



Balladry Significance and Toponymic Orality of Monai Majhi Village under the Realm of Folklore

Dr. Atrayee Kashyap

Assistant Professor, Department of English, cum Research Coordinator,
Arunodaya University, Lekhi Village, Naharlagun, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh India

Email: atrayeekashyap68@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 21-05-2025

Published: 10-06-2025

Keywords:

*Ballads, Folklore, Monai
Majhi, Orality, Stories,
Toponymy,*

ABSTRACT

Folklore is important in many different ways, it tells us about who people are, where they come from, what they are connected to and what makes them unique. Toponymic orality and ballads play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage, storytelling, and historical narratives. It is important to individuals so as to families, groups and communities in broadcasting their roots. Traditions, customs, stories, and special objects help us to feel connected to each other. Every culture is proud of some sort of folklore, in way or other. Monai Majhi a village in upper Assam of Jorhat district is proud of their ballads. What are you proud of? The village name Monai Majhi has got its historical toponymy. No one could provide any written evidences regarding the origin of the village but there is an oral history which the local and the outside inhabitants of the village firmly believe. This paper attempts to focus on the vitality of Toponymic orality and balladry significance of the communities which links up in moulding the culture of the village. Monai Majhi situated in the north-west region of the Bhogdoi river of Jorhat is famous for its unique ballads which have now transported into Bihu songs. The pious soil of Monai Majhi, in Jorhat living upto its tradition, may overcome the onslaught of time and keep glowing till eternity.

**Introduction:**

What is Folklore? People often use different terms to say the same thing. For instance, they might use 'folklore' or 'folk culture' or also 'traditional culture' instead of 'folklore'. But all these terms refer to the same concept: traditions that we usually learn from people we know not from reading books or at school from our teachers. Basically, folklore is the living tradition currently practiced and passed along by word of mouth, imitation or observation over time and space within groups such as family, social class, regional and others (Dorson, 1972). Everyone and every group have folklore. But, what does that mean? We are talking about the traditional stories, songs, customs, activities, objects and beliefs of the people. Sometimes, we don't even remember when or how we learn a tradition; we learn our folklore traditions in an 'everyday way'. Folklore is not 'old-fashioned' or 'ignorant'. Rather, it is done today, as well as having been done in the past. Everybody has many kinds of folklore they can call their own. And while some things stay the same, folklore can change somewhat from generation to generation, or from person to person, or also from place to place. While many traditions are learned in everyday ways, folklore is usually anonymous, meaning that we all don't know where it comes from. When we talk about grouping folklore into different categories, we are talking about different folk genres or categories or types of traditions. But, what does that mean? It simply means that we want to group similar kinds of folklore together according to their shared qualities. Folklore is living tradition which is practiced and passed along by word of mouth, imitation, or observation over time and space within groups such as family, ethnic, social class, regional and others. People often use different terms to say the same thing. For instance, they might use 'folklore' or 'folk culture' or 'traditional culture' instead of 'folklore'. But, all these terms refer to the same concept. There are different kinds of folklore such as oral traditions, folk music, folk dance, material culture, beliefs, customs, and body communications. Specifically delving into the importance of orality along with culture and community. There is a saying in English by William Cowper, "God made the country and manmade the town". Doing so makes it much easier to talk about all different kinds of folklore we can see. According to R.M. Dorson, the folklore and folklore studies can be categorized into four broad sectors: a) oral literature b) material culture c) social folk customs and c) performing folk arts (Ahmed, 2012). Why study Folklore? Folklore is important in many different ways. First, they are important to us individually as well as to families. Traditions, customs, stories, and special objects help us to feel connected to each other. Every culture is proud of some sort of



folk life, in one way or another. Cajuns (people of Louisiana, French) are proud of their food. Native Americans are proud of their baskets. African Americans are proud of their music. Monai Majhi is known for its ballads. What are you proud of? Sometimes, it is found that people are embarrassed by their own folk life traditions because they believe outsiders will not understand them. But when we study each other's folk life traditions, we often learn that other people's traditions are quite similar to our own. And they are similar, despite some differences. We are all much more alike than we realize. Just think about it. No matter where people come from, their birthday will probably be an important day for them, even though they may celebrate it in different ways. Folklore is important because it tells us about who people are, where they come from, what they are connected to, and that what makes them unique. That's why we study folklore that describes folk/folks life. William Cowper said it, "God made the country man made the town". Monai Majhi, a name that got introduced through ear pleasing Bihu songs of the local bihu group of the Monai Majhi village. The name of the village has got its historical toponymy. There is no written record regarding the origin of the village. But, there are oral histories which every inhabitants local aswell as outsiders believes. Jorhat is a place which has carved a niche for itself in the annals of history. Monai Majhi is a place situated to the North West region of the Bhogdoi river of Jorhat the village which was once famous for its interesting ballads transported into bihu songs the village is still trying to keep its traces treasured.

Aims and Objectives:

- a) An attempt to throw light on the importance of Orality.
- b) An attempt to put focus on the folk life of Monai Majhi village and treasure its interesting stories.
- c) Trying to discern the vitality of Balladry in Toponymic Orality under the realm of Folklore.

Research Methodology: Descriptive, historical and analytical methodology is followed depending upon the context of the paper. Usage of secondary data such as books, magazines, internet etc.

Significance of Toponymic Orality: Toponymic orality refers to the oral transmission of place names and their associated stories. This practice is significant because:

1. **Preserves Local History:** Many place names carry legends, myths, and historical events that would otherwise be lost.
2. **Strengthens Cultural Identity:** Oral traditions help communities maintain a connection to their ancestral roots.
3. **Aids Linguistic Continuity:** Indigenous and regional languages often survive through oral storytelling.



4. **Supports Geographical Knowledge:** Understanding of place names provides insights into historical land use and migration patterns.

Significance of Ballads: Ballads are narrative folk songs or poems that have been passed down through generations. Their importance includes:

1. **Historical Documentation:** Ballads often recount events, wars, and societal changes.
2. **Emotional Expression:** They convey deep emotions, from love and loss to heroism and tragedy.
3. **Community Bonding:** Singing or reciting ballads fosters a sense of unity and shared experience.
4. **Influence on Literature:** Many poets and writers have drawn inspiration from traditional ballads.

Vitality of Balladry in Toponymic Orality: Balladry in toponymic orality is a fascinating intersection of folklore, geography, and storytelling. It explores how place names (toponyms) are preserved and transmitted through oral traditions, particularly in ballads.

Analysis of Balladry in Toponymic Orality: Here's an overview of the key factors:

1. **Preservation of Local History:** Ballads often embed place names within their narratives, ensuring that historical events and cultural landmarks remain in collective memory.
2. **Oral Transmission & Adaptation:** Since ballads are passed down orally, they evolve over time, sometimes altering place names or adding mythical elements.
3. **Cultural Identity & Heritage:** Communities use ballads to reinforce their connection to specific locations, strengthening regional identity.
4. **Linguistic Influence:** The phonetic and rhythmic qualities of ballads help maintain the pronunciation and significance of place names.
5. **Interplay with Literature:** Many poets and writers have drawn inspiration from oral ballads, incorporating toponymic elements into literary works.

Relationship between Balladry and Toponymic Orality: Balladry and toponymic orality are deeply intertwined, as both serve as vehicles for preserving cultural narratives and historical memory. It helps in:

1. **Preservation of Place-Based Stories:** Ballads often incorporate place names (toponyms) to anchor their narratives in real or legendary locations, ensuring that these places remain culturally significant.
2. **Oral Transmission of History:** Through ballads, communities pass down stories of events, heroes, and folklore associated with specific locations, reinforcing their historical importance.



3. **Linguistic and Rhythmic Influence:** The oral nature of ballads helps maintain the pronunciation and meaning of place names, ensuring their continuity across generations.
4. **Cultural Identity and Collective Memory:** Ballads reinforce a sense of belonging by linking people to their ancestral lands and shared histories.
5. **Adaptation and Evolution:** As ballads are passed down orally, they evolve, sometimes altering place names or adding mythical elements, shaping how locations are remembered.

Monai Majhi village through the lens of Toponymic Orality: Oral literature called verbal art or expressive literature or orality is spoken, sung and voiced forms of traditional utterances (Dundes, 1988). Various songs connected with different ceremonies, festivals, customs and practices, like *Bihu songs*ⁱ, songs of mohoho ('moh' mosquito 'oho' a bodo word means to drive out, songs sung to drive out mosquitoes) songs of boat race, *manassa geet*ⁱⁱ, nichukoni geet (cradle songs) etc. Folk songs or more particularly the oral literature treasures up traditions. It is transmitted from one individual to another as well as from one generation to another over centuries. Proverbs and riddles are also an important part of oral literature. Proverbs have important functions in the societies now formed an inseparable part of the written literatures throughout the world, riddles have stayed in the folk life and still function in folk societies as important device for imparting knowledge about cultural societal paradigms of the society (Ahmed, 2012). Orality also embraces chants, prayers, laments, cries and even hollers and many other things which hardly have got any written evidences under it's rubric. There used to flow one river near Jorhat in the late eighteenth century or perhaps in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The river name was Disoi River. The geographical location where now the village Monai Majhi is situated, the Disoi River used to flow through the south of the place at that time. And one of the ministers of Ahom king named Purnananda Borgohain offered bhog (offerings made to God, a rice porridge made of rice, milk and sugar) in the river and let it floats till *Malow pothar*ⁱⁱⁱ and hence, the river was renamed as Bhogdoi River. The minister thought of developing a better communication across the river and hence established two centers for playing *kori*^{iv} the two centers were namely Dekakuri (center for the young man to play kori) and burhakuri (center for the old man to play kori). There was no bridge during those days for communication, and the only means of transport system was boat facility and also only one boat to communicate across the river. And there was a young man whose name was Monai, who was a *majhi*^v of the boat, helped people cross the river from both the ends. And hence, oozing the awakening of trade and commerce with the growth of communication Monai became popular across the river, and thus the place got it's name Monai Majhi after the boatman. And there was this boat service for several years, offered by Monai majhi. There grew the commercial bonding and the relationships of the people from



both sides of the river for several years. But time is not the same always. Urbanization has dawned upon the place and it's people. A bridge was built towards the mid of twentieth century for better and further communication. Thus, leading to the vanishing of the boat service offered by the boatman but the bridge couldn't replace the services offered by Monai majhi hence leaving his imprints behind, still the place is known after his name as Monai Majhi.

Balladry significance and Identity of Monai Majhi Village: Culture is the root which includes all that is given by one generation to the other, the religious beliefs, law, art, moral codes, customs, manners, literature, music and language. Culture is not instinctive it is acquired through learning. It includes acquired qualities including the man-made part of the environment. Culture being socialistic satisfies certain needs of man (moral and social). Culture is very much idealistic and is capable of adjustment. Various aspects of culture include the technological aspect and material aspects too. The social aspect such as relationships between people and ideological aspect such as beliefs, rituals, ethics, religious practices, art, magical beliefs and philosophies, etc. (Chittatukalam, 2002). Diving into the culture of the village Monai Majhi. As it is mentioned that the name Monai Majhi became popular through some bihu songs of the village. One of such bihu songs which is popular among the local bihu group of the village is:

Monai Majhi gaonre Xenduri Pomili, noit ga dhuboloi jai (Xenduri and Pomili of Monai Majhi village goes to take bath in the river). There is a song of Xenduri and Pomili two young girls of the village who were sisters. This song has changed numerous times having rolled through generations and after:

Monai Majhi gaonre Xenduri Pomili/

Kaaloloi khyati tholi//

Dujoni bai bhoni Eku ke nabhabi/

Nepalir logote goli//

Ujayeye ahile Bhatire Nepali/

Lole Kolebarit Boha//

Rendering in English: Xenduri and Pomili of Monai Majhi village you have set your names on fire, both you sisters did not thought of anything and ran away with a Nepali man. The Nepali man was not an inhabitant who sailed and settled in Kolbari.



Gakhir diya solote Aha jua korute/

Xendurik dekhile hoha//

Bhokou burhir pukhuri Tinitakoi tupiya/

Lole rhou mase khur//

Bhalkoi thakiba Xenduri Pomili/

Nepali poribo sur//

Borghoror murote Xendurir tantxal/

Nepalir jiruwa thai//

Rendering in English: In the chance of selling milk, he have seen Xenduri smiling, in the pond of Bhokou burhi three rhou fishes have hide themselves in the hole of the pond. Be careful Xenduri Pomili that Nepali man can be your thief. To the end, of the living room is the weaving machine of Xenduri where the Nepali man used to sit and take rest.

Barire kole kati khayankar korile/

Nepaliye jolpan khai//

Amar gaonr Xenduri Pomili/

Noit ga dhuboloi jai//

Agote Xenduri pasote Pomili/

Majote Nepali jai//

Nodir parote nirole bohi loi/

Duiyu monor kotha pate//

Logor xomoniyai kirili marile/

Mukhere eku namate//



Xendurik solile xenduror tema di/

Pomilik solile premere//

Makok solile Nepali gakhire/

Bapekok solile dhonere//

Bapek goisile Majuli paroloi/

Makok rokhia di//

Makor sokute nidraban marile/

Nile senehore ji//

Rendering in English: Bananas of the plantation if destroyed, then Nepali man is given bananas to have. Xenduri Pomili of our village goes to take bath in the river, first goes Xenduri then Pomili in the middle goes the Nepali man. Sitting on the river bank they used to share their feelings. And when their peer group teases them they sat quiet without replying. Xenduri was flattered by a box of vermilion and Pomili was wooed by love. Their mother was flattered by the fresh milk which Nepali used to sell and father was flattered by seeing his tight sum of earning. Once when father had to go to Majuli leaving their daughters in the hands of their mother, and the Nepali man getting his chance wooed the girls and make them ran away with him.

Dudinor pisote bapeke gom ple/

Jiyeke logale lethi//

Gonya gyatiye bapekok kolehi/

Jiyekor xokolu kotha//

Mak bapeke moril buli erile/

Xomajor mukholoi sai//

Xenduri Pomili kotha aji kali/

*Dekai bihu namot he gai//*

Rendering in English: After a couple of days father got to know about the mishap brought by his daughters to the family from his fellow villagers. The parents considered both their daughters to be dead for breaking societal norms, thus the youths of the village sings the story of Xenduri and Pomili in Bihugeets). Through some people it has been known that this song is sung in the local Bihu group of the village for years. Nobody has found the composer of this song though, but the song is still sung in the present day. It can be vaguely assumed that this song was composed some 120-140 years ago. And this song is based on true story the characters existed many years ago. This song reflects the culture code of the society that prevailed in those days in the village. Breaking the norms of the society the sisters ran away with a Nepali man and entered into an inter-caste marriage. During those days people doing inter-caste marriages were considered to be an err that is not at all forgiven or supported by the society. And the news of the girls running away with the Nepali man had spread like forest fire and became a burning issue for the whole village for years and thus, the young boys gave a shape to the news by converting it to bihu song. And the neighboring villages use to insist the local boys to sing this song while performing *bihu hoosori*^{vi}. For, the people who are not aware of this news would get to know and also the villagers took this song as a sign of remembering the societal norms and never to break them. And hence, this song can be termed as *malati*^{vii}. This has got no connection with bihu but people of this village still sing this song. This song holds a picture of a typical Assamese society which believed in rigid social norms and cultures. In today's Assamese society the inter-caste marriage is accepted to quiet an extent but, during those days the story of Xenduri and Pomili shook the village of Monai Majhi. It is mentioned in the song that:

Borhoror murote Xendurir tantxal/

Nepalir jiruwa thai//

Barir kole kati khayankar korile /

Nepaliye jolpan khai//

This song indicates that, during earlier days the typical Assamese society did not accept other caste people to cross their threshold, they were not allowed to come inside and sit and also they were not offered any food on plates. This song not only indicates the scenario of Monai Majhi during earlier years, but this song is like a snapshot which reflects the social customs and codes which the Assamese



society of that era has undergone. This song composed in the soil of Monai Majhi village is undoubtedly, a ballad in the Assamese Folk Literature (Borah, 2001).

But there is also one another ballad regarding the Toponymical Orality of the village Monai Majhi: It is completely based on folks' orality, it was a tale of two people a washer man named Monai and a washer woman named Majhi. Monai and Majhi's tale is a heart-wrenching folk story rooted in oral traditions. It tells of the deep love and unwavering support shared by Monai, a washer man, and Majhi, his devoted wife. Every day, they worked tirelessly by the Bhogdoi River in Jorhat, earning respect in their village for their dedication and affection toward each other. One fateful day, after heavy rainfall, the river swelled dangerously with strong undercurrents. Though they usually went together to wash clothes, Majhi stayed behind to complete household chores, cautioning Monai to be careful near the water. Tragically, as Monai worked, he lost his footing and was swept away by the powerful currents. A lone fisherman witnessed the accident and rushed to inform Majhi. Overcome with grief and unable to imagine life without her beloved husband, Majhi ran to the river, calling out his name in sorrow before plunging into the waters to reunite with him forever she said "in the entire village I was known because of you Monai you meant the world to me if you are not there with me I cannot live without you I am coming to you..." their tragic end left an indelible mark on the village and as a tribute to their eternal love and sacrifice, the place was named after them. Their story continues to be preserved through ballads, keeping their legacy alive in Assamese folklore.

The ballads of Monai Maji are a fascinating part of Assamese oral tradition, blending history, anecdote, and imagination. The ballads of Monai Maji hold a unique place in Assamese folklore, reflecting the region's rich cultural heritage. However, due to the oral nature of these traditions, many of them face the risk of fading away. Efforts are being made to document and preserve these ballads for future generations.

Monai Majhi village through the lens of Toponymic Orality: Basically community is a self-organized network of people with common agenda, cause, or interest, who collaborates by sharing ideas, information, and other resources. Some characteristics of community are as: (a) historical factor (b) social factor (c) economic factor (d) cultural factor. It is found that community's experiences with conflicts and the way it has managed conflict in the past greatly influence its present degree of social cohesion. Old cases of land tenure disputes, violent confrontations and divorces or adultery may appear to have been settled, but they may leave a residue of resentment in the community. Past conflicts often



determine trust levels between members of the community. Some salient features of community are as ethnicity and language, family structure, caste and other social divisions, gender relations. Cultural beliefs also play a profound role in people's sense of building a community. There are some communities that surround the Monai Majhi village. These communities have extended to villages. During Ahom King Gaurinath Singha's reign in Jorhat it is assumed that this villages might have taken it's settlement. And near to Monai Majhi village there was the king's minister Purnananda Borgohain's chamber where from he helped the king in ruling Assam. And his descendents are still found in the place. For commercial purposes to run business and trade smoothly the minister allowed the blacksmiths to settle near his place. Those were the blacksmiths who were experts in making the designs for palanquin, and thus, this place came to be known as *Dhekorgorha*^{viii}. And near to this place is *Duliyagaon*^{ix} where settled the palanquin bearers. Another place attached to this place is *Masmoriyagaon*^x, where the fishermen community resides, who supplied fresh fishes to the king and king's men. And some people who loved living life independently and didn't liked mingling with other people and also even with their family members, the king's minister bought those people and helped them in making a village of their own naming it *Ghorfoliya*^{xi}. Another place nearer to this is *Guwalgaon*^{xii}, where resides milkmen who supplied milk to the king and the kings men. Nearer to this place is *Bohotiyagaon*^{xiii} where resides the workers and labourers of king and kings men. Monai Majhi and these places have carved a niche in the annals of Assam history. The establishment of these places reflects a remarkable evidence of work done by the king's minister Purnananda Borgohain (Borah, 2001). And it is only through the stories and the settlement of the Monai Majhi village, that people could also have the knowledge of the other communities residing nearby the village.

Conclusion: An acquaintance with different aspects of folk life is indeed an important means of understanding the basic social set ups, cultural mooring, artistic aspirations through orality and characteristics of a community particularly of a tradition bound one. For instance, in some communities it is unthinkable that an individual might be considered the owner of a tree or forest since people believe that those resources are only in a temporary stewardship of the current generation which manages them on behalf of the ancestors and future generations. This creates incentives that are very different from those in another culture where people believe that trees can be a property like anything else, and that the owner has absolute right to decide what should be done with that property. Ballads and Toponymic Orality are essential components of folklore, serving as powerful tools for preserving cultural narratives, historical events, and communal identity. It can be understood that, the success of many collective



community activities depends on people's perceptions that they want to stay in a community and are willing to make investments in it. Now, all of these issues leads up to the key questions: Can people who inhabit the same community work together effectively? The first issue to access is whether it is the cohesive factors or the divisive factors in the community that seem to be stronger. In any community there will be some divisive factors. The question is whether there are, also cohesive factors that enable people to overcome their differences in order to engage in collective action. Ballads and Toponymic Orality share a deep connection through their role in preserving cultural narratives and historical memory. Ballads, often passed down orally, serve as a form of storytelling that captures local legends, events, and traditions. Toponymic orality, which refers to the oral transmission of place names and their meanings, similarly preserves historical and geographical knowledge. The oral tradition of place names ensures that local histories remain alive, much like ballads do through their lyrical storytelling. In many cultures, ballads incorporate place names to anchor stories in real locations, reinforcing communal identity and historical continuity.

In Monai Majhi village after the death of Bogai Borah Borbayan, the last practitioner of the ballads there is hardly anyone left to perform the ballads and the bihu songs flawlessly. Several songs, including the ballad of Xenduri and Pomili are rarely sung these days during *bihu hoosori*. It is said that, some Bihu songs are uniquely presented to indicate that those belongs to Monai Majhi village, it's unique because no *dhol*^{xiv} is used to accompany singers of the ballads from beginning to the end. The dancers perform only to the songs, the rhythmic tapping with a stick and clapping. The dhol is rarely played in between the stanzas sometimes with different *seu* and *sapor*^{xv} only a person with very fit physique can perform to the beats as it entails many yogic postures. This paper attempts to throw a light on the toponymic orality of Monai Majhi village situated in Jorhat, Assam, a small place which is impregnate with many interesting ballads and stories. The pious soil of Monai Majhi, living upto its tradition may overcome the onslaught of time and keep glowing till eternity with its platter of interesting ballads and stories.

Notes:

ⁱ Festival of Assam celebrated in the season of April.



- ii Snake charming songs sung by snake charmers.
- iii Field, an open area for cultivation, the field name is Malow, located in the Jorhat district of Assam.
- iv Conch shells in Assamese is known as 'kori', it is used for playing and also sometimes used in astrology.
- v Boatmen in Assamese language is known as majhi.
- vi A performance of music which is done in open space usually performed by the youths by singing, dancing and merry making accompanied by dhol pepa during Bihu.
- vii Ballad in Assamese is known as *malati*.
- viii A piece of bronze that is used to put in the palenquine as a design which is *dhekor* and the person who makes it is the blacksmith *gorha*.
- ix Duliya means the palenquine bearer
- x Fisherman in Assamese language is known as *masmoriya* and Gaon means village.
- xi *Ghor* means home and *foliya* means separation/or separated by cutting.
- xii A milkman in Assamese language is known as *guwal* and Gaon means village.
- xiii Working labourers or the servants who worked in the king's palace were known as *bohotiya* in Assamese language.
- xiv A musical instrument basically, belonging to the school of percussion musical instruments generally known as drum or dholak.
- xv *Seu* means the rhythms and *sapor* means the beats of a drum.

References:

- Ahmed, Ali Kashim. (2012). *Folklore of Assam*. Eastern Book Home, Gauhati.
- Borah, Apurba. (2001). *Borno*. Purbashri Offset Printers, Jorhat.
- Chittattukalam, Kuriala. (2002). *Culture and Religions of Assam*. Omsons Publications. New Delhi.
- Dorson M, Richardson. (1972). *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.



-
- Dundes, Alan. (1988). *Introduction to the Theory of Oral Composition*, IUP, Bloomington,
 - Essay adapted in 2005 “Folklife in Louisiana, Louisiana’s living traditions” from *Louisiana Voices, Educator’s Guide*, (1999-2019).
 - Foley, John. (1999). *Signs of Orality*. Brill Academic Publishers, Germany.