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Archiving The Ancestral: *Zhung-Lu* (Bhutia Traditional Folk Songs) as Vessels of Living Historical and Cultural Memory in Sikkim

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines *Zhung-lu*, the traditional folk song genre of the Bhutia (Lhopo) community of Sikkim, as a living archive of historical consciousness, spiritual ecology, and indigenous identity. Occupying a unique intersection between oral tradition, Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, and localized sacred geography, *Zhung-lu* functions beyond mere artistic performance to serve as a primary repository for community memory, ancestral lineages, and moral philosophies. However, rapid socio-cultural transitions including the influence of modern western education, urban migration, and pervasive social media have rendered the traditional oral transmission of *Zhung-lu* unprecedentedly vulnerable. Drawing on a multi-source qualitative methodology that combines personal interviews with community elders, content analysis of recorded media, and secondary literature, this study demonstrates the critical need to treat *Zhung-lu* as an essential intangible cultural asset. Furthermore, by exploring English translations of two representative *Zhung-lu* songs, *Denjong-chak- rab* and *Lungpo chung-chung*, this paper offers vital insights into indigenous methodologies for safeguarding endangered oral traditions and Bhutia heritage in the modern era.

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KEYWORDS:
Zhung-lu (traditional Bhutia folk songs), Denjong-chak- rab, Lungpo chung-chung, oral traditions, Sikkim, indigenous identity.

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INTRODUCTION

What is a folk song? "Folk song is a body of song in the possession of the people, passed on by word of mouth from singer to singer, not learned from books or from print… Genuine folk songs are not static, but are in a state of flux, they have been handed down through a fair period of time and all sense of their authorship and origin has been lost" (Gordon,1938). Gordon highlights that folk songs are oral transmission and are in constant evolution through different time periods. Folk songs serve as living libraries of human stories, capturing the values, struggles, and historical narratives of humans across generations.

Written historical records do not include everyday stories and lived human experiences. It misses out on oral accounts and historical facts preserved by people through folk songs. Hence folk songs act as a medium of collective memory. It also serves as a vital medium for counteractive acts of resistance against state narratives of written records. Folk songs preserve cultural identity, safeguard indigenous languages, and acts as a window into a region's historical events, ecological wisdom, and social harmony. Today, as globalization and digital media tend to erase local traditions, capturing these stories is no longer just about preserving the past, it becomes a necessity to protect cultural identity.

The traditional folk music of the Bhutia community in Sikkim represents a vibrant oral archive, preserving centuries of history, spiritual beliefs, and community values. Passed down orally from generation to generation, the Bhutia folk songs are categorized into seven distinct genres namely *Tsog-lu, Gurmo, Gyal-lu, Zhung-lu, Tel-lu, Dhe-lu, and Lu-shyag / Rtsed-lu*. Each genre of the folk songs serve a unique role in the social and cultural life of the people (Tribal Research Institute and Training Centre, Social Welfare Department, Government of Sikkim, 2026). Among these categories, *Zhung-lu* holds a position of profound importance. Far beyond mere entertainment, it functions as an explicit historical archive for the Bhutia community. *Zhung-lu* is a traditional Bhutia folk song with a historical and cultural context of the Bhutia people of Sikkim. *Zhung-lu* serves as vital repository

of Sikkim's intangible cultural heritage, functioning simultaneously as oral historiography and expressions of communal identity of Sikkimese Bhutia oral literature.

Key Dimensions of *Zhung-lu in general are:*

1. *Preservation of oral history and governance*: Zhung-lu documents historical milestones and past establishment of regional governance. It sheds light on the lineage and leadership commemorating the governance of historical rulers and regional leaders .

2.Architectural and monumental tribute: *Zhung-lu* offers praise for sacred structure such as chortens (stupa), monasteries, and important historical landmarks.

3. *Cosmological connections***:** It weaves elements of the natural world such as sacred mountains, rivers, the blue sky, and celestial bodies into communal identity of a region.

4. Spiritual allegory of Buddhist philosophies: It expresses deep-rooted spiritual values, karmic lessons, and religious allegories through traditional verses.

5. *Moral ethos and community solidarity*: It serves as a cultural anchor that reinforce communal harmony, shared ethics, and collective memory during public gatherings and festivals.

Research Questions

1. How do the textual themes in these *Zhung-lu* compositions record and transmit the historical memory and sacred geography of the Bhutias of Sikkim?
2. In what ways do formal performance contexts and song structures allow *Zhung-lu* to act as an intentional medium for preserving cultural heritage?
3. What insights do these translated texts offer regarding the historical relationship between the Bhutia (Lhopo) people, their environment, and their ancestral traditions?

LITERATURE REVIEW ON BHUTIA FOLK SONGS

Bhutia culture has historically been preserved through the practice of oral traditions, with early literature existing in the form of scattered ethnographies, although structured documentation has accelerated recently. Gyamtso (2009) published *Denjong Sunglu (Folk Songs of Sikkim)*, an extensive Bhutia-language compilation of traditional songs. The compilation has both the Bhutia version of the songs as well as the English translation. Another book published in 2011 by the same author offers a comprehensive exploration of the socio-cultural, historical, and religious dimensions of the Bhutia people titled '*The History, Religion, Culture and Traditions of Bhutia communities'*. The text serves as a foundational resource for understanding indigenous Bhutia heritage, detailing the intricate intersections between community traditions, belief systems, and historical development. The volume also includes traditional Bhutia folk songs, presented with annotated translations. Lachenpa and Lachungpa (2013) documented *Beiyul Demojong Kyi Luyang - folks and contemporary songs of Bhutia community with lyrics and notation* highlighting the Bhutia songs and traditional musical instruments. Furthermore, they illustrated how these diverse song genres chronicle Sikkim's socio-political history, beginning with the 1642 consecration of Phuntsok Namgyal, the first Chogyal (Dharma King) of Sikkim. Tsichudarpo (2004**)** compiled and edited *Sikkimese Songs*, demonstrating how traditional folk songs serve as vital repositories of cultural heritage, oral history, and community identity in Sikkim. Lachenpa (2021) compiled a comprehensive overview of Sikkimese Bhutia musical traditions, featuring 23 Bhutia folk songs alongside detailed descriptions of traditional dances and instruments. Specifically, the work documents the cultural significance of the Yak dance and Singhi Chaam (mythical snow lion, representing Mount Khanchendzonga in Sikkim) as well as indigenous folk instruments such as the piwang, dran-yen, gyumang, and yarga. Dokhampa (2016) contributed to the documentation of indigenous Bhutia culture in his book titled *Sikkimese Bhutia Songs and Musical Instruments.* The volume brings together a collection of traditional Bhutia folk songs alongside detailed ethnographic write-up on indigenous musical instruments. In its official documentation, the Tribal Research Institute and Training Centre (TRITC) of the Social Welfare Department, Government of Sikkim (2026), highlight seven distinct genres of Bhutia folk songs, which function not only as artistic outlets but also as oral archives preserving historical narratives, ritualistic practices, and seasonal observances. Consequently, documenting these seven traditional vocal genres is a crucial step toward mitigating the erosion of indigenous oral traditions amidst rapid modernization. Chettri and Sharma (2021, p. 34) writes that *Denjong Chha- Lu,* " …is one of the popular National songs of an older Sikkim…." indicating the historical significance of the *Zhung-lu*.

Apart from the text literature, the existence of Digital Archives and Oral Traditions as Primary Literature is important too. Digital platforms like YouTube function as vital open-access archives for preserving endangered or oral folk traditions. The channel *Denjongki Tashar Official* which was created on 13th February 2018 acts as a digital custodian for traditional Bhutia folk songs. Music videos uploaded by Chewang Bhutia in the channel, preserve traditional *Zhung-lu* folk songs like *'Denjong Cha Rab'*(16th June 2018) and *'Lungpo Chung Chung'(25th February 2022)* . While *'Denjong Cha Rab'* chronicles the historical establishment of Sikkim, *'Lungpo Chung Chung'* expresses deep reverence and affection for the native land. Together, these works demonstrate how *Zhung-lu* traditions encode both historical memory and cultural attachment to the place.

The digitization of *Zhung-lu* performances on platforms such as YouTube represents a contemporary shift in cultural preservation, ensuring the continuity and accessibility of intangible heritage for younger generations. An interview broadcasted by

Doordarshan Kendra Gangtok (featuring cultural advocate Palden Tsering Gyamtso in conversation with Kiden Bhutia on July 12, 2023) highlights the critical imperative need to safeguard traditional Bhutia folk songs against rapid cultural erosion. Gyamtso's testimony underlines that oral repositories like the *Denjong Cha-rab* function as indigenous historical texts, asserting the necessity of passing down these musical lineages to contemporary and future generations to maintain cultural continuity.

Field research and personal interviews conducted with Bhutia elders including S.T. Lama, Chewang Gyatso Lachungpa, P.T. Gyamtso, Dhokampa, and Baichung Tsichudarpo (personal interviews, 2025–2026) reinforces the critical urgency of transmitting traditional folk songs to the younger generation. There was a general understanding from them that the need for widespread dissemination across digital platforms, comprehensive documentation in written texts, and targeted educational initiatives designed to rekindle interest among contemporary youth should be initiated with more vigour.

METHODOLOGY: To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the subject, this paper utilizes a qualitative triangulation approach that integrates primary data from personal interviews with secondary data derived from existing literature and televised media broadcasts.

DISCUSSION ON *ZHUNG-LU 'DENJONG-CHA-RAB'* (bai-yul-me-chag)

For this paper, the discussion of the traditional Bhutia folk song (*Zhung-lu*) "Denjong Cha Rab" is based on the English translation by P.T. Gyamtso from his compilation, *Denjong Sunglu (Folk Songs of Sikkim)*, published in 2009. While spelling variations exist such as *Denjong Chha-Lu* (Chettri and Sharma, 2021) and *De-jong-chak-rab* in Gyamtso's text, the contextual meaning of the *Zhung-lu* remains consistent across all sources.

English translation of Zhung-lu :'Denjong-Chak-Rab' (bai-yul-me-chag)

1. "How fortunate and gratifying that this hidden land was found,
   How fortunate and gratifying that this hidden land is found
   in the valley of Demojong ;
2. How fortunate and gratifying that it is found by a lama,
   How fortunate and gratifying that Lama Lhatsun Chenpo found it;
3. How fortunate and gratifying that great monastery was established,
   How fortunate and gratifying that great monastery Pemayangtse was established;
4. How fortunate and gratifying that a Dharmaraja established this land,
   How fortunate and gratifying that Chogyal Phuntsok Namgyal established it;
5. How fortunate and gratifying that a palace was established,
   How fortunate and gratifying that Rabten tse palace was established;
6. How fortunate and gratifying that the holiest sacred place was found,
   How fortunate and gratifying that holiest sacred place Drak-kar-Tashiding was found;
7. How fortunate and gratifying that sacred relic holder stupa was established
   How fortunate and gratifying that Thong-wa-rang-drol was established;
8. How fortunate and gratifying that celestial cremation ground was found,
   How fortunate and gratifying that celestial cremation ground Sil-wa-tsal was found."

The folk song 'Denjong-Cha-Rab' (*Bai-yul-me-chag)* functions not merely as a traditional tune, but as an oral chronicle of the founding and sacred identity of the region. This *Zhung-lu* is known as a song depicting the conception of Sikkim. Sikkim in Bhutia language is known as *Denjong or Demojong* meaning 'valley of rice', *cha rab* meaning the establishment or the beginning. Chettri et al. (2021) notes the literal translation of Denjong as the 'valley of rice' in their scientific research on the rice landraces of Sikkim. The Himalayan state holds profound cultural and agricultural significance for indigenous paddy cultivation. *Bai-yul- Demojong* meaning the 'hidden valley of rice.' Thus encoding indigenous ecological history, with Sikkim's historical name, *Denjong.*

The main *theme* in the *Zhung-lu* lies in the *historical significance* of the lyrics. The lyrics refers to how a hiddenland was found in the valley of Demojong by the revered lama Lhatsun Chenpo. Historically Lhatsun Chenpo met the two other revered lamas Ngadak Sempa Chenpo and Kathok Kuntu Zangpo in Yuksam and unified the region and established Buddhism and crowned Phuntsok Namgyal as the first *Chogyal* (*Dharmaraja*) of Sikkim, marking the birth of the Namgyal dynasty that ruled the kingdom until 1975. The three lamas particularly Lhatsun Chenpo established the spiritual and political foundation of Sikkim. Furthermore, the song chronicles the establishment of Pemayangtse Monastery by Lhatsun Chenpo in West Sikkim, recognizing it as one of the region's oldest Nyingma monastic institutions. This account is corroborated by Bhutia (2013) in the *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, which affirms Lhatsun Chenpo as the founder of Pemayangtse monastery. The song additionally documents the establishment of Rabdentse, the first palace and seat of governance for the *Chogyals* (Dharma Kings) of Sikkim. It subsequently highlights the foundation of the sacred site of Tashiding, establishment of the *Thongwa-rangdrol* relic-holder stupa and the *Sil-wa-tsal* sacred cremation ground.

Thus the *Zhung-lu* chronicles the founding of Sikkim by embedding key political and religious landmarks within its lyrics and thereby illuminating the political history and cultural identity of Sikkim. Moreover, it functions as an invaluable educational tool for the youth to engage with their ancestral landscape, lineage, and spiritual heritage.

The *Zhung-lu* featured on Mr. Chewang Dorjee's *Denjong Tasher official* YouTube channel was released on 16th June 2018. It becomes evident that cultural preservation is shifting from oral performance to digital presentation and thereby securing traditional folk songs for wider, contemporary audiences. The digital cultural presentation of the Zhung-lu was shot across the key historical landmarks. The performance pairs contemporary studio production with traditional instruments, including the *Dran-yen* (also spelled *Dram-nyen*, a lute similar to a guitar), *Ling-bu* (bamboo flute), and *Piwang* (similar to violin). This demonstrates a blend of traditional and modern musical instruments in the presentation of folk songs.

DISCUSSION ON *ZHUNG-LU* 'LUNGPO CHUNG CHUNG' (LITTLE VALLEY)

"Little Valley yet an illustrious one
A safe sanctuary called Lachung for everyone
Fertile and settled, yet a serene land;
Pipons, elders and guests seated high above
Admiring the ambience with love;
Young women exhibit grace and charm
You are the pride of our valley and farms;
As the treeline of sandalwood runs straight in a row
It emanates fragrance;
The sound of the melting snow in spring and the bellows of Dri (female yak)
Emanates blissfulness;
The refugee of the Dharma and the prosperity in the valley
Is the testimony to the people's Karmic deeds;
May the Lachung Dzomsa flourish and thrive
I pray the Dzomsa soar to greater heights;
May the young men and women always carry a smile on their face
And may you always carry the valley in your heart."

The discussion is based on the 25th February, 2022 release on Chewang Bhutia's Denjongki Tashar official YouTube channel and translation done by Dr. Jigme Wangchuk Bhutia and Dr. Kunzang Namgyal Lachungpa. The *Zhung-lu* '*Lungpo Chung Chung'* is a rich cultural expression rooted in the high-altitude landscapes and traditions of Lachung which is in the far northern part of Sikkim. Modern music has fixed composition but this *Zhung-lu* music performance represents collective continuum with changes in its lyrics and tune through the time. Namgyal Wangdi Lachungpa's re-compilation of this song captures the evolving oral nature of the folk song. Likewise, Chewang Dorjee Bhutia's re-composition of the tune, makes the song appealing to the new generations. However the character of the Bhutia folk song is maintained by the use of traditional musical instruments such as dran-yen and ling-bu played by Jigme Gyalpo Sherpa and Pritam Chettri respectively.

The *Themes* reflected in the song are:

Topography and Natural Serenity: The song opens by anchoring the listener in a specific geographical and emotional space. Lachung is depicted as a sanctuary which is unspoiled, peaceful, and dictated by the rhythmic cycles of nature, such as the '*melting of the snow'* in spring that feeds the valley's ecosystem.

Sensory and Cultural Imagery: Traditional Himalayan pastoral life is vividly evoked through sensory details. The inclusion of lyrics such as '*sandalwood trees'* points to sacred rituals, spirituality, and aromatic purity. Burning of sandalwood incense by the Bhutia people during prayer rituals signify the purification of the air, an offering to the Buddha and guardian deities. The reference to *'bellows of the Dri (female yak)'* grounds the song in the bliss of daily life of pastoral communities of the region.

Social Harmony and Grace: Community structures, respect for lineage, wisdom and cultural hospitality is reflected in the lyrics "*pipons, elders and guests seated high above, admiring the ambience with love*". Pipon is the village headman of Lachung. The graceful depiction of the community's young women is reflected in the lyrics '*young women exhibit grace and charm, you are the pride of the valley…'.*

*Cosmology, Governance, and Prosperity***:** "*…Dharma and the prosperity in the valley is the testimony to the people's karmic deeds*" underlines that the valley is prosperous due to the people's good deeds. Mentioning the '*Lachung Dzomsa'* a traditional local self-governance system highlights communal autonomy, civic pride, and socio-political identity. Lachungpa (2013) states in the Gazeetter of Sikkim that, "According to the Census of India 2001, District census handbook: Sikkim, these institutions have existed for more than 350 years." This validates the fact that the self-governance system is an age old established governing system of Lachung.

The Emotional Core **:** The concluding sentiment shifts from physical description to internal attachment through lyrics such as *'carry the valley in one's heart'*. Regardless of physical distance, the landscape and the communal ethos of Lachung becomes an internalized emotional anchor for anyone connected to the valley.

Cultural & Artistic Significance

Preservation of Regional Identity: The *Zhung-lu* serves as audiovisual archive. By celebrating localized entities like the Lachung Dzomsa and pastoral lifestyle markers, the track acts as a cultural touchstone against rapid modernization.

Performance Context: Sung with the classic melodic ornamentations typical of regional folk styles, the vocalist Pema's rendition encourages community cohesion and stirs nostalgic pride among the diaspora and local residents alike.

CONCLUSION

The textual themes of both the *Zhung-lu* songs focus on sacred geography and historical memory. It shows how intangible heritage functions as an archive by turning physical landscapes and historical lineages into preserved knowledge. The digital dissemination of these *Zhung-lu* songs across YouTube and social media platforms actively bridges traditional communal settings with modern digital spaces. Rather than reducing the genre to a static museum piece, this online visibility demonstrates that *Zhung-lu* remains a dynamic, living tradition capable of adapting to contemporary modes of cultural transmission and global reach. The songs explore the deep ontological relationship between the Bhutia people (Lhopo) of Sikkim, their Himalayan environment, and their ancestral roots.

Zhung-lu transcends the boundaries of mere musical performance; they are the aural archives and cultural anchors of the Bhutia community in Sikkim. These traditional folk songs serve as oral repositories, preserving sacred geographies, ancestral values, and a profound reverence for the Himalayan landscape.

However, as Sikkim rapidly transitions into a more modern, digitally connected society , *Zhung-lu folk songs and Bhutia folk songs in general* face the imminent threat of generational disconnection. The decline of traditional community spaces and the dominance of global mass media risk reducing these vibrant historical vessels to museum artifacts.

Therefore, archiving *Zhung-lu* is not merely an act of academic preservation, but an urgent cultural necessity. Reviving these ancestral songs requires a dual approach:

- Rigorous ethnomusicological documentation and digital archiving for future generations.
- Active community-led transmission encouraging youth to engage with the lyrics, idioms, and historical contexts through contemporary cultural platforms.

FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

The future scope of research regarding *Zhung-lu* and Bhutia folk traditions is wide, offering numerous pathways for comprehensive academic exploration. Researchers can examine the socio-cultural evolution of these songs; how narrative folk melodies adapt to modern pressures of globalization, and digital media; inclusion of modern musical instruments in the presentation of folk songs; comparison of traditional musical instruments with modern musical instruments; study of the different types of Bhutia folk songs like spiritual *Tsog-lu*, patriotic *Gyal-lu*, romantic *Dhe-lu,* praise and blessing songs like *tel-lu,* and more.

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