

Received: December 2023 Accepted: January 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58262/ks.v12i2.051>

Folksongs: A Dynamic Expression of Cultural Heritage in Select Indigenous Autobiographies

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Abstract

Folksongs, deeply embedded in the oral traditions of indigenous cultures, serve as powerful medium for cultural transmission and resistance against assimilation. This paper explores the resonant theme of folksongs in select indigenous autobiographies, interpreting them as threads that intricately weave the cultural tapestry of indigenous communities. Through an analysis of two autobiographical narratives, Moon and Rainbow: The Autobiography of an Aboriginal by Dick Roughsey and The Autobiography of a Māori by Reweti T. Kohere, this study highlights the multifaceted role of folksongs in conveying cultural resonance, echoing ancestral wisdom, affirming cultural identity, and contributing to personal narratives set to the rhythm of cultural traditions. The inclusion of folksongs in indigenous autobiographies becomes a deliberate act of cultural revitalization and healing, offering a unique perspective on the interplay between music, identity, and the preservation of indigenous cultures. This exploration sheds light on the significance of folksongs as dynamic expressions of cultural heritage within the literary landscape of indigenous autobiographies.

Top of Form

Keywords: *Oral Tradition, Māori Folksong, Aboriginal People, Cultural Transmission, Personal Narratives, Cultural Revitalization.*

Introduction

Indigenous autobiographies hold significant importance as a literary genre in providing a unique and invaluable perspective on the experiences, histories, cultural identities and cultural traditions of indigenous communities. Indigenous cultures have a strong oral tradition, and the literary form, “autobiography”, act as a tool to preserve and transmit this oral knowledge. An integral part of oral tradition, folksongs have been central to indigenous cultures as a means of passing down knowledge, traditions, and values from one generation to the next. The incorporation of folksongs within indigenous autobiographies allows the authors to transmit cultural information in a manner that resonates with the oral traditions of their communities. They bridge the gap between spoken and written language, and ensure that traditional stories, wisdom, and customs are documented for future generations.

Folklore is a wide-ranging expression of rich and complex archaic culture. It is a vital element of a living culture. It represents the ancient thoughts of mankind, people’s feelings and worldview, their shared experiences and wisdom. “Folksongs are live human documents reflecting actual historical, processes and phenomena of different ages”, says Kishore Jadav in his monumental work *Folklore and its Motifs in Modern Literature*. ‘Folk’ is synonymous with people. This term is defined succinctly in Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary as:

The great proportion of the members of a people that determines the group character and that tends to

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preserve its characteristic form of civilization and its customs, arts and crafts, legends, traditions and superstitions from generation to generations. (Kishore Jadav 1)

Cecil J. Sharp, the great collector of English folksongs defines folksongs “as the song created by the common people” (Chettiar 20), contradicting it from the song popular or otherwise, which has been composed by the educated. In order to trace the history of folksongs and tales we should know the scholarly works done in Asia, before the Grimm’s Fairy Tales viz, ‘Kathasaritsagar’, ‘Panchatantra’ and ‘Jataks’. A German scholar, Theodore Bonfey even claimed in his introduction to *Panchatantra* (1859) that India, the seat of an ancient, highly developed civilization that had spread to Europe, was the home of the master tales subsequently found in the Grimm’s collection. Along with language and mythology, these wonder tales had diffused from India to Europe in ancient and historic times along well-traversed trade routes. Anthropologists of the School of Cambridge University converged on a central idea of myth—ritual origins of folklore on the basis of comparative study of Sir James George Frazer. In their view, mythic narratives accompanied and explained a sacrificial fertility ritual among the heathens. In course of time, the myth becomes separated from the rite and floats independently in oral tradition to evolve into magic tales.

Folksongs are found in diverse cultures around the world, each with its own unique styles and traditions. From traditional ballads to work songs and protest songs, the global repertoire of folksongs reflects the diversity of human expression. These songs serve social functions within communities. They are used in communal gatherings, celebrations, and rituals, fostering a sense of shared experience and connection among participants. They are dynamic in nature and can evolve over time through adaptation and reinterpretation. Different communities or artists may put their own spin on traditional folksongs, keeping them alive and relevant in changing cultural contexts.

Having typically characterized by simplicity in melody and lyrics, the folksongs cover the journey of folk life beginning from the cradle and ending with the funeral, connoting the spontaneous outburst of feelings, love, imagination, sentiments of the ancestors, morals, and disciplines. They often feature repetitive structures, making them accessible to a wide audience and facilitating easy memorization and transmission. They are deeply connected to the communities from which they originate. They are associated with specific regions, ethnic groups, or historical events, fostering a sense of shared identity and community bonding.

When integrated into the indigenous autobiographies, folksongs become a powerful tool for conveying the emotional landscapes of the author's experiences, fostering a deeper connection between the reader and the cultural context. Authors often use folksongs to interweave personal narratives within the broader cultural context. The inclusion of these songs enhances the autobiographical narrative by providing a musical and lyrical backdrop that reflects the author's connection to their cultural roots. These songs contribute to community bonding by reaffirming common cultural threads. As a result, the readers gain insight into the communal aspects of indigenous life that emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals within the group. The paper here intends to explore how folksongs serve as carriers of cultural knowledge, values, and stories within the context of indigenous autobiographies by examining the folk songs that are prevalent among the Lardil tribal community of Mornington Island, Australia, and the Māoris of East Cape, New Zealand, as exemplified in the indigenous autobiographies, *Moon and Rainbow: The Autobiography of an Aboriginal* by the Australian aboriginal writer Dick Roughsey and *The Autobiography of a Māori* by Reweti T. Kohere, a Native writer from New Zealand, respectively.

Methodology

The proposed study employs a purposive sampling strategy to select indigenous autobiographies that prominently feature folksongs in the indigenous autobiographies of Australian aboriginals, and the Māori of New Zealand to ensure the representation across different indigenous groups for a comparative analysis.

The study also utilizes qualitative content analysis to identify, categorize, and analyse instances of folksong representation in the selected autobiographies. Apart from that, the study employs a comparative analysis approach to explore variations in the use of folksongs among the indigenous groups from Australia and New Zealand as exemplified in the autobiographies of Dick Roughsey, and Reweti T. Kohere. It also identifies the commonalities and differences in themes, styles, and cultural representation.

Results

The analysis of folksongs in the selected Indigenous autobiographies as a dynamic expression of cultural heritage proved to be the potential contributions to various fields, including literature, cultural studies, anthropology, and identity studies. By investigating the folksongs incorporated in these indigenous autobiographies, it is understood that the folksongs function as the seminal contributions to the preservation and documentation of their cultural heritage.

Analysis and Discussion

The study enriches literary scholarship by exploring the use of folksongs as a literary device within autobiographical narratives. It offers insights into how indigenous authors employ this dynamic expression to convey cultural identity and historical experiences. The comparative analysis across different indigenous groups provides a platform for cross-cultural understanding. It enhances knowledge about the diversity of folksong traditions and their representation in autobiographical literature, that foster the appreciation for varied cultural expressions.

Folksongs in Moon and Rainbow: the Autobiography of an Aboriginal

Folksongs serve as a means of cultural expression, reflecting the identity, beliefs, and experiences of a particular community. They convey the everyday life, struggles, and celebrations of the people who create and perform them. Folksongs have been an integral part of the cultural heritage of Aboriginal Australians for thousands of years. These songs, often referred to as "songlines" or "dreaming tracks," play a crucial role in conveying the stories, traditions, and spiritual beliefs of Aboriginal communities. In Mornington Island, among the Lardil tribal people of Australia, there are songs for everything in their daily life—songs to bring rain or stop rain, songs to make a woman dream of a man so that she will love him and go to him. They have magic songs to cure many illnesses as well as to kill. They also have fighting songs, songs to drive away devils or evil spirits, and songs to direct the spirits of the dead away to Yili-jilit-nyeah—the good country beyond the Milky Way.

When a man is wounded by a spear, his relatives look after him. They keep the wound clean with pipe-clay and keep chanting "Me yal kay, me yalkey, me yal kay" meaning "from the spear, get better quickly". If a man is wounded by a nulla-nulla, the song is "Budgu yoombu yoombu, mana yoombu yoombu", meaning "from the nulla-nulla get better quickly". (*Moon and Rainbow* 79)

As per their belief, when a man breaks a law, such as cooking land food and sea food on the same fire, or going into the sea soon after eating the land food, the Mulgiri spirit belonging to that country becomes very angry. It will enter his stomach and fasten its teeth into him, causing great pain. Mulgiri spirits are really their totems or dreaming. The main one is old Rainbow, but there are many others like the sea eagle, the reptiles and the animals. These mulgiri spirits are believed to have their own country and they live in the sea near that country. Once the spirit enters the body of a person, it takes a lot of singing to drive the mulgiri out of him. A story about the ill impact of mulgiri spirit is described in the text as follows:

[. . .] a man named Darwal put his goanna in the fire to cook and sat down to eat some of his palm nuts. While he was eating another man came running into the camp yelling to everyone to come with nets and spears as there was a big school of tuna in shallow water. [. . .] Darwal ran too, still chewing his palm nuts. They caught plenty of fish, enough to feed everybody in camp. During the night Darwal became very sick. His stomach hurt badly and began to swell up until it was hard. [. . .] Darwal has got the Mulgiri of Yarrangara the sea eagle, in his stomach—he broke the law, an old man said. ‘We must chase Yarrangara out of him or he’ll die. ‘ One man got down on each side of Darwal and began to chant the song to drive out the mulgiri. They chanted louder—the words they chant meant ‘I sing your head—you go away. I sing your teeth—you go away. I sing your jaw—you go away. I sing your teeth—you go away. I sing your backbone- -you go away.’ (*ibid* 80)

Another song and story related to the man woman relationship and marriage is that of Gidegal. Gidegal was the moon-man who was a great lover of women. He was always after women and made many songs to make them fall in love with him. Roughsey’s older brother Burrud, (or Lindsay, the Christian name) is the biggest song-man of the Lardil tribe. He was often approached by many men to sing the *Jarrada* songs to help them get the woman they want. The ground is decorated and painted with white paint, red ochre feathers and white pipe-clay symbolizing vagina, penis and seminal flow. They also decorate their bodies with red and white paint and cohered bird-down. The process is described as follows:

When everything is ready the *Jarrada* man stands before the feathered pole with legs spread, knees bend and hands on thighs. His two relatives, perhaps grandfather and uncle, kneel over the holes at the side. They begin singing the cycle of love songs. As they sing, they sway their hips back and forth in the rhythmical motions of love-making. In the first song Gidegal sings his own body so that he’ll be strong and attractive to the woman. Each song is sung several times before going on to the next. The songs do not have to be heard by the woman; she may be many miles away. In the second song Gidegal sings the woman so that she will begin to dream of him. He sings ‘Guraday Lardimah, Guraday Lardimah—Gura Binba’—‘You will think sweet of me in your dreaming.’ He now sings ‘Bulgeery Rumana Mungeera Girano’—‘You will dream that I am making love to you.’ He sings a fourth song to make himself more attractive, and he sings, he rubs juice from the roots of a special bush over his body. The juice is mixed with goanna fat. (*ibid* 82- 83)

Gidegal sings a song so that the woman will not be able to stop looking at him. He sings again so that when the woman wakes up next morning, she will find herself wet as though from love-making. The last song describes the woman walking about next morning, knowing that she belongs to the man who sang in her dreaming. Gidegal sings all night and all next day, repeating the song cycle over and over. The songs make the evening star twinkle and the woman is again reminded of her lover. “He sings the lightning flash and when she sleeps, she also dreams of the lightning and sees the form of her lover in the flash. Her heart is warm and glad”. (*ibid* 83)

The *Jarrada* songs of Gidegal are believed to be never failing. The women use to fall in love with the singer of *Jarrada*, even if she didn’t like him before. The women also have songs to make men fall in love with them. They too go away into the bush to sing songs for magical love. Such songs are performed almost in the similar way that of the songs of men. There are also songs which are sung during the time of a person’s burial ceremony. Men and women paint their body with white clay and gather about the platform to dance and sing. The songs and dances recall the happy times in the past. The last song is really a chant to drive the spirit away to the east. “*Lengeer movreea—dunga-thanga rubaimara*’—Go away to the east—don’t stay here and trouble people.” (*ibid* 89)

Folk songs are thus of great importance for the Lardil community and are sung at important juncture of various rituals ranging from marriage, births and deaths. It seems to be alive and in great vogue as equal

to that of the myths and folk tales. They cover a wide range of themes, including love, work, nature, social issues, and historical events. They are humorous, poignant, and reflective, providing a diverse expression of human experiences.

Folksongs and the Autobiography of a Maori

Folksongs, folktales, and myths are also an integral part of the cultural heritage of the Māori people, the indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand. Māori folksongs, often referred to as 'waiata', play a significant role in conveying the history, traditions, and values of the Māori community. These songs are a vital means of passing down whakapapa (genealogy), histories, and cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. They cover a diverse range of themes, including love, war, nature, daily life, and cultural identity. Different types of waiata (songs) exist, such as waiata aroha (love songs), waiata tangi (mourning songs), and waiata whaiapo (courtship songs). One or two such references to the popular folksongs of the Māori people of East Coast are identified in the autobiography of Rewetie T. Kohere, titled *The Autobiography of a Māori*. The waiata tangi (mourning songs), that is sung on the death of a person as a means of mourning is placed below. The myth related to that song is as follows. It is known as the myth of Pawa and Rongokako.

Pawa was the navigator of the canoe Horouta which the Ngati-Porou tribe claims to be their tribal canoe. He was also the man who was involved in a Herculean struggle with the long-legged giant, Rongokako, and who, to catch the foe, planted a trap on Tawhiti hill which today bears its name, and the other end of the bow he fastened to Puketiti, the sugar-loaf near Mr. A. B. Williams's home. Rongokako was too wary and with his mighty strides evaded Pawa's machinations. He took one stride from Tapuwae (footprint), near Whangara, to Tapuwae, near Orutua. In his pursuit of Rongokako, Pawa left behind him, near his "stingaree" his little daughter, Maroheia, and, on his return, found her petrified and clinging to a rock called Ihu-toto, and even today you may find remnants of the forsaken little maid still clinging to Ihu-toto. In Hinetawhirangi's well-known song, wherein she mourns the death of her relative, Hamaiwaho, who jumped into the sea in order to escape from his Ngapuhi captors when near the Rurima Islands in the Bay of Plenty, an allusion is made to the legend. Hamaiwaho was drowned and his body was washed up on the Rurima rocks:

Naku i moumou, na Pawa i whakarere, Koia Maroheia e awhi mai ra Ihu-toto. I never tended thee as Pawa cast away. Maroheia, now hugging Ihu-toto. (The Autobiography of a Māori 34)

It was probably the casting of Hamaiwaho on the rocks that suggested to the Māori lyric, Pawa's neglect of his daughter, Maroheia, which led to her death as she hugged Ihu-toto rock. The poetess, in a sense, blames herself also for the neglect of her relative whose body was found on the Rurima rocks, as Maroheia's was found clinging to Ihu-toto rock. The weaving of the idea of neglect into the two incidents, her neglect and Pawa's, is clever and displays high imaginative powers and a decided poetic turn of mind.

Like the folk songs, folk stories are also of great value for the Māori people. Kohere goes on to say that Māori mothers and grandmothers are interested in telling stories of giants and giantesses to entertain little children. A typical story of a giantess popular among the Māori's is as follows. A little boy wanders into the forest and loses his way. After wandering about for a few days and subsisting on wild berries, he hears a peculiar noise, like the snorting of a wild horse. He looks for the cause of the noise and suddenly he espies a nanakia (ogre)—a terrible-looking giantess, whose grey dishevelled hair covers her rugged body, and who, with her long tapering fingernails, could pierce wild pigeons as they perched in the trees. The next day, curious to find out the home of the nanakia the boy climbs to the top of a high hill, from which he can survey the country around and find out his bearings. In the valley below he notices puffs of smoke rising above the trees. To investigate the mystery of the fire, he hurries down

into the valley and, warily approaching a dark mass in the wood, he notices it to be a rocky cave from which the smoke is issuing, and by the fire with her back towards him and the grey hair covering her recumbent body and her long fingers pointing in a heap towards the back of the cave, the nanakia is fast asleep. Judging by the heap of fresh pigeon bones lying near the fire, the boy gathers that the giantess has devoured several pigeons at one meal and she is likely to sleep for many hours. He loses no time in turning his face towards where his home lies and runs, afraid lest the nanakia should wake up too soon. As he nears the edge of the forest, he hears the cracking of broken trees and the same unmistakable snorting he had heard the day before. He knows that the nanakia is after his blood. Instead of walking through the bush, the monster is stepping from tree-top to tree-top and gaining on him rapidly. He is now in the open and crossing a plain. He again hears the snorting. As the giantess snorts she throws her terrible fingers in front of her as though her little victim is within striking distance.

The boy can almost feel the hot breath of the gigantic hag as she snorts and lurches forward. The boy now cries, "*Te kobatu nei e matiti, matata!*" ("O rock, split and crack"). It opens sufficiently to let him in and then closes. After travelling along the channel revealed by the opening, he comes to the surface, but the nanakia, bewildered by the boy's disappearance, is some distance behind. The race once more continues. When the nanakia is again within striking distance of her victim, the boy once more cries, "*Te wiwi nei e, matiti, matata!*" (O rushes, split and crack.") As the rushes open out the earth opens also and the boy leaps into the opening and is safe once more. The nanakia, fearful lest she should be too near the abode of mortal man, stands and hesitates and then turns back to disappear into the dark and lonely forest. (*The Autobiography of a Māori* 36)

Māori folksongs are thus a vital cultural expression that plays a central role in the preservation of language, cultural traditions, and the transmission of knowledge within the Māori community. They embody the rich history and identity of the Māori people and continue to be a vibrant and evolving aspect of their cultural heritage. These songs are used in educational settings to teach language, history, and cultural values. They also express *whakapono* (belief) and are a means of reinforcing cultural identity among the Māori youth.

This research study that aims to provide an understanding of how folksongs serve as dynamic expressions of cultural heritage in indigenous autobiographies, may contribute to both academic scholarship and cultural preservation efforts. The findings may empower indigenous communities by showcasing the richness of their cultural heritage through autobiographical storytelling. This can contribute to a sense of pride, cultural continuity, and community cohesion.

Conclusion

Folksongs are, in short, the living expressions of culture, connecting communities through shared narratives, melodies, and traditions. Their significance lies not only in their musical and lyrical qualities but also in their role as cultural artifacts that bridge the past, present, and future of a community. They serve as repositories of historical knowledge, linguistic elements, and traditional customs. Having served as a form of storytelling, folksongs educate the younger generations about their cultural history, moral values, and traditional practices. Through the lyrics, melodies, performance and continuation of folksongs, knowledge is passed down in an engaging and memorable manner that ensure the transmission of their cultural legacy to future generations. They serve as a means of reflecting the identity, beliefs, and experiences of a particular community. They convey the everyday life, struggles, and celebrations of the people who create and perform them. In short, folksongs function as the quintessential tool in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage in indigenous autobiographies. By incorporating these songs, the autobiographers Dick Roughsey and Reweti T. Kohere enrich their

narratives with layers of cultural meaning, linguistic diversity, and emotional resonance, ensuring that the essence of indigenous cultures is authentically conveyed and passed down to future generations. Understanding the significance of folksongs in autobiographical narratives in turn can contribute to initiatives that aim at safeguarding and promoting indigenous cultural heritage.

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