



Conference on

Oral Traditions: Continuity and Transformations Northeast India and Southeast Asia

1-4 February, 2016, Shillong, Meghalaya, India



INTACH

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Division

Indian
National Trust
for Art and
Cultural Heritage



Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD)
The Centre for Community Knowledge

Donated by Prof T B Subba

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Preface

The conference on the theme of 'Oral Traditions: Continuity and Transformations', held from 1-4 February, 2016, at Shillong, was the first international conference on oral traditions of the region of northeast India and southeast Asia.

The 4-day conference brought together fifty scholars from five countries namely, India, Thailand, Malaysia, UK and the Netherlands, along with heritage activists and museum curators belonging to local communities from the region. Developed around the continuing interactions and involvement in the region by the Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK), and the North East Forum (NEF) at Ambedkar University Delhi, the conference was an enabling activity for the Intangible Cultural Heritage Division of INTACH, to develop partnerships in the northeast Indian and southeast Asian regions.

The conference was structured as a combination of keynote addresses, research paper presentations, lecture demonstrations and panel discussions. A curated walk of an indigenous community museum, along with interactive sessions, presentations and experience-sharing by local community members, added to the knowledge exchange process. Apart from acquainting the audience with new knowledge on communities that has emerged after the introduction of multi-disciplinary studies in the field of cultural heritage, the presentations described innovative approaches to working with communities, and studying intangible and tangible cultural heritage through oral traditions.

The sessions were designed to include various themes which helped the participants to engage with oral traditions in multiple ways, from folklore to language, and performative

traditions; from gendered tales found in material cultures, to ecological traditions and stories of origin. The presentations made by researchers from Southeast Asia revealed insights into how oral traditions are transforming under different socio-economic contexts.

Revitalising the cultural heritage centres and museums through oral traditions was the subject of discussion at the Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures. The exotic collection on display at the multi-storied museum literally walked the participants through the culture of northeast India, invigorating an emotional and thought-provoking panel discussion. Acknowledging the expansion and reach of the digital age into the 'remote', the conference hosted an open session, dedicated to examining the various dimensions of oral narratives and memories in a digital age.

In the concluding session, participants overwhelmingly expressed the need to continue further iterations of such a conference. Considering that the prevalence and passage of culture in the region relies heavily on oral traditions, this conference hopes that it will be the first of many.

On behalf of the organisers, we wish to thank our partners in Shillong, the INTACH Meghalaya Chapter, Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures and Lady Keane College. In addition, we would like to thank the North Eastern Council, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Gol, and the International Institute for the Inclusive Museum.

Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) –
Intangible Cultural Heritage Division
Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) –
Centre for Community Knowledge

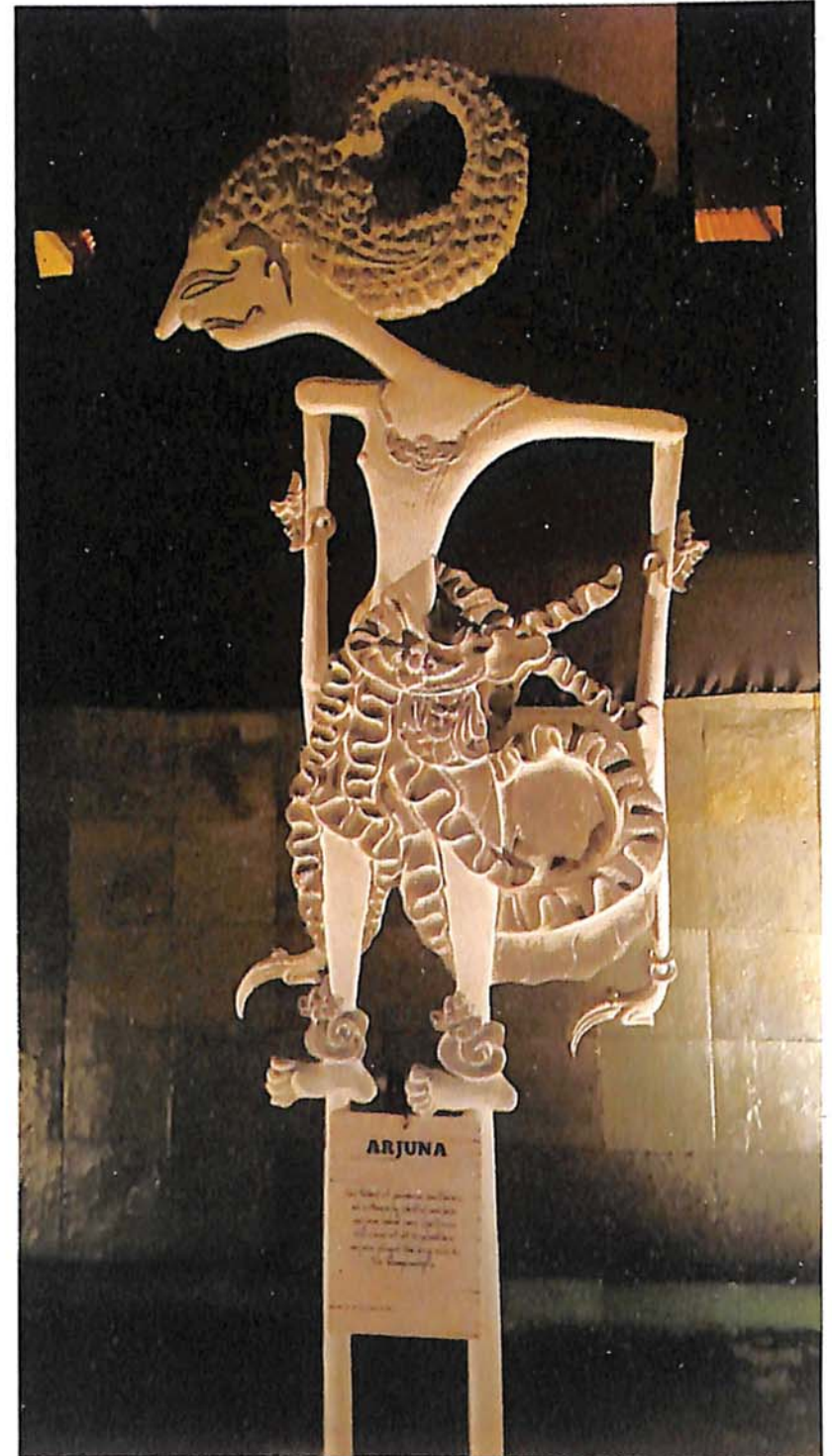


Concept

Northeast India is a region that falls outside the larger Indian cultural framework. The region is called a “shatter zone” by political and cultural geographers, denoting a cultural area dominated by two or more neighbouring regions, China and southeast Asia. The indigenous tradition of the region is a result of many processes – of cultural flows, migrations and movements of communities, and their local histories. Its isolation from South Asia, as well as colonial geo-political influences in the 19th and 20th centuries, the advent of Christianity, and the introduction of education and community-led reforms, have all served to give the region a special identity.

The connections between many aspects of life in the Northeast region, and the larger Asian cultural landscape can be substantiated from a transnational perspective. In order to contextualise the cultural, social and historical dynamics of the region, it is important to look beyond political boundaries, highlight the cultural continuities in the larger region, and reconsider the manifestation of identities in terms of geographical continuity and cultural dynamics. At a time when the study of multidimensional cultural aspects has been attracting contemporary scholars and policy makers across the world, the shift of focus towards the northeast Indian and southeast Asian region becomes indispensable.

The need for a cultural mapping of the region was indicated by various academic and professional cultural institutions, emphasising the importance of collating the diverse information, establishing linkages between researchers and scholars, and promoting communication between various tribal communities.





Oral Tradition

The transmission of oral literature and knowledge from a generation to the next is the heart of tradition and memory in oral cultures. It becomes a valuable source of information about people's history, and provides an insight into the meanings that people attach to their past. Oral traditions become threatened when elders die, or when livelihoods are disrupted; and become increasingly endangered in the wake of rapid globalisation and socio-economic transitions which exert complex pressures on small communities. The consequent alteration in social order may challenge, and at times overthrow the traditional knowledge practices.

Keeping this in mind, the conference explored themes like:

1. Transformations seen in material and intangible cultures in ritual, tradition and history, or in studies of archaeology, linguistics and genetics, reflect movements and interactions of peoples. Together they help to map a terrain of human cultural diversity in the region.
2. Observation of oral cultures at the sites of transmission and exchange draw attention to the continuities and transformations, and the consequent adaptation or dislocation of tradition in tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
3. Reimagining the museum as a space for civic engagement, and its cultural and psychosocial role in building a holistic cultural life, and establishing an identity of communities in times of dislocation and change.

The conference engaged the expertise of multidisciplinary participants to explore how in the presence of transformative social, political and ecological change, the communities of the region strive and succeed in retaining cultural continuity through transmission of knowledge and practice.

It attempted to look specifically at living cultures – tangible and intangible – as transformations in the sphere of exchanges and social value. Other areas included examination of cultural continuities in materials, crafts, social organisation and technological innovations in oral traditions.



Hon'ble Governor of Meghalaya, Shri V Shanmuganathan, at the exhibition of photographs by Dr. Verrier Elwin

The conference drew public attention towards the dramatic cultural changes witnessed by the region in the last half of the century, by organising an exhibition of photographs taken by one of the first major anthropologists who studied the region, Dr. Verrier Elwin. Another objective of this exhibition was to draw attention to the urgent need to preserve and digitize this photographic heritage of the northeastern region of India. The exhibition served as a visual document by providing insights into a critical period of transition.

Conference Objectives

- * To understand how the indigenous communities are transmitting knowledge and practice through traditions of oral cultures, in the presence of social, political and ecological change.
- * To learn how communities here have retained cultural continuity through specific regional initiatives and community-based practices, and how these practices are being used to document the cultural heritage.
- * To scope present and past cultural connections among communities of northeast India and southeast Asia, by examining cultural practices for similarities and inter-linkages.