



Digital Archiving Beyond Preservation

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Abstract. This paper studies Digital Archiving beyond preservation, focusing on power, knowledge, and narratives. Digital archiving, a process and act of storing information sources and resources in the digital space. The documents and items are stored, retrieved, and disseminated from repositories. However, it is more than the neutral act of scanning documents and storing; it encompasses the processes of collecting, preserving, organizing, and providing access to materials in digital form, including manuscripts, rare books, newspapers, paintings, photographs, film archives, artifacts, sculptures, and digital-born content. By creating cultural memory into systematic knowledge through categorization and metadata, digital archiving becomes a knowledge system.

This paper discusses the ethical and theoretical framework of digital archiving, rather than technical, and as a site of tension, one that doesn't merely store or retrieve but actively shapes and reshapes through the act of selection, categorization, and dissemination. Drawing on concepts of power/ knowledge, as well as epistemic justice, this paper examines how oral traditions and fluid narratives are reconfigured into fixed metadata descriptions and curated, often influenced by dominant narratives.

Who determines what is preserved or omitted, and on what basis? Does it risk reshaping oral traditions and sacred knowledge of broad cultural memory? How do factors like gender, class, and status influence archival decisions? Instead of offering definitive answers, this paper tries to highlight the complexities, conflicts, and shortcomings of digital archiving, while acknowledging its potential for broader accessibility and cultural continuity.

Keywords: digital archiving, knowledge/power, cultural memory, narratives

1 Introduction

It is an evening in Manipur, before dinner, and elders are sitting with their grandchildren around the fireplace in the kitchen called *Phungga*. There, the goddess *Emoinu*, protector of fertility and wealth, also resides in a mud structure. The elder narrates folktales, myths, heroic tales of forefathers, songs of everyday life, and occasionally, spontaneous stories. These orally transmitted stories carry the identity, philosophy, history, culture, and values of the community, serving as a means of forming and transmitting collective memory. The world is increasingly shaped by technology and advanced knowledge systems; these voices risk being lost. The digital form of preservation is a way that democratizes storytelling to expand beyond local contexts, however, this process may alter the fluidity and essence of the storytelling tradition.

“Digital archiving is a process of storing information sources and resources in digital space.”[1] It captures ephemeral and rare narratives, oral memory, folk songs, manuscripts, and photographs, making them searchable and readily accessible. This transforms cultural memory into a structured body of knowledge that is categorized and presented with fixed metadata, and consequently becomes a knowledge system. However, the act of scanning and storing documents is more than a neutral act.

The act of preserving is never neutral, as the decisions about what is recorded, how it is categorized, and to whom it is made accessible reflect power and a dominant narrative. In Northeast India, multiple languages, ethnicities, cultures, and gendered experiences that are unique in themselves coexist. Although digital archiving democratizes preservation and accessibility, it can also privilege certain voices over others. For example, women's oral histories and queer lived experiences may be sidelined as informal or folk, while other narratives gain prominence.

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This paper examines digital archiving in the context of Manipur and the Northeast through the lens of power, knowledge, and ethics. By drawing theoretical background from Foucault's concept of knowledge and power, Derrida's archive fever, Fricker's epistemic injustice, and Caswell and Cifor's radical empathy, to interrogate how archives in digital form shape endurance, representation, and biases in the knowledge system.

2 Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to:

1. Examine how oral traditions, folktales, and cultural memory transform digital archiving into structured knowledge systems.
2. Analyze the choices involved in digital archiving—what is preserved, how it is categorized, and how different voices are represented.
3. Analyze digitally archived narratives—literary texts, podcasts, and other oral or performative media—to understand how women's and queer lived experiences are represented, interpreted, or reshaped.
4. Interrogate digital archiving through theoretical frameworks such as Foucault's power and knowledge, Derrida's archive fever, Fricker's epistemic injustice, and Caswell & Cifor's radical empathy.
5. Assess whether digital archiving in Manipur broadens access to cultural memory or unintentionally privileges certain voices over others.

3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, critical-interpretive approach to examine digital archiving as a knowledge system that reshapes cultural memory in Manipur. It closely studies a range of sources, including digitally archived oral traditions, folktales, literature, and audio-visual media. They are analyzed, particularly focusing on how women's and queer lived experiences are preserved, represented, or transformed.

Close reading of texts, archival critique of categorization and metadata, and comparison between oral performative traditions and their digital representations are among the methods. There is limited scholarly work on digital archiving in Northeast India; this paper emphasizes theoretical frameworks to critically examine the processes, ethical considerations, and knowledge structures embedded in digital preservation. This paper draws on theoretical frameworks from Foucault's *Power/Knowledge*, Derrida's *Archive Fever*, Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice*, and Caswell and Cifor's concept of radical empathy.

This paper refers to a podcast project as a case study produced by a private foundation, featuring short stories by an eminent Manipuri woman writer, read by female artists in regional dialects, and archived digitally. This paper will draw from the podcast project, I was able to contribute and participate in the archiving process of this project.[6] The practical experiences I gained in executing some of the decisions involved, such as organizing content and curating metadata, allow an analysis that moves beyond theoretical abstraction, gaining practical knowledge on how Digital Archiving operates in practice while reflecting on the potential biases, limitations, and opportunities it presents.

4 Archives, Power, Representation: A Theoretical Framework

An archive is more than documentation of archival items.. It becomes an invisible architecture of knowledge. The narratives that are preserved, whether a folktale, an oral performance, a text, visual media, or a podcast, are through a system of decisions and classifications that build another collective memory. This idea will be explored through a theoretical framework. For Foucault, power and knowledge are inseparable.[4] In this study, power here refers to the authority embedded in archival practices, the processes that determine what is preserved, how they are categorized, how it is circulated, and represented. Archive, rather than a passive storage of memory, is a system that regulates visibility and historical significance, shaping what counts as knowledge. Thus, digital archives are both knowledge systems and instruments of power.

Digital Archiving can be seen as a narrative with its own aesthetic, structure, and bias, and could be perused as a body of literature in itself, with its curation choices and acts of storytelling. The conjunction between digital archival practices and the representation of gender and queer narratives presents a site of great potential for scholarly discourse.[7] The frameworks in digital humanities for preserving, interpreting, and giving visibility provide a new paradigm of meaning-making.

Drawing from contemporary feminist digital humanities scholars, digital archiving influences the preservation and accessibility of cultural narratives, which can be considered as a manifestation of the dynamics of its society in digital spaces.[8] Literature is a reflection of society wherein dominant ideologies are portrayed in multiple dimensions to showcase the dynamics of a society, so a comparative analysis holds the potential to democratize how digital archiving preserves unique culture and marginalized narratives.

Foucault's ideas of power and knowledge call to attention the tension that arises among fluid, lived experience and fixed acts of preservation through choices and metadata in Digital Archiving. Oral traditions of recounting stories, folktales shared in songs, or improvised narratives passed down through generations, which are inherently dynamic and context-sensitive. When these narratives are digitized, they are captured, categorized, and described in ways that make them searchable, accessible, and enduring. This process not only uses the technical aspect for preservation, but it also reorganizes memory, shaping how communities and scholars perceive cultural knowledge. Digital archives actively become the units in the structure of a larger knowledge system, determining which narratives gain persistence and which remain marginalised.

The referred podcast project of reading short stories written by an eminent Manipuri woman writer, by female artists, exemplifies these dynamics. The stories, centered on women's lived experiences, are read by female artists, using regional dialects, recorded, and archived digitally. From a Foucauldian perspective, the selection of stories, choice of narrators, and metadata applied in the archive reflect subtle exercises of authority that determine which narratives gain prominence and circulate widely. The podcast serves as a concrete example of how digital archiving structures visibility, transforms marginalized voices, and ephemeral oral storytelling into enduring knowledge.

In addition to Foucault's theory, Jacques Derrida's Archive Fever further highlights the paradoxical nature of preservation, which is driven by both a desire to preserve and an inevitable act of forgetting.[3] Every act of archiving involves simultaneous phenomena of inclusion and exclusion, and each decision carries ethical and epistemic weight.

This framework of theories highlights the possible fragility and selectivity inherent in the preservation and representation in Manipur, as well as in other states in the Northeast. For instance, a folk song or a short story may expand beyond the hills and rivers of the Northeast through digital archives, but the very act of framing, labeling, and storing it fixes it in ways that may diverge from its original fluidity.

Derrida's ideas remind us that archives are never neutral repositories. They are structured spaces in which certain forms of knowledge are privileged, sometimes unintentionally, over others. While Foucault and Derrida inform our understanding of how archives build a knowledge structure, the concept of epistemic injustice by Miranda Fricker provides the background for the ethical implications of whose voices are valued within these structures of knowledge that comprise collective memory and knowledge.

Epistemic injustice happens when individuals or communities are unfairly treated as informal or personal, resulting in the devaluation or silencing of their perspective and knowledge.[5] This causes unfairness in recognizing who can contribute knowledge and whose knowledge counts in a society or a knowledge system. Applied to digital archiving in Manipur, this perspective draws attention to how women's oral histories, queer narratives, and other marginalized experiences may be overlooked or classified as informal, folk, or peripheral. Also, on the contrary, narratives produced by elite or mainstream groups may gain prominence simply because they fit pre-existing archival categories or scholarly expectations. Fricker's framework allows us to critically assess whether the digitization process reproduces these inequities, even as it ostensibly democratizes access to cultural memory.

Building on this ethical perspective, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor's notion of radical empathy, the "ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience, etc.", offers a practical approach to addressing these inequities. Radical empathy in archives emphasizes the responsibility of archivists and scholars to recognize the affective, emotional, and embodied dimensions of memory.[2] It involves an awareness of the communities whose narratives are preserved and a commitment to ethical representation. The theoretical lenses encourage our attention to the nuances of oral storytelling, the context of performance, and the lived experiences of women and queer communities. Radical empathy demands that archivists consider the intentions of the creators, the cultural significance of the narratives, and the potential impacts of preservation and dissemination on the communities represented. In the context of Manipur, where oral storytelling and performance are central to cultural life, radical empathy entails attentiveness to the nuance, context, and lived experience of narrators and subjects. In the creation of the podcast, careful attention has been given to the dialect used, performance, and narrative voice, which ensures

that the stories are represented with respect and authenticity without simplification or misrepresentation, highlighting the ethical dimension of digital preservation.

These frameworks—Foucault’s structural lens, Derrida’s archival tension, Fricker’s epistemic ethics, and Caswell and Cifor’s radical empathy - allow for a multidimensional understanding of digital archiving in Manipur.[2] They illustrate how archives actively shape knowledge and visibility, create tensions between preservation and forgetting, and produce ethical responsibilities toward marginalized voices.

Audience data of the podcast revealed that the podcast had a particularly strong female listenership, especially among women aged 25–35. This points to how digital archiving can resonate with specifics, opening new spaces for identification, empathy, and community-building. This theoretical framework situates Digital Archiving as a site for complex tension, continually interpretive, and ethically engaged practice rather than a neutral technical act. The digitized items, whether oral traditions, literature, or performative narratives, are not only preserved but through it reshaped through processes of categorization, metadata, and curatorial choice. It provides the tools to assess how Digital Archiving can expand and democratize access to knowledge, amplify underrepresented narratives, and simultaneously interrogate the subtle dynamics of power, representation, and inclusion in the Northeast’s digital knowledge systems.

5 Limitations

Limitations of this study acknowledge that the scope of analysis is primarily focused on Manipur, rather than a comprehensive survey of the region’s diverse digital archival practices. The paper draws from only one case study—the podcast project featuring short stories by a Manipuri woman writer—which offers valuable insight; however, it represents only one instance of digital archiving. The project’s audience data highlights a significant female listenership between the ages of 25–35, suggesting the project has resonated with younger women. The analysis does not extend other than the original platform (YouTube), it was distributed as well as archived. This study also doesn’t discuss digital corrosion. The study emphasizes theoretical reflection over technical or empirical assessment, positioning itself as an exploratory inquiry into the ethical, epistemic, and representational dimensions of digital archiving.

6 Conclusion

Digital Archiving in Manipur, as well as the Northeast, creates a space for both remarkable opportunities and ethical challenges. By conserving oral traditions, literature, and performative narratives and transforming them into digital formats, archives can extend the reach of cultural memory beyond local communities, amplifying voices that were previously confined to oral or regional spaces. The podcast project highlights this potential: stories read by female artists, including those with regional dialects, become accessible to a broader audience, preserving women’s lived experiences while respecting their linguistic and cultural specificity.

However, the neutrality of the process is still questionable. As Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* reminds us, archives inherently structure what can be said, remembered, and transmitted, giving authority to certain narratives while leaving others at risk of exclusion. Derrida’s notion of archive fever highlights the paradox of preservation: every act of archiving simultaneously preserves and forgets. Fricker’s concept of epistemic injustice further emphasizes that marginalization can persist even within digitally democratized spaces, while Caswell and Cifor’s framework of radical empathy underscores the ethical responsibility of archivists to represent communities faithfully.

Digital archives are dynamic systems of knowledge, its ever evolving decisions about inclusion, categorization, and dissemination carry subtle but significant consequences. They offer a pathway to democratize cultural memory and preserve linguistic, gendered, and performative diversity—but only when guided by ethical reflection and attentiveness to marginalized voices. In the context of Manipur, digital archiving demonstrates how technology can bridge temporal and spatial boundaries, making oral traditions, literature, and lived experiences accessible while prompting critical awareness of whose stories are heard and whose remain at the margins. The scarcity of region-specific research on digital archiving regarding literature and oral traditions in Manipur creates a gap that this paper seeks to address.

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