

ARTICLE

Digital Initiative, Indigenous Heritage: A Catalyst for Digital Theological Discourse and Digital Activism

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Abstract

This research suggests that engaging in the revisiting and recovering of Indigenous heritage is needed to initiate the decolonization process, representing individual or community efforts to move away from the captivity of colonial ideologies. It will analyse Indigenous Christian initiatives, namely in the field of contemporary music and fashion, aimed at reclaiming cultural heritage using digital technologies and platforms among the Indigenous Tangkhul Nagas, while making it accessible and engaging for the contemporary generations. These creative initiatives exemplify a form of digital activism and are noteworthy because Indigenous heritage, including their way of life, beliefs and intellect, was previously described as demon worship and rejected by colonizers. This exploratory paper argues that creative use of digital technologies and platforms by Indigenous communities has the potential to inform digital theological discourse and contribute to discussion of digital activism, particularly among the Tangkhul Nagas. The proposed work positions digital theology within a decolonial framework, arguing that revisiting and recovering Indigenous heritage constitute liberation from colonial ideologies. Furthermore, rather than a “radical democracy” framework, my contribution to digital activism is reframed as a process that challenges not only current power structures but also their disregard for Indigenous heritage.

Keywords: Digital theology, Digital activism, Decolonization, Indigenous heritage, Tangkhul Nagas, Digital platforms

Introduction

The recovery of Indigenous heritage marks the beginning of decolonisation. This process serves to challenge the continuing influence of colonial ideologies that posit their religion, education and culture as superior to those of Indigenous communities. Such initiatives are significant, as colonizers, particularly American Baptist

missionaries and British administrators and/or ethnographers, disregarded their heritage and imposed, if not coerced, colonial ideologies onto Indigenous Tangkhul Nagas (see Vashum 2007); American Baptist missionaries with British administrators and/ ethnographers under the term “colonial”, as mission work was carried out in collaboration with the British Empire. Given this historical precedence, I look at Indigenous Christian initiatives in contemporary music and fashion, focused on recovering cultural heritage using digital technologies and platforms among the Tangkhuls, while ensuring it is accessible and engaging for contemporary generations. I argue that these creative initiatives have the potential to inform digital theological discourse and contribute to the discussion of digital activism, particularly among and beyond the Tangkhuls.

The term “decolonize” or “decolonization” is used as a methodology to develop a framework to conceptualize existing practices of recovering Indigenous heritage and provide support in initiating community action. This means amplifying the voices of Indigenous communities who are involved in the recovery of Indigenous heritage using digital technologies and platforms, particularly in contemporary music and fashion. It will be limited to the works of a folk-rock musician, Rewben Mashangva, and fashion designers Asa Kazingmei and Easterlight Zimik. I examine digital content, such as YouTube videos, interviews, social media posts, and web-based publications and scholarship on digital theology and digital activism.

Recovering Indigenous Heritage as Decolonization

Tangkhuls began the process of recovering their cultural heritage a few decades after the colonials departed Ukhrul, Manipur, in the 1950s. These early initiatives are a form of decolonisation, where Tangkhuls began to resist the influence of colonial ideologies by reclaiming Indigenous heritage.

Early Recovery Efforts

The British Empire collaborated with Western missionaries to spread Christianity among the Tangkhuls, who reside along the Indo-Myanmar border. William Pettigrew, the first Western missionary to Indigenous communities, greatly contributed to spreading Christianity in Manipur (Pettigrew 1986). Pettigrew spent approximately forty years on the dissemination of the Christian faith through his literary works, preaching, healthcare, and teachings. He also propagated Christianity in ways that undermined Indigenous knowledge, including the prohibition of festivals linked to *Āmeoyan*, the Indigenous religion (Pettigrew 1909).

Colonials engaged in civilizing mission enforcing colonial ideologies (sociocultural values). This means influencing the early Indigenous converts to imitate colonial practices. In their thinking and practices, they carried with them colonial ideologies.

Frederick S. Downs suggests that the “traditional system” of Indigenous communities “could not survive under the centralised British administration and jurisprudence” (Downs 2001: 63). However, two to three decades after Pettigrew left Ukhrul (1960–70s), efforts to recover Indigenous heritage began. While some works clung to Pettigrew’s format, others, such as Luikham (1961), Shimray (1967) and Shaiza (1970), clearly represented Tangkhul heritage. These early texts, composed in the Tangkhul language, initiated the recovery of Indigenous heritage, albeit limited to a select group of individuals. These initiatives emerged from a desire to embrace Christianity while retaining their Indigenous ways of life. There was increasing concern around why the Nagas could not adopt their own cultural practices while still being good Christians, especially since Western Christians take part in singing, dancing and drinking (Horam 1977: 14). Indigenous communities in Northeast India (NEI), including the Tangkhuls, worked to reclaim their heritage. Nalini Natarajan observes that within the Khasi community, both Christians and non-Christians uphold strong commitment to their longstanding values, customs, and traditions (Natarajan 1977: 193).

These recovery initiatives hold great significance because colonizers historically rejected or dismissed Indigenous knowledge. The initiatives resist the continued influence of colonial ideologies. Yet, their denominational ties remain strong as Tangkhul churches embrace an Anglican-Baptist perspective on theology and church structure. Tangkhuls continue to use Western approaches to worship, using hymns, gospel music and choir participation (Pettigrew 1897, 1899). Their approach to reading the Bible also takes a colonial approach, where individual salvation is emphasised. Tangkhuls also adopt their culture, such as clothing, music and education (Nukshirenla and Dhanaraju 2019: 52; Philip 1976: 93).

Tangkhuls may have merely copied Anglican-Baptist Christianity without being rooted in their cultural tradition (Keitzar 1982: 310). Dominant groups have assimilated marginalized communities. But Tangkhuls did not entirely abandon their Indigenous heritage. They preserved certain aspects of their cultural identity while adopting the Christian faith.

Recovery Efforts with Colonial Frameworks

Establishing a school marked the beginning of the civilizing mission. This was followed by the planting of churches among the Tangkhuls (Vashum 2007: 3). Such mission tasks were accompanied by the publication of catechisms, Bible translations, hymns, etc. (see, for example, Pettigrew 1907). This civilizing mission carried colonial ideologies which were embedded with colonial religious and sociocultural values.

Tangkhuls shared knowledge from one generation to the next within their community, in the context of village social structure, inter-village interactions, and occasional exchanges with other communities. Informally, they share knowledge through kinship and family relationships. Formally, it is shared through *Longshim*,

an Indigenous education system, also called *mayarlong* for boys and *ngalalong* for girls (Horam 1977: 67–74). They prioritize communal learning by imparting knowledge that they can use in their everyday lives. But colonials viewed *Longshim* as a “heathen” practice resulting in its eventual discontinuation (Furer-Haimendorf 1939: 58). In fact, early converts to Christianity faced a ban on any Indigenous practice related to *Āmeoyan*.

Hence, early attempts to reclaim Indigenous heritage failed to resonate with the larger society. Their recovery efforts adopted text-based methods, introduced by colonizers and conflicting with oral traditions. While there were printed books, “print culture” remained supplementary when compared to oral traditions (Shimreiwung 2013: 71). For example, early educated Tangkhuls founded the Tangkhul Literature Society in 1938 (Shimray and Maransa, 1993: 2–3). They published many texts, secured state-level recognition for the Tangkhul language, and offered it as a subject in high schools and higher secondary schools in 1985 (Shimray and Maransa 1993: 25). These initiatives mostly remained limited to “school textbooks and Tangkhul language”; they did not evolve into major “literary works and publications” (Shimreiwung 2013: 76). They struggled to convince the wider community to participate in revitalizing Indigenous heritage/history.

Indigenous theology perceives the divine, human and natural worlds as interconnected (Vashum 2003: 68); however, colonial influences introduced a dualistic theology that separates the sacred from the secular. Hence, Tangkhuls tend to categorize anything beyond the sacred (church and related activities) as secular. The church and its associations limit the reach of anything they label as secular, controlling what the community receives from the sacred. This means that early recovery efforts outside the church structures did not produce the expected results. Considering this reality, we must seek answers to several questions: What are other ways to recover Indigenous heritage? Could recovery initiatives align more closely with Tangkhul Naga oral tradition? Can Indigenous Christians lead these initiatives, even if they originate outside church structures and contribute to digital theological discourse and activism within Tangkhul churches?

Ambivalence of Christianity

Tangkhuls experience Christianity in two distinct ways. First, it arrived as a colonial power that dismissed Indigenous religion and knowledge. Pettigrew (1909) saw Indigenous ways of life as something to be replaced rather than retained. Second, the mission school system influenced students to look at their own culture as “backward”. Tangkhul Christianity slowly became more like the people who brought it. They engaged with the same Bible that was translated to undermine Indigenous culture, while still spreading its message. Yet, colonially influenced churches that had earlier ignored their own heritage were also willing to display digital art with

Indigenous heritage at the Tangkhul Baptist Gospel Quasquicentennial (Shaiza 2024). Due to this complexity, one cannot reduce Christianity to merely a colonial tool or an Indigenous possession. It retains both.

The artists who will be discussed in this paper walk a tightrope. They are Christians who critique the ways that Christianity has been used against their community, yet they also uphold Christian identity and church institution. Their work shows that decolonisation does not mean giving up Christianity. Rather, it means reclaiming the capacity to be both Christian and Tangkhul on their own terms.

Indigenous Creative Initiatives in the Contemporary Context

Tangkhuls are engaging in the recovery of Indigenous heritage using digital technologies and platforms in contemporary Indigenous music and fashion. This section examines those creative initiatives which can inform digital theological discourse and contribute to discussions of digital activism, particularly in and from the Tangkhuls.

Indigenous Music

Tangkhuls learned to read and write with an adapted Roman alphabet in the mission school (Pettigrew 1897). They grew proficient in it as they translated the Bible and hymns into the Tangkhul language and made them accessible. The Bible was translated from the King James Version into Tangkhul language, along with a collection of English hymns (Pettigrew 1927). In this task, Pettigrew's student assisted him (Ragui 2022). These students also carried forward the teachings imparted to them after the colonials left. They sought to emulate colonial figures, advancing their ideologies and presenting them to the community as a way forward (Kharingpam 2020: 8). This mindset further reinforced the notion that colonial ideologies are "civilised," while an Indigenous way of life is "uncivilized". In practice, this means they continued to translate and compose new songs using colonial formats. Western songs and musical instruments like the guitar, piano, drums and violin replaced traditional instruments and tunes. However, Tangkhul traditions like *tingteila* (one-stringed lyre), *kashankachon* (attire/wraparound shawl), *phung* (log drum), and *hao laa* (folksong) were neglected.

There are, however, exceptions. Recently, Rewben Mashangva has featured the identity of Indigenous communities through his unique blend of folk and blues. His music blends influences from Western artists like Bob Marley and Bob Dylan with *hao laa*, the folksong (Longkumer 2023). Mashangva grew from not being able to afford a guitar to becoming a national icon. He received the fourth-highest civilian award, the Padma Shri, from the Indian government in November 2021 and the title "guru" (teacher) from the North East Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC) in 2004 for his folk

music work (UT Desk 2021). His folk music also helped him gain global recognition, with the *New York Times* reporting on his contribution to Bob Dylan's songs (Sengupta 2008).

Mashangva's recovery efforts are a form of decolonisation. It stands out in preserving *hao laa* and reinventing musical instruments like *tingteila* and *phung*, fusing them with other forms of music (Longkumer 2023: 66–7; Sadokpam 2018: 290–91). His music is complemented by his presentation of traditional attire and appearance during performances (Mashangva 2021). Arkotong Longkumer described his performance as follows:

When [Mashangva] performs, he wears the Raivat Kachon, which is a traditional Tangkhul body cloth. Alongside this, he wears various necklaces, sometimes a bird feather, but always with a traditional Naga haircut (kept long at the back and shaved along the sides), and a pair of leather boots. With an acoustic guitar, and harmonica – this is the brand, the persona that identifies [Mashangva]. (Longkumer 2022)

His performance represents Indigenous identity and shows how other Indigenous communities have had shared experiences. For Longkumer, “He is more than a musician; he is a reviver of tradition, an activist, a reformer and the leader of a movement that is reverberating” (2023: 62). Through digital platforms, people can access his work, i.e., hear him sing, play, or speak. Over the course of time, Mashangva has uploaded over two hundred videos to YouTube. These videos include music videos, interviews, live performances and messages for Indigenous communities and beyond.

Mashangva works to reclaim and preserve Indigenous heritage while resisting the dominant voice. As a pacifist activist, he writes songs about peace in response to the militarization of NEI. Examples of such works include songs like “No more killings” and “Winning peace together”. He calls for maintaining peace among different communities in NEI; he also expresses concern about the dominant influence of colonial ideologies. Mashangva claims that colonial schooling has little to do with Indigenous village life. Instead, he finds a stronger connection with herding sheep than with the blue-eyed, golden-haired figure of Jesus they introduced (Longkumer 2023: 67–8).

Tangkhuls adopted colonial cultures, including their music and clothing. Kharinpam asserted that after the early students converted to Christianity, the semi-educated converts embraced their new identity, viewing themselves like the colonial teachers/missionaries and rejecting their own culture (2020: 8). This is a concern. Indigenous communities began to abandon their heritage, burning traditional clothing and ornaments, triggered by the assumption that they are associated with Indigenous religions. The problem lies in connecting the colonial ideologies with

“light”, while branding other cultures as “dark” or in darkness. The term “guru” applied to Mashangva, though unfamiliar to the Tangkhuls, gains new meaning as a “cultural reviver”. It embodies his self-identification as a *guru* who brings light, “Even if it’s a small light” (Longkumer 2023: 15–16, 66).

Indigenous Fashion

This new perception of “light” highlights individuals who engage in revitalizing Indigenous heritage using digital tools and platforms. Kazingmei debuted his clothing design, “Immortal”, at the Lakmé Fashion Week in 2012, marking his emergence as a next-generation designer (Lakmé Fashion Week 2012). He launched his fashion collection, “Changvei”, at Lakmé Fashion Week Winter/Festive 2014, helping him achieve national recognition (Haokui 2014). Kazingmei’s designs highlight Tangkhul culture and connect to younger generations.

Augustine Horchuangam, a model, was inspired to form Featherheads Haokui after this show (Shatsang 2022). This band currently produces creative music that celebrates Indigenous heritage. Spectators found themselves intrigued by the culture on display, as Augustine sported a *hao kuiret* (a traditional hairstyle) and adorned his head with feathers. This experience made him realize he knew little about his culture and motivated him to explore and promote it (Featherheads Haokui n.d.). In 2016, four years after the Lakmé event, he formed a band to preserve and promote Tangkhul culture. In their journey, Mashangva guided them in integrating Western music with *hao laa* (Longkumer 2023: 85).

These recovery initiatives, whether from Mashangva or Kazingmei, stand out in several ways. First, the civilizing mission instilled a perception of Indigenous heritage as inferior. The recovery of heritages not only resists colonial captivity but helps in recovering Indigenous identity. Second, the earlier recovery efforts were limited to Ukhul and Kamjong districts, with hardly any digital presence. Kazingmei’s exhibition at Lakmé Fashion Week, which was televised on national television, showcased Indigenous creations. His fashion designs were competent when compared to those of dominant groups. Third, recovery of Indigenous heritage through creative efforts is commendable. But it raised concerns about foreigners/outside appropriating Tangkhul motifs from *kashan-kachon* for commercial interests (Varah, Pamreishang and Khamrang 2021). Rathiulung Elias KC also expresses concern about “who owns, interprets, and benefits from digital knowledge” pertaining to Indigenous communities. This concern comes from the argument that India’s intellectual property rights fail to adequately protect the heritage of Indigenous communities and calls for review (Varah, Pamreishang and Khamrang 2021: 383). This paper avoids legal questions; however, the issue holds relevance as Tangkhul plant and animal designs embody cultural knowledge and meaning (Shimray 2024: 189).

Easterlight Zimik, an Indigenous fashion designer, addresses these issues. Zimik works as a fashion designer, illustrator and print designer (Jamir 2017). He returned to Ukhrul and now collaborates directly with local weavers. His recent collection, “Dear Spring”, explores textile traditions from NEI and creatively applies them (Thingshung 2024). He then moves to the Tangkhul community and their identity through fashion, music, landscape and creativity (Pheirei 2024). He found that mostly older people wear *kashan* (wraparound) during church services or formal occasions. Zimik aims to change this by redesigning it to attract a younger demographic and promote everyday wear. This is done by engaging them on Instagram and featuring *kashan* in key events (e.g., the “Indigenous Fashion Futures” archive at the India Art Fair (Zimik n.d.; India Art Fair 2025)).

Zimik is also attempting to create a system to help local weavers showcase their work and improve and empower them (Pheirei 2024). Local artisans try to meet the demands of their community but struggle to share their work beyond Tangkhuls. The “Dear Spring” collection followed an earlier collection titled *Shim* (home), with aims to inspire more *kashan* wearers. Zimik launched the collection in Ukhrul, his hometown, rather than Mumbai or Delhi. This choice marked his “real journey as a designer and to open my vision to the world”, while working together with local weavers (Ekhon 2023).

Additionally, Zimik’s conversational digital art integrates Tangkhul culture, social life and landscapes, inviting viewers to ask uncomfortable questions. For instance, in the work titled “What They Want to See”, he examines societal constraints that keep women captive (Zimik n.d.). He wonders if he created this art for personal fantasy, to communicate, or to support feminists whose causes he does not understand. Zimik is a Christian, although he did not create his artwork for the church. Church groups recognized his work; he presented two pieces, “An Ode to Raivat Kachon” and “Khom”, at the Tangkhul Baptist Gospel Quasquicentennial (Shaiza 2024). His art examined the impact of colonial Christianity and the decline of tradition and symbols in Indigenous culture. The first piece showcased intricate motifs on a shawl that embody Tangkhul identity, while the second piece wove textile designs to suggest unity. In both artworks, *haoshim*, the traditional Tangkhul house, served as a shared heritage (Shaiza 2024). The digital artworks showcased the Tangkhul culture by combining traditional and modern features that celebrate the diversity and richness of the Indigenous community.

Towards a Digital Theological Discourse and Digital Activism

We begin with key terms as we consider how these creative initiatives affect digital theological discourse and digital activism. Eric Steinhart used “digital theology” as

a term to examine theological concerns associated with the use of artificial intelligence and virtual reality, with a particular emphasis on the notion of personhood (Steinhart 2012). Some argue that technology may assist in our understanding of God and religious concepts (Kolog, Sutinen and Nygren 2016), while others argue that theology and computational methods can complement one another (Sutinen and Cooper 2021). Considering these different views, Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Jonas Kurlberg define digital theology in four waves: using digital tools for theological teaching, facilitating research via digital culture, participating in theological discourse within digital spaces, and providing a prophetic critique of digitality (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg 2019). The aforementioned definition of digital theology informs us of its development, but overlooks whose theology is considered significant and how digital spaces mirror colonial legacies. Communities whose traditions faced suppression by colonizers confront a question that goes beyond the digital practice of theology; they seek to recover what was nearly lost. This paper positions digital theology within a decolonial framework, where I argue that revisiting and recovering Indigenous heritage in digital spaces is an act that liberates us from colonial captivity. Similarly, the term “digital activism” is used to refer to actions that recover Indigenous heritage and resist power structures using digital tools and platforms. This aligns with Carlson and Frazer’s research on Indigenous Australian activism where Indigenous communities engage in digital activism emphasizing cultural survival and self-representation (2016). When the term “digital technologies” is used, it includes hardware like phones, computers, and cameras and digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, websites and streaming services that facilitate the creation, distribution and discussion of content.

Digital Theological Discourse

This paper engages with the discussion of digital theological discourse and presents the four waves of digital theology outlined by Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg. They document online religious practices and terminology, differentiating between using the internet to enhance offline faith and religious practices occurring in digital environments, examining the impact of digital culture on theology, and examining the interaction between online and offline faith within broader social and theological contexts (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg 2019: 34–5). Recognizing that nearly all contributions originate from Euro-American contexts, Stephen Garner highlights the need for voices from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Oceania and other minority contexts (Garner 2020). This paper expands on the proposed Wave 5 of “a theological reassessment of digitality and a digital reassessment of theology” by situating it within a decolonial framework and in the context of Tangkhuls (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg 2019: 37).

Decolonial Critique

Current digital theology frameworks help enter the conversation. But there is a need to recognise that they carry assumptions and perspectives that may not align with Indigenous contexts. Digital frameworks offer strategies and approaches that they adopt. These discussions emerge from a specific backdrop of technological saturation and advancement. However, they may overlook how a digital theology can emerge where colonial history influences both access to technology and religious identity.

The digital space is not neutral for Tangkhuls. It emerges in a context where earlier innovations or technologies – like printing presses, schools, hymnbooks and others – replaced Indigenous ways of life. As indicated earlier, Pettigrew used print in his translation of the Bible and hymns to replace oral tradition. When contemporary Tangkhul artists use YouTube, Instagram, or other digital platforms, they adopt and adapt with these new tools. They take back technology for purposes that colonizers may not have envisioned, particularly recovery of Indigenous heritage. This suggests that Wave 5 should explore how digital culture influences theology and examine whose theological perspectives shape digital culture, along with the historical power dynamics that digital spaces represent.

A Decolonial Wave

Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg explore digital theology through the lens of digital humanities, examining the interaction between theology and digital culture (2019). This paper, however, uses decolonization as a methodology to recover Indigenous heritage raises questions about the underlying Eurocentrism in digital theology. My discourse highlights the significance of reclaiming Indigenous heritage dismissed by colonizers, by sharing their stories and recreating their creations. The focus is on contemporary *hao laa* (music) and *kashan* (fashion), using digital tools and platforms. This decolonization process prioritizes Indigenous voices, where their history, experiences and stories are portrayed in digital spaces. This decolonial process through digital tools and platforms serves as a form of liberation from colonial ideological captivity. This means seeking liberation from the theological perspective of colonials, where the gospel lacks deep roots in the “cultural life” of Indigenous communities and these communities uncritically imitate the colonials (Keitzar 1982: 310).

This is a form of digital theology that positions the current discourse as a theological response to the colonial erasure of Indigenous knowledge/heritage. *My proposed digital theology touches aspects of Wave 3 and 4, and proposes an alternative Wave 5.* As my work analyses how contemporary Tangkhul musicians and fashion designers make use of digital platforms, it carries aspects of Wave 3. They navigate digital spaces, rewriting cultural narratives and encouraging Tangkhuls to engage in

conversation. As my work examines the colonial and missionary histories imposed on Tangkhuls, it engages in a prophetic reassessment of digitality in theology (Wave 4). In doing so, it calls for an alternative of Wave 5, which advocates for a theological discourse that incorporates neglected voices, particularly those of Indigenous communities. This comes with recognition that Tangkhul churches have moved beyond using digital technology and platforms to improve communal worship by streaming sermons. The above recovery initiatives – music and fashion – invite them to use digital technologies for creation and interpretation. Such creative projects require reassessing their voice and its possible reinterpretation using digital technologies and platforms.

The Tangkhul case clearly shows four features of this decolonial Wave 5. First, the development of digital theology must resist the colonial histories embedded in digital platforms. YouTube serves as a platform owned by global corporations and shaped by Western algorithms, despite its use for Indigenous purposes. In order to decolonize knowledge, Jonas Kurlberg suggests that this must be challenged. Second, given this reality, theological reflection in digital spaces must take into account both the loss of knowledge and the new advancements that emerged under colonialism. The contemporary music and fashion initiatives both create and recover. Third, digital theology from the perspective of Indigenous communities resists the sacred/secular dichotomy established by colonial missionaries. Zimik's art, when presented in church gatherings, challenges the distinctions between worship and the cultural expressions that colonial powers sought to uphold. Fourth, this wave calls for methodological humility: digital theology emerging from Indigenous contexts may differ from traditional academic theology. It could appear through music videos, fashion shows, or Instagram creative efforts/posts, instead of journal articles or conference papers.

Digital Activism

As indicated, digital activism is perceived as a process that challenges existing power structures and colonial power that disregards Indigenous heritage. Neumayer and Svensson categorise digital activism through two key dimensions: the activist's readiness to engage in civil disobedience and their perspective on the "other" (agonistic versus antagonistic) (Neumayer and Svensson 2014: 1). These dimensions identify four activist types: the "salon activist" engages in online discussions, petitions, and symbolic actions while remaining law-abiding yet antagonistic; the "contentious activist" breaks laws through hacking, property damage, or radical protest; the "law-abiding activist" seeks dialogue and change within legal boundaries, favouring institutional engagement; and the "Gandhian activist" employs non-violent civil disobedience to oppose adversaries while upholding pluralism (Neumayer and Svensson 2014: 9–12).

This research presents a different viewpoint by focusing on Indigenous decolonial activism, which does not necessarily conform to the digital activist typology. It suggests a different way to protest than the ones Neumayer and Svensson suggest, such as hacktivism, clicktivism, or networks that lack a defined goal (Neumayer and Svensson 2014: 5). This approach of creative digital engagement uses contemporary Indigenous music and fashion to convey real-life experiences, pointing to a new type of digital activism. This framework, an aspect of the Wave 5, expands by including cultural revitalization and resisting the dominance of colonial ideologies.

It highlights the distinctions and similarities with other digital activism initiatives that Indigenous communities undertake. Mashangva spoke of a parallel with the longstanding tradition of “Aboriginal resistance and political expression” in Australia (Carlson and Frazer, 2016) with the militarisation of Indigenous inhabited areas. This parallel approach emphasizes the recovery of Indigenous heritage as a form of digital activism, refining the discourse on the captivity of colonial ideology. In the initiatives of Kazingmei and Zimik, Indigenous communities are using social media and digital platforms to revitalize their culture and encourage community development socially and economically (Corbett, Singleton and Muir 2009: 71–8). Despite the digital divide in Indigenous communities in Ukhrul, Australia, and elsewhere, many increasingly use digital platforms. Guy Singleton and others see it as “maintain their cultures, communicate, archive knowledge, empower their communities, develop skills and generate income” (Singleton et al., 2019).

This paper demonstrates Indigenous activism as a powerful act of self-reclamation, distinguishing it from Neumayer and Svensson’s framework. My framework presents activism as a means of negotiating identity and driving digital initiatives within Indigenous communities, leveraging social media for mobilization. Recovering Indigenous heritage acts as a form of resistance and affirms cultural identity in a constructive way. This use of digital tools and platforms brings insights in finding new approaches to recover Indigenous heritage. This is a shift from rejection to recovery, offering an understanding of activism that operates outside a dominant paradigm. It is made possible by amplifying the voices of the marginalized, resisting captivity by colonial ideologies. This represents a new approach to digital activism.

Limitations of Digital Platforms

Digital platforms open new possibilities, but we also need to be aware of their limits. First, the digital gap is still a problem in the Ukhrul and Kamjong districts. Many villages face unreliable connectivity to the Internet (see Arora and Sapre 2025). Smartphones, computers and data plans create a financial burden that many families struggle to manage. While Tangkhul artists connect with the larger community through digital content, many community members are excluded, notably those

from lower-income families and older generations. There is a disparity between those with or without internet access.

Second, owning digital platforms differs from using the services of these platforms. For instance, Google owns YouTube, and Meta owns Instagram; these firms are responsible for managing the visibility of content, developing algorithms for making recommendations, and distributing profits. Algorithms often display a bias against Indigenous content. Those who own these platforms can remove videos or suspend their users without any explanation. Communities may discover that user-collected data gets used in ways beyond their control (Spano and Zhang 2025). Artists share traditional knowledge and pass it to corporations that may not prioritise the community's welfare. This could reinforce colonial patterns of extraction, where Indigenous communities' resources – now cultural and digital – get appropriated for the benefit of others.

Third, surveillance poses a significant concern. The military is heavily present in NEI to deal with sociopolitical issues, and it also grants the government the power to keep surveillance on internet activities. The ruling government can monitor artists and flag them, especially when they critique its policies (SFLC.in 2025). While digital platforms appear to encourage free expression, they can also be used to monitor and regulate Indigenous voices. A digital presence does not equate with transmitting culture.

Fourth, digital platforms may serve as a supplement, but they cannot replace the embodied and relational means through which Indigenous knowledge has traditionally been shared (Dutta 2011). For instance, watching a video of *hao laa* does not equate to learning through communal involvement, elder mentorship, and participation in village life. An overreliance on digital tools may undermine cultural practices by replacing intergenerational learning with their own, rather than supplementing it.

Yet, these four limits do not render the efforts to recover digital data ineffectively. It is recommended that we exercise precautions. To put it differently, members of the Tangkhul community should discuss digital activism and theology while bearing in mind the limitations and challenges of the digital platforms.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that recovering Indigenous heritage through digital spaces constitutes a form of decolonization among Tangkhuls. It examined early recovery efforts that stayed within colonial frameworks and found that they failed to reach the larger community. It then explored contemporary initiatives in music and fashion by Mashangva, Kazingmei and Zimik. It argued that their creative work on YouTube, Instagram and other digital platforms is making Indigenous heritage accessible for the contemporary generations. This reality, particularly their creative initiatives,

provides resources to rethink digital theology and digital activism from a decolonial perspective.

Three findings stand out from this research. The first relates to the value of digital platforms for decolonization, whereby Indigenous communities are recovering their cultural heritage. The second suggests that digital theology engages with voices from diverse contexts, including drawing on Indigenous music and fashion designs as sources for theological reflection, extending beyond churches and seminaries. The third concerns digital activism from the perspective of Indigenous communities that focuses on recovery of Indigenous heritage rather than protest.

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