



Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi: It's Historical and Cultural Importance of the Festival Among the Singpho Community

Arpita Dowarah

Research Scholar, Department of Sociology,


Assam University, Silchar cum Asst. Professor in Don Bosco College, Golaghat

arpitadowarah@gmail.com



<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijst.v2i3.266>

Cite this Article: Dowarah, A. (2026). Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi: It's Historical and Cultural Importance of the Festival Among the Singpho Community. *International Journal of Science, Strategic Management and Technology*, 02(03). <https://doi.org/10.55041/ijst.v2i3.266>

License:  This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are properly credited.

Abstract

Singphos are one of the major tribes on North East India. The tribe is known as Jingpo in China and in Burma it is known as Kachin. The Singpho tribe belongs to Mongoloid stock and found in the upper part of the Tinsukia district of Assam and other parts of Assam. They have vibrant and rich cultures that fascinate other people from the rest of the world. If talk about Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi, which is the traditional dance festival of Singphos that celebrated every year in the month of February. It is one of the national festivals of Singphos and festival is organized to show the culture and traditional custom of the community. In order to focus the importance of the festival the paper will highlight the historical and cultural importance of the festival with Singphos and it will also focus on the acceptance of the festival by the community in the modern society. For collection of data both primary and secondary source of data will be used were the secondary source of data will collected from e-books, journals, magazines etc. For primary data collection the ethnographic approach will be used with the quasi participant observation method followed by interview schedule.

Key words –Culture, Dance festival, History, Singphos, Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi

Introduction

Northeast India unfolds like a vibrant, multicolored carpet woven from over 200 indigenous tribal groups, each tracing origins to Austro Asiatic, Mongoloid, and even Caucasoid roots, crafting a kaleidoscope of distinct cultural identities, age-old traditions, and unique languages. Spanning eight states, this region often called the “Seven Sisters” plus Sikkim hosts speakers of Indo-Aryan tongues like Assamese, Tibeto-Burman dialects (prevalent among hills tribes), and Austro Asiatic languages among Munda groups. This linguistic and ethnic diversity, shaped by migrations and isolations in the Eastern Himalayas, fosters resilience amid biodiversity hotspots, making Northeast India a living museum of human adaptation. (S Morey, 2014)

Among these communities, the Singphos stand out as a historically powerful group, renowned for their warrior ethos and clan-based governance across generations. Today, they cluster mainly in the upper reaches of Tinsukia district in Assam with pockets in Sivasagar (Sibsagar), Jorhat, Golaghat, and Karbi Anglong while larger populations thrive in Changlang and the former Lohit (now Namsai) districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Scholar Manjela Singpho estimates their total at around 25,000 as of 2011, with official Margherita Development Block data pegging Assam's count at 6,442; in

Tinsukia's Margherita Subdivision, they dominate villages like Ketetong, Bisagaon, Inthem, Ulup, and Hassak, sustaining lives through tea gardens, weaving, and subsistence farming. It was believe that there are followers of animism, and now embraced the teaching of Theravada Buddhism in 1882. (A. Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, 2017) (S Morey, 2014)

Lacking a written history, Singphos preserve their legacy through vivid oral traditions, positioning them as one of Northeast India's prominent migrant communities from Myanmar and China known as Jingpho there and Kachin in Myanmar. Oral lore, chronicled by elders like Singda Ladan, recounts their epic odyssey: ancestors fleeing Majoi Singra Bum or Kaang Singra Bum ("Naturally Flat Mountain," possibly in Mongolia) around 700-800 BCE, traversing southwest Tibet by 600-300 BCE, lingering in Singpho Valley for 400 years, and reaching the Brahmaputra Valley between 300 BCE and 100 CE. This narrative underscores their migratory resilience, blending with local ecosystems. (R. Tunkhang, 2018)

Their rich culture and traditions are manifested in their beautiful costumes, their weaves and crafts, the dance forms, the songs, their traditional rituals and Indigenous knowledge. The Singphos are divided into a number of clans, each under the chief known as a Gaam. As Singphos are divided by Geographical boundaries they steadily maintain a line of communication sharing their cultural traditions, religion and language. With spontaneity and Enthusiasm Singphos, Kachins and Jingphaws mingle and participate in unique annual celebrations of the 'Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi'.

The Traditional dance festival that give another identity to the Singphos and take them back to root to create its own identity. The Singpho tribe has unique socio-economic demographic characteristics with varied living pattern. Their opulent culture shines through stunning attire like men's black jackets with silver embroidery and women's wrap-around skirts (lukat) masterful weaves from hand-spun cotton, intricate bamboo crafts, and rhythmic dances paired with soulful ballads. Linguistically rooted in the Tibeto-Burman family, they organize into exogamous clans led by a Gaam (village chief); who arbitrates disputes and leads rituals. Despite geographic divides by borders, Singphos, Kachins, and Jingphaws sustain vital communication channels, converging with fervor at the annual Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi a whirlwind dance festival of gongs and swords that reconnects them to ancestral roots, reinforces identity, and draws global visitors. (R. Tunkhang, 2018)

The Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi stands as their pinnacle cultural event, held annually in February (often aligning with the full moon) across villages like Bordubi and Napo. Drawing hundreds from India, Myanmar, and even China, it features exuberant group dances with gongs, drums, and swords symbolizing warrior prowess performed in circular formations around a towering Manu pole adorned with feathers and flora. The name encodes profound symbolism: "Poi" means grand festival, "Manu" (or Manau) denotes the sacred dance invoking prosperity, and "Shapawng Yawng" honors their mythical ancestor, a heroic figure who tamed rivers and founded clans. (R. Tunkhang, 2018) (2026.1, 7)

Unique in socio-economic fabric, Singphos exhibit diverse living patterns: from stilted bamboo longhouses in hilly hamlets to settled villages near tea estates, blending foraging with cash crops. Traditionally animists revering nature spirits (nani), they embraced Theravada Buddhism in 1882 via missionaries, merging rituals like ancestor veneration with monastic chants evident in tattooed priests (duwa) and festivals blending both faiths. This evolution highlights their adaptability, preserving indigenous knowledge in herbal medicine and sustainable agriculture amid modern challenges.

Far beyond a lively gathering of feasting on rice beer (known as hting or lau) and bamboo shoots, the festival reenacts epic migrations and battles from Singpho lore, with costumed performers channeling spirits through rhythmic chants. It honors ancestors via offerings at clan altars, reinforcing kinship bonds in a patrilineal society, while strategically preserving identity amid modernization pressures like Hindi imposition and Hindu assimilation. In multiethnic India, this ritual fortifies their autonomy, promotes tourism, and even aids conservation dancers often pledge forest protection ensuring the Singpho's legacy endures in a globalized world. (Z. Wang, 2018)

The Singpho people are historically and ethno linguistically linked to the broader Kachin and Jingpo groups spanning upper Myanmar and Yunnan province in China, forming a trans-border ethnic continuum shaped by centuries of mobility and shared cultural practices. Scholarly accounts, drawing from linguistic, anthropological, and historical sources, confirm that the Singphos of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are essentially identical to the Kachin a term popularized by the Burmese to denote Jinghpaw speakers and related subgroups within the Tibeto-Burman family. While the Singphos of Assam typically eschew the “Kachin” label in local contexts to assert their distinct regional identity, they openly acknowledge this underlying cultural homogeneity, evident in shared language dialects, clan structures, and ritual traditions that transcend modern national boundaries. (S. Morey · 2014)

This connection traces back to a significant 18th-century migration from the fertile Hukawng Valley in Myanmar, where environmental pressures, conflicts, and quests for arable land prompted Singpho clans to cross the rugged Patkai range into British India. Settling in the riverine foothills of present-day Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, they adapted their semi-nomadic practices to new landscapes while preserving core elements of their heritage. The Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi festival often intertwined with the broader Manau tradition serves as a living repository of this migration history, transforming abstract journeys into embodied memory through dance, choreography, and spatial symbolism. (R. Tunkhang, 2018)

The festival grounds themselves become a dynamic stage for visual retellings of Kachin-Jingpo migration sagas. For instance, the intricate “line map” choreography in the central Manau dance traces the Jingpo people's southward trajectory from the Tibetan plateau along the Irrawaddy River, with dancers' formations mimicking river bends, mountain passes, and valley settlements. This historical memory is further “written on the Munao Showroom” a ceremonial pavilion and “lingered in the mouth of Zhaiwa,” the traditional priest or storyteller whose recited epics invoke ancestral voices. What distinguishes the Singpho from neighboring ethnic groups like the Tai Ahoms or Mishmis is this codified narrative of origin and endurance, which bolsters internal solidarity and resilience. At the heart of the Munao Showroom stands a stylized mountain emblem symbolizing the mythic birthplace of Jingpo ancestors on Manoi Singra Bum, acting as a permanent visual anchor that orients participants toward their upland roots amid diasporic scattering. (R. Tunkhang, 2018) (G. Brath, 2013)

Historical Foundation of the Festival

The Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi festival is fundamentally rooted in the Singpho oral genealogy, a rich tapestry of spoken narratives that traces the community's collective descent to a mythic progenitor named Shwapawng Yowng (variously spelled Shapawng Yawng) from the sacred Manoi Singra Bum Mountain. This ancestral narrative provides a profound mythic foundation for the festival, which is meticulously designed not only to honor this founding figure but also to revive and perpetuate the historical memory of the Singphos lineage amid modern challenges to indigenous identity. Regarded as the common ancestor of all Singphos an ethnic group indigenous to the hilly terrains of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam Shapawng Yawng embodies the primordial unity of the people, and the festival serves as a ritualized acknowledgment of this genealogy, bridging the temporal gap between past origins and present existence. (P. Sonowal and J. Konwar, 2024)

The prime motive behind the organization of the festival is to portray the wide varieties of the rich culture and traditions, their customs and wildlife biodiversity of the Arunachal Pradesh. It is responsible attempt to promote, protect and preserve the ancient cultural rich heritage of the small population of the community. The Festival nurtures the social relationship and communication that will bring a sense of unity among them. Singpho tribe as we know is one of the small distinct communities of several tribes that constitute Arunachal Pradesh and this festival brings limelight and give them an opportunity to portray their rich cultural heritage to the country. The festival is also an effort to deviate the substance addiction of the youth to valuable efforts.



In Singpho cosmology, where the boundaries between the physical world, ancestral spirits, and divine forces blur, the festival emerges as a primary mode of transmitting history, social norms, and cosmological worldview to younger generations. During the multi-day celebrations, ritual songs (known as ‘moi’ or hymns) and dramatic enactments recount the heroic exploits, migrations, and spiritual encounters of Shapawng Yawng and other ancestral figures, weaving tales of creation, valor, and harmony with nature. These performances transcend mere artistry; they are sacred enactments infused with rhythmic chants, traditional instruments like the ‘trumphingong’ and ‘rang’ bamboo clappers that invoke the ancestors’ presence, ensuring their blessings for prosperity, health, and communal cohesion. Through this oral-performative tradition, the Singphos safeguard their intangible heritage against erosion from globalization and urbanization, fostering intergenerational continuity and a deep-seated sense of belonging. (R. Tunkhang, 2018)

The Manau dance forms the vibrant centerpiece of the Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi festival and is revered as the “national festival” of the Kachins and Singphos, embodying their collective spirit and unity across generations. Characterized by expansive circle formations or serpentine processions that draw in entire villages often hundreds of participants clad in traditional black tunics, silver headdresses, and intricate beadwork the dance fosters profound social cohesion, dissolving hierarchies as chiefs, elders, and youth move in synchronized harmony to the resounding beats of gongs, drums, and bamboo stamps. (G. Brath, 2013)

Historically, the Manau was far from a monolithic event; it encompassed a sophisticated category of rituals with nine distinct types, each tailored to pivotal life occasions and performed with precise choreography and invocations. These included funeral ceremonies to guide souls to the ancestral realm, house-blessing rites (Hpum Manau) to sanctify new dwellings against misfortune, celebrations honoring tribal chiefs' ascension or milestones, and propitiatory dances to appease restless ancestral spirits. For instance, the ‘Sut Manau’ marked moments of escalating prosperity, such as when a wealthy patron's fortunes multiplied, invoking blessings for continued abundance; the ‘Wan Manau’ celebrated bountiful harvests, with dancers mimicking sowing and reaping motions; while the ‘Majum Manau’ served war commemorations, recounting victories through fierce, rhythmic footwork. This ritual taxonomy not only addressed immediate communal needs but also reinforced cosmological balance, ensuring harmony between the living, the dead, and the natural world a tradition that continues to adapt in contemporary Singpho celebrations. (G. Brath, 2013) (R. Tunkhang, 2018)

One of the most profound symbolic elements of the Manau dance lies in its intricate choreography, which vividly mimics the "line maps" of ancestral migration fluid, serpentine patterns etched into the earth by generations of Jingpo-Kachin-Singpho feet. Dancers form elongated human chains or concentric circles, led by master performers who guide the procession through deliberate twists, pauses, and surges that replicate the contours of river valleys, mountain crossings, and valley settlements along the ancient southward routes from the Tibetan plateau. These movements are not arbitrary flourishes but encoded cartographies, transforming the festival ground into a living topography where each step retraces the perilous journeys of forebears fleeing conflict, seeking fertile lands, or following spiritual omens. (Z. Wang, 2018)

Far beyond a mere social activity, the dance functions as a “thorough baptism of mind and body,” immersing participants in a trance-like unity that awakens the latent power of the collective and fortifies their ethnic emotional and psychological identity. As villagers young and old, men and women surrender to the rhythmic pulse of gongs and chants, following leaders in precise patterns, they viscerally relive the hardships of their ancestors: the exhaustion of Patkai treks, the triumph of Hukawng Valley escapes, and the resilience forged in exile. This embodied reenactment instills a profound sense of continuity, purging individual doubts and binding the community in shared catharsis, where sweat-soaked unity becomes a ritual renewal of Singpho indigeneity amid encroaching modernity. (Z. Wang, 2018) (G. Brath, 2013)

Importance of Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi Dance in contemporary society

The pulsating rhythm of the Manau dance is masterfully provided by a specialized ensemble of traditional instruments, including resonant gongs (*tumph* and *htingram*), deep-toned drums ‘mana’, and melodic reed pipes (*Shawk*’ or duct flutes), which together forge a steady, hypnotic cadence. This sonic architecture guides the pace and flow of the procession, synchronizing the movements of hundreds of participants into a mesmerizing wave accelerating during triumphant migrations, slowing for reflective hardships ensuring seamless unison even in vast gatherings that can span days. (Z. Wang, 2018)

In Contemporary society, it however, reveals a poignant shift in musical practice amid generational transitions. In smaller or urban-influenced celebrations, the mastery of these instruments has waned as elder musicians pass away, leaving a void in live performance expertise. Consequently, younger participants increasingly rely on pre-recorded CD tracks or digital playback to sustain the dance, prioritizing continuity over authenticity in resource-scarce settings. Yet, this adaptation sparks resilience: community leaders and organizations like the Kachin Baptist Convention spearhead revival efforts, conducting workshops to train youth in indigenous instrumentation, ensuring the authentic throb of live music endures as a bulwark against cultural dilution. (G. Brath, 2013)

The traditional attire donned during the festival stands as a vibrant expression of Singpho identity, craftsmanship, and gendered aesthetics, transforming participants into living embodiments of heritage. Men wear the woven chequer-pattern ‘lungi’ (*Khaitung*) in bold black and green, accented with vivid red, yellow, and white yarn linings that evoke fertile valleys and ancestral trails. This is complemented by a fitted shirt ‘*Samtong*’, a utilitarian shoulder bag (*Khak*) for ritual items, and a distinctive turban ‘*Khuphok*’ adorned with feathers or beads, symbolizing leadership and vigilance.

While Women dazzle in colorful tops ‘*Choi or Pipa*’, flowing skirts or wrappers (*Singket*), and the iconic conical hat ‘*Monmaokring*’ fringed with tassels. Elaborate ornaments grace the neck (*Phugak* necklaces of cowrie and silver), waist (*Ningwat* wrappers), and legs (*Bathang* protective gaiters), while blouses shimmer with silver vesicles and barrel skirts in striking red and black—central icons of Jingpo-Singpho identity that sway rhythmically, narrating tales of fertility and fortitude.

These ensembles spring from weaving traditions upheld on traditional back-strap looms, hailed as the “lifeline of society” and a testament to women’s enduring resilience. The Singpho Textile Exhibition, a highlight of the 2026 festival, celebrated these artisans by showcasing hand woven masterpieces alive with geometric motifs spirals for rivers, diamonds for mountains inspired by nature's patterns, preserving ecological wisdom and economic autonomy in an era of synthetic fabrics.

Social cohesion has become a cornerstone of the modern Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi festival, evolving beyond its ancient ritual roots to address pressing contemporary challenges within the Singpho community. In 2026, Organizers harness the festival as a dynamic platform for social communication and unity, explicitly targeting youth vulnerability to substance addiction by channeling their energy into constructive cultural engagement. Framed as a lifeline for the younger generation, events feature workshops, dance troupes led by teens, and storytelling circles that redirect restless spirits toward pride in heritage, fostering resilience against urban temptations like alcohol and drugs. (2026.1, 7)

By urging youth to don traditional attire vibrant *Singket* skirts and *Khuphok* turbans with “pride and confidence,” elders instill a profound sense of belonging and responsibility, countering assimilation pressures. The festival grounds pulse with intergenerational exchange: seasoned *Zhaiwa* priests mentor novices in ritual chants, while grandmothers demonstrate back-strap weaving, ensuring oral genealogies, cosmological hymns, and social norms flow unbroken to the next generation. (G. Brath, 2013) (R. Tunkhang, 2018)

The 2026 celebrations marked a triumph, with unprecedented youth participation—hundreds of young Singphos swelling procession ranks, their voices amplifying ancestral songs—signaling a successful cultural revitalization. This surge not only knits the community tighter but subtly integrates Singphos into India's mainstream, healing historical marginalization in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh through shared national festivals. (2026.1, 7)

Since 1985's inaugural of modern Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi festival, ethnic tourism has emerged as a vital force, drawing domestic travelers, international visitors, and Singpho kin from China and Myanmar to spark cross-border cultural exchanges. This visitor influx creates a robust economic platform, enabling rural Singphos especially women and artisans to showcase and sell traditional recipes, handloom textiles, and handicrafts through community-based organizations. Tea and textile exhibitions stand central, transforming cultural legacy into sustainable income, with vibrant stalls displaying geometric-motif weaves and aromatic brews that blend heritage with market viability. Globalization threatens Singpho language and oral traditions, prompting Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein to call it the “strongest pillar of identity,” advocating dedicated school teachers and indigenous education programs. Initiatives now digitize ancient manuscripts, folklore, and rituals, making preservation accessible via apps and archives for digital-native youth, aligning with India's indigenous knowledge goals. (2026.7)

Audiovisual recordings of Manau festivals from China and Myanmar sustain ethnic ties, popular in border hubs like Hula Street, where they evoke “on-the-scene” presence and reinforce shared symbols across nations. Modernization's tools state circuits framing it as “intangible heritage” boost visibility but risk commodification and co-optation, yet the festival's “adaptive resilience” endures, evolving rituals while anchoring identity. (P. Sonowal and J. Konwar, 2024)

Conclusion

The Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi festival stands as a profound testament to the enduring resilience and cultural vitality of the Singpho community, weaving together threads of ancient mythology, historical migration, and adaptive modernity into a living tapestry of identity. Rooted in the Singpho oral genealogy that venerates the mythic progenitor Shapawng Yawng from Manoi Singra Bum, the festival began as a sacred tribute to this common ancestor, preserving cosmology through ritual songs and hymns that link the living to ancestral spirits. (2026.1)

Over centuries, it has evolved from intimate clan rituals encompassing nine distinct Manau types for harvests, funerals, and prosperity into a multifaceted platform addressing migration legacies from Myanmar's Hukawng Valley, religious shifts influenced by Christianity, and the pressures of globalization. This transformation mirrors the Singpho's journey across the Patkai range, where the Manau dance's “line map” choreography continues to trace their southward paths, baptizing participants in collective memory and ethnic pride. In its contemporary form, the festival excels as a sophisticated instrument for social cohesion, drawing entire villages into circle processions that dissolve hierarchies and foster unity, while explicitly targeting youth diversion from substance addiction through dance troupes, attire workshops, and storytelling circles. (R. Tunkhang, 2018)

The 2026 Miao celebrations exemplified this, with high youth turnout donning *Khaitung* lungis and *Singket* skirts “with pride and confidence,” ensuring intergenerational transmission of oral traditions, weaving techniques, and social roles amid urban influences. The 2026 event, graced by dignitaries like Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein, spotlighted “purposeful” reflection honoring anti-colonial heroes like Beesa Gaum (who gifted tea seeds to Robert Bruce in 1823, birthing Assam's tea legacy) and Luttora Gaum while tackling language erosion through digitization of manuscripts and folklore. (2026.7)

Ethnic tourism since 1985 has empowered women artisans via textile exhibitions, blending economic vitality with cross-border ties to Jingpo kin, even as digital recordings from Hula Street sustain transnational identity. Despite commodification risks, the festival's adaptive resilience its hypnotic gongs, vibrant attire, and migratory dances bridges



Hukawng roots to India's cultural mosaic, guiding the Singpho's future with ancestral vigor. (P. Sonowal and J. Konwar, 2024)

References

1. "Shapawng Yawng Manu Poi anchors Singpho collective memory," (2026) *Singpho Festival Scholarly Insights*.
2. "Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi Changlang District, Government of Arunachal Pradesh | India," Government of Arunachal Pradesh, [Online]. <https://changlang.nic.in/festivals/shapawng-yawng-manau-poi/> 2020
3. Tunkhang, R (2018) 'Some Aspects of Ethnic Art and Cultural Practices for Community Empowerment: A Study of Singphos of Assam, India,' *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*.
4. Wang, Z (2018) "Counter Flow of Cross-country Audiovisual Products and Cross-border Ethnic Identity in the China-Myanmar Border Region," in *Proc. ICCSSH*, pp.1656–1661. DOI: [10.2991/iccssh-18.2018.339](https://doi.org/10.2991/iccssh-18.2018.339)
5. Brath, G (2013) "Kachin sound instruments within the context of the kachin baptist convention of northern burma," M.A. thesis, Liberty University.
6. Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, M (2017) *Dancing to the state: Ethnic compulsions of Tangsa in Assam*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780199472598.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199472598.001.0001)
7. "Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi celebrated | Preserve culture, language and heritage: DCM," Arunachal Observer, Feb.15, 2026 [Online]<https://arunachalobserver.org/2026/02/15/shapawng-yawng-manau-poi-2026-celebrated-preserve-culture-language-and-herbage-dcm/>
8. P. Sonowal and J. Konwar (2024) "Between Cultural Continuity and Changes: With special reference to Singpho community," *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, vol. 7, no. 3, DOI:[10.47191/ijsshr/v7-i03-21](https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v7-i03-21)
9. Choudhury, S. & Dutta, (ed). (1980) *Gazetteer of India*, India, Arunachal Pradesh, Tirap District, Shillong.
10. Morey, S. (2014) Studying tones in North East India: Tai, Singpho, and Tangsa. *Language Documentation & Conservation*, 8, 637–671.
11. Barua, S. N (2013) *Tribes of Indo- Burma Border*. Published by Managing trust, Margherita Ethnological Museum. Margherita, Assam, India with Bhabani Books, Bhabani Complex, Hatishila, Panikhaiti, Guwahati-26.