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The Algorithm and the Storyteller: Artificial Intelligence-Mediated Folklore and Indigenous Storytelling in Northeast India

This paper examines the increasing application of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in Indigenous folklore from Northeast India where a growing corpus of artists and creators are leveraging GenAI to reinterpret local folktales, myths, and legends into images and videos. These practices are transforming how stories are imagined, experienced, and circulated. Through select cases, this paper analyzes AI-mediated folklore as an emerging folkloristic expression in which narrative authority is reconfigured and distributed in human-AI collaboration.

Keywords from the AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus and Library of Congress Subject Headings:
Generative artificial intelligence; AI-mediated folklore; narratives; authority (performativity); narrative authority; storytelling; Northeast India

The burgeoning of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), particularly models such as Midjourney, Sora, and DALL-E, that convert texts to images, videos, and soundscapes, has marked a fundamental shift in practices of storytelling and cultural production. These models, with their accessibility, ease of use, and democratization (Oke 2025) have embedded themselves in everyday creative and vernacular practices, which has not only altered the technological conditions of storytelling, but substantially reshaped human narratives. As a result, what was once conceived as distinctly human-centric domains, such as folklore, oral traditions, and performance, now encounter a new phase of negotiation as they become increasingly mediated through algorithmic infrastructures.

In Northeast India, where folklore and oral traditions remain foremost components of Indigenous knowledge systems, these developments are evidenced by the growing corpus of independent artists such as Chinmoy Barma and YouTube channels like Hilly Tales, Project Monday, and AI Manipur. These creators from the region are leveraging GenAI to reinterpret and visualize local folktales, legends, and myths into images, animated videos, and synthetic soundscapes for digital audiences. Stories that were traditionally performed in localized

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contexts—domestic, communal gatherings, ceremonial and ritualistic settings—now circulate across digital platforms and publics, including diasporic and even transcultural audiences.

This essay identifies these evolving practices as AI-mediated folklore and examines them as an emergent form of folkloristic expression. Rather than understanding them as mere media expansion or digitized retellings, this paper argues that they represent a reconfiguration of the conditions of performance, mediation, and transmission. AI-mediated folklore restructures the very spatial, social, and technological conditions within which storytelling takes shape and meaning. While AI adoption in cultural heritage preservation is often celebrated for revitalization, enabling greater reach and resonance with a larger audience and thus gaining popularity (Aydemir 2023), its implications run far deeper than questions of accessibility and preservation. In particular, the intersection of AI and folklore indicates a restructuring of the aesthetic, epistemological, and sociotechnical configurations, introducing complex questions concerning legitimacy, representation, and cultural continuity.

Contemporary discussions on AI application in art, literature, and music foreground debates around creativity, authorship, and copyright, particularly when the boundary between human creation and automation become increasingly blurred. Landmark cases such as *Portrait of Edmond Belamy* (2018), created by the Paris-based collective Obvious and later auctioned at Christie's for US$432,500, and *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial* (2022), created by Jason Allen using Midjourney that won the 2022 Colorado State art competition, exemplify the growing concerns regarding AI-generated art and corresponding debates surrounding creativity and authorship since the last decade. These developments have raised broader questions about the role of human artists in an increasingly automated world (Hertzmann 2018:1). Parallel developments in AI-generated literature interrogate the idea of authorship (Evron and Tartovsky 2024), problematizing the distinction between natural and artificial texts, and even so far as speculating a "new post-artificial situation in which standard expectation of text is replaced by an agnostic stance in regard to its origin" (Bajohr 2024a:333). As a result, this has led to the formulation of critical frameworks such as "algorithmic narrativity" (Rettberg and Rettberg 2025:37), "causal authorship" (Bajohr 2024b:321), and "entangled authorship" (Bomba et al. 2024:3). In these cases, authorship is essentially framed as co-creation between human and nonhuman actors, which also delineates the degree of distance between the human author and resulting text. Hannes Bajohr conceptualizes it as "distributed authorship" that maps the reorganization of creative production across the "vast network of human and nonhuman actors" (2024b:329).

While these frameworks expand the notion of authorship in AI-generated art and literature, the case of AI-mediated folklore requires a different analytical adjustment. In folkloric traditions, the central issue has not been ownership or individual authorship, but of legitimacy of the authority to narrate, perform, interpret, and transmit tradition within a community. In this context, narrative authority refers to the socially recognized and culturally sanctioned legitimacy to enact, speak, perform, and pass on tradition. In other words, narrative authority in folkloric tradition is relational and custodial; it is enacted through embodied performance and sustained through community validation, shared cultural knowledge, and collective verification. Performance is a demonstration of cultural

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knowledge, competence, as well as accountability. As such, authority is also determined by community recognition and validation.

This distinction is particularly significant for the intersection of folklore and GenAI, particularly within Indigenous contexts, where folklore functions not merely as a creative or artistic expression but also as a living knowledge system grounded in shared custodianship and situated epistemologies. As AI assumes an increasing role in storytelling, folklore is recontextualized from embodied co-presence to disembodied visual and algorithmic simulations within platform infrastructures. These shifts do not simply introduce new media forms; they also unsettle established configurations of narrative authority and reframe the conditions under which legitimacy is constituted and recognized.

Situated within this rapidly evolving landscape, this essay examines AI-mediated folklore in Northeast India as an emerging mode of expression where narrative authority is distributed and infrastructurally mediated. Narrative authority does not only reside in embodied storytelling but also emerges through the dynamic interaction of human intention, algorithmic systems, training datasets, and platform logics of circulation and visibility. In this configuration, the human storyteller is not displaced, but rather the locus of narrative authority is renegotiated within a sociotechnical human-AI collaboration. Moving beyond celebratory narratives of technological democratization and deterministic accounts of automation, this essay conceptualizes GenAI as part of a broader storytelling infrastructure shaped by the interplay of human agency and structural constraints.

Folklore, Storytelling, and Technological Transitions

The role of technology in mediating human narratives, from oral traditions to print, digital and now the algorithmic era, foregrounds a longer technological shift in storytelling that has transformed as well as disrupted them (Oke 2025). Folklore scholarship has consistently demonstrated that vernacular traditions are not confined to a singular materiality, mode or medium, even though folklore has been most closely associated with orality and face-to-face performance. Contrary to earlier predictions that folklore would disappear with advancing modernity, it has been proven time and again that it adapts and transforms fluidly across shifting technological environments while retaining its social and cultural functions. To this effect, Alan Dundes (1980) observed that technology does not erase folklore, but enables its transmission and even inspires new forms of expression. Similarly, as noted by Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, new technologies do not "replace, or eliminate earlier ones. They alter relations among them and incorporate one another with far-reaching effects" (1998:310). Robert Glenn Howard (2008:193) foregrounded the existence of "technologically mediated folklore," drawing attention to web-based vernacular expressions such as jokes, folk beliefs, and legends. Further extending the convergence of folklore and the internet, Trevor J. Blank (2009) argued that the internet is not just a carrier but a facilitator of new folkloric production.

In emphasizing how vernacular traditions and technology converge, digital folklore scholarship foregrounds notions of community, tradition, performance, and transmission, as they are reconfigured within ubiquitous networked communications and digital media (de

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Seta 2020). Collectively, these interventions establish that folklore is not defined by relic-based artifacts nor bound to a medium-based restrictive identification. Rather than being just transmitted, folklore is continually remediated, adapted, performed, and experienced within changing media ecologies. Jill Terry Rudy conceptualizes this as the "intermedial mingling" of folklore, highlighting how folkloric expressions traverse oral, print, electronic, and digital media (2018:7). Most significantly, intermediality demonstrates that the movement of folklore across media is not merely a change or expansion of media, but a process that reconfigures its material and communicative imaginaries. Technologies therefore function not just as vessels or channels, they do not simply host folklore, but structure the conditions under which it is produced, transmitted, and recognized.

This trajectory is essential for understanding newer forms of storytelling shaped by GenAI and its potential applications in cultural heritage management (Spennemann 2023). However, unlike earlier media forms that enabled recording, preservation, and broadcasting, GenAI systems generate visuals and sonic compositions as outputs through probabilistic modelling. As such, the narrative content is rendered and reassembled through algorithmic processes. Thus, AI-mediated folklore marks a significant departure from earlier media counterparts and storytelling paradigms, since they shape the aesthetics, representational forms, and textures of these narratives. This algorithmic mediation of narrative content further complicates our understanding of storytelling, particularly as a mechanism for cultural continuity. Under these conditions, narrative authority, which was previously grounded in embodied performance and community recognition, is distributed across human intentionality, generative systems, and platform infrastructures. This effectively takes the form of a human-AI collaboration.

As established, folklore has always travelled, morphed, taken different shapes and meanings in encounters with new communicative environments. But GenAI differs vastly from earlier media in that it operates within large scale data infrastructures, algorithmic logics, and platform economies. As infrastructures, they are not neutral, as they are embedded within power structures, data politics, and epistemological tensions. GenAI systems consequently influence how narratives are generated, circulated, and legitimized. Under these conditions, AI-mediated folklore and its implications must be registered within broader technological and epistemic contexts. For these reasons, the following section briefly turns to the political and infrastructural dimensions in AI systems that subsequently influence the conditions under which narrative authority is negotiated and distributed in AI-mediated folklore.

Politics of AI and Folklore as Cultural Data

GenAI applications are widely celebrated for their innovative potential, their capacity for democratization of creative expression, and perceived potential in cultural heritage revitalization. They augment accessibility and engagement of cultural heritage, particularly for digital native audiences. However, generative systems operate within global infrastructures shaped by uneven power relations and are trained on large-scale western datasets, which are in turn shaped by colonial logics, a condition described as the "coloniality in AI systems" (Wakunuma et al. 2025:257). It has been argued that such infrastructures risk

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reproducing historical patterns of biases, inequalities, extraction, and epistemic hierarchies that are reminiscent of colonial practices (Arora et al. 2020; Mollema 2024). In other words, they reflect the structural hierarchies in which certain epistemologies, languages, and aesthetic norms are privileged over others.

This is evident in critical AI scholarship that has consistently challenged narratives of technological neutrality. Kate Crawford (2021) framed AI within the extractive economies of resource and data mining, foregrounding that AI is shaped by political, economic, cultural and historical forces. Ruha Benjamin (2019) similarly critiques the myth of technological neutrality and highlights how algorithmic systems reproduce systemic inequality. In the same vein, Nick Seaver (2022) underscores that algorithms are not neutral, as they are embedded in social and economic interests. Collectively, these critiques foreground AI as an infrastructure shaped by socioeconomic interests and cultural logics rather than a neutral tool of innovation.

While scholarship on AI in cultural heritage contexts is expanding, the implications of GenAI specifically for Indigenous knowledge systems remain comparatively underexplored. Perera et al. (2025) note that Indigenous knowledge systems are often marginalized within mainstream AI discourse. This marginalization is not simply about representation and the lack thereof, but it concerns deeper epistemological asymmetries that perpetuate existing hierarchies and skewed power relations. This also alludes to imminent risks and challenges posed by growing AI infrastructures to Indigenous knowledge systems as they are further abstracted from their community-centered, situated and relational frameworks.

When Indigenous folklore from Northeast India enters generative systems, it is processed within these global infrastructures as cultural data. Cultural narratives which are sustained through embodied performances and relational dynamics in a community are transformed into decontextualized inputs for the generative systems. This marks a significant shift in the material and epistemic conditions under which folklore is produced, recognized, and transmitted. From being situated, relational, and contextually grounded, it shifts within data economies and platform logics. This affects elements such as narrative texture, tone, and archetype, which are shaped by algorithmic logics rather than culturally specific norms and conventions. AI-mediated folklore does not merely present digitization and thus cannot be interpreted as a simple exercise in "restoration and creative reinterpretation of folk traditions to increase the accessibility and engagement of younger audiences" (Faisal et al. 2025:143).

This also does not imply that AI-mediated folklore is to be simplified into technological automation where cultural agency is absent. On the contrary, it points to a distribution of narrative authority across human agency, generative systems, and platform infrastructures. As Supongtemjen and Paokholun Hangsing (2026) observe, generative systems offer new multi-modal avenues for accessibility and engagement while simultaneously presenting risks of cultural inaccuracies, linguistic distortions, and homogenization. Thus, the intersection of AI and Indigenous folklore presents a complex and ambivalent arena which enables new forms of expression and democratization, but it also introduces structural constraints and precarities. While these broader critiques are vast and exceed the scope of this paper, structural issues are not abstract concerns, as they shape

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aesthetic, linguistic, and epistemic parameters and are thus crucial for understanding how narrative authority is distributed.

AI-Mediated Folklore and Storytelling: Practices from Northeast India

In Northeast India, the increasing adoption of GenAI by artists and digital creators marks a significant shift in folklore and storytelling practices, as they leverage generative tools like Midjourney to visualize and narrativize oral folktales, myths, and legends for digital audiences. Such practices carry deeper significance considering the sociocultural functions of folklore and oral narratives as vital epistemological repositories of Indigenous identity, history, and collective memory. In these practices of AI-mediated storytelling, narrative authority which is traditionally grounded in embodied performance becomes distributed across a network of human and nonhuman actors, including GenAI and platform infrastructures. The aesthetic construction of these oral narratives is shaped not only by human imagination and prompts but also by training datasets and algorithms, while their visibility and legitimacy is determined by digital audience, platform logics, and engagement metrics.

To understand this transformation and negotiation in practice, this essay focuses below on select cases from Chinmoy Barma's AI art series, *Assamese Folklore Legends and Ghosts* (2023) and the YouTube channel *Hilly Tales*, which translates Naga oral narratives into videos for platform circulation. These cases were selected through purposive sampling to reflect the diversity of cultural heritage in the region, as well as the range of AI-mediated storytelling practices currently emerging across digital platforms. As an exploratory study, this selection is illustrative rather than exhaustive and offers insights into AI-mediated storytelling and how narrative authority is distributed within contemporary media environments.

Reconfiguring Narrative Authority through Human-AI Collaboration

Cultural narratives such as folktales, myths, and legends have always existed in the public domain. Such intangible cultural heritage is not bound to any specific author or to individual ownership. Its cultural continuity and transmission, however, has persisted through transgenerational communication and embodied performances by storytellers and community members. This communal basis of cultural knowledge transmission underscores the significance of narrative authority, which is the socially recognized legitimacy to narrate, interpret, and pass down tradition within a community, grounded in shared cultural knowledge and community validation.

However, emerging practices of AI-mediated folklore from Northeast India disrupt this paradigm, as authority is reconfigured from embodied co-presence towards a distributed dynamic across human actors, generative systems and the platforms where the AI-mediated folklore circulate. The case of Chinmoy Barma, a visual artist and filmmaker from Assam, provides a particularly useful example of this shift. Barma created a viral AI art series titled *Assamese Folklore Legends and Ghosts* which was originally published on his Facebook[1] and Instagram[2] accounts in 2023. This was subsequently documented by various Indian digital

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news media (Borah 2023; Das 2023; Karmakar 2023). The series comprised of 11 artworks that reimagined different characters and figures drawn from Assamese folklore through GenAI. In an interview with local daily *Pratidin Time* (2023), Barma describes AI as a democratizing tool that enables wider participation in creative productions. He characterizes the role of AI as "increasingly indispensable" while emphasizing his own role in curating prompts from imagination and cultural stories, through which AI generates visual interpretations of folklore. In another account given to *The Times of India* (Das 2023), Barma further clarifies and reiterates his role within this process as he determines which cultural narratives to adapt and occasionally intervenes through Photoshop and sketching. While the series on Assamese folklore is AI-generated, Barma retains agency over selection of stories, curation of appropriate prompts, as well as the initial publication and presentation of the resulting outputs through his social media accounts.

Barma's practice may exemplify a collaborative model in storytelling, where the human storyteller is neither entirely displaced nor has sole authority or control over the resulting representation. Instead, narrative authority emerges through the interaction between human-led practices—such as selecting narratives and formulating prompts—and the generative processes of AI. For example, "prompt engineering" (White et al. 2023; Underwood 2023), which entails crafting effective, strategic, and iterative instructions to interact with large language models (LLMs), functions as a site of human agency. While they may seem deceptively simple, prompts guide narrative direction and aesthetic framing, which influences the efficacy and accuracy of output. Prompts thus operate as functions of human intentionality, subjectivity, cultural knowledge, and aesthetic judgment within the storytelling process.

This collaborative dynamic, however, is not without structural constraints and limitations. GenAI operates as an opaque infrastructure that has been described as the "black box of algorithmic imagination" (Colella 2025:8). This refers to its internal systems and decision-making processes that remain unknown and inaccessible to users. Dominant training datasets and algorithmic logics shape what can be visualized and how cultural imagery is rendered. This directly informs representational form. As such, human agency operates within these structural constraints. This so-called "human agency" may be reified through varying degrees of prompt formulation, contextual awareness, selection, rejection, and iterations, but the parameters of possibility are partly structured by the GenAI system. In this way, narrative authority emerges as a collaborative network where human storytellers' cultural knowledge and intention structure the prompts, while generative systems assemble outputs based on those prompts, deriving from vast training datasets that may very well be beyond the immediate cultural context.

This distribution extends beyond production to circulation, which is illustrated by Barma's emphasis on democratization. It highlights how GenAI tools lower technical barriers, enabling broader participation so that individuals without formal skills in animation or illustration may participate in this cultural production. GenAI tools and digital platforms thus function as infrastructures that enable new pathways for folklore to gain renewed relevance, accessibility, circulation, and visibility. This is illustrated by the virality of Barma's AI art series on social media platforms. However, visibility is not neutral, as it is

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shaped by various platform affordances such as likes, shares, comments, reposts, and hashtags, which in turn augment certain narratives over others. Therefore, narrative authority resides not only in production, but also at the level of platform infrastructure and circulation.

This redistribution of narrative authority in AI-mediated folklore also carries consequences for how folklore is represented, imagined, and experienced. When authority is increasingly and simultaneously negotiated through prompts, generative systems, and algorithms, the resulting visual form of folklore also gets shaped by these actors. In other words, just as narrative authority carries implications for who creates, narrates, and validates the story, it equally affects how a story appears visually. Thus, the aesthetic construction and visual dimension of AI-mediated folklore is a significant part of the broader reconfiguration of storytelling under these new conditions of human-AI collaboration.

Visualizing Folklore: Standardization and Aesthetic Codification

The reconfiguration of narrative authority in AI-mediated folklore also entails a transformation of the oral narratives into a visual form, thereby introducing new aesthetic conventions and a new mode of representation. This aesthetic construction from oral to AI-mediated visuals differ fundamentally from traditional, embodied storytelling traditions. This shift from embodied storytelling to AI-mediated outputs represents more than a shift in narrative configuration or a change in medium but it also signals a fundamental reconfiguration of the aesthetic conventions, performative registers, and temporal dialectics inherent to oral narrative genres. In the case of embodied performances, the co-presence of the storyteller and audience forms a dynamic, interactive system; cultural narratives are continuously shaped and validated through this dialectical relationship that is both situated and performative.

In the case of Northeast India, these folkloric narratives are embedded within the community, rituals, and gatherings, finding continuity through each retelling that is endowed with narrative improvisation based on audience and locality and performative nuances such as vocal modulation, gesticulation, and facial expressions. This qualifies narrative fluidity, variation, and interpretative openness as classic characteristics of folklore. However, AI-mediated folklore takes on different characteristics. For instance, in oral storytelling traditions, popular figures such as supernatural entities, spirits, heroes, and gods often remain open to narrative improvisation and audience imagination. It allows folklore to have an interpretative openness to be imagined and experienced across retellings and performances. As such, oral stories and their various constituent elements, such as mythic figures, spirits, landscapes, and events, are envisaged through embodied performance, narrative fluidity, and human imagination.

In AI-mediated folklore, the aesthetic construction and transformation of oral narratives from variability and interpretative openness to an AI-generated visual artifact raises important questions about cultural specificity, representational fidelity, and the intersection between Indigenous cultural heritage and GenAI. Examining the following cases of how folklore figures and narrative worlds are rendered through GenAI provides a critical entry point to further understand the broader implications of AI-mediation of folklore within

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the contemporary digital landscape. These negotiations and dynamics become particularly apparent in the emerging practices from Northeast India, which increasingly employ GenAI to visualize folklore and circulate it on digital platforms. The following cases—Chinmoy Barma's AI-generated imagery of the Assamese supernatural entity *Pixaas* and the YouTube channel Hilly Tales—will illustrate how oral traditions are transformed through visual codification, aesthetic standardization, and platform-based circulation.

Assamese Folklore as AI Art: Chimnoy Barma's *Pixaas*. In Assamese folklore, the Pixaas is a malevolent, supernatural spirit with the ability and power to possess humans. It is found in oral stories as well as documented in written collections such as Benudhar Rajkhowa's *Assamese Demonology* (1905).

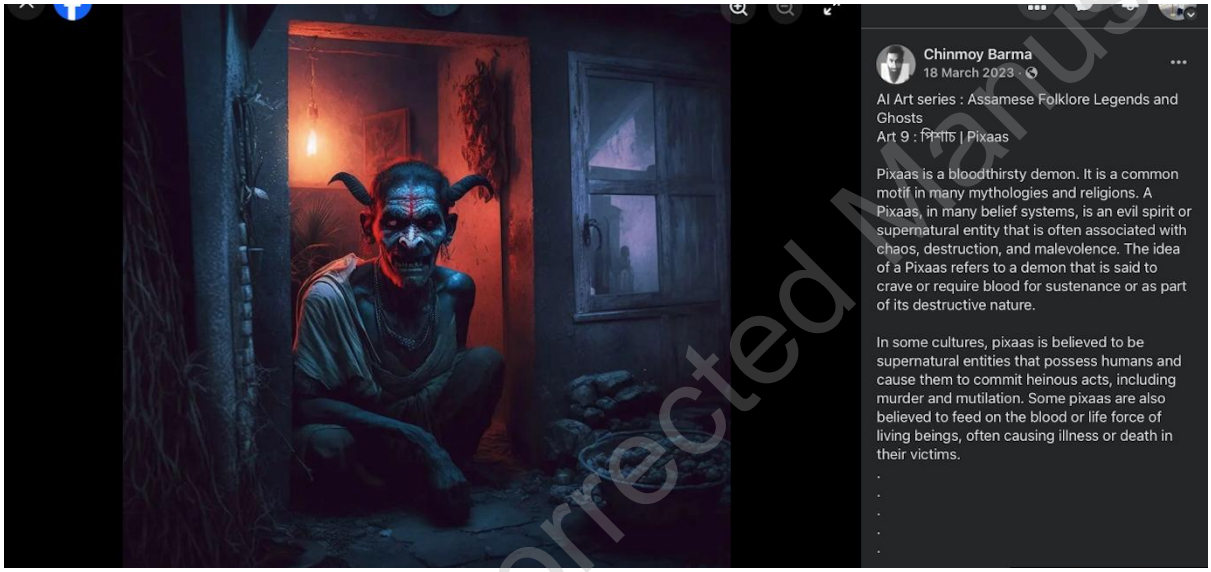


Figure 1. Screenshot of an AI-generated image of Pixaas created by Chinmoy Barma (2023). Source: Chinmoy Barma, Assamese Folklore Legends and Ghosts, Facebook, March 18, 2023.

As a widely popular supernatural figure in Assamese ghostlore, it is of great significance within Assamese culture. This is evident by the large body of oral narratives that are replete with such figures. Making a case for Assamese legends, Kishore Bhattacharjee explains that "figures like spirits may take different meanings and the discourse of the stories connected with the spirits also take different turns depending on the purpose of the story" (2006:107). This clearly suggests variability and contextual fluidity as part of the oral tradition that carries these tales forward, keeping such supernatural figures alive in the collective imagination across generations.

In Barma's AI-generated image of the Pixaas, the entity is depicted as a humanoid-like figure with horns, deep-set glowing eyes, and a menacing expression, positioned in a crouching pose in a dark and dimly lit setting with red light effects. While this visual representation may have been produced from textual prompts curated by Barma describing an existing figure embedded within Assamese folklore, its subsequent remediation through

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generative systems has transformed a variable, open, and fluid entity into a stylized, standardized visual artifact primarily meant for circulation on digital platforms. The significance of such a transformation in AI-mediated folklore cannot only be qualified through parameters of technological novelty, but also by the fundamentally altered conditions through which folklore is imagined and experienced.

Traditionally, folklore figures such as the Pixaas have existed primarily in oral storytelling, local belief systems, and the collective imagination. In Assamese oral tradition, they exist less as a fixed visual figure than as a fluid, narrative entity whose appearance may remain open to description, interpretation, and local variation. The storyteller shapes the tale, assigning descriptions to such supernatural figures while highlighting its malevolent nature, appearance, and behavior to effectively evoke fear and instill caution. Often, they perform an underlying didactic function that adheres to the local cultural belief system. Thereafter, these cues are interpreted at the level of the listener, giving the entities shape, form, and meaning within the realm of collective and cultural imagination. In Barma's AI-generated visualization of the Pixaas, such ambiguity and interpretative openness is resolved by assigning a definitive form and visual identity, metamorphosing from a fluid cultural imaginary into a stabilized visual representation. This underscores the transformation from narrative imagination to AI-mediated stabilization.

Another significant characteristic is indicated by the aesthetic reconfiguration vis-à-vis the broader influence of algorithmic logics and training datasets. The striking features as observed in the AI-generated image of Pixaas such as the glowing red-eyes, demonic-looking horns, gaunt, skeletal-like figure, dark atmospheric color, dramatic lighting, and hyper-realistic texture are certainly compelling and well-received as evidenced by its virality when it was first released in 2023. However, these representational details cannot be qualified merely through parameters of virality or aesthetic novelty. These recognizable visual and design tropes complicate the case of AI-mediated folklore. The image appears to draw from globally predominant horror aesthetics rather than an identifiable Assamese visual tradition. As a result, the Pixaas that originally represents cultural anxieties and local beliefs in Assamese culture has been reimagined and visualized through an aesthetic vocabulary drawn from global fantasy and horror conventions. Effectively, the AI-generated Pixaas is removed from its cultural imaginaries. As such, this process of visual standardization and aesthetic codification undermines the cultural context and situated knowledge from which this figure originates. This suggests that AI-mediated folklore may not necessarily produce faithful representations of the local cultural knowledge and may lack local nuance, as they are shaped by the dominant patterns across training datasets of generative models. While this does not entirely diminish the cultural value and role of such technological innovation in cultural heritage, it does present the layered complexities within AI-mediated folklore that includes questions of "cultural accuracy, semantic coherence and representational fidelity of AI-generated outputs" (Supongtemjen and Hangsing 2026:1).

Additionally, the process of visual codification further connects to the broader question of narrative authority. As established, the cultural knowledge of the Pixaas originates from Assamese folklore, and their meaning is derived through retellings, performances, and community interpretation. When mediated through GenAI, the resulting

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image emerges from a complex collaborative dynamic involving the human creator, prompts, generative model, and algorithmic logics. The resulting output is neither solely Barma's creation nor is it entirely an AI-product. The role as the human creator determines the prompt curation and interpretative direction, and the AI-generated image thus rendered is shaped by training datasets and an opaque algorithmic process. This alludes to a complex redistribution of narrative authority in AI-mediated folklore that complicates conventional understandings of storytelling and marks AI-mediated folklore as a novel expressive genre, rather than a simple technological expansion of oral tradition.

***Hilly Tales*: From Oral Tradition to AI-Mediated Folklore on YouTube.** While Barma's AI art series, *Assamese Folklore Legends and Ghosts* (2023), as demonstrated through the Pixaas, focuses on the transformation of folkloric figures into AI-mediated visual artefacts, YouTube channels such as Hilly Tales extend beyond static visual images by adapting Indigenous folk narratives into audiovisual storytelling for circulation within contemporary digital platform economy. The channel currently stands at 119 thousand subscribers and has published around 44 videos. Quite significantly, this channel represents an emerging digital culture from within the rapidly growing local creative industry that adapts Indigenous folklore for digital platforms. For example, the channel Hilly Tales specifically curates folktales from Nagaland as well as other regional folktales from Northeast India, reworking them into audiovisual storytelling using AI-generated imageries, video-editing techniques, and voice-over narration in English language. Through this process, the content of this channel transforms folklore from an oral, embodied performance into AI-mediated storytelling for audiences on digital platforms. The video titled "The Three Brothers: Chakhesang, Angami and Sumi" from this channel can serve a second illustrative case study to further analyze AI-mediated folklore. This video is based on a Naga folktale "Tso-Tawo," which translates as "The Spirit Stone." According to Naga oral tradition, this etiological tale explains the origin story and shared ancestry between the three major Naga communities—Angami, Chakesang and Sumi—tracing it to the village of Khezakenoma in present-day Nagaland. This story establishes a transgenerational, Indigenous epistemology that memorializes and validates shared lineage, common ancestry, and intertwined histories. The sociocultural and historical significance of such folklore lies in its potential to establish intertribal relationship and association within the larger hierarchical order of other tribes and to establish self-identity (Xaxa 2008).

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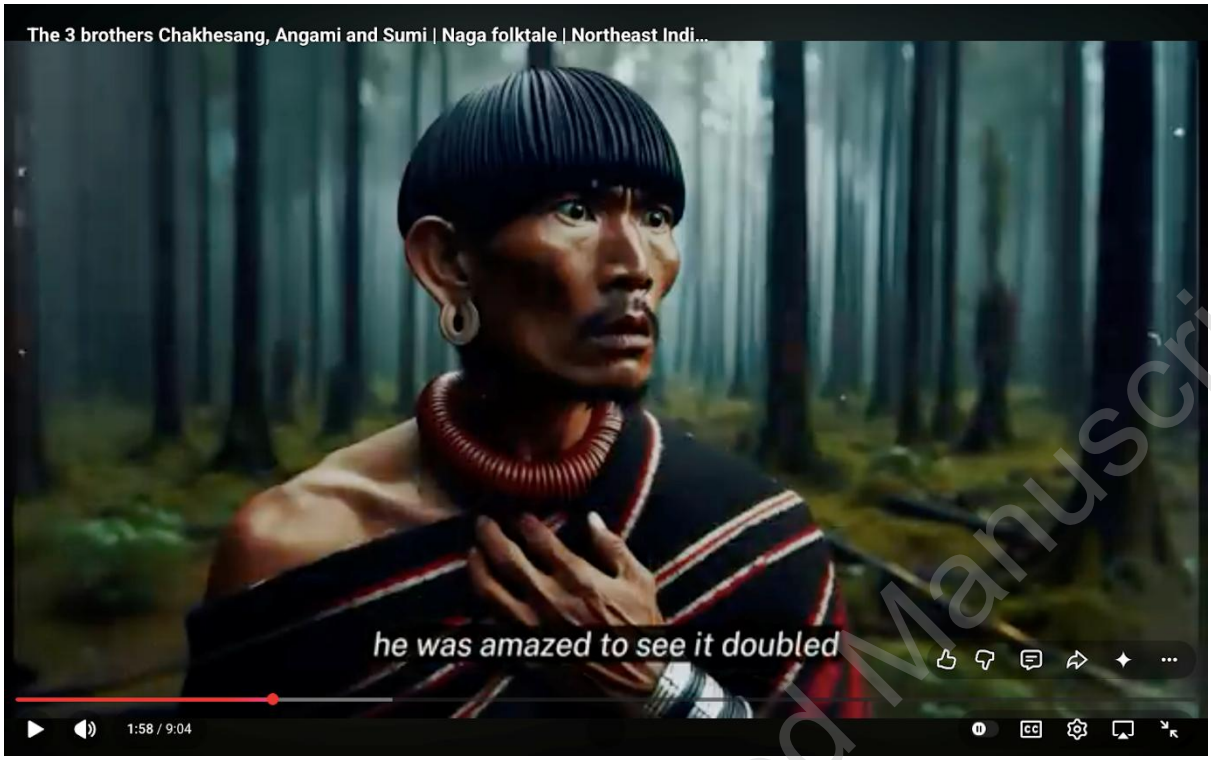


Figure 2. Screenshot of a frame from the video "The Three Brothers: Chakesang, Angami and Sumi" (based on the Naga folktale "Tso-Tawo") on the YouTube channel Hilly Tales.

While the oral folklore of "Tso-Tawo" finds cultural continuity through retelling, performance, and localized interpretation, its YouTube adaptation reconfigures it through a series of AI-mediated imageries that depict specific scenes from the story that have been subsequently edited and reassembled into a structured audiovisual composition accompanied by a human voice-over narration in English language. The AI-mediated imageries depict village scenes, tribal characters, stylized landscapes, and various cultural markers such as traditional clothing, ornaments, kitchen, hearth, and other elements that are supposed to represent Naga material culture. There is much to be unpacked here vis-à-vis visualization and aesthetic convention. While such visualization of an otherwise oral narrative undoubtedly expands the accessibility of the tale, introducing it to a wider audience as evidenced by the subscriber base and number of views, it also reveals underlying issues such as stereotypical standardization and cultural flattening. These are observable in the generalized "tribal" imageries alongside the hyperrealistic textures and cinematic style visuals.

Overall, it may seem visually compelling but on closer examination, these representations are superficial and glossy rather than being informed by Naga cultural and artistic traditions. The visuals collapse and reduce Naga identity markers into generic and globally recognizable "tribal" aesthetics. As a result, it reproduces the dual effect of cultural misrepresentation and reduction to fit generic and stereotypical visual tropes rather than an accurate cultural representation of Naga culture. Similar observation has been made by Moatemsu Jamir and Nigamananda Das (2024) who have identified several inaccuracies in AI-generated representations of Ao Naga culture such as traditional hairstyles, clothing,

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ornaments, traditional domestic architecture such as kitchen, hearth, and other material artefacts. These distortions also indicate the hallucination tendencies of generative models when tasked with mediation of culturally specific narratives. Therefore, in both cases of AI-mediated folklore—Barma's Pixaas and Hilly Tales' "The Three Brothers: Chakhesang, Angami and Sumi"—the overall process of visualization and aesthetic codification reproduces the risk of generalization and standardization of an Indigenous, cultural heritage even as it amplifies its accessibility and relevance to a wider digital public.

Another significant dimension that is revealed through Hilly Tales and other such YouTube channels is how narrative authority is negotiated within digital environments. In traditional storytelling, narrative authority is located along the dynamic axes of the storyteller and the listening audience. This interactive community participation is key to narrative authority. In AI-mediated folklore such as "The Three Brothers: Chakhesang, Angami and Sumi," narrative authority is delineated through a complex collaborative process—the channel creator who sources the tale, translates them into prompts for AI-generation, scripts for voice-over narration, edits the video to fit the YouTube format, and subsequently circulates them on digital platform. This underscores the multiple points of human intervention that are embedded within this larger process, and thus demonstrates a larger network of human and technological actors through which narrative authority is negotiated and distributed.

Simultaneously, it also provides further insights into how narrative authority is negotiated through disclaimers provided on such channels that create content based on folklore. Specifically, such disclaimers perform a significant cultural and epistemic function that establishes creator positionality in relation to the cultural heritage and oral tradition in question. They frame the stories as originating from "traditional narratives passed down through generations"[3] while also acknowledging the existence of variations across different sources and storytellers. In doing so, they foreground variation and plurality as core characteristics of folklore and oral traditions. Simultaneously, through disclaimers the creators emphasize preservation of cultural heritage as the primary objective of a channel like Hilly Tales. This assertion performs an important function in recognizing folklore through collective, cultural custodianship rather than individual authorship or ownership. In doing so, the creators position themselves as mediators and cultural transmitters of cultural heritage through contemporary media technologies.

This configuration is complimented by the parallel role of platform users as an audience who participates in this ecosystem. Unlike the traditional storytelling conditions where narrative legitimacy is expressed through community participation, digital platforms like YouTube mediate and quantify audience engagement through metrics such as views, likes, comments, shares, and subscriptions, while algorithmic systems shape the visibility of the content. While these platform-mediated digital publics may be fundamentally distinct from traditional communities in scale and in the asynchronous nature of their participation, their engagement, along with platform logics that make them visible, contribute to the legitimacy and validation of the narratives as digital content. In this way, they effectively influence circulation and visibility of the narratives within the platform economy. Thus, narrative authority becomes distributed across myriad actors, including creators, generative

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tools, platform infrastructures, and digital publics, each of which plays a role in determining how folklore is imagined, interpreted, and validated.

Structural Constraints and Representational Risks

Despite the transformative potential, AI-mediated folklore introduces significant risks and limitations. Barma highlighted the difficulty in generating Assamese language prompts, which illustrates that the human agency in prompt curation is entangled with linguistic and technical limitations of generative models. In their experimental study of AI videos generated from prompts based on Indigenous Ao Naga oral tradition, Supongtemjen and Hangsing (2026) highlight such limitations in representing cultural and regional specifics, further reflecting gaps and biases in the training data. As most generative systems are predominantly trained on Western and dominant language datasets, these structural limitations directly affect how non-Western cultural elements are visualized and rendered. This is further obscured by the opacity of algorithmic systems—the "black box" —that may result in biases, misrepresentations, and further marginalization of non-Western cultures (Ghosh et al. 2024). Consequently, AI-mediated folklore from Northeast India will reveal certain cultural inaccuracies, linguistic distortions, and stereotypical or homogenized representations that reflect the broader challenges of authenticity, nuance, and cultural authority (Supongtemjen and Hangsing 2026). Thus, the same infrastructures that enable cultural renewal and broader circulation of cultural heritage may inadvertently reproduce epistemic distortions that further marginalize underrepresented cultures.

Therefore, it is crucial to situate human-AI collaboration and the distribution of narrative authority within these structural conditions to avoid flattened and uncritical techno-optimism. This collaborative dialogic does not imply equal agency of human and AI and does not anthropomorphize the role of generative models as agentic. Narrative authority in AI-mediated folklore is shaped not just by collaboration and audience validation, but also by the uneven mechanisms of data, visibility, and algorithms. This critical framing will allow negotiation between cultural responsibility and technological innovation, without devolving into any form of technological determinism or defensive traditionalism.

Conclusion

The select cases examined in this paper demonstrate that AI-mediated folklore in Northeast India is not to be understood merely as another instance of folklore adapting to new media technologies. The practice represents an emerging mode of folkloric expression that reconfigures the very conditions of storytelling through which cultural narratives are produced, interpreted, circulated, and validated. While folklore has historically exhibited adaptation across changing communicative media, the ongoing convergence of folklore with GenAI technologies introduces an entirely unique dynamic where folklore and storytelling traditions are fundamentally transformed.

This essay frames the transformation through the lens of narrative authority, which may be understood as the socially recognized and culturally sanctioned legitimacy to narrate, perform, interpret, and transmit cultural knowledge. This implies that narrative authority in

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folklore is relational and custodial, sustained through shared cultural knowledge and community validation. Within Indigenous storytelling traditions, such authority has been grounded in embodied performance, cultural knowledge, participation, and transgenerational continuity. The cases of Chinmoy Barma's AI-generated visualization of Assamese folklore and the YouTube channel Hilly Tales unsettles this established paradigm where narrative authority is no longer vested exclusively in the human storyteller. Instead, it emerges through a collaborative, albeit messy, assemblage of human and nonhuman actors involving prompt design, generative systems, training datasets, platform infrastructures, and digital publics.

At the same time, these cases show that AI-mediated folklore should not be misconstrued as the displacement of human storytellers or the elimination of human agency. As repeatedly emphasized throughout these cases, human intentionally remains central throughout the process in the selection of narratives, formulation and direction of prompts, editing, and contextual framing. In other words, storytellers continue to function as cultural mediators whose cultural knowledge and creative directions shape the conditions under which folklore is translated and visualized by generative systems. This foregrounds the role of human agency, which is repositioned within this larger assemblage and reconfiguration of narrative authority in AI-mediated folklore.

This transformation is not just technological, as it also carries epistemic implications. As seen in the above cases, the collaborative dynamic cuts across different actors and interrelated points of production and circulation, which are affected by broader structural constraints. Firstly, narrative authority is negotiated through a human-AI collaborative process wherein human actors exercise agency through prompt generation, iterative direction, and editorial decisions, while generative models shape the aesthetic construction of the AI-mediated outputs through probabilistic modelling and training datasets. Under these conditions, narrative authority emerges as dialogic, constituted through the interaction between human creators and technologies such as GenAI, rather than being exclusively human or automated. Secondly, at the level of circulation, platforms such as YouTube play crucial roles in the visibility and validation of AI-mediated folklore. Engagement metrics such as views, comments, subscriptions, and shares function as measures of audience engagement within platform infrastructure that shape the visibility, recognition, and thereby, amplification of particular narratives.

Generative systems operate within an opaque internal architecture, shaped by selective and predominantly Western datasets that frequently underrepresent Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems. This black box of algorithms combined with linguistic and cultural data gaps may reproduce harms and risks, especially for intangible cultural heritage, such as simplification, marginalization of minority voices, and cultural appropriation (Eyadah and Odaibat 2024). Both the visual codification of Assamese Pixaas in terms of global horror aesthetics and the standardized "tribal" aesthetics and flattened representation of Naga cultural markers clearly demonstrate these harms and risks.

These epistemic stakes and concerns are particularly significant in Northeast India, where folklore functions not merely as aesthetic or artistic expression but constitutes a living repository of cultural identity, history, legacy, and Indigenous epistemologies. When such

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traditional knowledges are transformed into cultural data and enter global AI infrastructures, they inadvertently become entangled with the underlying structural issues of representation, legitimacy, and epistemic justice. Therefore, AI systems that enable cultural revitalization and enhance accessibility may simultaneously perpetuate epistemic erasure through cultural flattening, homogenization, and "digital colonialism, in which western trained models interpret Indigenous material through reductive visual and linguistic framework" (Supongtemjen and Hangsing 2026:5). The question that arises is not whether GenAI should be deployed in Indigenous cultural contexts for cultural preservation. Instead, the more productive questions involve how such convergence of Indigenous folklore and global AI infrastructures can reduce risks and harms by privileging cultural specificity and incorporating the community knowledge. Most importantly, it must be guided and complimented by cultural responsibility.

It is evident that human-AI collaboration does not indicate an equal or symmetrical distribution of agency, nor does the democratization of AI tools equate to a fair and accurate cultural representation. It remains entangled with deeper epistemic questions of data politics, and algorithmic aesthetic construction, among others. However, it does present opportunities and possibilities that require attention as to how narrative authority is negotiated despite the uneven infrastructures of mediation. Therefore, AI-mediated folklore does not erase the human storyteller or the anthropocentric notion of human agency. It can be located alongside infrastructures that enable new forms of expression and cultural renewal while also introducing new challenges and asymmetries that underscores the need for a critical understanding and engagement with generative systems in the context of Indigenous storytelling and the preservation of Intangible cultural heritage.

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< Captions and Alt Text >

Figure 1. Screenshot of an AI-generated image of Pixaas created by Chinmoy Barma (2023). Source: Chinmoy Barma, Assamese Folklore Legends and Ghosts, Facebook, March 18, 2023.

Figure 1 alt-text: The Assamese supernatural entity visually rendered as a humanoid figure with horns and glowing red eyes following hyperrealist and global-horror aesthetic conventions.

Figure 2. Screenshot of a frame from the video "The Three Brothers: Chakesang, Angami and Sumi" (based on the Naga folktale "Tso-Tawo") on the YouTube channel Hilly Tales.

Figure 2. alt-text: An AI-generated image with hyperrealistic textures of a male character depicted as a Naga tribesman with the forest as the backdrop. Stylized and generalized tribal tropes show up in the striped shawl, an ornate neckpiece, and earrings that the figure is wearing.

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[1] Chinmoy Barma, "AI art series: Assamese Folklore legends and ghosts," Facebook, March 18, 2023; view the post on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=902210744367172&set=pb.100037347643267.-2207520000.

[2] Chinmoy Barma (@thebabayaga07), "AI Art series: Assamese Folklore Legends and Ghosts," March 18, 2023; view the post on Instagram at https://www.instagram.com/p/Cp5-WzNyWf4/.

[3] For instance, the YouTube video "The 3 Brothers Chakhesang, Angami and Sumi" includes a disclaimer stating that the folktales shared on the channel are "based on traditional narratives passed down through generations, both verbally and in written form." This explicitly acknowledges that the narratives are inherited communal traditions that "may vary depending on the source or storyteller" and describes the channel's aim as celebrating and preserving the cultural heritage of Northeast India. See Hilly Tales, accessed August 27, 2026.

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