


**Research Article**

# Folklore and Cultural Memory in the Works of Laltluangliana Khiangte

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**Abstract**

Folklore constitutes one of the most vital foundations of tribal literature in India, serving as a repository of collective memory, cultural values, indigenous knowledge systems, and social identity. In the context of North-East India, Mizo literature presents a particularly rich terrain for examining the interplay between folklore and cultural memory. Among the foremost contributors to this literary tradition, Professor Laltluangliana Khiangte stands out for his sustained, prolific, and scholarly engagement with Mizo folk heritage and his pivotal role in transforming oral traditions into written literary forms.

Born on 28 June 1961 in Mizoram, Khiangte obtained his PhD in literature from North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in 1991 and D.Litt. in Folklore in 1999, establishing himself as one of the foremost scholars of Mizo folklore and literature. He taught Mizo language and literature at Pachhunga University College, Aizawl, from 1985, and became a full-fledged professor at Mizoram University in 2005. He was honoured with the Padma Shri in 2006 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (Puraskar) in 2018 for his exceptional contribution to Mizo literature and drama.

This paper explores the role of folklore and cultural memory in the works of Laltluangliana Khiangte and argues that his writings function as cultural archives that preserve and reinterpret indigenous knowledge in the face of modernisation and cultural change. His engagement with folktales, songs, myths, and traditional narratives demonstrates how oral literature can be translated into written discourse without losing its communal ethos. The study further examines how his works contribute to the preservation of Mizo identity, the construction of historical consciousness, and the resistance to cultural marginalisation.

By situating Khiangte within the broader framework of Indian tribal literature, this paper highlights the importance of folklore as both a literary resource and a cultural practice. It ultimately argues that his contribution is central to understanding the dynamics of memory, identity, and representation in indigenous literary traditions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indian tribal literature represents one of the oldest and most vibrant forms of cultural expression, deeply rooted in oral traditions and communal life. Unlike mainstream literary traditions that developed primarily through written texts, tribal literature has historically been preserved through storytelling, songs, rituals, myths, and performative practices. These forms constitute a living tradition in which knowledge, history, and values are transmitted across generations.

In this context, folklore is not merely a body of traditional stories but a dynamic system of cultural communication. It serves as a repository of collective memory, enabling communities to preserve their past while negotiating their present. Folklore encapsulates the worldview, ethical codes, ecological knowledge, and social practices of tribal societies. As the eminent cultural theorist Jan Assmann argues, cultural memory is not a passive record but an active process of reconstructing identity across time.

Among the various tribal literatures of India, Mizo literature occupies a distinctive place due to its rich oral heritage and strong connection with community identity. The Mizo people of the Indian state of Mizoram, with ethnic affiliations extending to Myanmar and Bangladesh, have cultivated a remarkable oral tradition over centuries. Mizo historian K. Zawla has observed that among pre-literate peoples of the world, the Mizos are among the richest in songs, a testimony to the extraordinary depth of their folk culture.

Laltluangliana Khiangte emerges as a dominant and defining figure in this tradition. A playwright, poet, folklorist, and academic, he has authored over 38 books in the Mizo language and 23 in English, written more than 30 plays in Mizo, and edited 34 books in both languages. His works demonstrate a deep scholarly engagement with Mizo folklore and a firm commitment to preserving indigenous knowledge systems. By transforming oral narratives into written texts, he not only documents cultural heritage but reinterprets it for modern audiences, ensuring its survival in a rapidly changing world.

This paper seeks to examine the role of folklore and cultural memory in the works of Laltluangliana Khiangte. It explores how his writings function as cultural archives, how they preserve and reinterpret oral traditions, and how they contribute to the broader field of Indian tribal literary studies.

## 2. Laltluangliana Khiangte: Life, Career, and Literary Legacy

Any serious engagement with the folklore and cultural memory dimensions of Khiangte's work must begin with an understanding of his biography and intellectual formation. Born on 28 June 1961 to Tlanghmingthanga—a Presbyterian church elder, teacher, and Synod Music Instructor—and Mrs Darngei of the Khawlhing clan, Khiangte grew up in a deeply Christian household in Mizoram. His grandfather, Rev. Liangkhaia, was a pioneer Mizo author and winner of the Mizo Academy of Letters award in 1979. His father's elder brother, L. Biakliana, is remembered as the first novelist in the Mizo language. This literary lineage profoundly shaped his intellectual identity.

Khiangte began his academic career at Pachhunga University College, Aizawl, in 1985, teaching Mizo language and literature. He joined the postgraduate department of Mizo as a Reader in 1999 under the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Mizoram Campus, and became a full Professor in 2005 at Mizoram University. He served as Dean of the School of Education & Humanities and as an executive council member of Mizoram University. He has also held the position of ex-principal and secretary of the Council of Serampore College (University).

His scholarly credentials are formidable. He obtained his PhD in literature from NEHU in 1991, his D.Litt. in Folklore in 1999—making him a rare dual doctorate in both literature and folklore—and an honorary Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) in 2012. His academic achievements are matched by his creative output: six of his books were listed among the top 20 books in the Mizo Leikhabu Zempui (A Compendium of Mizo Bibliography, 2005), and at least 14 of his Mizo books have been translated into English, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Khasi, Manipuri, and Garo.

Among his major awards are the Rashtriya Lok Bhasha Samman (2003), Bharat Adivasi Samman (2005), Padma Shri (2006), Indian Tribal Drama Award (2012), Sangeet Natak Akademi Puraskar (2018), and the K Zawla Memorial Award (2007). His play Pasaltha Khuangchera was declared the Mizo Book of the Year in 1997. He was recognised as Writer of the Year by *Lelte Weekly* in 2002, 2003, and 2004. His play *Chharmawia* was serialised on *Doordarshan*.

## 3. Folklore as the Foundation of Tribal Literature

Folklore forms the backbone of tribal literature, encompassing a wide range of expressive forms such as myths, legends, folktales, songs, proverbs, riddles, and rituals. These forms are deeply embedded in the everyday life of the community and reflect its collective consciousness. In tribal societies, folklore performs multiple functions: it serves as a vehicle of education, transmitting moral values and social norms to younger generations; it reinforces social cohesion by creating a shared sense of identity and belonging; and it preserves the memory of ancestors and historical events, ensuring cultural continuity across generations.

Moreover, folklore reflects the intimate relationship between tribal communities and their natural environment. Many folktales and myths are centred around forests, rivers, animals, and supernatural forces, highlighting an ecological worldview that emphasises harmony with nature. This relationship is not incidental but constitutive of the tribal cosmology, wherein the social, natural, and spiritual worlds are intricately intertwined.

In the Indian context, the importance of folklore is particularly pronounced because many tribal communities relied primarily on oral traditions for the preservation of knowledge. Written documentation often came late, and in many cases, it was initiated by outsiders, frequently resulting in distorted or decontextualised representations. Therefore, the work of insider-scholars like Khiangte becomes crucial in documenting

and preserving indigenous narratives from within the community, with cultural sensitivity and scholarly rigour.

G.N. Devy's foundational study *After Amnesia* (1992) illuminates the ways in which colonial literary history marginalised tribal and oral literatures. Scholars like Verrier Elwin, despite their limitations as outside observers, also drew attention to the richness of tribal literary traditions. Kiangte's work can be seen as a continuation and corrective of these efforts—a reclamation of the Mizo literary heritage by a Mizo scholar.

#### 4. Cultural Memory: Conceptual Framework

Cultural memory, as theorised by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, refers to the shared recollection of the past that is maintained and transmitted within a community through narratives, rituals, symbols, and practices. Unlike individual memory, which is personal and subjective, cultural memory is collective and institutionalised. It provides a community with a sense of continuity, identity, and direction.

In tribal societies, cultural memory is closely linked with oral tradition. Stories, songs, and rituals serve as carriers of memory, preserving knowledge about the past and providing a framework for understanding the present. These narratives often blur the boundaries between history and myth, creating a symbolic representation of the community's experience. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's concept of 'invented tradition' is also relevant here—not in the pejorative sense of fabrication, but in the sense of how communities actively construct and reconstruct their heritage in response to changing circumstances.

The concept of cultural memory is particularly relevant in the context of tribal literature because many indigenous communities lack written historical records. In such cases, folklore becomes the primary means of preserving historical consciousness. Oral literature is not a mere substitute for written history; it is a distinct and sophisticated mode of knowing and remembering, with its own conventions, aesthetics, and epistemologies.

Kiangte's works can be seen as an extension and formalisation of this process. By documenting oral narratives, he transforms ephemeral memories into enduring literary forms. His writings not only preserve cultural memory but also reinterpret it, making it relevant for contemporary readers both within and beyond the Mizo community.

### 5. Major Works: Folklore Documentation and Cultural Preservation

#### 5.1 Folktales of Mizoram (1997)

Published by LTL Publications and the Art and Culture Department of Mizoram in 1997, *Folktales of Mizoram (Mizo Folklore-I)* is one of Kiangte's most significant contributions to folklore studies. The volume comprises 66 folk tales compiled, translated, and edited by Kiangte, specifically prepared to introduce non-Mizo readers to the tribal culture, literature, and folktales of the Mizos. The tales cover diverse themes—heroism, morality, kinship, the supernatural, and the

relationship between humans and the natural world—and are organised into thematic sections.

What distinguishes this work is Kiangte's dual role as a cultural insider and academic scholar. He does not merely record narratives but contextualises them within the wider cultural framework of the Mizo community, providing introductory notes and interpretive commentary. The book has been widely acknowledged as a resource for preachers, theologians, scholars, and students interested in Mizo oral literature, demonstrating its interdisciplinary reach.

In 2012, Kiangte further extended this project with *100 Traditional Mizo Stories*, published by the Sahitya Akademi, which broadened the corpus of documented Mizo folk narratives available to national and international audiences.

#### 5.2 Mizo Songs and Folk Tales (2002)

Published by the Sahitya Akademi in 2002 as part of its prestigious series on Indian Literature in Tribal Languages and Oral Traditions, *Mizo Songs and Folk Tales* is a landmark publication. The volume presents different genres of Mizo songs and folk tales, representing the uniqueness and salient features of Mizo folk literature. Sahitya Akademi's series was designed to meet the long-felt need for a systematic documentation of India's tribal literatures, and Kiangte's volume for Mizo literature stands as a foundational text in this series.

The work highlights a remarkable feature of Mizo folk tradition that distinguishes it from many other oral traditions: in Mizo folk songs, the composer or the person whose name the composition bears can often be identified. This is extraordinary, as it is customarily assumed in folk literature studies that the composer of folk songs cannot be isolated from the collective voice. Kiangte's documentation of this feature enriches the field of folklore studies internationally.

The Mizos have long been celebrated as a singing tribe, and their musical tradition is among the richest in the country. As noted in the volume, one scholar observed that if the possession of songs is used as a criterion to measure the civilisation of a people, the Mizos would be counted as among the most accomplished. Kiangte's meticulous documentation of this heritage ensures its scholarly preservation.

#### 5.3 Mizo Drama: Origin, Development and Themes (1993)

Published by Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, in 1993, *Mizo Drama: Origin, Development and Themes* is a comprehensive scholarly study of the dramatic tradition in Mizo culture. This 277-page work traces the roots of Mizo drama in traditional performative and ritual practices, analyses its development into a modern literary form, and examines its major themes. The study is significant not only as literary history but as folklore documentation, as it charts how performative oral traditions evolved into a written and staged dramatic tradition.

Kiangte's own extensive practice as a playwright—with over 30 plays to his credit—gives this scholarly work an authenticity and depth of insight that few academics could provide. His play *Pasaltha Khuangchera*, declared Mizo Book of the Year in

1997, exemplifies the high literary standards he brings to the dramatic tradition, while his play *Chharmawia* was serialised on Doordarshan, reaching a national audience.

#### 5.4 Tribal Culture, Folklore and Literature (2012)

Published by Mittal Publications, New Delhi, in 2012, *Tribal Culture, Folklore and Literature* represent Khiangte's most comprehensive single-volume treatment of the subject. The book systematically introduces the tribal society, culture, folklore, language, and literature of the Mizos—including their communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh—to a broad academic audience. The work is praised for its lucid organisation and its ability to convey the richness of Mizo cultural heritage in accessible scholarly prose.

This work can be read alongside his earlier *Mizos of North East India: Culture, Folklore, Language, Literature* (2008, first released in Mumbai), which similarly provides a synoptic account of the Mizo world. Together, these volumes represent Khiangte's systematic effort to make Mizo cultural knowledge accessible beyond the boundaries of Mizoram.

#### 6. Orality, Literacy, and the Question of Authenticity

The transition from orality to literacy is one of the most complex and contested themes in tribal literary studies. Oral narratives are inherently dynamic, allowing for variation, improvisation, and contextual adaptation. Written texts, on the other hand, tend to be fixed and standardised, removing the narrative from its performative context. This transition raises fundamental questions about authenticity, representation, and cultural preservation.

When oral narratives are written down, they may lose certain performative and communal aspects—the voice, gesture, rhythm, and communal response that are integral to their meaning in oral performance. Walter Ong's theories on secondary orality and literacy offer a useful framework here: writing transforms orality but does not destroy it; rather, new forms of cultural memory emerge at the intersection of these modes.

Khiangte addresses this challenge with a sensitive and culturally informed approach. His introductory notes and contextual commentaries in his folklore collections serve to restore, as far as possible, the performative and cultural context of the narratives. He strives to preserve the original spirit and flavour of the narratives while adapting them to the written medium. His work demonstrates that it is possible to document oral traditions without fundamentally compromising their cultural integrity, provided the documentarian is deeply embedded within the culture.

Furthermore, Khiangte's role as both a creative writer and a scholar allows him to bring a dual sensitivity to this task. He does not merely transcribe but interprets, contextualises, and in some cases, aesthetically reworks oral materials for contemporary literary reception. This approach—sometimes termed creative ethnography—has become an important methodology in tribal literary studies globally.

#### 7. Songs and the Emotional Dimensions of Cultural Memory

Folk songs occupy a central place in Mizo cultural life, associated intimately with every aspect of social and ritual experience: festivals, harvest, mourning, courtship, warfare, and celebration. Unlike folktales, which primarily convey narrative content, songs capture the emotional dimension of cultural memory. They express feelings of joy, sorrow, longing, and belonging, creating a profound and affective connection between individuals and their cultural heritage.

Khiangte's extensive documentation of folk songs—particularly in *Mizo Songs and Folk Tales* (2002)—highlights their importance not merely as ethnographic data but as living emotional texts. His identification of named composers in the Mizo folk song tradition challenges prevailing assumptions in folklore studies and affirms the sophistication of Mizo oral culture. His documentation of war songs (*zaiawm*), love songs (*hla thlasik*), and work songs demonstrates the richness and diversity of this tradition.

The emotional memory embedded in folk songs is particularly significant in the context of cultural trauma and change. As the Mizo community has undergone rapid transformation through Christianisation, modernisation, and integration into the Indian nation-state, folk songs have served as a bridge between past and present, a means of preserving an emotional connection to ancestral ways of life even as material conditions change dramatically.

#### 8. Folklore as Resistance and Cultural Assertion

In the context of colonialism, missionary influence, and modernisation, many tribal communities have experienced significant cultural disruption. Their traditions have often been devalued or misrepresented in mainstream discourse, treated as survivals from a primitive past rather than as sophisticated cultural systems in their own right. In such a context, the preservation and celebration of folklore become an act of cultural assertion and, at times, of resistance.

By systematically documenting and celebrating Mizo folklore, Khiangte challenges dominant narratives that marginalise tribal cultures. His work argues implicitly and explicitly for the intellectual and aesthetic richness of Mizo oral tradition, countering stereotypes of tribal societies as backward or static. The Sangeet Natak Akademi's recognition of his work in 2018 and the Padma Shri in 2006 represent a national acknowledgement of the cultural significance of this labour.

Khiangte's works also engage with the complexity of Mizo cultural identity in the contemporary moment. The Mizo community spans three nation-states (India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh) and has experienced the pressures of both Christian evangelisation and state-led nationalism. His folklore collections preserve a pre-Christian and trans-national dimension of Mizo culture that might otherwise be obscured or forgotten in contemporary cultural discourse.

In this sense, his work participates in what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger describe as the active construction of tradition—not fabrication, but the conscious effort to select,

preserve, and transmit certain cultural materials as foundational to community identity. This is, ultimately, both a scholarly and a political act.

### 9. Comparative and Contemporary Relevance

The study of Kiangte's works has significant implications for the broader field of Indian tribal literary studies. His methodology—combining deep cultural immersion, rigorous documentation, and creative reinterpretation—offers a model for other tribal literary scholars across India. His collaboration with the Sahitya Akademi on the Indian Literature in Tribal Languages and Oral Traditions series demonstrates the possibilities of institutional support for such documentation projects.

Comparative study of Kiangte's work alongside similar efforts in other tribal communities—for instance, the documentation of Gondi, Santhali, or Bodo oral traditions—reveals both common patterns and distinctive features. The identification of named composers in Mizo folk song, for example, is a feature that differentiates the Mizo tradition from many other oral cultures and merits further comparative investigation.

In the contemporary context, the preservation of folklore is more urgent than ever. Rapid globalisation, urbanisation, and digital media culture pose profound threats to indigenous oral traditions. Young people in tribal communities are increasingly disconnected from the oral heritage of their ancestors. In this situation, literary and scholarly works that document, reinterpret, and celebrate folklore play an irreplaceable role in cultural survival.

Kiangte's example also highlights the importance of institutional frameworks for this work. His position at Mizoram University has given him the academic resources, networks, and legitimacy to pursue large-scale folklore documentation projects. His editorship of literary journals such as *Thu Leh Hla* and *Hruaitu* has created platforms for the dissemination of Mizo cultural knowledge. These institutional dimensions of his work are as important as his individual scholarly contributions.

### 10. CONCLUSION

Folklore and cultural memory are integral to the understanding of tribal literature, and their significance is vividly exemplified in the works of Professor Laltluangliana Kiangte. His writings serve as cultural archives that preserve the oral traditions, values, and identity of the Mizo community for both present and future generations.

By transforming oral narratives into written literature—through works such as *Folktales of Mizoram* (1997), *Mizo Songs and Folk Tales* (2002), *Mizo Drama: Origin, Development and Themes* (1993), *100 Traditional Mizo Stories* (2012), and *Tribal Culture, Folklore and Literature* (2012)—he ensures the continuity of cultural memory while making it accessible to a wider national and international audience. His work challenges cultural marginalisation and affirms the importance of indigenous knowledge systems as living, dynamic, and intellectually significant traditions.

Thus, Kiangte's contribution is not limited to Mizo literature alone; it has broader implications for the study of Indian tribal literature as a whole. His work stands as a testament to the enduring power of folklore as a source of identity, continuity, and cultural resilience in a rapidly changing world. He represents not only a scholar-folklorist of the first order, but a cultural custodian whose work will endure as a foundational archive of Mizo civilisation.

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