

# Preserving Tradition Amidst Modern Schooling: The Interplay of Education and Cultural Identity in the Lisu (Yobin) Tribe

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how formal education influences cultural continuity and communal identity among the Lisu (Yobin) tribe in northeastern India. Predominantly Christian for over seven decades, the Lisu nevertheless retain selective elements from older spiritual traditions in marriage, childbirth, and funerary practices. A mixed-methods design combined qualitative interviews (n = 46) and focus groups (n = 7) with quantitative surveys (n = 406). The analysis focused on rituals (marriage, childbirth, death) and language usage, contextualized by the tribe's remote setting in Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh. Most participants view education as crucial for preserving intangible heritage: 94% believe local schools can reinforce Lisu language and cultural references. A minority, however, highlights tensions—religious practices, out-migration for schooling, and standardized curricula overshadowing clan-based knowledge. Despite faith ethics guiding daily life and new gravel roads (built in 2022) enhancing connectivity, symbolic vestiges of older ritual elements (e.g., postpartum warming, once-common multi-day vigils) persist. This showcases a selective fusion of tradition and modern influences.

Village councils, educators, and NGOs should ensure formal schooling does not sideline local languages or reduce ancestral customs to “folklore.” Supporting bilingual instruction, documenting unique rites, and organizing cultural events on school premises can help preserve these practices. By examining a predominantly Christian tribal group that still retains *selective* pre-Christian traditions, this study broadens understanding of how **smaller frontier communities** integrate external educational frameworks **without** relinquishing core communal ethos. The research highlights the Lisu's strategic adaptations—such as mother-tongue instruction, digital archiving, and ritual reenactments—thereby offering **practical insights** for educators, policymakers, and NGOs seeking culturally responsive approaches. This nuanced perspective underscores that modern schooling need not displace indigenous identity; rather, **locally attuned** innovations can reinforce intangible heritage even amid socio-economic pressures.

**Keywords:** Lisu (Yobin), Cultural Preservation, Indigenous Knowledge, Rituals, Language, Bilingual Education

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Context and Rationale

Formal education is widely recognized as a means to achieve economic advancement (Sen, 1999). Yet for indigenous communities, schooling can also pose cultural dilemmas (Brock-Utne, 2013). In Arunachal

Pradesh—characterized by rugged mountains and diverse tribal populations (Xaxa, 2016; Ghosh, 2007)—these tensions are particularly evident. Tribal groups often seek modern education to access opportunities yet remain cautious about losing oral traditions and clan-based practices (Saha, 2017).

The **Lisu (Yobin)** tribe, which has been predominantly Christian for over 70 years, offers a distinctive example of how certain **older ritual references**—once integral to their ancestral traditions—still find expression in marriage customs, childbirth practices, and funerary ceremonies (Bradley, 1994; Maitra, 1988). While **NGO-led schools** and state curricula shape younger generations' worldviews, clan cohesion and communal ethos remain central (Elwin, 1988). This article thus contributes to broader discussions on **indigenous resilience, bilingual education, and cultural adaptation** (Chilisa, 2012).

### 1.2 Research Focus and Questions

Challenging the assumption that formal education inevitably undermines ancestral practices (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), the Lisu case suggests a **selective integration**: older clan motifs endure but often reframed through faith norms or modern schooling priorities. The study poses three guiding questions:

1. **Ritual Evolution**: How do **marriage, childbirth, and funerary practices** adapt amid modern schooling?
2. **Language and Identity**: What role does **Lisu language** (and mother-tongue teaching) play in sustaining communal identity in mainstream curricula?
3. **Stakeholder Influence**: How do **teachers, NGOs, and local leaders** facilitate—or hinder—the ongoing transmission of intangible heritage?

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

Focusing on a small tribe (~4,000 members) highlights complexity often overshadowed by research on larger groups. By documenting **cultural persistence** in a geographically isolated region, the Lisu show how communities can maintain older practices while adopting aspects of formal education (Brock-Utne, 2013). Findings are relevant for policymakers, community educators, and researchers who aim to foster local traditions alongside socio-economic progress.

Section 2 of this article reviews the literature on **indigenous education and cultural preservation**. Section 3 explains the **mixed-methods** approach, including data collection, analysis, and ethical safeguards. Section 4 presents findings on **ritual continuity, language usage, and generational perspectives**. Section 5 provides a theoretical interpretation, and Section 6 offers policy recommendations—focusing on mother-tongue integration, documentation of clan-based practices, and the training of Lisu educators.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Indigenous Education and Cultural Continuity

Cultural continuity involves the intergenerational transmission of rituals, dialect, and community identity (Smith, 1999). In tribal contexts, formal education may risk overshadowing these traditions when curricula omit local histories or minority languages (Saha, 2017). However, **bilingual** or **community-centric** approaches can enhance intangible heritage—reinforcing local-language literacy, memorializing oral knowledge, and validating ancestral customs within academic frameworks (Brock-Utne, 2013; Chilisa, 2012).

### 2.2 Rituals, Spiritual Life, and Modern Influences

Rituals—such as marriage or funeral rites—unify communities around spiritual frameworks and moral conduct (Elwin, 1988). Among Himalayan tribes, Christian or Buddhist affiliations often coexist with

older, clan-based traditions; symbolic remnants may appear in ceremonies even after large-scale conversion (Mibang & Behera, 2004). Modern schooling can reshape these rites if textbooks dismiss them as archaic or if teachers favour mainstream religious/scientific stances (Das, 2020).

### 2.3 Lisu (Yobin) in Changlang District

#### Historical Isolation

Prior to India's administrative presence (1961), Lisu villages relied on **shifting cultivation** (rice, millet) and forest gathering, governed by clan leadership (Bradley, 1994). Certain older spiritual references—such as *MU-ZI* (unsettled spirits) and postpartum customs—were transmitted orally across generations (Elwin, 1988).

#### Transition to Christianity

By the mid-20th century, Christian family influences across the border from Myanmar played a pivotal role in leading most Lisu families to embrace the Christian faith. Nonetheless, elements of **ancestral** practices continued to appear in communal gatherings and everyday life (Thomas, 2023). This **selective adaptation** illustrates how external religious ideas can merge with established clan values (Berry, 1997).

#### Contemporary Developments

While older works note minimal infrastructure (Maitra, 1988), a newly built **gravel road** in 2022 has improved connectivity, alongside **NGO-led schools** and adult literacy efforts. Although literacy rates have risen, Lisu respondents still worry about overshadowing intangible heritage—especially in remote hamlets lacking bilingual materials or culturally relevant teaching approaches (Saha, 2017).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Study Design and Site

A **mixed-methods** strategy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) was employed to capture both quantitative overviews and qualitative depth. Fieldwork took place from January to June 2024 in Changlang District's Lisu-majority villages (Gandhigram, Hazolo, Dawodi, Nibodi, Ngwazakha).

- **Geographic Constraints:** Due to steep terrain and limited road access (until 2022), a **purposive sampling** approach targeted households balancing older clan customs with modern Christian schooling experiences.

### 3.2 Data Collection Instruments

#### 1. Quantitative Survey (n = 406)

- **Structure:** Survey questions addressed perceptions of ritual significance, Lisu language preference, perceived educational benefits, and family-level changes in ceremonies.
- **Sampling:** Households included elders, parents, and youth aged 18+, ensuring generational diversity.

#### 2. Qualitative Interviews (n = 46)

- **Format:** Semi-structured, focusing on marriage, childbirth, funerals, language usage, and community identity.
- **Participants:** Clan elders (custodians of older knowledge), parents making schooling decisions, youth (students, dropouts), and local church representatives.

#### 3. Focus Group Discussions (n = 7)

- **Composition:** 7–8 participants each, grouped by generational or occupational roles (e.g., weaving elders, local NGO teachers).
- **Topics:** Clan-led traditions, mother-tongue teaching, postpartum norms, Christian influences, perceived effects of formal education.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

#### 1. Quantitative Analysis

- Data were compiled and analysed in **Excel** for basic descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages).

Key items included:

- Ritual participation
- Language usage
- Views on education's impact
- Out-migration for schooling

#### 2. Qualitative Analysis

- A thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) guided transcript coding:

- Open Coding:** Identified initial categories (e.g., "MU-ZI references," "warmth ritual," "bilingual impetus," "clan solidarity").
  - Axial Coding:** Clustered these into broad themes (e.g., "marriage transformations," "youth vs. elder perspectives," "Christian synergy").
  - Selective Coding:** Linked them to theoretical constructs (e.g., "cultural fusion," "acculturation strategies").
- Triangulation** (Patton, 2015) cross-checked numeric data (e.g., 94% seeing schools as preserving Lisu heritage) with narrative details on how or why preservation occurs.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approvals was obtained from village councils, church elders, and local committees. Written or verbal consent was secured per literacy levels. **Pseudonyms** were used to uphold confidentiality around sensitive postpartum or older spiritual topics. In line with **constructivist** principles (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), summary results were shared with local leaders to respect communal knowledge.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Evolving Marriage Customs

#### 4.1.1 Engagement and Dowry

72% of respondents noted "some or significant change" in marriage customs. In past decades, extended dowries and pig inspections emphasized clan bonds and older ritual references. Christian prayer now typically inaugurates the wedding, yet communal feasting, weaving-based gifts, and clan blessings remain central.

*"We still gather to share a big feast, but now we pray in church first instead of reading pig intestines for signs."*

**(G2-P3, Male, 52)**

#### 4.1.2 Elopement and Bride Kidnapping

Former occurrences of bride kidnapping have completely disappeared. Modern "elopement" usually involves mutual consent, with clan elders mediating any compensation if a prior engagement was cancelled. Younger couples cite **church-led** teachings on marriage ethics and **school-based** condemnation of forced unions as key factors.

### 4.2 Childbirth: Continuity and Adaptation

#### 4.2.1 Postpartum Warmth Ritual

Despite rising hospital births, **80%** of mothers still observe warming fires or postpartum enclosures for

about a week, guided by older beliefs about safeguarding maternal well-being. Educated women view these as both “traditional and practical,” combining medical check-ups with communal support.

*“Even after I came home from the hospital, my mother insisted on lighting the fire near my bed for a week.” (FG4-P4, Female, 33)*

#### 4.2.2 Naming Ceremonies

**Ninety-one percent** of respondents emphasized the significance of **mother-tongue naming** for preserving clan genealogies. In most families, **senior relatives** (often grandparents) select a **Lisu name** for the newborn, ensuring that ancestral links remain visible in each generation. Although the community predominantly identifies as Christian, these naming customs remain rooted in **local traditions**, rather than formal church rites. Many participants credited **Church-led literacy** initiatives for helping them **document** genealogies in writing, thereby reducing the risk of losing intangible references to lineage.

*“When a child is born, the eldest in the family chooses a Lisu name, connecting the baby to our ancestors.”*

**(G3-P4, Female, 35)**

### 4.3 Funerary Rites and MU-ZI Lore

#### 4.3.1 multi-Day Vigil

While funerals increasingly last **24–48 hours**—aligned with current faith norms—some older families recall multi-day vigils referencing *MU-ZI* (unsettled spirits). Interviews indicated that the majority of older-generation respondents once practiced a three-day vigil, but such an extended form is now less common. Younger Lisu primarily view the vigil as communal mourning rather than literal fear of reanimation.

*“We keep vigil mostly for respect now; older folks told stories of Mu-zi, but we rely on prayers and support.”*

**(FG6-P6, Female, 42)**

### 4.4 Language Use and Cultural Documentation

#### 4.4.1 Importance of Lisu Language

**94%** of respondents believe local schools can preserve the Lisu dialect if bilingual or supplementary Lisu resources are introduced. However, most classes rely on Hindi/English, prompting some families to conduct weekend church-based lessons to maintain literacy.

#### 4.4.2 Digital Archiving

Many participants described **filming** older chants or stories with smartphones. Younger, tech-savvy Lisu collaborate with NGOs to compile audio/video archives, viewing these as crucial for retaining intangible heritage in the face of out-migration.

*“We film grandpa telling old stories or singing clan songs, so our children won’t forget.”*

**(G4-P8, Male, 27)**

### 4.5 Tensions and Trade-Offs

- **Generational Gaps:** Some elders feel a “loss of traditional depth,” while youth emphasize that faith schooling offers strong moral grounding. **Older spiritual** references tend to remain in symbolic or partial forms.

- **Standardized Curricula:** About **8%** worry mainstream textbooks exclude clan lore, effectively treating it as peripheral. They push for **bilingual** or **culturally enriched** materials to sustain family rites.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Education as Cultural Reinforcement

Rather than automatically eroding local norms, schooling can serve as a platform for preserving heritage—*if* it features mother-tongue modules, communal archiving, and teacher awareness of older clan customs (Chilisa, 2012). The Lisu incorporate Christian or mainstream knowledge yet also leverage literacy to record genealogies and important traditions, reflecting strategic adaptation (Berry, 1997).

### 5.2 Christian Identity and “Selective Traditionalism”

Despite their longstanding Christian affiliation, the Lisu retain certain **ancestral** references—MU-ZI lore, postpartum warmth, clan blessings at weddings—often in symbolic or modified forms. This layered approach, often referred to as 'selective traditionalism,' blends NGO-led schooling or faith-based ethics with older clan values, reflecting patterns documented among other Himalayan communities (Mibang & Behera, 2004).

### 5.3 Future-Proofing Language and Rituals

Younger participants frequently advocate bilingual or digital avenues to safeguard intangible heritage. The emphasis on **Lisu dialect** aligns with cultural sustainability scholarship (Brock-Utne, 2013). However, ongoing NGO or governmental support is necessary to ensure that bilingual or archiving initiatives remain robust rather than sporadic.

### 5.4 Balancing External Curricula and Local Autonomy

While education can yield socio-economic benefits (Rath, 2006), “one-size-fits-all” syllabi risk sidelining clan histories or older references. Elders suggest that mainstream textbooks ignore genealogies or symbolic traditions, whereas youth propose partial rewriting of local texts or a “Lisu primer.” This tension mirrors broader debates on **whose** knowledge is legitimized in formal schooling (Chilisa, 2012).

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Overall Synthesis

Among the Lisu (Yobin), a **predominantly Christian** tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, formal education and **older ancestral** references intertwine in nuanced ways. Weddings now blend biblical prayers with communal feasts, postpartum practices coexist alongside hospital births, and funeral vigils—though less frequent in their original multi-day form—persist as communal mourning rather than literal fear of unsettled spirits. Meanwhile, preserving the **Lisu dialect** relies on mother-tongue lessons and digital recordings of clan lore. Hence, modern schooling need not displace heritage—provided it is responsive to local norms.

### 6.2 Policy Recommendations

#### 1. Bilingual and Culturally Enriched Curricula

- **Action:** Incorporate Lisu vocabulary, genealogies, and traditional references into part of the school curriculum.
- **Rationale:** Fosters cultural pride and intangible heritage, boosting student engagement.
- **Outcome:** Linguistic preservation, lower dropout rates, deeper intergenerational knowledge transfer.

#### 2. Collaborative Ritual Documentation

- **Action:** Invite village councils, church leaders, and NGOs to record postpartum customs, older chants, genealogical narratives.
  - **Rationale:** Digital archives secure intangible traditions in light of generational turnover and migration.
  - **Outcome:** Permanent, accessible cultural records for local youth and diaspora.
3. **Training Local Lisu Teachers**
- **Action:** Provide specialized scholarships for Lisu youth who combine faith ethos with clan knowledge to teach in local schools.
  - **Rationale:** Indigenous educators are more likely to integrate local language/culture, compensating for standard syllabi's gaps.
  - **Outcome:** Greater cultural resonance of school programs, fewer teacher shortages in remote areas.
4. **Community-Led School Events**
- **Action:** Sponsor annual cultural days at school, showcasing Lisu marriage reenactments, weaving, postpartum traditions, etc.
  - **Rationale:** Symbolically places intangible traditions alongside modern academics, validating them within formal education.
  - **Outcome:** Strengthened communal cohesion, intergenerational exchange, sustained intangible knowledge.

### 6.3 Limitations and Future Research

- **Sampling:** Despite 406 surveys and 46 interviews, extremely remote hamlets may still be underrepresented.
- **Longitudinal Insights:** Future studies could track whether children in bilingual pilot programs maintain Lisu language/ritual practices over time.
- **Comparative Dimension:** Examining other smaller tribes (e.g., Mishmi or Nocte) could clarify which educational models best preserve intangible heritage in northeast India's tribal regions.

Overall, the Lisu demonstrate that **formal education** and **ancestral customs** can co-exist fruitfully. By incorporating mother-tongue lessons, respecting older familial practices, and aligning faith norms with clan values, schooling becomes a channel for reinforcing—rather than diminishing—cultural identity. This underscores the promise of **community-oriented** educational strategies amid socio-economic changes.

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