also brings attention to persistent challenges associated with the documentation and preservation of oral traditions. Issues such as language erosion, ethical complexities, commercialization of folklore, and limited institutional recognition of oral evidence continue to threaten the sustainability of oral knowledge systems. However, the analysis indicates that community-driven initiatives, digital archiving, and the integration of oral traditions into educational contexts provide promising pathways for safeguarding and revitalizing oral heritage. Lastly, the study reaffirms that oral histories are indispensable for understanding Indigenous epistemologies and social realities. Their systematic inclusion in social science research not only enriches empirical and theoretical knowledge but also advances methodological pluralism and epistemic equity. Recognizing oral history as a legitimate and robust form of knowledge production is therefore essential for building more inclusive, reflexive, and context-sensitive social science scholarship.

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