An increasing necessity is being felt to generate appreciative categories to apprise and understand literary forms rooted in oral tradition as distinct from that of a literature rooted wholly in the written form. The need is to differentiate between verbal texts and the written text. John Miles Foley, pointing out that little prior work have been done on oral traditional aesthetics, warns that external critical and appreciative modes often distort intrinsic tribal truths and functions of their oral art forms:

... it would be only too easy to fall into the clutches of one or another current literary theory and to communicate whatever can be discovered about oral traditional art solely through the exclusivist metaphor of that particular theoretical approach. That would be a serious error, not because the approach itself might not be interesting and worthy, but rather because whatever insights are gained must necessarily be as free as possible of specialist assumption in order to be most useful to the widest range of scholars. If we communicate exclusively through one or another critical methodology, then the possibility remains that the ground gained is no more than a product – perhaps an illusionary product – of that methodology. The suspicion remains that the insight may vanish when exposed to the harsh light of another approach (Foley1991: xii-xiii).
It is not possible to produce an oral poetics from within the precincts of a wholly written culture, which basically considers text as a 'fait autonome' that can be explicated by the 'literature-in-vacuo' approach. The cornerstone of contemporary literary criticism draws on post-modernist postulations that seeks to analyse and describe texts as entities whose meanings are under continuous flux and constant modification. Brian Swann, a critic of Native American Literature, articulates his distrust for such contemporary critical standpoints:

We are now being told that the idea of ‘text’ has been redefined. To believe that words have meanings and that texts refer to something beyond themselves is now charmingly naïve . . . meaning is lost, dead or hidden. Meanings become a form of mystification. Texts must be read under erasure so that at once texts mean and do not mean . . . we are led into a mad mirror world where symbols and the concept of a real world becomes, to all extents and purposes pointless . . . the outward turn into narrative is rejected for a withdrawal into a world of words (Swann1983: xvi-xvii).

The worlds of words are two different entities for the oral and the written discourses. While in traditional oral discourse the word is a powerful tool to promote and negotiate a sense of community and collective harmony, to integrate the individual to the larger reality around him, in the written discourse, the word is a tool for subjective expression that can be traced back to post-renaissance critical constructs celebrating the individuals ability to triumph over restrictive social structures. Ong distinguishes the oral from the written word and discusses the differences among aural/oral, manuscript and typographic media and their social and cultural implications. Regarding the phenomenology of writer and
reader he says that they converge in silence with words quite different from those employed by their oral counterparts (Foley 1988: 94-95). The convergence of word and recipients in the oral world is more immediate and interactive.

**Oral and Oral-derived Literature**

Folk literary forms are rooted in oral antecedents and the origins are often traced to the verbal expressions of pre-alphabetical cultures. Literatures that are traditionally unwritten and originally belong to non-alphabetical cultures are oral literatures. Thus ideally, oral literature should be orally composed, transmitted and performed without any significant contact with writing.

It is clearly possible, and preferable, to insist upon the recognition of ‘oral’ when referring to any ‘literature’ conceived, transmitted and performed in an ‘oral context’ by members of a ‘folk group’, who share and transmit this oral traditional material (Lawless 1985: 81).

Oral texts often come across as simple and at times cryptic. However one should bear in mind that “these are all performance texts rather than designed to be taken in and assessed through the reader’s eye alone” (Finnegan 1995: 19). They often carry intense emotional associations into the performances. Foley proposes three principles, namely ‘tradition-dependence’, ‘genre-dependence’ and ‘text-dependence’, which can help in the understanding of oral poetry.

Tradition-dependence is incorporating aspects “that is peculiar to the given tradition and therefore a significant part of its definition” (Foley 1988: 109). Those aspects can be “natural language characteristics, metrical and other prosodical requirements, narrative features, mythical and historical content . . .” (ibid: 109).
Genre-dependence is understanding oral poetry against the context of its genre, and understanding "how these oral genres work" and what are their "distinct dynamics" (ibid: 110). Text-dependence "is simply the necessity to take into account the precise nature of each text" (ibid: 110), i.e. whether they are oral or oral-derived, recorded from performance or dictated and so on. One has to understand the nature of the representative texts. Any appreciative categories aimed at oral literature should keep these issues in mind.

As civilisation traverses the course from pre-alphabetical to semi-alphabetical societies and on to completely alphabetical societies, the ideal of an absolute orality is getting increasingly hard to be realised. Thus the exact scope of the term 'oral' is disputed. Verbal texts can be said to be accessible in manuscript form but belongs to an 'oral' creative moment in a given society, when the texts are learned, transmitted and performed orally. For Ruth Finnegan, oral literature usually includes literature "originally composed and performed orally that has reached us through written transmission, like some of the early epics" (Finnegan1992: 11)

What also needs to be considered is the fact that in cultures where large volume of information might be lost irrecoverably, extant recordings of specimens are of utmost importance. Foley's advocating of using the term and concept 'oral-derived' (Foley1991: xv) for verbal texts can be applied to these kind of oral literatures. For clearly, the printed representation is very different to performative verbal texts that are basically acts bound up with extra-verbal referents.
Experiencing the written text, even with a sense of its shaping culture, is clearly different from listening to a verbal text in a performative milieu. For, as Krupat puts it, it is hard to “believe that our textual culture, although presently restructuring itself to replace print with print out, can develop an oral poetic. But this is not to say that the idea of an oral poetic cannot be effective in checking our tendency to project alphabetic categories on non alphabetic practice of the Native Americans” though “our script mark on the page is a pale trace of what their voices performed” (Krupat 1985: 117).

This concept oral-derived is of “more than a taxonomic convenience, since it allows us to examine the traditional feature of the work alongside its post-traditional characteristics” (Foley 1991: 15). If the traditional features are preserved in recorded specimens of early pioneers, the post-traditional features are manifest in the contemporary poetic and cultural practices of a community or a tribe in the context of a changing socio-cultural milieu. The Assamese Bihu songs provide a good illustration of this point. From being a part of traditional pastoral festival of dance and song of gay abandon involving a cross section of tribes and communities in the open agricultural fields, it has evolved into a medium assertive of Assamese linguistic and cultural identity of a highly constrained stage bound urban and semi-urban middle-class festival, whose influences have flowed back to the pastoral heartland of the state, thus distinctly modifying the Bihu songs. The post-traditional intrusions become evident if the earlier documented versions are compared with current ‘cassette’d' specimens.
Evolution of the Study of Oral Verse Forms

Initial critical approaches to oral verse forms considered it as a primitive forerunner – "the wild yells of the uncivilized" – of high literary cultures of the present time, best implicit in the notion of savagism. Frances Densmore, a pioneering collector, approached her subject in such a "traditional manner". "She believed he was a 'savage' on the way to 'development ... has no ideas of true pitch'" (Swann1985: 05). In 1962, C.M. Bowra published his *Primitive Songs* in England, the prejudice being clearly reflected in the title, where he attempted to examine what is known of primitive songs and their "attempts to put words into a rhythmical order" (Bowra 1962: xiii) to draw some 'illuminating' conclusions about the earliest types of literature. However, as Tedlock has pointed out "some of the features of oral narrative which have been branded 'primitive', on the basis of comparison with written prose fiction, can be now understood as 'poetic' instead" (Tedlock1983: 71). Tedlock and his contemporaries have established that oral literature contains qualities of highly developed and sophisticated literatures.

On the opposite side of the spectrum was the early romantic notion of folk literature as an uncontaminated form of national literature. Folk literature was recognised as the original heritage of a nation since the time of Herder. Elwin observes that in forming a nation, national literature plays an important role. He refers to Devendra Satyarthi's belief that the time has come "for nationalist India to arouse the imagination of our people to look upon their folk-songs as synonymous with nationalistic literature . . ." (Elwin1944: xx).
Theoretical works of much greater dimension in the field of oral verse forms was initiated by the publication of A.B. Lords *The Singer of Tales* in 1960, based on his and Milman Parry's\(^1\) study of the Homeric verse forms in the epics Iliad and Odyssey. According to Lord’s theory of oral composition, verbal art is not memorised but composed in the course of performance with the help of formulae. Thus, oral performance is not about ready texts or their recollection, but about rules of performance and reproduction of texts. Discussing the relationship between writing and orality, he stated that a text can be either oral or written, and ruled out the possibility of a transitional text. Phases of transition exist, but texts do not since the technique involved in writing and orality is antithetical and “mutually exclusive” (Lord 1960: 129).

One of the most important critics of Lord’s concept of the transitional text was Ruth Finnegan. In works like *Oral Poetry. Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (1977) and *The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry* (1978) she draws from her own fieldwork on oral verse forms and shows that written and oral literature co-exist in many culture, often in an interactive framework. She gives the examples of oral renderers who rely on brief written notes for their performance (Finnegan 1976: 137-141). “The idea of pure and uncontaminated ‘oral culture’ as the primary reference point for the discussion of oral poetry is a myth” (ibid 1977: 24). More importantly, through her diverse works on oral poetry, she showed that oral poetry has multiple genres, and Lords and Parry’s postulations being

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\(^1\) Lord was Parry’s student and in *The Singer of Tales*, Lord presented a summary of Parry’s theses and his own research that went on to establish the basic tenets of the oral-formulaic theory.
primarily involved with epics, need not always hold true for other type of oral verse forms in their totality. As Foley also maintains, the need is to know "how these other genres work, to what degree they conform to the laws of epic oral narrative and to what degree they have their own distinct dynamics" (Foley 1988: 110).

Foley's own work is with epics and he contextualises his study of Greek, Slavic and ancient English epic poetry in each of the traditions' inherent features. According to him the overt oral and oral-derived expressive structures are only 'metonymic', a part which to be understood has to be associated with the larger traditional and cultural structure that remains 'immanent' and engender the given oral-derived expressions. The "... inherent metonymic meaning of a traditional structure, while dependent on the surface denotation for a viable conduit, remains immanent, looming over the textual score and enriching it associatively" (ibid: 252). This larger traditional and cultural structure is the extratextual domain unique to oral traditional art. It is this domain that provides with what Foley calls the 'inherent' meaning and metonymically implied extratextual dimension. He says that because "... the idiom is metonymic, summoning conventional connotations to conventional structures, we may say that the meaning it conveys is principally inherent" (ibid: 08). It is in the renderers' ability to orchestrate the traditional idiom coherently and effectively that determines the quality of the verbal creation.
Archer and Elwin’s work in India reflects another trend in the study of oral verse forms. They also grasped the importance of the cultural context of oral verse forms, but though insightful, their extensive research lacked the depth and comprehensive nature of the works discussed above. Archer’s *The Blue Grove*, first published in 1940, was on the oral songs of the central Indian tribe Uraon and he immediately directed interest to the conceptual difference of art in the tribal and non-tribal world:

Unlike in the English social system in which one could pass one’s life without coming in contact with poetry, the Uraon tribal system uses poetry as a vital appendix to dancing, marriages, and the cultivation of a crop-functions in which all Uraons join as part of their tribal life. Apart from these functions there is no Uraon poetry, and without this poetry the functions are incomplete (Archer1944: Preface).

Elwin Verrier’s *Folk Songs of the Maikal Hills* (1944) and *Folk Songs of Chhatisgarh* (1948) followed Archer, where amongst others, he studied the role of symbolic referents in tribal poetry, which he found “is the readiest cure for embarrassment, and can smooth over a business transaction or a hitch in one’s love-making with equal facility” (Verrier1944: 113). Thus the concept of the functional in tribal poetry came into play. Translation of oral poetry also became a subject of serious attention and both Archer and Verrier directed considerable attention to it. According to Archer, Indian folk poetry “is a combination of certain images, certain rhythms and certain effects of music, and only if a translation could provide an exact for each of these elements could it be perfect” (ibid: xxi). However, Archer goes on to say that it is difficult to appropriate all the
elements into a translation, and "if rhythms are maintained, the images will suffer, while no form of English can reproduce the musical effects of Hindi, Uraon, Gondi, or Mundari" (ibid: xxii).

In 1964, Alan Dundes in his *Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* had drawn attention to the structural features of oral literature. He concluded that there are no structural differences between Native American myths and tales. The classification of myth and tales was based on Native American system, and he inferred that such distinctions must involve other yardsticks like context of performance, style of rendition and the setting. Thus he pointed out the importance of native categories for understanding oral literature. His 'Texture, Text and Context' emphasises that oral literature can be fully understood by how it functions in context, with both performer and audience present by taking note of its textual and textural features. Thus language and the performative context of texts assumed prime importance. He also showed that with the help of peoples commentaries literary forms can be accessed and he called the method 'oral literary criticism'.

Melville Jacob in his *Pattern in Cultural Anthropology* published in 1964, stressed on the expressive content of oral literature. In his earlier *The Content and Style of an Oral Literature* (1959), he had declared oral literature to be a total literary event within a native setting and identified elements of drama in oral narratives. The concerns of Dundes and Jacobs get reflected in the work of later scholars like Hymes and Tedlock. Hymes carried forward Jacobs principles in his
finding in traditional Chinookan narratives "measured verses" that acts as linguistically marked segments built around alterations of sound and silence.

Hymes ethnopoetic analysis focuses on stylistic and grammatical features in order to find the formal, poetic structure of a text, the underlying rhetorical form in the texture. This formal structure - the organization of the text into units of various kinds - is an end in itself but it is not the major goal of study. The final goal in ethnopoetic study is the meaning and function of a text in performance and communication, and this is based on the notion that interpretation is not only dependent on the referential contents of a text but also on the formal structure in which the contents are presented (Anttonen1994: 114).

Hymes is important because he found oral-derived texts valid data to be worked upon, even when information on the extra-verbal performative elements is missing. "The gestures, voices, tunes, pauses of the original performances cannot be recovered. Still much of the structure persists and can be perceived. Essential real relationships remain"(Hymes1981: 7-8).

Dennis Tedlock, unlike Hymes and Jacobs, who found transcribed and dictated texts to be valid resource for interpretation, urges greater attention to be paid to spoken performance as a guide to underlying structural patterns in his "The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation" published in 1981. He stressed that oral performance is actually a work of interpretation. Therefore he tried to record through transcription variation in pitch, vowel length, cadence etc through typographical means (like showing a high pitch with capital letters), and presents a text as it was heard in performance. "To fix a text without making visible marks
is to bring stress and pitch and pause into a fixed relationship with the words” (Tedlock 1981: 45). This he tried to incorporate visually in the oral-derived text. Hymes found this difficult to accept as it was not always possible to determine whether such elements are regular stylistic devices or accidental occurings and multiple renditions of a verbal event will be necessary to determine whether such elements are conventional or specific to a single rendition.

Lauri Honko adds the concept of the singer’s personality to the traditional context and tries to account for variations in traditional oral-derived forms to a performer-tradition relationship. In his article ‘Types of Comparison and Forms of Variation’ in 1986, he asserts that both the traditional background and the performers are valid existence at the same time. New versions come forth through the interaction of the performers drawing on traditional motifs and personal competence.

Arnold Krupat in his *The Voice in the Margin* published in 1989 advocates the examining of the mode of production of the text, the author, literature and canonicity to organise an approach to native texts. In a move towards what he terms as ethnocriticism, he analyses the nature of collaborative effort between language translator, transcriber, and the native language informant. He outlines his agenda in his *Ethnocriticism* published in 1992. Ethnocriticism for Krupat begins with a rejection of what he calls “esthetic universalism” which stems from a set of assumption. The first holds that “for all the difference in cultural custom all over the world, art is, nonetheless, essentially same everywhere”. The second
assumption is that the "... insistence on the importance of ethnographic information in the understanding of Native American Literatures ... as social-scientific knowledge is pre-dominantly knowledge of its own rule, codes and concepts for making sense of culture, not of culture itself (Krupat 1992: 180, 181-183). Ethnographic information is of utmost importance, for what Krupat is basically propounding is a criterion that takes into consideration "culturally specific modes and codes" in which to present observations on Native literatures; divorced of the culture specific codes and modes, any critical reading will be misinterpreting cultural details, appropriating them in ways apt for western critical discourse, yet unfit for traditional art forms.

The need is therefore to approach traditional literary forms through methods that are best suited and valid to uncover the aesthetics, meanings and functions of traditional art forms in general and oral verse forms in particular. For such explorations cross cultural studies are of immense importance. Finnegan points out that such comparison develops a greater perspective and a clearer eye for distinctive characteristics that one might otherwise take for granted. As lot of research has been undertaken in the field of Native American oral literature, it will worthwhile to compare Native American oral verse forms with those of any other tradition. This is felt to be a more pressing need in Assam, which offers varied oral verse traditions, and yet not much theoretically evaluative work has been undertaken.
Studies in Verse Forms of the Native American and Assam Tribes

The earliest Native American anthology of note was *Path of the Rainbow* in 1918 by George W Cronyn where translations of songs from a variety of tribes done by earlier collectors like Schoolcraft, Densmore, Matthews, and Boas were offered. The songs were grouped into sections defined by culture areas: Eastern Woodlands, Southwest, Great Plains, and so on. Its form and editorial practice became a benchmark for other anthologies that followed, and the critical response it evoked from literary critics, anthropologists and others reflects contours of concern that is in circulation till the present time. An early review of the anthology faulted its romanticism, that "a good Indian is . . . a singing one", its translation practice "in the arbitrary arrangement of words and a pretentious typography that is foreign to [the] native", and the lack of a context where "many of these songs cry aloud for nothing so much as footnotes" (Evers 1983: 25). Boas in his earlier insistence on transcriptions and translations of and from native languages anticipates the idea that language was the key to the understanding of native art forms:

> The best approximation to the art of narrative of primitive people is probably found in those cases in which educated natives write down the texts, or in the records taken down by some missionaries who have acquired complete control of their language, and who are willing to give us just what they hear (Boas 1975: 241).

It is along these concerns with motive, translation, and context that much of the later day scholarship has developed. Margot Astrov’s *The Winged Serpent* in 1946 and A Grove Day’s *The Sky Clears* in 1951 followed. Like Cronyn’s anthology,
both are organised around culture areas and draw their material from earlier translations. The motive was to annex Native American poetic practices to the broader realm of American literature. However, unlike Cronyn’s anthology, there are substantive introductions and references to ground the material anthologised, for according to Day:

A mere ‘anthology’ of Indian verse without any clues to the backgrounds of human needs and human emotions from which these unusual poems sprang would be worse than useless, for it would be misleading (Day 1951: xi).

Responding to the above anthologies, Dell Hymes finds the underlying proposition that earlier translators can be trusted to be incongruous to the declared fear of non-contextualised and decontextualised texts to be misleading, for authenticity can be based on original texts. Hymes propounds a going back to the original transcription of a text in performance to study the linguistic feature for a fuller understanding of native poetic concerns. He finds the study of language to be too important to be the sole discretion of the linguists and the study of the text too valuable to be divorced of its language (Hymes 1981: 35-62). Later notable anthologies are William Brandon’s *The Magic World*, John Bierhorst’s *In the Trail of the Wind* in 1971 and Jerome Rothenberg’s *Shaking the Pumpkin* in 1972. Rothenberg put to practice his notion of ‘total translation’ in his anthology that invited vitriolic derision to enthusiastic approval from various critics. While Larry Evers’ finds Rothenberg “to have returned to the view that native American verbal art is nothing more than a kind of raw material to be appropriated into their
own art" (Evers1983: 26), Arnold Krupat and others welcomes it. Krupat finds Rothenberg's practices reflecting his notion of translation as criticism and a step towards what he calls 'ethnocriticism' (Krupat1992: 173-200). Brian Swann's *Song of the Sky* published in 1993 is an attempt at what he calls 'reworking' of older translation against the contextual perspectives of the original. These anthologies “have served as friction points around which ethnologists, folklorists, poets and literary critics have regularly gathered to grind critical issues...issues that has remained with us...” (Evers1983: 23).

The earliest instance of recorded version of oral literature of Assam Tribes is J. D. Anderson’s *A Collection of Kachari Folk-Tales and Rhymes* first published in 1895. Republished in 1981, the book is a collection of “myths and wonder tales, often humorous, and a number of songs, representing the Darrang variety of the Bodo-Kachari language” (Anderson1981: prefatory). It was in 1957 that Praphulladatta Goswami published his *Bihu Songs of Assam* (1957), a collection of oral-derived Assamese songs. Goswami was a pioneering voice in Assam and went on to inspire a whole lot of scholars. Promode Chandra Bhattacharya published his *Bodo Folk Songs and Tales* in 1957, which was followed by Mohini Mohan Brahma’s *Folk Songs of the Bodos* in 1960. Goswami went on to publish another collection of oral-derived Bihu songs with extensive ethnography in 1988 called *The Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs* which included Mising and Bodo Bihu songs. Bhaben Narzi’s *Bodo-Kacharir Jana Sahitya* published in 1957 was an invaluable insight on the folk life and literature of the Bodos, and like
Brahma’s, was an important insiders view on his own people. Narzi’s *Bodo-Kacharir Geet-Mali*, published in 1983, is an anthology of oral-derived verse forms accompanied by contextual ethnographic materials. Along with Assamese and English, studies on the Bodo tribe written in the Bodo language gradually became popular. For a literature in transition from orality to the scripted form, the script was not yet settled with works being written in both the Devnagiri and Assamese script. Sukumar Basmutary’s *Abaoi Abwmi Solo* (1968) and *Bodo Khuga Methai* (1969), and Ratikanta Basumatary’s *Abaou Aboini Methai Jolonga* (1982) are noteworthy Bodo texts written in the Assamese script. Bihuram Boro’s *Gibi Bithai* (1984), Nileswar Brahma’s *Balabganwi Boroni Khonthai* (1993) and Pramod Chandra Brahma’s *Sonaki Bijab* (1993) are important collections of oral-derived verse forms in the Devnagiri script. However important works are still being written in Assamese and English with Madhu Ram Boro emerging as a prolific author in both the languages. He published a trilogy on Bodo folk literature called *Bodo Lok-Sahitya*. The first part on songs was published 1995.

Apart from the works on the Bodos, another extensively covered tribe is the Karbi. There are anthologies published in both Karbi and Assamese languages. The native scholars like Lonkam Terang are active in the field. Nilomani Phukan (1993) published an anthology of folk poetry that includes oral verses of some Assam tribes. Birendranath Datta was the editor of the *Folk Songs of the Mising* (1992), that examined the songs against their cultural context elucidated in the detailed introduction. Nahendra Padun published an anthology of Mising songs

The presentation of tribal verse forms in Assam is not yet a serious academic and critical endeavour. Translation practices vary widely from prose representation to versified versions devoid of original aesthetic features. The values of these studies lie in the collection and compilation of verse forms of diverse communities with basic ethnographic information. Archer and Elwin provided some scholars guidelines for conducting such initial foray into the field of oral verse forms. However the scholars have not considered the issue of transferring oral traditions into typographic arrangements. Similarly no care has been taken to uncover native poetic concerns. Moreover attention to cultural codes and ethnocritical practices has also been cursory. In this context there is a need to initiate a study careful and sensitive to the approaches developed in similar studies elsewhere.

Aim of the Study

This study proposes to evaluate and analyse the oral-derived verse forms of the Assam tribes in a comparative framework. The verse forms of the selected Assam tribes will be examined against the theoretical background and analytical approaches to the verse forms of selected Native American tribes. The primary
aim of the study is to establish principles that can be operative in the understanding of oral-derived verse forms of the Assam tribes in the realms of structure, vision, rendition and meaning. These principles will be sought by adopting an ethnographic approach that takes into consideration both commonalities and divergences of the compared groups and appreciative paradigms generated to locate and understand oral based verse practices.

The study thus seeks to identify the aesthetics that determines oral-derived verse forms in the compared tribes. It will go into the conception, creation and rendition of the verse forms being compared. In this context, the study will seek to understand how the traditional practices of the tribal people induce in a community the poetic response, because oral-derived verse forms are rooted in the communal experience. Interaction of individual creative instincts and traditional communal role in shaping oral-derived verse forms will thus be a subject of inquiry. On the basis of this comparative study certain issues in the study of oral verse forms will be addressed.

Methodology

Selection of the tribes

There are twenty-three tribes in Assam, amongst whom fourteen are listed as hill tribes and nine as plains tribes. Initially from amongst the Assam tribes the Bodos and the Misings were selected because oral-derived verse forms of their songs have been anthologised and secondary sources of their ethnography both by tribal
and non-tribal scholars are available. Moreover, they are easily accessible for supplementary data.

The project was initiated by a survey of the oral-derived literature of the Native North Americans to identify the tribes to complement the selected Assam tribes. The native people of North America were originally divided into more than three hundred cultural groups, and by 1940 were still speaking more than 149 languages and many dialects derived from seven basic linguistic groups. They have been subjected to extensive and intensive cultural studies since the work of Franz Boas and his followers and the survey threw up considerable information on some specific tribes that have been the subject of major studies by leading American scholars. Native American culture studies are divided into nine broad-based culture areas and representative tribes from three different culture areas were selected. The Anishinabes (formerly known as Chippewa or Ojibway) from the Eastern Woodlands, the Inuits (more famous as Eskimos) from the Arctic coast and the Navajos from the Southwest were selected for the study based on the abundance of specimens and accessibility to secondary sources of ethnographic information.

Sources and methods of data collection

Library research

The main source of oral verse forms and the ethnological context has been from the published anthologies, monographs, and other major publications of both the Native Americans and Assam tribes since the whole project is directed towards
the evolving of an oral-derived poetics. This involved extensive library work at
the Indo-American Centre for International Studies at Hyderabad, United States
Information Service Library and The National Library at Calcutta beside the
libraries at Gauhati University and North Eastern Hill University, Shillong.
Certain specimens were also provided by the collaborators based on collections
made for their own study and from lesser-known monographs in their personal
possessions.

**Collaboration**

The methodological paradigm also included collaborators and informant in the
model of the Native American experience. This was essential to gain access to the
tribal language materials available in Assam and to understand the cultural milieu
and background of the selected specimens. According to Barre Toelken, the
informants' role is of 'decisive importance' in our critical approaches to the
understanding of oral literature, for "... the informant's conception of his own
art can open possibilities to us which we might otherwise never suspect, and can
save us from the blunder of inserting our own culture's aesthetic prejudices where
his belong" (Toelken and Scott1981: 78-79).

A number of Bodo scholars, like Monoranjan Lahari² and Dr. Anil Boro were
approached during the course of the project. It was Tulan Mochahary who
collaborated full time on the Bodo section. Mochahary is from amongst the new
generation of students in Bodo language and literature, who had his education

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² Monoranjan Lahari, a leading Bodo scholar, was met at his Kokrajhar residence on the 18th of
July 1999, as a part of the field trip to Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon. Kumud Basumatary of
Gossaigaon College mediated and participated in the discussion.
primarily through the Bodo medium during his early years of schooling. A postgraduate in Bodo from the Gauhati University, and presently a colleague, he helped in translating verse forms recorded in the Bodo language. We also examined existing Assamese and English translation and he helped in pointing out the inaccuracies and in retranslating existing translations. As a person who actively takes part in traditional festivities, he could provide valuable insight into the ethnography of the ritualistic songs and the songs of festivities. Through the interaction with him, it could also be understood that the meanings of certain traditional references have been lost, since he could not relate to certain references in the recorded verses of the past.

If Mochahary provided a contemporary perspective, Nahendra Padun, one of the leading scholars of Mising culture and a keen student of Assamese literature, helped out in the Mising section. He not only provided ethnographic information that was rare and invaluable in the understanding of Mising verse forms, but also showed how Assamese language and literature has influenced Mising expressive forms. He helped in highlighting certain contextual information that helped in reworking recorded specimens of Mising oral verses and returning them to their traditional sense.

Fieldwork

The project also included fieldwork on the Assam tribes for the collection of supplementary data and verification of certain information. Gossaigaon, Kokrajhar and the Chariduar area were visited for the purpose. Whereas the first
two were visited to generate data on Bodo oral verse forms, Chariduar was visited to study Mising oral verse forms in performance. However, these trips were of very short duration and the majority of supplementary data were generated through interactions with the collaborators.

**Data processing and analysis**

To classify Native American verse forms the practice of different anthologists and compilers were taken into account and a scheme for classification evolved. Similarly for Assam tribes, classification was evolved on the basis of both printed materials and opinion of the collaborators. Monoranjan Lahari and Nahendra Padun furnished the traditional tribal genres of oral verse forms, which was compared with those in the printed anthologies, and a viable classificatory scheme evolved that was felt would reflect tribal concerns.

The interviews with the collaborators and resource persons were recorded on tape in order to be reworked later. Bodo and Mising language materials were transcribed in English and the accompanying translation of the collaborators which was in Assamese was both recorded and written down and later translated into English. The translations of the collected verses were done by me, with the help of the collaborators and where English translations were available, they were reworked with their help. In the process attention was paid to nuances of tradition. Mode of rendition of the original songs, that is, whether the performance was group based or individually oriented and the role of the recipients, that is, whether it was active or passive were considered to grasp the significance of the content.
and the context. Ethnographic details were gathered and theoretical perspectives generated during the course of the study were followed to analyse the collected verse forms.

The collected Native American data have been analysed in the light of the major theoretical postulations of leading ethnocritics like Hymes, Tedlock, Krupat and others and the contours of appreciation of the Native American verse forms followed to arrive at a broad based pattern of Native American poetics. This entailed studying the approaches to translation as a collaborative endeavour and taking into cognisance differing viewpoints. By positing opposing and conflicting ideas about translation, underlying patterns of concern were sought to be understood that would help in the overall understanding of imperatives that goes on to make the songs. The dynamics behind reworking and retranslation were analysed that helped in understanding the nature of inaccuracies in the older version, and how inaccurate translation is a misrepresentation of a tribe.

The reasons behind the inability of traditional western critical methods to unravel the full significance of Native American verse forms were studied and the path along which the alternative methods proceeded followed to understand how appreciative categories to oral and oral-derived literatures have been generated. The materials have been analysed from a ‘literature in context’ as opposed to the ‘literature in vacuo’ approach in order to understand the underlying principles that go on to create and sustain such literary forms. Any contextually oriented study is intrinsically comparative. It entails comparing the verbal text with its referential
world in order to understand the full implication of the text. When the depiction present in the specimen of the verbal text reflects or corresponds to an external reality, such similarities or the lack of similarities are basically uncovered through comparing the verbal text with its external referents. The basic ethnospecific nature of the present study requires unravelling dominant themes, attitudes, motifs, and poetic practices that are recurrent and dominant and that interconnects into a pattern of poetic practice.

Cross cultural studies like the presents on are either implicitly or explicitly comparative. It is implicitly comparative when one can safely assume that similarity must exist in the normative ways of living, thinking and behaving "without one's actually having to engage in comparison because comparing would simply uncover similarities that one assumes exist anyway" (Georges1986: 07). Thus the assumption that Bodo and Mising oral verse practices are implicitly comparative in the study. From the vantagepoint of being located in Assam and encountering members of the two tribes in their socio-cultural milieu, one cannot help but observe outlines of similarities. Yet such assumption cannot be made of the Native Americans, and the comparatibility has to be borne out explicitly. This was done by reviewing scholarship that has subjected Native American oral-derived literature to both extensive and intensive cultural studies since the work of Franz Boas and his followers. These reveals that Native American oral-derived literature possesses a unity and harmony of theme, structure, and articulation that transcends the great variation natural to a multi-ethnic and poly-cultural entity
formed by the collective term 'Native American'. Native American artists from “myriad cultures today share a collective sense of American origins, deep-rooted in the land”:

Though diverse, they overlap in “native” concerns for kinship and tribal ways of thinking, shaped culturally over thousands of years, still viable. These peoples are witnesses to a common sense of dispossession forced on them as native “Indians”. Their mythically storied, pre-lapsarian origins before the European “invasion” and their mutual sense of displacement, the dream and its descent, transcend factional differences in a shared struggle for cultural survival and rebirth (Lincoln1983: 13).

Once the modes of approaches and methods of evolving a Native American oral-derived poetics were studied, the Assam tribal oral-derived verses were sought to be accessed through similar methods. Then the organised data were submitted to evaluative approaches generated from the study of the Native American oral-derived verse forms to uncover underlying aesthetic patterns of the Assam tribal verse forms. Foleys concepts of ‘immanence’ and ‘metonymy’ were integral to the overall contextual approach and the data were tried to be returned to the larger ambience of the cultural landscape. The poetic features like repetition, meaningless vocables and sound segments, the synecdochic referents (image and metaphor will be inappropriate terms), relation with the graphic arts, and the functional aspects of the tribal verse forms were considered to generate a holistic view of tribal oral-derived verse forms. Finally, an attempt was made on the basis of this comparative evaluation to develop a dialogue with the critical practices towards oral verse forms.
Limitation of the Study

The study has been totally dependent on translation, and though it is an integral part of the conception of an oral-derived literature, yet a direct access to some of the languages of the originals would have been fruitful. Moreover, the access to the Native American tribes was only through library work. It is felt that an interaction with a few leading Native American scholars, both tribal and non-tribal, and an exposure to the Native American socio-cultural milieu would have enriched the work. Moreover, a direct access to some of the pioneering works on the Native Americans were not possible due to their unavailability in Indian libraries. The study is basically an exploration of contours of aesthetics, and does not present a thorough analysis of the traditions involved.

Relevance of the Study

Indigenous culture is under universal duress and there is a constant dilution of the ethnic way of life all over the world. As contemporary academic and critical interest concern itself with local culture, the need is increasingly being felt to engage in a multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural dialogue to generate appreciative categories to understand the art, culture and thereby the life of ethnic and tribal communities. Much of the earlier neglect originated from the fact that familiar critical and literary approaches often frustrated a proper understanding of the subject of appraisal. External critical and appreciative modes often distort intrinsic tribal truths and functions of their art forms, thus such categories have to be generated from within the artistic and literary practices of the tribes.
themselves. Moreover, no analytical study of oral poetry has been undertaken in Assam, and the need is to analyze the verse forms documented in the second half of the last century by pioneering folklorists of the state.