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Retelling Rongmei Folktale in Animation: *Legend of Gairiamnang*

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Abstract

Folktales have been orally transmitted across generations and cultures. With technological advancement, there has been a paradigm shift in the medium of transmission of folkloric materials. With folktales travelling through the oral-digital trajectory, traditional tales have been reimagined and retold in digital spaces such as YouTube. This paper is a study of this shift, i.e., from oral to digital, within the Rongmei folk tradition. It looks at the animated film *Legend of Gairiamnang* (2025), which is based on one of the greatest Rongmei folktales—*Gairiamnang le Guiliannei* (Gairiamnang and Guiliannei). The paper highlights how the animated tale, available on *Bingson TV* on YouTube, presents Rongmei traditional beliefs and culture to not just the community's audience but globally. In modern times, traditional storytelling is being largely substituted by digital storytelling such as animation, in which digital media is used to tell stories by integrating text, images, audio, video and interactive elements. The cultural essence embedded in the Rongmei folktales is now transmitted through digitally enriched retellings than through conventional narrative methods. Thus, the paper argues that animated folktales like *Legend of Gairiamnang* play a vital role in preserving culturally rich stories, thus allaying concerns about possible oblivion of traditional knowledge and narratives in a technological era.

Keywords: Rongmei, Digital Storytelling, Folktales, Animation, Culture

Introduction

The Rongmei tribe is one of the conglomerate tribes of the Zeliangrong community (Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei tribes) living in the Northeastern region of India. According to G. Makuga, "Rongmei is one of the oldest indigenous major tribes of the Nagas" inhabiting the "North East of India, i.e., Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland" (1). Majority of the tribe's population is found in the two districts of Tamenglong and Noney of Manipur besides other states: "The ancestral home of the Rongmei lies in the mountain ranges in the Tamenglong district of Manipur and adjacent mountainous areas of Nagaland and Assam" (Aphun 308). Apart from these areas, the Rongmei people live in parts of the Imphal valley of Manipur and the adjoining foothills. The term Rongmei is derived from "Maruongmei", wherein "Rong" literally means "the South Direction" and "Mei" means "People"; so, the term Rongmei means "the people of the South Country or Southerners" (Makuga 54). Based on oral tradition, the Rongmeis, alongside other kindred Zeliangrong tribes, are believed to have "lived at a place called Makuilongdi" (Gangmei 2). From there, in due course of time, they dispersed to different directions to establish separate settlements. Thus, "Rongmei (settled in the south), Zeme (in the west), and Liangmai (who remained in and around Makuilongdi)" (Gangmei 2). The Rongmei Nagas bear mongoloid features and are simple, brave, amiable, hospitable, sympathetic, friendly, and love singing, dancing and festivities (Makuga 1). "Racially, the Rongmei Nagas belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid race" (Aphun 308), and are endowed with "a very rich heritage of custom and culture" (Makuga 103). An important source of the Rongmeis' cultural wealth is found in their folk elements such as tales, songs, dances, riddles, proverbs, traditional beliefs, customs and practices which have been orally transmitted through generations.

The paper studies the shift from orality to digital adaptation of a famous folktale, *Gairiamnang le Guiliannei* (Gairiamnang and Guiliannei), by keeping in focus its animated retelling called *Legend of Gairiamnang* (2025). It looks at how *Legend of Gairiamnang* preserves and disseminates Rongmei traditional beliefs and culture to the community's audience and beyond in a digital era. Besides the animation film, the source of this study is based on written materials on the folk hero Gairiamnang, such as "Gayriamnang" in K.G Neilalung's *Pupouh Pary Khatni Latchap* (Stories and Proverbs of the Forefathers) (2010), and "Gairemnang and Guilennei" in Chaoba

Kamson's *Folk-Tales of the Kabui (Rongmei)* (2021). The paper analyses *Legend of Gairiamnang* in view of its cultural significance, and also highlights the importance of channels like *Bingson TV* in digital folklore. It also explores how folktales in digital adaptation play a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of culturally significant tales and thereby, traditional knowledge, in a technologically advanced era.

Digital Folktales: Preserving Culture for Future

It goes without saying that folkloric materials have been transmitted orally through generations as William R. Bascom observes: "All folklore is orally transmitted" (28). According to Alan Dundes, "in a culture without writing (termed "nonliterate" cultures by anthropologists), almost everything is transmitted orally" (1). In this process of generational transmission, "verbal memory skill is understandably a valued asset in oral cultures" (Ong 56). In preliterate societies, it was memory that sustained and preserved the cultural materials. But, with the onset of literacy, written technology emerged and this was reinforced by that of print. In his seminal work, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), Walter J. Ong highlights that in the move from orality to literacy, writing and print have transformed human consciousness and the way one understands oral culture. He notes that the technology of writing has "shaped and powered the intellectual activity of modern man" (82). With this, primary orality of culture without writing came to be replaced by what Ong terms as *secondary orality* (radio, telephone, digital platforms) (2). These means of communication, which developed with electronic technology, have taken the oral lores and narratives beyond conventional spaces to a wider audience.

The integration of technology in cultural expression has led to the swift transmission of folklore in the digital age. At first, it was assumed that technology would lead to the demise of folklore. But this assumption has been rendered false as it plays a vital role in the contemporary era, transforming the way of life, the way we work, communicate and share information, thus expediating the process of cultural transmission: "As technology has redefined the way of communication in our lives, traditional folktales are now making their presence on digital platforms" (Bhushan 34). Dundes also asserts that,

> Technology, especially as it im-pinged upon communication techniques, was thought to be a factor contributing to the demise of folklore. Not true!

> The technology of the telephone, radio, television, Xerox machine, etc., has increased the speed of the transmission of folklore. What used to take days, weeks, or months to cross the country can now move around the world in a matter of seconds. So, technology isn't stamping out folklore; rather it is becoming a vital factor in the transmission of folklore and it is providing an exciting source of inspiration for the generation of new folklore (17).

The internet is the new reservoir of folklore today and has become the centre of cultural production. In his pivotal work, Blank (2009) also notes the internet as "a tool of cultural production that we utilize on a daily basis" (8), and which "has helped to re-facilitate the spread of folklore through electronic conduits" (7). He further underlines the "anonymity and efficiency in the speedy dissemination of ideas" (9). Thus, folktales have travelled through the oral-digital trajectory and traditional tales have been reinvented in digital versions such as animation on YouTube, both educating and entertaining a wider audience including children. Virtual interaction, cultural exchange, and infotainment through social media platforms made possible by the internet have become an inevitable part of life. The traditional storytelling method has declined drastically with the shift from orality to literacy that resulted in the discovery of the technology of writing. The written and print technologies had already transformed the way people think and become conscious of themselves and the society. This awakening in the thought process led to writing, printing and publication of traditional tales, paving the way for a shift to a different kind of 'literacy', to borrow Ong's term, which is premised on electronic expressions of ideas, knowledge and culture.

Recent studies on animation as a form of cultural preservation through entertainment are gaining ground. Sylvia Sagolsem (2018) has explored how the *phungawari* (literally, fireside stories of the Meiteis) has evolved from its traditional form to the digital form. She further asserts that "Phungawari has witnessed a fair amount of audio-visual adaptations in the form of animated movies on YouTube" (76). Bhushan (2024) too argues how integration of technology into culture has resulted in the digital adaptations of age-old folktales, thus disseminating traditional knowledge embedded in these tales to the outside world by transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. She states: "Digital adaptation of folktales can be a potent tool to preserve and popularise folktale culture in India" (41). Further, Maya Bhowmick and Ankuran Dutta (2020) have analysed the animation movies based on folktales

of three different Indian Languages (Hindi, Bengali, Assamese), and reiterates that digital folktales are a means of history, moral lessons and entertainment to children and others. They are wellsprings of the traditional knowledge system amidst the modern knowledge system.

Rongmei Folktales in Film and Animation

When it comes to folktales, the integration of digital technology with traditional storytelling has given way to a new form of storytelling, namely digital folktale. Rather than being a disadvantage for age-old cultural heritages, it plays a vital role in upholding these priceless lores for the contemporary times and future generations. Rongmei folktales in animation on YouTube can reach a wider audience beyond cultural boundaries and narrate culturally significant tales in lively and contemporised forms.

Some of the well-known Rongmei folktales have been adapted into cinema and digital films. *Meiriang Lubonnei* (Meiriang and Lubonnei) (1990), scripted and directed by Ragongning Gangmei, was the first Rongmei folktale-based film and was a big hit in the early nineties. Then, Kachangthai Gonmei, "a renowned script writer, filmmaker and actor, also winner of numerous awards" (Kamei 54), produced two digital films on Rongmei folktales namely, *Puinau Puida* (Stepmother) (2018) and *Nakamh Riangsuanneic* (Nakamh and Riangsuanneic) (2021). Gonmei's folktale film *Puinau Puida* won the Jury award in 2018 at an event organised by Sahitya Seva Samiti, Manipuri Film Awards, Manipur. While the second film, *Nakamh Riangsuanneic* earned numerous awards in the International Folklore Film Festival, Kerela in 2021. The most recent folktale in adaptation is about *Gairiamnang le Guiliannei* (Gairiamnang and Guiliannei), presented in animation as *Legend of Gairiamnang* (2025) by L. Kamei. These Rongmei folktales in adaptation, both in film and animation, vividly portray the Rongmei people's cultural traditions, songs, dances, music, festivals, customs, attires, rituals, and other ancestral practices.

Legend of Gairiamnang: First Rongmei Folktale in Animation

The story of the Rongmei folk hero and legend Gairiamnang in "Gairiamnang and Guiliannei" is valued as "one of the best and longest stories among the Rongmei folk tales" (Sebastian 83). It tells the story of Gairiamnang, who

had immense love for Guiliannei, his beloved lady. Guiliannei came under the false belief that his love, Gairiamnang had fallen into the hands of his enemies while he was away to find a new settlement area, and ended up marrying Kouran, the antagonist in the story. Gairiamnang was inconsolable when he returned to find Guiliannei married to Kouran. His world was in despair and darkness. Profoundly saddened and lost in grief, he accepted his fate but pleaded with the elders of the *Nammei Pei* (Village Council) to allow him to be with Guiliannei for a night in order to express their love for each other one last time. As allowed by the elders, Gairiamnang and Guiliannei met and shared their aching sentiments with each other, only to find that the night was short and bitter-sweet. They wished the sun would not rise, but rise it did, and they both parted with heavy hearts, never to meet again. Losing Guiliannei, the only one he treasured, and grief-stricken, Gairiamnang wandered from place to place and wherever he went, he played his *Rah* and sang sweetly. His songs enchanted all, especially those maidens of the villages he visited. One of those maidens was Kendinei, the younger sister of Chingkhu of Rangkatlong. Then, "Gairiamnang and Disonpou went to the village of Kourang and reached there" (Kamson 39). Once there, he played his *Rah* and sang romantic songs from Kimbut's Hill situated opposite to the village. Listening to his soothing songs, the young girls of Kourang were enamored with him and did not want Gairiamnang to leave. But, from Kourang, Gairiamnang left for a village called Sairem only to become a warrior in the subsequent battles fought between the two villages, Lungnamlong and Montha. He was the bravest of fighters in those battles. It was in the third battle that Gairiamnang was hit by the spear of Thondipou, king of Lungnamlong. Surrounded by the leaders of Lungnamlong's warriors, 'Gairiamnang could not move. As a last attempt, he opened his eyes and called, "Guilennei" but she was not seen and closed his eyes forever saying, "Mother, I am going (Apoi ai tatthe)" (sic) (Kamson 61). He was beheaded and his head taken to the king's house. This was how Gairiamnang, the hero met his tragic end.

Gairiamnang has been remembered through generations for the cultural legacies he left behind. Oral tradition says that he had incomparable skill in *Rah Jaimei*, i.e., in playing the stringed traditional musical instrument called the *Rah* in Rongmei. According to legends, blessed by his father *Pubuan Ra* (the god of Pubuan Hill), all maidens who heard Gairiamnang sing with the *Rah* were captivated by him. *Gairiamnang Lu* (Songs of Gairiamnang); sentimental

and romantic folksongs and *Gairiamnang Ginruan Lu or Rah Lu* (Songs of Gairiamnang's travels) are highly valued Rongmei folksongs to this day.

The animation film *Legend of Gairiamnang* depicts the life, rise and tragic downfall of the folk hero, Gairiamnang. It portrays his origin, his love life with Guiliannei, and the pangs of separation he endured after Guiliannei left him for Kouran. The legend is portrayed as a young man born to a divine father and a human mother in the animated tale. He is shown as a skilled hunter when he kills the fawn by the river side with his spear in the first attempt (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 20:35); the animation portrays his skill as a folk musician in a scene in which he sits at the courtyard of Guiliannei's house and sings melodiously with his *Rah* (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 35:28-35:40). In the entire film, the folk hero is depicted as an embodiment of true love, courage, endurance, fidelity, and spirit of Rongmei folk music.

The animated folktale also showcases a kaleidoscopic view of the Rongmei traditional society through depiction of the skilfully woven and embroidered traditional attires worn by the Rongmei men and women, the indigenous tools like *Takhian Baeng* (knife), *Phuu* (spade like tool for tilling the fields) used for agricultural purposes, *Buih* (spear) and *Baengsaeng* (Sword) used for self-defence while on travels or while going to the fields (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 40:35). The film displays the pulsating cultural dance called *Tuna Laam* (Maiden's dance) accompanied by melodious folksong. It also portrays the Rongmei traditional marriage system in the scenes where Guiliannei is sent off from her paternal home to be married to Kouran (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 59:36-59:44), and in the wedding ceremony of Guiliannei and Kouran which is performed by a traditional priest who holds a cock in his hands and recites the ritualistic prayers, *kasuai-kadam* (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 1:03:12-1:03:53). The film shows how, in the primitive Rongmei society, the courtyard of the traditional house or *Taraengkai,* "the decorative traditional house of Rongmei Nagas" (Makuga 48), was used as a space for vital discussions, marriage negotiations, wooing of women and other activities like rice pounding using wooden mortar (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 55:25), weaving, embroidery works, etc. In Rongmei belief, *taraengkai* (Rongmei traditional house) was a house of merit constructed in honour of the supreme God for the fortune and wealth bestowed upon an individual or family. Today, the use of the courtyard is a practice of the past. Modernised houses have taken the place of *taraengkai*

or the traditional houses and the modern living rooms have become the courtyards of those days.

Furthermore, the animation film displays some of the unique indigenous handicraft items crafted and commonly used by the Rongmei people in the bygone days but are no longer widely in use. Handcrafted materials such as *Kaah and Kalhuang* (cane or bamboo baskets) used for storing paddy, carrying food items while going to work, collecting vegetables from the forests and fields, normally carried by women (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 42-42:10), *Khuk* (bamboo or cane container with lid for storing treasured materials such as costly traditional shawls, attires, etc.), and *Khoujai* (a smaller size bamboo or cane container with a lid especially used by the women to safely preserve their valued ornaments) were widely used by Rongmeis in the olden days. The film brings these items and their usages alive. Every now and then, Guiliannei opens her *Khuk-Khoujai* (bamboo or cane containers) where she preserves her valued possessions; the armlet given by Gairiamnang, *Tuu le Taa* (ornaments) and her *Langmiu pheisoi* (a woven traditional attire for Rongmei ladies) (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 46:32). These traditional containers are now obsolete as modern almirahs and drawers have replaced them. In the days without lockers and safety shelves, these traditional cane cases were used to preserve possessions of great values. Another aspect of the Rongmei culture vital to be noted in the film is the traditional practice of summoning "a Council of Elderly men known as Village-Elders" (Makuga 25), for a session in the Village Court (*Nammei Pei*) (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 1:04:32). The aforesaid practice may be explained thus: in the traditional Rongmei village, the head of the Village Council or an appointed elderly man would come to the middle and elevated point of the village and verbally summon a meeting of the village councillors called *Baanza* in the Village Council House (*Nammei Peikai*). This meeting was meant for deliberating upon matters concerning criminal acts, land disputes, marriages, etc. This was done in the absence of the modern means of communication to inform members for a sitting on matters of urgency and importance. These lost practices are now only shown in such folktale-based films. Thus, it goes without saying that animation films on folktales such as *Legend of Gairiamnang* are a repository of Rongmei cultural knowledge and traditional practices, bringing to life the customs of the past.

While keeping the original story, Gairiamnang's legend in the digital adaptation is contemporised for modern viewers. For instance, a man passing

along the field where Guiluanliu, Gairiamnang's mother, is tilling the soil, asks her in Meiteilon (also known as Manipuri language), "*Echanupi, san lougero?*" (My daughter, do you want to buy cattle?) (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 6:22-6:28). Subsequently, the man sings: *"Narol erol thai mai"* (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 6:34-6:40), a catchy phrase from an old Manipuri song, to express failure of communication between different languages. Moreover, the dialogues in Rongmei are amusing and contemporised with colloquial language and humorous tones to appeal to the younger generation. The folksong that accompanies the dance of Guiliannei and other maidens is called *Khuaiguna Laam* (honeybee dance) (*Legend of Gairiamnang* 35:12-35:20), and its tune is lively and widely known across communities of the region. For the rest of the viewers, the film has subtitles in English. Thus, *Legend of Gairiamnang* has contemporary relevance and suits all viewers. While the characters are well-animated, lively and comical, they are true to the film's intent of showing the community's culture to the viewers. From start to finish, the animation is captivating, colourful, picturesque and entertaining for people of all ages.

Bingson TV

The YouTube channel *Bingson TV* that broadcast *Legend of Gairiamnang* is owned by L. Kamei and has more than seven thousand subscribers as of 2026. The channel describes itself thus:

> "An independent film production studio with a purpose— (the goal of such production is)— to preserve, celebrate, and reimagine the cultural legacy of the Zeliangrong people through the art of cinema. Rooted in tradition, driven by storytelling, we are committed to capturing the essence of our heritage and sharing it with the world—one frame at a time. Support the movement: Subscribe to our channel, share our stories, and stand with us in safeguarding our cultural identity. Preserve the past. Empower the present. Inspire the future".

Hence, the channel identifies itself as a platform for recreating the oral tales for the younger generation, in whose hands the sustainability and dissemination of the rich Rongmei folktales greatly depends. Regarding the adaptation of "Gairiamnang and Guiliannei", it states:

> "This production is a cinematic adaptation of the traditional Rongmei folktale Gairiamnang and Guiliannei—a timeless narrative handed down through generations. Through this work, we endeavour to preserve and

> celebrate the rich cultural heritage and identity of the Rongmei people by bringing our ancestral stories to life".

Thus, Rongmei folktales in animation that are available on online platforms such as YouTube help preserve and promote Rongmei ancestral tales for the generations to come.

Conclusion

In oral culture, transmission of folklore is slow and has a smaller audience. Folk cultural assets remained confined within the communities, untouched by literacy and the electronic age. But, with the shift from orality to literacy and the development of written, print and digital technologies, human consciousness has been transformed and the way one understands oral culture broadened. Furthermore, the internet technology has transformed the way oral narratives are preserved and transmitted. Today, the internet is a tool for cultural production and its rapid spread, thus re-facilitating the spread of folklore in general and folktales in particular. With changes in time, these folktales have taken varied forms, proving their relevance and survival in contemporary times wherein sustainability of cultural heritages is challenged by modern influences.

Folktales in animation is an evolved form of the traditional oral tales that offer numerous advantages for revival of the culturally valued tales in a digital world. They reconstruct the ancestral practices, revive indigenous knowledge system, and play a vital role in the resurgence of identity of a group, as Sagolsem too has observed. Animating the rich Rongmei folktales plays an important role in keeping cultural knowledge alive and making it accessible to both particular and global audiences. Today, animation is one of the forms of entertainment that captures audiences of all ages. Not only children but people of varied ages can have better understanding of their traditions and culture through digital folktales as in animation.

As the paper demonstrates, digital adaptation of oral folktales contributes in safeguarding the indigenous knowledge and the traditional practices. The first Rongmei folktale in animation *Legend of Gairiamnang*, which is based on the folktale *Gairiamnang le Guiliannei* (Gairiamnang and Guiliannei) is one such example. The film plays a significant role in transmitting the culturally rich tales to the present generation, thus disseminating invaluable traditional and indigenous practices of the Rongmeis. The cultural values immanent

in traditional Rongmei folktales are conveyed through digitally enriched retellings. Thus, digital folktales such as these remediate one's culture and history from being lost, acting as a modern repository of traditional knowledge and practices.

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