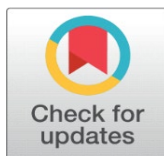


RITUAL PERFORMANCE AS CULTURAL ARCHIVE: A STUDY OF MOHAN-DEODHAI-BAILUNG CEREMONIES IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how the ritual performances of the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community of Assam function as embodied archives that preserve and transmit cultural memory and communal identity. As priest-healers deeply rooted in indigenous epistemologies, the Mohan, Deodhai, and Bailung perform ceremonial practices that not only mediate between the natural and spiritual realms but also encode historical consciousness and ancestral narratives. Drawing on Richard Schechner's theory of performance as restored behaviour and Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, the study situates these ritual actions as dynamic, performative texts through which oral knowledge, cosmology, and social cohesion are enacted and remembered. Based on ethnographic observation and cultural performance analysis, the paper reveals how gesture, chant, sacred objects, and spatial arrangements are employed to transmit indigenous knowledge across generations. In doing so, it argues that the ceremonial practices of the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung are not static traditions but evolving cultural repositories—resilient and responsive to external pressures while safeguarding a unique worldview. These rituals emerge as critical to understanding the role of performance in sustaining identity, healing memory, and affirming indigenous sovereignty in contemporary Assam.

Keywords: Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung, Ritual Performance, Cultural Archive, Embodied Memory, Performance Theory, Cultural Memory, Indigenous Knowledge



1. INTRODUCTION

The Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community of Assam occupies a distinctive position within the indigenous ritual landscape of Northeast India. As ritual specialists and priest-healers, they perform sacred ceremonies that bridge the spiritual and ecological realms, often invoking deities, ancestral spirits, and natural forces. Unlike the more widely documented Brahmanical or Tai-Ahom ritual traditions, the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung represent an indigenous knowledge system shaped by oral cosmologies, land-based practices, and intergenerational memory.

Ritual in such communities serves not merely as religious practice but as a cultural and epistemic system—a performative mode through which social values, historical consciousness, and environmental ethics are enacted, remembered, and transmitted. Victor Turner (1969) conceptualizes ritual as a “social drama” that not only reflects but actively constructs social reality (p. 42). In Richard Schechner's (2006) framework, ritual is “restored behaviour,” a repeated yet adaptive set of actions that gain meaning through performative reiteration and collective memory (pp. 28–30). Similarly, Jan Assmann (2011) emphasizes that cultural memory is often transmitted through ritualized practices that anchor collective identity and meaning across generations (pp. 6–8).

1.1. THE PRESENT STUDY ASKS TWO KEY QUESTIONS

- How do the rituals of the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community function as embodied cultural archives?
- What forms of knowledge and memory are preserved and transmitted through their ritual practices?

To explore these questions, this paper adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in ethnographic observation and performance analysis, supported by theoretical insights from performance studies and memory studies. The fieldwork includes interviews with ritual practitioners, observation of selected ceremonies, and documentation of chant, gesture, spatial design, and symbolic elements. This approach enables a layered reading of ritual as not only an act of worship but also as a living archive—where cosmology, ecological relationships, and historical experience are performed and preserved.

In doing so, the study contributes to the understanding of ritual performance as a mode of indigenous cultural resilience and epistemological continuity in the face of modernity and marginalization.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework for this study is situated at the intersection of performance theory and cultural memory studies, enabling a nuanced understanding of how ritual acts performed by the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community function both as embodied traditions and as repositories of historical memory. Drawing primarily from the works of Richard Schechner and Jan Assmann, the study interprets ritual as both performative text and mnemonic practice.

Richard Schechner's theory of performance articulates ritual as a form of "restored behaviour"—that is, behaviour that is symbolic, rehearsed, and repeatable, yet capable of transformation within its re-enactment (Schechner, 2006, pp. 28–30). Ritual, in this view, occupies a liminal space—neither entirely spontaneous nor rigidly scripted—and generates meaning through its repetitive and efficacious nature. These liminal performances, often marked by symbolic gestures, chants, and structured bodily movement, embody what Schechner terms as "twice-behaved behaviour" (2006, p. 35), where the act itself becomes a site of cultural negotiation and continuity. For communities like the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung, whose oral tradition is rich yet under-documented, ritual performance serves as an essential mechanism for both cultural preservation and renewal.

Complementing this view is Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, which differentiates between communicative memory—short-term, intersubjective recollection—and cultural memory, which is objectified in rituals, texts, and monuments and spans several generations (Assmann, 2011, pp. 6–8). Cultural memory is structured through "figures of memory," including myths, rituals, and symbols, which are passed down through performative repetition. Assmann asserts that ritual plays a vital role in anchoring identity and transmitting collective memory, particularly in societies where written history is secondary to embodied practice (2011, p. 36).

When applied to the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung context, these frameworks reveal how the ritual body becomes a living archive—performing knowledge systems embedded in ancestral cosmology, environmental relationships, and social cohesion. The act of performance itself—through chant, costume, gesture, and spatial arrangement—transmits not only sacred meaning but historical continuity, allowing the community to negotiate its cultural identity across time.

Thus, combining Schechner's performative lens with Assmann's mnemonic theory allows for an enriched reading of ritual as a dynamic mode of cultural resilience and epistemic practice. The rituals of the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung, therefore, emerge as liminal spaces where time, memory, and community intersect in performative acts of cultural affirmation.

3. ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT: THE MOHAN-DEODHAI-BAILUNG COMMUNITY

The Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community represents a unique strand of ritual specialization and indigenous knowledge practice in the cultural landscape of Assam. Functioning as priest-healers, their spiritual authority is closely tied to the land, ancestors, and invisible forces believed to govern both health and ecological balance. This community, often associated with tribal and non-Brahmanical systems of worship, occupies a marginal yet resilient cultural space, where orality, embodiment, and ritual ecology define social and spiritual life.

The three ritual roles—Mohan, Deodhai, and Bailung—are often distributed hierarchically but work in complementary capacities during ceremonial performances. The Mohan typically serves as the lead ritual specialist, often involved in spirit negotiation and mediumship. The Deodhai acts as a visionary and sometimes a female priest-medium who communicates with spirits through trance and oracular speech. The Bailung assumes the role of healer and knowledge keeper, often entrusted with ritual objects and traditional medicinal practices (Bordoloi et al., 1987, pp. 32–33). These roles are fluid and adapted to the specific ritual context, whether it is a land purification rite before sowing crops, a spirit-invocation ceremony to appease deities, or healing rituals for individuals afflicted by illness or spiritual imbalance.

Rituals performed by the community are deeply integrated with the agrarian calendar and local cosmology. For instance, land-cleansing ceremonies often precede cultivation, signifying not just agricultural preparation but the reestablishment of harmony between human and non-human entities. Similarly, spirit-invocation rituals involve trance, drumming, chanting, and offerings, allowing the Mohan or Deodhai to mediate between the human world and the spirit realm. Healing rituals are performed when afflictions are diagnosed as spirit-induced or environmentally caused, using a combination of herbal medicine, symbolic gestures, and spoken incantations (Narzary, 2022, pp. 118–120).

Transmission of ritual knowledge in the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community remains predominantly oral and experiential. Young members are initiated through apprenticeship, involving years of observation, memorization of chants, and participation in ritual procedures. This intergenerational pedagogy fosters a living continuity of tradition where knowledge is not abstracted from practice but inscribed in the very act of performing. As such, their rituals function as dynamic epistemic systems that resist textualization, privileging embodied memory and oral performance.

This ethnographic lens underscores that the community's ceremonies are not merely religious performances but complex systems of knowledge production, identity assertion, and ecological mediation. The Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung, therefore, maintain an ontological relationship with ritual, wherein performance becomes a mode of knowing, healing, and belonging.

4. RITUAL AS TEXT: EMBODIED MEMORY AND SYMBOLIC ACTION

Within the ritual world of the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community, performance transcends religious devotion to become a coded text—rich in symbolic gestures, mythic allusions, and cosmological structure. These rituals, passed down through generations, are not merely repetitions of custom but living archives wherein the body, space, and action collaborate to encode and transmit cultural memory. Drawing on performance theory, particularly Richard Schechner's understanding of “restored behaviour” (2006, p. 35), ritual here functions as an embodied script, one that is constantly revised and re-performed, embedding the past into present ceremonial action.

Selected rituals—such as land purification rites before cultivation or spirit-invocation ceremonies to heal communal disorder—illustrate how gestures (e.g., tracing symbols in rice flour), vocal chants invoking deities or ancestors, and the use of ritual costume (like white robes, sacred grass garlands, or trance-inducing ornaments) operate as layers of signification. These elements are not decorative; they represent embodied knowledge systems rooted in an indigenous cosmology that recognizes the interconnectedness of the human, natural, and spiritual worlds (Assmann, 2011, pp. 40–42). Each movement or sound functions like a “mnemonic device,” transmitting cultural myths and encoded ecological ethics without dependence on written language.

The ritual space itself is transformed into a site of performative archiving. For instance, the temporary sanctum created for ceremonies—often demarcated by banana trees, sacred threads, and earthen altars—operates as what Erika Fischer-Lichte might call a “transformative space,” wherein participants and spectators alike enter a heightened mode of sensory and emotional awareness (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 38). Within this charged environment, the performer's body becomes the primary site of inscription. The trance of the Deodhai, the rhythmic chants of the Mohan, and the measured gestures of the Bailung all become ways of writing history—not on paper but through the body itself. As Peggy Phelan suggests, “the body in performance disappears even as it manifests meaning” (1993, p. 148), thus rendering ritual both ephemeral and enduring.

Moreover, these bodily acts are not simply reenactments but forms of remembering. The performer's body remembers a cosmology, re-enacts mythology, and gives voice to a history that is often excluded from dominant textual archives. The ritual process, therefore, preserves indigenous epistemology through aesthetic embodiment, becoming a

lived archive that retains sacred memory across generations. In this sense, ritual is not only performance but also pedagogy, preservation, and resistance.

5. CULTURAL MEMORY AND IDENTITY FORMATION

For the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community, ritual is not only an enactment of belief but also a vital mechanism for preserving cultural identity in the face of marginalization and socio-political change. As Jan Assmann (2011) articulates in his theory of cultural memory, ritual practices serve to stabilize identity by transmitting shared values, symbols, and cosmological frameworks across generations (pp. 36–38). In communities with limited textual traditions, like that of the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung, cultural memory survives predominantly through oral traditions, embodied gestures, and material artefacts—all of which are deeply embedded in their ritualistic performances.

Rituals serve as temporal anchors, allowing the community to situate themselves within a continuum of ancestral knowledge. This is particularly crucial in an era where modern state institutions and dominant religious systems often undermine or erase local epistemologies. In land-purification ceremonies, for example, sacred chants passed down orally recount the origin myths of the land and its deities. These are not mere recitations but communal assertions of origin and belonging—acts of cultural recall that resist displacement and homogenization.

The performative body plays a critical role in this mnemonic transmission. Every hand gesture, foot pattern, costume element, or chant performed by the Mohan, Deodhai, or Bailung contributes to an intricate web of meaning-making that constitutes collective identity. As Erika Fischer-Lichte notes, the repeated ritual action embeds meaning not only in the mind but also in the senses, making identity formation a multisensory and affective experience (2008, p. 43). This physical repetition becomes a means of internalizing and affirming community values—a cyclical pedagogy of cultural selfhood.

Material culture also participates in this process. Ritual implements such as bamboo structures, sacred vessels, natural dyes, and medicinal herbs are not only functional but symbolically resonant. Their use and handling during rituals embody encoded knowledge about ecology, health, and cosmology. These material elements carry what anthropologists might refer to as “residual memory”—inscriptions of lived experience and ancestral wisdom that are activated through ceremonial interaction (Connerton, 1989, pp. 71–73).

The continued practice of these rituals, despite growing marginalization, is a form of cultural resilience. In many cases, younger members of the community are gradually drawn into these practices, encouraged through apprenticeship and active participation. Though modernity poses challenges—such as migration, secular education, and the breakdown of traditional village networks—the community’s strategic adaptation of ritual form (e.g., combining healing rites with community festivals) indicates a dynamic preservation rather than mere cultural inertia.

Thus, the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung rituals serve as more than religious observances—they function as cultural scaffolds for identity construction, repositories of collective memory, and agents of indigenous continuity.

6. CHALLENGES AND CONTINUITIES

The Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung ritual practices, rooted in ancient oral and embodied traditions, face significant challenges in the contemporary socio-political landscape of Assam. As with many indigenous ritual communities, the imposition of dominant religious ideologies, state-driven homogenization policies, and the forces of modernization have deeply affected the continuity of their cultural expressions. However, these challenges have also elicited strategic adaptations that reflect resilience and cultural creativity.

The first major challenge is the marginalizing influence of organized religions—especially Hinduism and Christianity—which have historically dismissed indigenous rituals as “primitive” or “superstitious.” This has led to a decline in participation and legitimacy among younger community members, particularly in urbanized or mission-influenced areas. The absorption of ritual sites into state-controlled forest lands and the discouragement of animal sacrifices under animal protection laws have further restricted traditional performances, altering their spatial and symbolic foundations.

State education and administrative systems have often failed to accommodate indigenous epistemologies, privileging textual literacy over oral and performative knowledge systems. Consequently, the ritual specialists—Mohan, Deodhai, and Bailung—struggle to transmit complex cosmological and ecological knowledge to younger generations

through conventional means. However, the community's turn to adaptation has been a notable form of continuity. For instance, ritual practices are increasingly being incorporated into public festivals or scheduled alongside civic events, making them more accessible and visible. These forms of hybridization allow the core symbolic functions—healing, purification, protection—to persist, even in altered performative contexts (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 147–149).

Performance documentation is emerging as a crucial strategy for cultural preservation. Several recent initiatives by folklorists and performance scholars have involved video recordings, transcription of chants, and ethnographic publications that aim to archive endangered ritual forms (Assam Folklore Archive, 2021). While these methods risk reducing dynamic performance to static representation, when conducted collaboratively with ritual practitioners, they offer tools for intergenerational transmission. Academic collaborations have also helped elevate the rituals from being viewed as marginal to being recognized as intangible heritage worthy of preservation and critical study (Assmann, 2011, p. 119).

Moreover, digital platforms—particularly among Assamese cultural groups and diaspora forums—have enabled the sharing of ritual narratives, chants, and ceremonial images, albeit with selective visibility. These media create new circuits of memory and recognition, linking the ritual past to present concerns of identity and resistance. Although the spiritual and ontological dimensions of the rituals can never be fully captured on screen, these digital traces contribute to what Schneider (2001) calls “performance remains”—partial yet powerful reminders of lived cultural expressions.

In sum, the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung rituals illustrate a dynamic tension between continuity and change. While threatened by external impositions and internal attrition, the rituals endure by adapting their form, forging new contexts, and asserting their relevance. The community's creative resilience and openness to scholarly partnership offer hopeful pathways for sustaining their sacred knowledge systems into the future.

7. CONCLUSION

The ritual performances of the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community function as more than ceremonial events; they constitute a living cultural archive, embodying centuries of ecological wisdom, mythological knowledge, and socio-spiritual cohesion. Anchored in oral transmission and performative embodiment, these rituals preserve not only cosmological narratives but also the structural foundations of community identity, healing, and resilience (Assmann, 2011, pp. 34–38). As shown in this study, these acts of performance are not static traditions but dynamic, evolving knowledge systems, capable of negotiating modern pressures while sustaining indigenous epistemologies.

Drawing from Richard Schechner's theory of performance as “restored behaviour,” it becomes evident that the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung ceremonies enact history not through written texts, but through repetition, transformation, and embodied remembrance (Schechner, 2006, pp. 28–29). The ritual gestures, chants, costumes, and sacred objects together form a layered, multisensory mnemonic system that allows memory to be both preserved and renewed in each iteration. As Schneider (2001) reminds us, performance “leaves remains”—traces that extend beyond the immediate present and haunt future acts of cultural representation (p. 102).

Moreover, the ceremonies' continuity amidst the forces of religious conversion, land commodification, and cultural marginalization underscores their significance in the broader discourse on indigenous sovereignty and memory politics. Ritual becomes a site of cultural resistance—a means through which the community asserts its right to narrate and embody its own past (Hirsch, 2008, p. 11). In this sense, the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung rituals not only safeguard memory but also actively produce it, enabling historical continuity even in contexts of disruption.

Future directions for research must move toward interdisciplinary collaboration, involving ethnography, performance studies, anthropology, and digital humanities. Projects that engage ritual practitioners as co-researchers—rather than subjects—can lead to richer documentation and more ethical preservation practices. Additionally, there is a pressing need for community-based cultural revitalization programs that reconnect younger generations to the ritual heritage through immersive learning, performance archiving, and localized heritage policies. These efforts will not only ensure the transmission of sacred knowledge but will also reaffirm the central place of performance in shaping, sustaining, and transforming indigenous cultures.

In conclusion, the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung ceremonial practices remain a powerful testimony to the performative potential of ritual in mediating the past and future. As cultural archives encoded in movement, sound, and sacred action, they remind us that memory is not merely what is remembered, but what is enacted, shared, and lived.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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