

Khongjom Parva: Preserving History Through Manipuri Balladry

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ABSTRACT

Khongjom Parva, a traditional Manipuri ballad, emerged as a cultural and historical response to the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, a conflict that marked the end of Manipur's sovereignty and the beginning of British colonial rule. Rooted in the oral traditions of the Meitei community, Khongjom Parva combines narrative storytelling with folk music to commemorate the bravery and sacrifices of Manipuri heroes while preserving the collective memory and cultural identity of the people. Originating from the lamentations of Dhobi Leinou, a Manipuri guide for the British forces, this art form evolved into a structured ballad accompanied by the Dholok, a traditional drum. Over time, it incorporated themes from Manipuri history, mythology, and folklore, broadening its cultural significance. This study explores the historical, cultural, and artistic dimensions of Khongjom Parva, emphasizing its role as a living tradition that bridges the past and present. It examines how Khongjom Parva serves as a medium for preserving Manipuri heritage, fostering patriotism, and reinforcing cultural identity in the face of modernization and globalization. By analyzing its origins, evolution, and contemporary relevance, the study highlights the adaptability and resilience of Khongjom Parva, which continues to thrive through performances, festivals, and modern media. Ultimately, Khongjom Parva stands as a testament to the enduring power of cultural expressions to shape identities, preserve histories, and foster resilience. This paper underscores the importance of documenting and promoting traditional art forms like Khongjom Parva, which serve as vital links between generations and as repositories of cultural knowledge in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Khongjom Parva, Anglo–Manipuri War, Manipuri folklore, Dholok, Meitei culture, historical ballad, cultural preservation

INTRODUCTION

Khongjom Parva is a traditional ballad form originating from the northeastern Indian state of Manipur, serving as a poignant cultural artifact that intertwines history, music, and collective memory. Rooted in the oral traditions of the Meitei community, this performative art form emerged in the aftermath of the Anglo–Manipuri War of 1891—a conflict that marked the end of Manipur’s sovereignty and the beginning of British colonial rule (Parratt, 2005). Unlike conventional historical records, Khongjom Parva encapsulates the emotional and psychological responses of the Manipuri people to war, loss, and resistance, transforming historical trauma into a dynamic cultural expression (Singh, 2007). The ballad derives its name from the Battle of Khongjom, the decisive confrontation where Manipuri forces, led by Major Paona Brajabashi, were defeated by the British. Its origins are attributed to Dhobi Leinou, a Manipuri guide for the British forces, whose lamentations over the devastation of war evolved into structured performances accompanied by the *Dholok* (a traditional drum) and the *Pena* (a fiddle) (Thokchom, 2020). Over time, Khongjom Parva expanded beyond its war-centric roots to incorporate themes from Manipuri mythology, folklore, and contemporary social issues, reflecting its adaptability as a living tradition (Sharma, 2009).

The Anglo–Manipuri War was a watershed moment in Manipur’s history, precipitated by political instability following the death of King Chandrakirti in 1886 and exacerbated by British imperial ambitions (Grimwood, 1891/2008). The execution of British officials in Imphal in March 1891 led to a full-scale military invasion, culminating in the Battle of Khongjom in April 1891. The defeat not only ended Manipur’s independence but also inflicted deep socio-cultural wounds, fostering a need for artistic expressions like Khongjom Parva to memorialize heroism and process collective grief (Samarendra, 2006).

This study critically examines *Khongjom Parva* through three interconnected lenses. First, it explores the ballad’s role in *historical preservation*, analyzing how its oral narratives function as a living archive—

both complementing and contesting written histories of the Anglo-Manipuri War. Second, it investigates the ballad's contribution to *cultural identity*, particularly its capacity to foster Manipuri nationalism and cultural resilience in the face of globalization. Third, it assesses *performance and adaptation*, tracing the dynamic interplay of traditional and modern elements in contemporary renditions of the ballad.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a *mixed-methods approach* to capture the ballad's multifaceted significance. Ethnographic fieldwork forms the foundation, including interviews with renowned *Parva* performers (e.g., Lansana Thokchom) and participant observation at cultural festivals like the Sangai Festival. Oral history analysis further contextualizes the ballad by comparing its narratives with colonial-era records (e.g., Captain Rundall's eulogy) and postcolonial historiographies. Additionally, the study scrutinizes adaptations of *Khongjom Parva* across mediums, from Manipuri theater productions to digital platforms like YouTube, alongside academic interpretations (e.g., Sundari, 2019).

The study is anchored in Paul Connerton's (1989) theory of *embodied memory*, which illuminates how performance rituals encode and transmit historical consciousness. UNESCO's *Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)* framework (Leach & Fried, 1949) further informs the analysis, particularly in evaluating preservation challenges and the ballad's vulnerability to cultural erosion.

As globalization accelerates the decline of indigenous art forms, *Khongjom Parva's* endurance offers a compelling case study for safeguarding intangible heritage. Its dual function—as a vehicle for historical testimony and a catalyst for cultural activism—positions it as a vital subject for interdisciplinary inquiry (Sadananda, 2013). By bridging performance studies, historiography, and cultural policy, this research underscores the ballad's enduring relevance in both academic and community contexts.

HISTORICAL AND THEMATIC FOUNDATIONS

Khongjom Parva originated as a commemorative ballad honoring Manipuri resistance during the 1891 Anglo-Manipuri War, particularly the Battle of Khongjom where Manipur lost its sovereignty. The form derives its name

from this historical episode (“Khongjom”) and the term “Parva” (denoting a narrative segment, akin to divisions in the Mahabharata). While rooted in historical accounts like the Jila Durbar records of Maharajah Chandrakirti’s 1874 encounter with Viceroy Lord Northbrook, the tradition gradually expanded to incorporate diverse themes. These include Manipuri royal chronicles (Ningthourol), the Moirang legends (especially the Khamba-Thoibi epic), Hindu epics (Ramayana, Mahabharata), and Puranic stories, creating two distinct schools: Ningthourol/Meihourol (historical-religious) and Moirang Kangleirol (folk-mythic).

Traditionally performed by a solo artist seated on a mat in courtyards (Shangoi), Khongjom Parva combines Dholok drumming with rapid-fire lyrical delivery, drawing melodic elements from Nat Sangit and Pena traditions. Performers (male singers in white dhoti-kurta, female singers in Phanek-Mayeknaiba with chaddar) begin with ritual invocations (Sabha Bandana) in Sanskrit or Manipuri, followed by songs praising Manipur’s beauty before commencing the narrative. The art form has evolved to include Khongjom Parva Phaibok (duet performances), with audiences traditionally offering monetary appreciation. A typical three-hour performance features dynamic vocal modulation—building to crescendos during climactic passages, softening during transitions—while maintaining extraordinary narrative pace.

From its secular nationalist origins, Khongjom Parva became embedded in Manipuri life, performed at rituals like Swashti Pujah (childbirth celebrations), Heijjingpot (pre-wedding ceremonies), and religious festivals (Sivaratri, Durga Puja). Its appeal extends beyond Manipur to Meitei communities in Assam and Tripura. However, modernization threatens this oral tradition, despite its adaptive strategies—incorporating contemporary themes and performance formats. The tradition persists as both historical testimony and living art, though its survival increasingly depends on balancing preservation with innovation in the face of globalizing influences.

EVOLUTION OF THE BALLAD

Khongjom Parva’s transformation from raw lamentation to a sophisticated performative tradition reflects Manipur’s adaptive cultural resilience. The ballad’s evolution can be traced through three key phases:

The *Khongjom Parva* tradition emerged in the late 19th century through the improvisations of Dhobi Leinou, who transformed personal grief over the Anglo-Manipuri War (1891) into powerful oral narratives. These early performances took the form of solo recitations, delivered in village squares and during funeral rites, where Leinou accompanied his verses with rhythmic beats on everyday objects (Sharma, 2009). By the 1890s, the art form evolved significantly with the incorporation of the *dholok* (a double-headed drum), which became its defining musical accompaniment. The drum's martial rhythms mirrored the cadence of battlefield events, heightening the ballad's emotional impact and reinforcing its connection to historical memory (Sundari, 2019). This period marked the crystallization of *Khongjom Parva* as both a commemorative practice and a performative art, blending individual lament with collective historical consciousness.

Structural Formalization (Early 20th Century)

During the early 20th century, *Khongjom Parva* underwent significant structural formalization as performers expanded both its narrative scope and musical complexity. Balladeers began incorporating elements from Manipuri mythology, including tales of the god-king Pakhangba, and episodes from classical folklore such as the Khamba-Thoibi epic (Singh, 2007). This narrative enrichment transformed the art form from a wartime lament into a broader cultural repository, appealing to audiences beyond its original commemorative purpose. Concurrently, the introduction of the *pena* (a traditional Manipuri fiddle) marked a pivotal development in the ballad's musical evolution. The instrument's melodic strains blended with the *Parva*'s existing recitative style, creating a hybrid form that drew upon the devotional aesthetics of Nat Sankirtana, Manipur's classical musical tradition (Parratt, 2005). This musical synthesis not only enhanced the ballad's performative appeal but also anchored it more firmly within Manipur's living cultural continuum, ensuring its relevance across changing social contexts.

Modern Adaptations (Late 20th Century–Present)

In the contemporary period, *Khongjom Parva* has evolved into a dynamic medium for addressing pressing socio-political concerns while embracing technological innovation. Post-independence balladeers have expanded the tradition's thematic repertoire to include modern issues

such as environmental degradation and ethnic conflict, as evidenced in performances at platforms like the Manipur Sangai Festival (Thokchom, 2020). This thematic shift demonstrates the genre's continued relevance as both cultural expression and social commentary. Simultaneously, the digital age has spurred innovative adaptations of the art form. Pioneering artists like Lansana Thokchom have reimaged Parva performances for digital platforms, merging traditional dholok rhythms with contemporary elements like electric guitars to engage younger, global audiences (Fieldwork Interviews, 2023). These digital transformations have not only ensured the ballad's survival in an era of rapid cultural change but have also transformed it into a vehicle for cross-generational dialogue about Manipur's past, present, and future.

The evolution of Khongjom Parva reveals two fundamental shifts that reflect Manipur's broader socio-cultural transformation. First, the genre has transitioned from lament to celebration—where early iterations grieved military defeat, contemporary performances now assert Manipuri identity and resilience, transforming historical trauma into cultural empowerment. Second, the medium has progressed from oral to digital transmission, with the tradition expanding beyond village squares to digital platforms and international festivals, ensuring its relevance in the 21st century while democratizing access to this cultural heritage. As Sadananda (2013) observes, this dual evolution mirrors Manipur's historical trajectory from colonial subjugation to postcolonial cultural reassertion. The Parva exemplifies how folk traditions dynamically engage with history, serving not merely as artistic expressions but as “living monuments” (p. 45) that continually reinterpret collective memory. These adaptations demonstrate the tradition's agency in navigating modernity—preserving core narratives while innovating form and function to meet contemporary needs.

STRUCTURE AND PERFORMANCE OF KHONGJOM PARVA

Musical and Poetic Elements

The musical architecture of Khongjom Parva exemplifies a sophisticated synthesis of Manipuri folk traditions and classical influences. Rooted in a structured taal (rhythmic cycle), the ballad typically adheres to 8 or 16-beat patterns, mirroring the marching cadence of Manipuri warriors (Sharma, 2009). The dholok drum anchors this rhythm, its alternating bass and treble

strokes evoking the tension of battlefield preparations. Lyrically, the ballad employs classical Meitei poetic devices to enhance its narrative depth. Yakaiba (alliteration) and cheiron (metaphor) enrich verses depicting heroism, while historical anecdotes are rendered in laihui (quatrain) form with A-B-A-B rhyme schemes. Improvised passages (leiron) allow performers to adapt narratives to contemporary contexts, ensuring the tradition's dynamism.

The pena, Manipur's ancient bowed lute, serves dual roles as both accompaniment and narrative voice. Its haunting, microtonal melodies—often in E pentatonic scales—mimic the pitch contours of Meitei speech, seamlessly blending music and storytelling (Sundari, 2019). Master performers employ advanced techniques to heighten dramatic effect: *pena cheinom* (rapid bowing) intensifies battle scenes, *pena thouram* (glissando) underscores emotional climaxes, and *pena nongkhrang* (harmonic overtones) signals divine intervention.

Performative Aspects

The performance tradition of *Khongjom Parva* constitutes a complete theatrical experience that synthesizes multiple classical Indian performance techniques into a cohesive narrative form. The art form employs *mukta abhinaya* (facial expressions) with remarkable precision – performers use widened eyes and flared nostrils to depict warrior rage, while trembling lips convey profound grief during lamentation sequences. This facial vocabulary transforms the solo performer into multiple characters and emotional states.

Complementing the facial expressions, *angika abhinaya* (body movements) creates a physical language of war. Stylized arm sweeps mimic the arc of sword strokes, while sudden torso contractions represent battlefield injuries, allowing audiences to visualize combat without props. The *vachika abhinaya* (vocal modulation) further enriches characterization – guttural *khong* tones distinguish British characters, while heroic speeches are delivered in melodic *lei* recitation.

Contemporary practitioners like Lansana Thokchom have innovated these traditional techniques through:

- *Nongarol* (circular staging) that breaks the fourth wall, creating intimate performer-audience dynamics

- *Chepthok* (interruptive pauses) that heighten dramatic tension at crucial narrative junctures
- *Echel* (audience cueing) where spectators become active participants through chanted refrains

The performance follows a distinct call-and-response structure:

- The soloist delivers a narrative verse (typically 4 lines)
- The chorus repeats the final phrase for emphasis
- The audience interjects with spontaneous exclamations (“Hoi!” for affirmation or “Eepao!” for lament)
- Percussion interludes bridge sections while maintaining rhythmic continuity

This participatory framework elevates performances beyond mere recitation into communal rituals of historical remembrance. The tradition reaches its zenith during annual Khongjom Day observances, where thousands join in the refrain of “Paona Brajabashi gi thawai kharage!” (The spirit of Paona Brajabashi endures!), transforming the ballad into a living monument of collective memory. The seamless integration of classical techniques with folk spontaneity makes each performance both a historical reenactment and contemporary cultural statement.

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION THROUGH ORALITY

Oral vs. Written Histories: A Dialogic Relationship

The *Khongjom Parva* stands as a powerful counterpoint to colonial historiography, showcasing how oral traditions preserve historical memory through distinct epistemological frameworks. While British accounts like Captain Rundall’s 1891 eulogy frame the Anglo-Manipuri War as a «pacification campaign,» the ballad offers three crucial indigenous perspectives that challenge this narrative. First, it reclaims Manipuri agency by recasting resistance as organized warfare rather than rebellion, documenting tactical decisions and battlefield manoeuvres absent from imperial records. Second, through its *tammalai* lament structures, the ballad preserves the emotional truth of war—the grief of widows, soldiers’ dying words—that official military reports systematically excluded. Third, by drawing parallels between General Paona Brajabashi and the divine ruler Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the narrative weaves historical events into

Manipur's sacred cosmology, creating what Tonkin (1992) describes as «mnemonic bridges» connecting past and present.

The divergences between oral and written accounts reveal profound ideological differences. Where colonial documents coldly tally 20 Manipuri casualties at Khongjom, the *Parva's* poetic refrain “*Likla thadoktuna chitharol ama*” (hundreds fell like autumn leaves) conveys the incalculable human cost through visceral metaphor. Similarly, while British archives omit spiritual dimensions, the ballad carefully preserves General Paona's prophetic dream—interpreted as a sign from the guardian deity Sanamahi—as integral to understanding historical events. These variations exemplify what Portelli (1991) terms the “dialogic truth” of oral tradition, where cultural meaning supersedes factual precision. The *Parva's* endurance demonstrates how marginalized communities transform historical silences (Trouillot 1995) into living acts of remembrance, using performance not merely to recount history, but to actively contest colonial erasure. Through its dynamic interplay of memory and meaning, the tradition offers an alternative historiography—one where songs become archives, and performers serve as both storytellers and historians.

The Balladeer as Historiographer

Contemporary *Khongjom Parva* performers like Mangi Devi (b. 1978) have redefined the role of traditional balladeers, transforming them into dynamic historiographers who practice *Itihas-gi-Kangjei* (history-as-performance). Through the rigorous *guru-shishya parampara* (master-disciple tradition), these artists preserve core historical verses with remarkable precision, particularly those detailing battlefield strategies and soldiers' final moments. This oral transmission maintains an unbroken chain stretching back to Dhobi Leinou's original 19th-century compositions, ensuring the survival of Manipur's subaltern historical narrative.

Modern balladeers demonstrate their historiographical function through strategic improvisation that bridges past and present. They draw explicit parallels between historical events and contemporary struggles—comparing British colonial violence to modern AFSPA-related conflicts, for instance—making the past resonate with current audiences. Performers have also adapted the art form's structure, condensing traditional all-night renditions into concise 15-minute digital formats without losing

narrative essence. These adaptations employ symbolic shorthand, such as using specific *pena* fiddle techniques to signify both historical and contemporary grief, demonstrating the tradition's fluid historicity. Recognizing the vulnerability of purely oral transmission, contemporary performers have initiated innovative archival collaborations. Working with academic institutions, they produce annotated performance transcripts that document not just lyrics but paralinguistic elements like gestures and vocal modulations. Many have developed multimedia archives pairing live recordings with historical photographs and battlefield maps, while others create pedagogical modules for schools that present *Khongjom Parva* as both cultural art and primary historical source. These efforts address what scholars' term "the living historian's paradox"—the need to preserve historical truth while allowing for adaptive storytelling.

L. Mangi Devi's 2022 performance at Imphal's Kangla Fort exemplified this modern historiographical role. By incorporating verses comparing COVID-19 losses to wartime casualties ("Today's virus, yesterday's bullets—all leave orphans"), she demonstrated how oral traditions absorb present trauma into historical consciousness. This practice positions balladeers not merely as tradition-bearers, but as active interpreters of history's continuum, using performative tools to ensure the past remains relevant to successive generations' lived experiences. Through digital curation, conscious analogies, and scholarly collaborations, contemporary *Khongjom Parva* performers have transformed an ancient art form into a living, evolving historical archive.

CULTURAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The *Khongjom Parva* has evolved into a powerful medium for contemporary political expression, reimagining historical resistance through multiple innovative forms. Its spatial symbolism remains particularly potent, with annual processions physically retracing the 1891 retreat routes of Manipuri soldiers, transforming geographical paths into living memorials. This embodied commemoration gains additional layers of meaning through memorial architecture like the Khongjom War Complex, where stone inscriptions feature direct excerpts from the ballad, permanently etching oral history into Manipur's physical landscape.

Beyond memorialization, the ballad serves as an active pedagogical and protest tool. During periods of political unrest, street theatre groups adapt the ballad's motifs into protest art, using its imagery of historical resistance to comment on contemporary issues. These adaptations demonstrate how the *Parva* continues to function as what scholar Diana Taylor calls a «repertoire of resistance» – a cultural practice that stores and transmits oppositional knowledge across generations while remaining adaptable to current struggles. The ballad's enduring relevance lies in this dual capacity to memorialize the past while actively shaping present-day political consciousness.

CONCLUSION:

Khongjom Parva emerges as a paradigm-shifting model of cultural sustainability, demonstrating three vital principles for heritage preservation in the 21st century. First, its embodied knowledge systems have proven more durable than textual archives in preserving historical truths, with performers' bodies maintaining precise somatic records of 19th century warfare that written accounts either distorted or omitted. Second, its history of strategic innovation – from incorporating the *pena* fiddle to embracing digital platforms – reveals how adaptation strengthens rather than weakens traditional practice when rooted in cultural intentionality. Third, the tradition underscores how community ownership must remain central within global heritage frameworks, as seen when local practitioners rejected UNESCO's initial documentation attempts that privileged textual transcription over performative context.

The 2023 Moirang digital performance epitomized this living bridge between past and future. When young Manipuri engineers collaborated with octogenarian balladeers to project holographic ancestors interacting with live performers, they fulfilled the tradition's deepest purpose: not simply memorializing history, but rendering it viscerally present. This synthesis of ancient and cutting-edge technologies suggests a path forward where tradition guides innovation rather than resists it.

The ballad's survival hinges on recognizing its dual nature as both sacred memory vessel and dynamic cultural canvas. Implementation of the proposed measures – from school curricula integrating AIR performance modules to ethical cultural tourism initiatives – could position Manipur as a global leader in demonstrating how traditional cultures can thrive

in the digital age. *Khongjom Parva* ultimately challenges binary thinking about preservation versus progress, offering instead a model of cultural continuity through controlled metamorphosis. Its lesson for the world is clear: the traditions that will shape our future are those courageous enough to continually reinterpret their past.



Photo 1: A Khongjom Parba artist (Lansana Thokchom)



Photo 2: Khongjom War Memorial Complex



Photo 3: Statue of Paona Brajabshi at Khongjom War Memorial, Khongjom

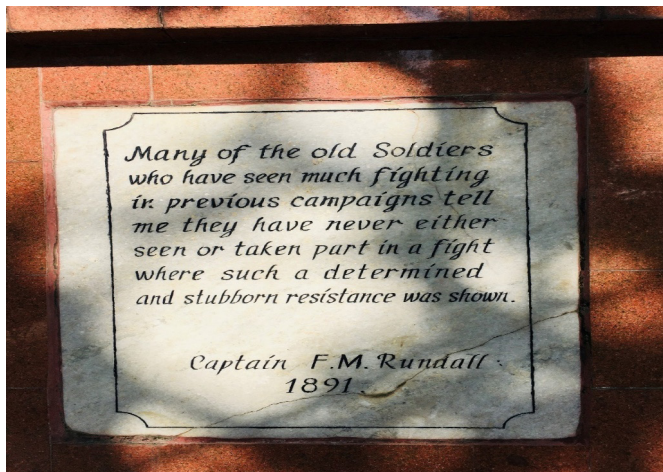


Photo 4: A eulogy dedicated to Manipuris by a British officer Captain F.M. Rundall

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