



## Original Article

# AUTHENTICITY OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: FOLKTALES OF THE AO NAGA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores authenticity of Ao folktales that appear as narrative and AI-assisted content on Youtube. The paper employs a mixed qualitative approach for the analysis of visual and textual elements of the folktales. Along with this, viewers' comments and creators' positioning are examined within the engagement it generates. The paper draws on folklore studies, postcolonial theory and media anthropology to trace and understand the change in meaning and authenticity as traditional narratives interact with digital platforms. Findings of the study shows that while Youtube enhances visibility of the Ao folktales, platform incentives tend to privilege visually attractive content over authentic and community-grounded content. The study also identifies distinct patterns of folktales as content which are linked to incentives offered by the platform and motivations of content creators. The paper argues for the need of community involvement and validation to ensure authentic cultural representation on digital platforms.

**Keywords:** Ao Folktales, Authenticity of Culture, Folklore Studies, Media Anthropology, NEP 2020, Postcolonial theory, Youtube

## INTRODUCTION

Narratives of a culture are articulations of ideas and experiences which shapes behaviours and attitudes of community members resulting in distinct culture and identity of the community. For the Ao Naga, such narratives are indispensable part of the identity of the community. As Richard M. Dorson states, folklore represents "the culture of the people..." [Dorson \(1968\)](#). The narratives of the Aos, in the form of folktales, not only function as means of entertainment, but also operate as epistemological archives, convey world view and prescribe socio-moral norms and values. The realization of these functions through folklore and folktales, was historically dependent on oral transmission within the Ao community: as observed by Temsula Ao, "oral tradition... became repository of all knowledge..." [Ao \(2017\)](#). This orality made storytelling a dynamic space for negotiation and evaluation of values and norms, inducing change in culture while simultaneously perpetuating it.

The modern digital landscape is facilitating new modes for the transmission indigenous tales through social media platforms and AI-assisted content. The digital space opens up the possibilities for folktales to be transmitted to a larger number of audiences. However folktales as content in digital platforms have to be examined beyond technological empowerment. UNESCO recognizes that, "... culture is often eroded by the impact of the industrialized culture purveyed by the mass media" [Seitel \(2001\)](#). The formats of the media platforms which are optimized to cater to particular inclination of content consumption can inadvertently compromise authenticity of the culture, which calls for responsible stewardship in the digital space.

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These concerns for authenticity are necessary as The National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020, emphasises on reviving indigenous knowledge system and advocates the integration of these into educational and digital domains in India. The document states that "all curriculum and pedagogy... will be redesigned to be strongly rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos in terms of culture, traditions..." (Ministry of Human Resource Development 16). This finds resonance with UNESCO's proposition that "Folklore, as a form of cultural expression, must be safeguarded by and for the group (familial, occupational, national, regional, religious, ethnic, etc.) whose identity it expresses" [Seitel \(2001\)](#). Therefore, the integration of indigenous knowledge into educational and digital domain will require approaches to validate indigenous knowledge from the community in order to authentically portray and inform about a culture.

Within this contemporary context, the paper focuses on folktales of the Aos as representations of its culture and whether the folktales in digital platform are presented accurately. The paper examines these concerns of cultural authenticity from folkloristic theory, postcolonial theory and media anthropology.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Folklore Studies

Folklore is recognized as a vital cultural resource that situates a community through shared narrative, practices and through intergenerational knowledge transmission. Through this a community conceives, perceives, interprets and describes their existence, as aptly observed by Dundes, "folklore is autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people's own description of themselves." [Dundes \(2007\)](#). The autobiographical nature is fundamental to folklore, as it equips the community to assert a worldview that is sourced from their lived experience, morality and worldview. Dorson's definition of folklore as "the culture of the people...the hidden submerged culture lying in the shadow of the official civilization" [Dorson \(1968\)](#), invites critical reflection on the nature of cultural expression under dominant knowledge-power structures. Under dominant knowledge systems, folklore retreats as undercurrent in the society. This conflict in knowledge systems, as different cultures, reflects the dynamics involved in the preservation and adaptation of cultures in the context of their authenticity. The survival of Ao folklore and culture, as it encountered dominant knowledge system attest to the adaptive capacity of folklore and role in identity formation and cultural continuity. In this manner, the historical context of folklore becomes essential in the analysis of its digital representation.

### Postcolonial

While folkloristic perspectives shed light on the resilience of folklore and folktales, postcolonial theory offers critical insights into the resurgence and renewed interest in indigenous narratives. This can be understood in postcolonial terms of resistance, agency and identity negotiations. In "Resistance and Postcolonialism: A Critical Review", Bhandari outlines four models of postcolonial resistance [Bhandari \(2022\)](#), which can be examined as strategies that the community adopts to negotiate identity.

The first model, Resistance as Rewriting Colonial narratives, which is countering negative colonial portrayals [Bhandari \(2022\)](#). This model is drawn from Edward W. Said's Orientalism. For the Aos this model indicates the act of reclaiming traditional narratives that were suppressed and delegitimized during colonial rule as legitimate knowledge resources.

The second model, Resistance as subversion, emphasizes cultural negotiations and the formation of hybrid subjectivities within the concept of "third space" (Bhabha) that destabilizes colonial binaries [Bhandari \(2022\)](#). Within this model, digital platform enables hybrid narrative forms; traditional tales reproduced as video, paving way for new expressive possibilities.

The third model, Resistance as Opposition, advocates more radical approach to oppose colonial power structure, drawing from Frantz Fanon revolutionary activism [Bhandari \(2022\)](#). Though less applicable to the present study, this model highlights how folklore can function as ideological resistance.

The fourth model, Resistance as Transformation, proposed by David Jefferess, who was inspired by the movements headed by Gandhi and Mandela, emphasizes on transformation of material and immaterial conditions [Bhandari \(2022\)](#). Through this model, the integration of Ao folktales into educational and digital domains represents the potential for transformation induced by historically marginalized indigenous knowledge.

From the perspectives of these models, the renewed interest in Ao folktales is the community's active decolonizing efforts to reclaim authority over their own narratives.

## DIGITAL PLATFORM AND AI CONTENT

The renewed interest in traditional tales, can also be attributed to accessibility of media platforms such as Youtube, Instagram and Facebook among many others, which curate traditional stories. Technological advancement in the production and dissemination of digital content has enabled folktales to be reconfigured across various formats and it is able to reach diverse audiences. The digital environment provides unprecedented visibility and access to cultural tales and at the same time, it is also a democratizing space for creative representations of folktales. This accessibility accompanied by new formats of cultural contents is fertile ground for generating interest in youth for their culture.

These optimistic potentials of the digital space for cultural revitalization also come with serious challenges. Folktales presented across digital platforms put cultural authenticity at risk. Algorithms that recommend content format, which are driven by engagement metrics, along with incentives for monetization, all influence content creation. This may inadvertently reconfigure folktales to better suit algorithmic suggestions at the expense of cultural nuance.

AI-assisted content generation complicates the challenge further. AI tools are capable of producing content in rapid succession in a variety of formats, accompanied by attractive visuals. This can make folktales more visible in digital platforms. However, this technology, without meaningful supervision, risks flattening differences between distinct cultures. A study by Ghosh et al. on AI-generated images of Indians highlights documents this precise issue: images generated by AI with prompts, following the word "Indian", were generic and with inaccurate mixture of regional and cultural elements [Ghosh et al. \(2024\)](#). Another study by [Bianchi et al. \(2023\)](#), finds that "AI-generated images not only reflect but also amplify stereotypes" [Bianchi et al. \(2023\)](#). These studies expose the inherent risks of using AI mediated for cultural representations.

## MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY AND DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Media anthropology, with digital ethnography as methodology provides perspectives on the interactions of platforms, audience reception and meaning making. Beyond digital content, digital ethnography takes into account the socio-technical and commercial ecology in which content is produced. This approach is valuable to the study of Ao folktales by contextualizing the representation of Ao folktales with engagement metrics and algorithms that drives digital platforms.

Importantly, in media anthropology authenticity is not as fixed, rather, "it is dynamic, and changes relative to the conditions under which it is sought, created and recognised" [Thurnell-Read et al. \(2022\)](#). In digital contexts, authenticity becomes contingent on multiple overlapping factors: narrative integrity, community involvement in content creation, audience recognition of cultural specificity, and the extent to which digital mediation preserves or erases the relational and performative dimensions of storytelling. From this perspective, media anthropological analysis requires examining not only digitized folktales but the entire system—platform affordances, algorithmic incentives, engagement metrics, content creator strategies, and audience reception—through which authenticity is continually constructed and contested.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed qualitative approach to examine how digital platforms reshape Ao folktale authenticity. The analysis combines visual and narrative analysis of Ao folktales on YouTube with engagement metrics, viewer comments, and creator positioning analysis. Grounded in folklore studies, postcolonial theory, and media anthropology, the research traces how meaning shifts through changes in medium, performance style, and audience reception.

The study analyses YouTube videos of Ao folktales uploaded between 2018-2025, selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation across creator type: Ao and non-Ao; visual style: AI-assisted and traditional performance; language: Ao and English, and popularity.

Videos are analyzed for presence and accuracy of Ao-specific cultural markers—including traditional hairstyles, clothing and material objects. Video descriptions are examined for to see if there is mention of cultural context and source attribution. AI-enhanced visuals are compared to traditional performance formats to identify differences in cultural representation.

Viewer comments are analysed as authenticity evaluation and critique as cultural authority claims. Comments are cross-referenced with subsequent uploads to trace how and if audience feedback influences content creation decisions.

Creator identity, authenticity claims, monetization presence, and responsiveness to community feedback are documented and compared.

## LIMITATIONS

Analysis is limited to Ao folktales in three channels in YouTube platform. Only those comments referencing authenticity or direction to content creators are analysed. Cultural authenticity was operationalized through ethnographic sources and community consultation.

## FINDINGS

This study analyzed fifteen representative videos across three primary YouTube channels documenting Ao folktales: five each from Hilly Tales (@hillytales9891), Project Monday (@projectmonday-z5e) and Moa Imdonger (@moaimdonger6485). While Hilly Tales and Project Monday has AI-assisted videos of Ao folktales, Moa Imdonger documents the tales without AI mediation.

### Category 1: Monetised Channels with AI-Generated Visual Content

Hilly Tales and Project Monday employ generative artificial intelligence to create accompanying visual elements for voice-over narrations of Ao folktales. The use of attractive visuals could very well be one important reason why there is considerable engagement and views.

Videos of folktales in Hilly Tales are accompanied by the disclaimer that “effort has been made to present these stories accurately, they may vary depending on the source or storyteller”, which takes into account the variability of cultural narrative. Videos in Project Monday has more detailed disclaimer: “we strive to present these stories faithfully, variations may exist depending on the source or storyteller. ... The costumes depicted in this story are for artistic and narrative purposes only. They do not represent accurate historical, cultural or factual attire”, this is followed by source material information. These disclaimers were observed to be consistent across the videos examined.

The visuals in both channels depict notable inaccuracies of Ao cultural markers. Traditional haircut of the male Ao, the traditional clothing of both sexes, ornaments, kitchen and hearth along with material culture items such as basket, looms are inaccurately displayed. These distortions appear across the videos analysed.

The comments in the videos in both the channels are mostly positive. Many comments affirm the authenticity of the tales exemplified by a comment “I remember my grandmother told me when i was child.” However there are comments that question authenticity of the narrative such as, “The story is not accurate”, in some of the videos. Many comments are also in the form of request to make a video for a particular folktale, which is incentive for further similar uploads. The simultaneous affirmation and questioning of authenticity reveals the how cultural authenticity is reframed within digital spaces.

#### **Category 2: Channels without monetisation and traditional narrative content**

The channel Moa Imdonger documents Ao folktales being narrated by in Ao language. The channel at the time of the study was found not to be monetised. No description was available on the videos of Ao folktales in the channel. The narrator appears in traditional Ao attire and there are not AI generated complementary visual. This minimal approach could very well be a reason for lower views compared to channels in Category 1. Even so, there is active interaction between the narrator and the person documenting, which reflects the performative and interactive nature of traditional storytelling.

Comments are mostly positive, affirming the cultural values in the folktales and cultural authenticity. Comments are frequented by request of a particular folktale which is motivation for further uploads. Critical comments, when present, are directed towards video and audio editing.

## **ANALYSIS**

The inaccuracies in AI generated visuals of Hilly Tales and Project Monday, align with the study by Ghosh et al. which documents how AI generation images are stereotypical with overemphasis on traditional clothing and ornamentation, and mixture of different cultures without regard for the distinctiveness of each [Ghosh et al. \(2024\)](#). The consistent inaccuracies suggest that AI-assisted content is optimized to be visually engaging which unfortunately generalizes the Ao cultural aesthetics, flattening it for broader appeal. Alongside this visual flattening, there is considerable loss of performative aspect central to storytelling relying more on the visuals to assist storytelling.

In terms of disclaimers used, when Project Monday states that “The costumes depicted in this story are for artistic and narrative purposes only. They do not represent accurate historical, cultural or factual attire”, it indicates that creators are aware of the discrepancies themselves. And while this important disclosure is ethically sound, it still risks inaccuracies to be absorbed as authentic by viewers who are not familiar with Ao culture and aesthetic. It also ironically gives legitimacy to the production of inaccurate contents and the onus for determining accuracy in content shifts to the viewers. The absence of a comparable disclaimer in Hilly Tales is then a serious limitation; it could potentially convey a sense of authenticity without acknowledging visual inaccuracies.

#### **Analysis through theory**

The positive comments, requests for more tales in all the three channels as well as questioning of narratives signal not only interest of the audience to be reminded and to know more about traditional narrative but it also highlights the communal nature of folklore towards formulating cultural authenticity in the digital space. Accordingly, authenticity as “a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree” (Vannini and Williams 3) is reflected in the interactions among viewers and content creators, demonstrating affirmation and at the same time scepticism towards establishing authenticity.

#### **Postcolonial**

The renewed interest in Ao folktales as evidenced in the channels can be examined through postcolonial theory as an act to reclaim and resist. Whether conscious or not about postcolonial ideas, it is a deliberate decolonizing act to reclaim and re-legitimise narratives that were suppressed. The presence of identifiable Ao content creator documenting videos in the native aligns with postcolonial model of “Resistance as Rewriting Colonial Narratives”, indicating a deliberate act of reclaiming by the community.

Conversely, the digital space and AI-assisted representations of Ao folktales can be compared to Bhabha’s concept of “third space”, which open up avenues for new expressions. While this space offers opportunities for creativity over how traditional

narrative are presented, it could come at the cost of creating engaging content that is disconnected from the very culture it aims to represent.

The fourth model of postcolonial resistance, "Resistance as Transformation", offers another dimension to understanding Ao folktales in digital space. The integration of indigenous knowledge in educational and digital domains alludes to the potential for transformation through contextualized education as envisioned in NEP 2020. However, the findings of the paper suggest that this potential for transformation is compromised when cultural content gain traction despite inaccuracies. The material and immaterial transformation requires the exercise of agency and stewardship by the community towards its authentic representation in the midst of incentive driven content which implicates the transformation of digital platform systems as well.

### Media anthropology

Authenticity of a culture is subject to the conditions in which it is determined [Thurnell-Read et al. \(2022\)](#). Then the conditions shaping authenticity, with focus on Ao folktales in YouTube, are monetization, creator positioning, content format and viewers' participation. These conditions have bearing on authentic portrayals of culture in digital platforms.

In monetized AI-assisted channels, authenticity is expected to emerge through disclaimers: creators acknowledge narrative variability and AI mediation, inviting informed viewers to configure authenticity. On the other hand, in non-monetised "traditional" performance channels, authenticity emerges through viewers' participation. The use of native language, narration by an elder in traditional attire, viewers' suggestions and subsequent contents all contribute to establishing authenticity, rather than being dependent on disclosures. The nature of comments in category 2 is implicit affirmation of cultural accuracy, with critical comment directed towards technical improvements.

From the monetization aspect, channels in Category 1 face optimization pressure, requiring rapid upload and attractive visual with broad aesthetic appeal. And the continued use of AI-assisted visual despite acknowledged inaccuracies is a consequence of being in platforms designed to reward engagement over cultural authenticity. The channel in Category 2 operate outside incentive structure and because of this, it appears minimalistic, garnering high degree of confidence in its legitimacy. The absence of monetization pressure could well be a reason for authenticity in content.

The findings are congruent with UNESCO's observation that traditional "culture is often eroded by the impact of the industrialized culture purveyed by the mass media" [Seitel \(2001\)](#). Although platforms are ostensibly neutral, it is structured in manner that rewards broad-appeal content consequently resulting in erosion of cultural authenticity. This complicates the relation between authenticity and reach: while compromised cultural representations are monetized and have high reach, authentic representations operate at lesser visibility and lacks economic sustainability. This is not to say, inaccuracies have broader appeal, an important consideration could be made for language used in the channels that make content accessible to viewers; channels in category 1 uses English and channel making content accessible beyond Ao community, channel in category 2 use Ao language, which restricts viewership to Ao speakers.

This raises critical questions on if authenticity and wider accessibility can coexist or if trade-offs are inevitable between authentic cultural representations and reaching broader audience.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Bianchi et al. make the observation that, "We cannot prompt-engineer our way to a more just, equitable future" [Bianchi et al. \(2023\)](#), which highlights that it is insufficient to address issues only on a technological plane. This highlights community involvement as a crucial aspect for validating representation in digital platforms in the context of AI-assisted content. Community involvement has to be realised through the facilitation of authentic content rather than censorious sanctions. For instance, community certifying boards, comprising of Ao cultural knowledge bearers, could certify content for its authenticity or inaccuracies. This can incentivise content creators to collaborate with the community to be more precise in cultural depiction, enhancing overall content quality. Along with this the community can also devise ways for ethical monetization of content that creates economic sustainability for creators that focuses on authenticity of cultural representation.
- 2) Content creators should include link-rich video description along with disclaimers in cultural contents. Links in video description can provide viewers access to other culturally authenticated resources, in terms of websites, videos and books. This would be demonstrative of ethical responsibility expected of content creators, particularly in term of portrayals of cultures that share similarities but also maintain distinctiveness. Along with this, for contents in native languages, including subtitles in other languages can enhance accessibility and widen the reach for authentic cultural content without compromising cultural integrity.
- 3) Digital platform can facilitate this by integrating community certification badges that are visible on videos. With this search results could signal content that has been vetted through the community regardless of viewership metrics. Along with this, search filters should be modified to account for native terminology for folktales ensuring content in native language is

accessible. For instance, folktales in the channel in category 2, is only visible when searched with the native term “Tar Nunger Otsu” for folktales.

## CONCLUSION

The examination of Ao folktales in Youtube as representations of Ao culture reveals the inverse relation between authenticity and viewership reach. Monetized and AI assisted channels with Ao folktales narrated in English, attractive visuals along with inaccurate cultural depictions achieve high reach. On the other hand, non-monetized channels with Ao folktales narrated in Ao, without AI mediation and minimal production, preserves authenticity with high fidelity but has lower visibility in the platform. This relation between authenticity and reach may very well, at least in part, due to linguistic accessibility. From folklore studies' perspectives, the validations of narrative, observed through comments, points to the participatory nature of constructing cultural authenticity. The growing interest in folktales positions the community and content creator within postcolonial frameworks, where narratives are reclaimed and new modes of creativity explored. This creative impulse for representation in digital space however risks the erosion of cultural distinctiveness with the incorporation of AI mediated content. This flattening of culture in media platform consequently undermines NEP 2020 vision of revitalizing indigenous knowledge systems in their distinctive character. Community engagement, in terms of validation of narrative as well as economic support in the digital space is necessary to facilitate the creation of content that is authentic. However, this must be reflected as changes in the platform structures. Without modification to the existing platform structure, it is bound to privilege inaccurate, visually attractive content over authentic representation.

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