



The Shaman As Custodian Of Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Case Study Of Kullu District

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the function of shaman (Goor) as the principal guardians of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), specifically within the localized socio-cultural context of Kullu District, Himachal Pradesh, India. There is a lot of research on Himalayan shamanism in anthropology, but not much on how it interacts with the UNESCO ICH domains when looked at only through the eyes of indigenous ritual authorities who run their own communities. This qualitative exploratory study fills in the gaps by focusing on the voices of the Devta institution's functionaries, such as the Goor (shaman), Kardar (administrator), Pujari (priest), and Deulu (ritual assistants). The study utilizes Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Reflexive Thematic Analysis with NVivo software, based on in-depth interviews with 28 participants from 12 villages, complemented by extensive participant observation at internal community ritual events. The results are fully mapped onto the five UNESCO ICH domains, showing how embodied knowledge, oral traditions, and traditional craftsmanship make up a living, self-sustaining system for preserving heritage. In addition, four main themes come to light: (1) The Shaman as Living Archive, which shows how somatic and emplaced knowledge keeps local history alive; (2) The Sacred Agrarian Economy, which shows how the community's internal gift logic works; (3) Secrecy as Epistemic Sovereignty, which shows how keeping sacred knowledge secret protects it; and (4) Intergenerational Transmission, which shows how people use internal strategies to deal with secular modernity. The idea of "Ritual Stakeholders" adds to stakeholder theory by saying that these actors are legitimate entirely from divine mandate. Policy implications suggest that Devta (Deity) institutions should be included in local heritage preservation plans so that the community can keep full control over its Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

Keywords: Shamanism, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Devta Institution, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Kullu Valley, Stakeholder Theory, Epistemic Sovereignty, Phenomenology

1. INTRODUCTION

The Kullu Valley in Himachal Pradesh, which has long been known as Dev Bhumi (the Land of Gods), is home to one of the world's oldest, most complex, and deeply rooted living shamanic traditions. In this isolated mountainous area, gods and goddesses (*Devtas* and *Devis*) are not just abstract religious ideas that people passively worship in static temples. Instead, they are active, ruling groups that run daily life in the village, settle local socio-economic disputes, set the cycles of farming, and talk directly to their constituents through people called Goor (Shaman). This *Devta* (Deity) institution is a very advanced way

for indigenous people to govern themselves. It combines spiritual authority with social administration, ecological management, and strong judicial functions (Sax, 2009; Sutherland, 2003).

The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sets up five different areas for recognizing living traditions around the world (UNESCO, 2003). However, modern academic discourse often removes these practices from their immediate community context and judges them based on things like outside economic development, state-sponsored heritage conservation, or modernization. This focus on the outside world unintentionally hides the complex internal systems that the local people use to keep these traditions alive for themselves.

This research fills a major gap in theory by focusing entirely on the internal dynamics of the local community. It doesn't look at outside points of view on purpose. Instead, it asks: How do shamans and traditional ritual authorities in Kullu see and carry out their roles as ICH custodians only within and for their own communities? How does the village ecosystem deal with the problems it faces when it comes to keeping rituals pure, enforcing traditional law, and passing on embodied sacred knowledge to younger generations who are becoming more and more influenced by secular modernity?

This research responds to important calls for decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 1999) and recognizing epistemic sovereignty (Battiste, 2002) by putting the indigenous point of view first and giving the voices of those who are living repositories of this intangible heritage a central place. This question has a lot of meaning in the fields of sociology and anthropology. As the Himalayas change quickly in terms of economy and education, it is important for localized heritage policy and researchers to understand how indigenous institutions adapt internally to keep their social and spiritual unity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Shamanism: From Universalism to Localized Governance

The word "shaman" comes from the Tungusic word "šaman," which means "one who knows" (Hutton, 2007). There has been a lot of discussion in anthropological literature about what this word means. Eliade's (1964) foundational work called shamanism "archaic techniques of ecstasy," focusing on how the shaman could use their mind to travel through cosmic realms. This universalizing framework has been very important in the past, but it has also been heavily criticized for taking different indigenous traditions out of their specific social and political contexts (Kehoe, 2000; Atkinson, 1992). Lewis (1971) made an important social and structural distinction that linked shamanic practice to local community structures instead of just transcendent experience.

In the specific context of the Himalayas, these debates are very well-organized. Samuel (2008) calls the *Goor* of Kullu "institutionalized shamanism" because it is a role that is deeply rooted in the center of village governance rather than on the outside. Sax (2009) writes about how deity mediums in the Central Himalayas serve as the final arbiters of "divine justice," settling land, water, and family disputes that secular state authorities can't. Berti (2015) shows in a similar way that the *Dev Vani* (voice of the Deity) is a parallel legal system, or "legal pluralism," that works well with state institutions. The *Goor* is not just a healer or a mystic; they are also a constitutionally recognized authority in a local "cosmic polity" (Sutherland, 2003).

2.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Embodied Heritage

To fully understand local heritage requires engaging deeply with Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) literature. Berkes (2012) characterizes Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission". This framework transcends colonial classifications of indigenous practices as "superstition" (Agrawal, 1995), acknowledging instead highly systematic epistemologies rooted in extensive place-based experience.

Shamanic knowledge in Kullu is uniquely embodied and performative. Csordas (1993) presents "somatic modes of attention" to elucidate how indigenous practitioners foster bodily awareness as a fundamental mode of knowledge. Shamanic traditions of Kullu district depend on what Connerton (1989) calls "incorporating practices," which are ways of knowing that are stored literally in the locals' nervous systems, vocal apparatus, and ritualized movements. This is different from textual traditions that

value written records. The *Goor's* trance is a very advanced performance of culturally patterned behaviour that is learned through hard work and years of practice (Thakur, 1997).

The landscape itself also serves as a huge, living memory aid. In the Himalayas, where sacred groves (*dev van*), mountain peaks, and water sources are all aware of their moral responsibilities, Basso's (1996) idea that "wisdom sits in places" really resonates powerfully. Shamans read this landscape closely, maintaining delicate relationships with place-based deities.

2.3 Intangible Cultural Heritage: Critical Perspectives on the UNESCO Framework

The UNESCO 2003 Convention was a major turning point in global heritage discourse, moving from monument centered preservation to the safeguarding of living practices. Intangible Cultural Heritage encompasses "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills" along with their associated instruments and spaces (UNESCO, 2003). This democratization of heritage shifted the emphasis from "stones and bones" to "people and processes" (Kurin, 2004).

Critical heritage studies have made this framework more complicated, though. Smith (2006) outlines an "Authorized Heritage Discourse" (AHD) that frequently prioritizes aesthetically appealing, tangible heritage even as it nominally embraces the intangible. Hafstein (2004) warns against "folklorization," which is when living, changing local traditions are turned into scripted, static performances to meet outside regulatory standards of authenticity. Heritage is not a static list of practices for the Kullu community to keep in an archive; it is a living, changing way for the community to stay alive. The *Goor* is the most important place where the five UNESCO ICH domains come together in everyday village life.

2.4 Internal Community Governance and Ritual Stakeholders

Stakeholder theory, which comes from strategic management (Freeman, 1984), has been applied widely in heritage planning. Conventional models, however, presume contemporary, secular, democratic organizations in which power is intrinsically negotiable (Timur & Getz, 2008). These assumptions are entirely invalid when examining indigenous contexts where authority is derived from non-negotiable religious foundations. Hollinshead (1999) contends that conventional frameworks favor "economic rationality," overlooking profound motivations fundamentally grounded in ritual obligation.

The deity has complete control over the community in the *Devta* institution. The *Kardar* (Deity's Administrator) takes care of the village's material needs, the *Pujari* (Deity's Priest) keeps strict ritual purity, and the *Goor* (Shaman) speaks for God. In the traditional, secular sense, these people are not "stakeholders." Their legitimacy comes from their family ties, strict purification, and divine election that the community has confirmed. Higgins-Desbiolles (2006) argues that we should see these indigenous groups as "rights-holders." This study builds on that by suggesting the idea of "Ritual Stakeholders" as a way to understand how communities govern themselves.

2.5 Research Gaps

This review identifies six significant gaps in existing literature:

Table 1: Matrix of Identified Research Gaps

Gap Type	Existing Literature Focus	The Identified Gap (Missing Link)
Conceptual Gap	Shamanism as 'Cultural Product' OR 'Governance' (Separated)	Integrated view: Shamanism as BOTH Governance & Resource
Geographic Gap	Amazon & Siberia	Western Himalayas (Devta Traditions)
Stakeholder Gap	Secular Actors (Govt, Operators, Tourists)	Ritual Authorities (Kardar, Pujari, Gur)
Methodological Gap	Guest Gaze (Tourist Motivations)	Host-Centric / Indigenous Perspectives
Ethical Gap	General Tourism Ethics	Ethics of 'Sacred Secrecy' & Knowledge Rights
Policy Gap	Secular Bureaucratic Logic	Legal Pluralism (Devta Parallel Governance)

Conceptual Gap: Shamanism is studied anthropologically as a governance system, and tourism studies frame it as a cultural product, but integrated research treating it simultaneously as both is lacking.

Geographic Gap: Shamanic tourism research concentrates on the Amazon and Siberia; the Western Himalayas, despite rich Shamanic traditions, remain unmapped in this literature.

Stakeholder Gap: Standard frameworks focus on secular actors (government, operators, tourists), rendering invisible the ritual authorities like *Kardar*, *Pujari*, *Goor*, who actually govern sacred sites and practices.

Methodological Gap: Research predominantly adopts the "guest gaze," examining tourist motivations and experiences; host-centric ethnographies centering indigenous perspectives are scarce.

Ethical Gap: While tourism ethics are debated, the specific ethics of "sacred secrecy"—the protection of restricted knowledge from commodification—receive insufficient attention.

Policy Gap: Tourism master plans operate on secular bureaucratic logic, failing to account for "legal pluralism" wherein Devta institutions exercise parallel governance authority.

This study addresses these gaps through an exploratory qualitative investigation centered on ritual custodians' perspectives in Kullu District.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Epistemological Framework

This study uses an exploratory qualitative design, which is a great way to look into socio-spiritual phenomena that are deeply rooted and not well studied, where understanding the context is very important (Stebbins, 2001). The research design is based on two complementary frameworks: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). These are combined with an Indigenous Standpoint epistemology.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers a robust framework for comprehending how individuals derive profound meaning from their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). IPA's intense focus on the individual enables an in-depth analysis of how particular ritual authorities maneuver their specialized roles within the village ecosystem. This study employs the Reflexive

Thematic Analysis (RTA) framework established by Braun and Clarke (2021) to interpret the intricate narratives that arise, ensuring thorough data analysis while preserving theoretical adaptability. Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Nakata, 2007) is the most important part of this whole methodological approach. This framework fundamentally changes the balance of power. It makes it clear that the local voices of the *devta* functionaries are not just sources of information for a Western audience, but the ultimate epistemic authorities and sovereign guardians of their own living culture.

3.2 Study Area and Participant Recruitment

The study was conducted in Kullu District, Himachal Pradesh, India, particularly in the Kullu Valley and neighboring side valleys. Kullu was chosen for multiple reasons including its well-documented *Devta* institution (Thakur, 1997; Sutherland, 2003; Sax, 2009), its status as a major tourist destination (welcoming over 3.5 million visitors each year), and the ongoing practice of shamanism, the *Goor* tradition is still alive and important in society, not merely a heritage relic.

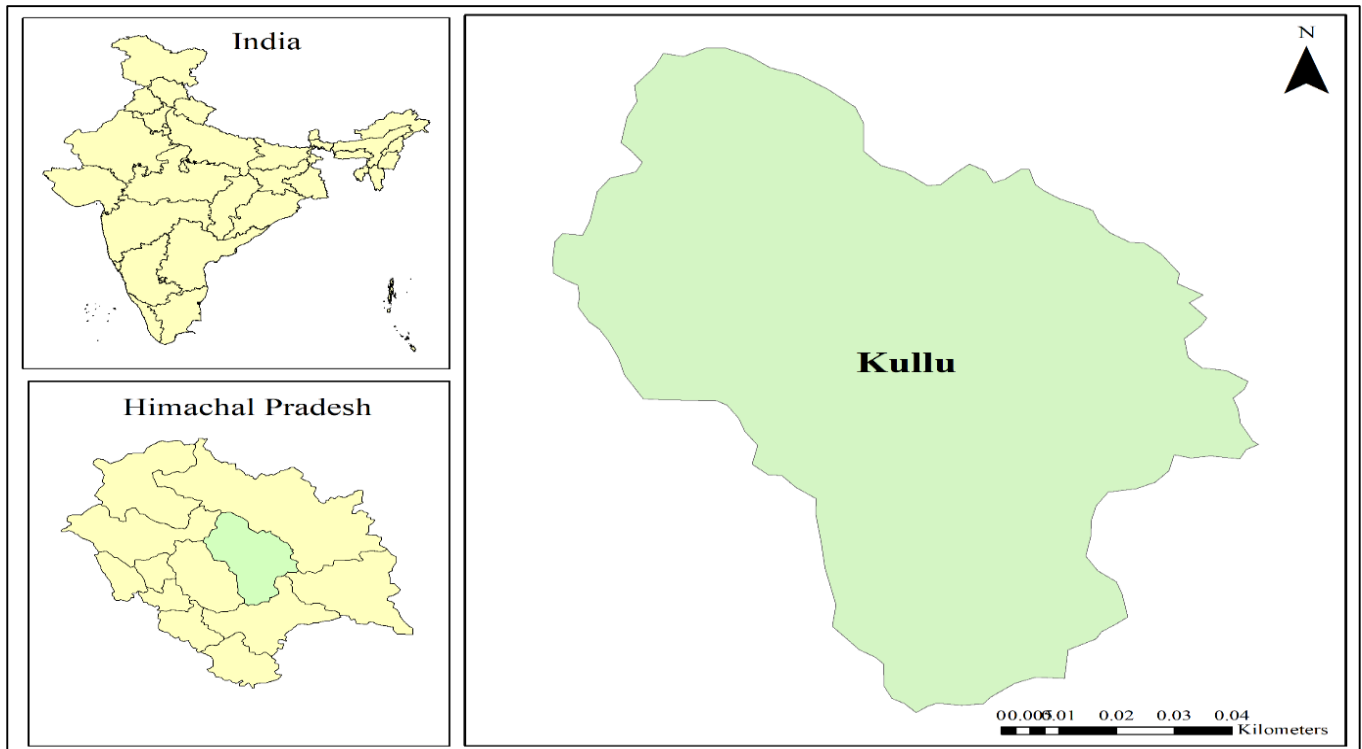


Fig. 1: Map of the Study Area

Twelve villages were purposively selected to capture variation in: proximity to tourist centers (from Manali-adjacent to remote), deity prominence (major regional Devtas vs. local gram-devta), and tourism exposure (high, medium, low). Villages included Naggar, Katrain, Raison, Fozal, Old Manali, Vashisht, Jagatsukh, Kullu town, Hawaii, Hurla, Gushaini, and Khokhan. Each village's Devta committee provided initial access.

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Inclusion criteria required: (1) current, active service within a recognized Devta institution; (2) a minimum of five years of formally recognized experience; and (3) universal community recognition of their ritual authority. The final sample comprised 28 participants distributed across four traditional functional categories:

Initial contact was established through village headmen and Devta committee members, who introduced the researcher to potential participants. Snowball sampling then proceeded, with participants recommending other knowledgeable individuals. Sampling continued until thematic saturation—the point at which new interviews yielded no substantially novel insights—was achieved (Guest et al., 2020).

The final sample comprised 28 participants distributed across four functional categories (Table 2).

Table 2: Participant Characteristics

Role	Number	Age Range	Years Experience	of	Villages Represented
Goor (Shaman)	12	35-72	8-45		10
Kardar (Administrator)	8	41-68	6-30		8
Pujari (Priest)	5	38-65	10-40		5
Deulu (Ritual Assistant)	3	29-55	5-25		3
Total	28	29-72	5-45		26

All participants were male, reflecting the gendered nature of formal Devta roles in this region (a limitation addressed in section 3.8). Occupations outside ritual service included farmers (15), small business owners (6), retired government employees (4), and laborers (3). Education levels ranged from no formal schooling (8) to postgraduate degrees (2).

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data collection was systematically executed over a continuous six-month period (October 2023–March 2024), spanning multiple agrarian cycles and critical local festival seasons.

Semi-structured in-depth Interviews: Lasting between 60 and 180 minutes, they took place in participants' homes or in closed temple neighborhoods. The interview guide observed personal beginnings, daily spiritual and agricultural duties, problems that come up between generations, and ways to keep sacred knowledge safe. Interviews were done in Hindi and the Kullvi dialect of the area.

Participant Observation: The researcher attended 15 exclusively internal ritual events, comprising private puja ceremonies, confidential pooch (oracular consultation) sessions, and local melas. The focus of observation was mostly on how sacred spaces were arranged, how the community worked together, and how the Goor's trance showed up in the physical world.

Document Analysis: Local temple records (where access was granted by the *Kardar*) and community-published vernacular materials were reviewed to triangulate historical narratives.

3.4 Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Analysis proceeded through six phases utilizing NVivo 14 software, moving iteratively from familiarization and initial descriptive open coding to IPA case-level analysis, and finally to cross-case theme development and refinement.

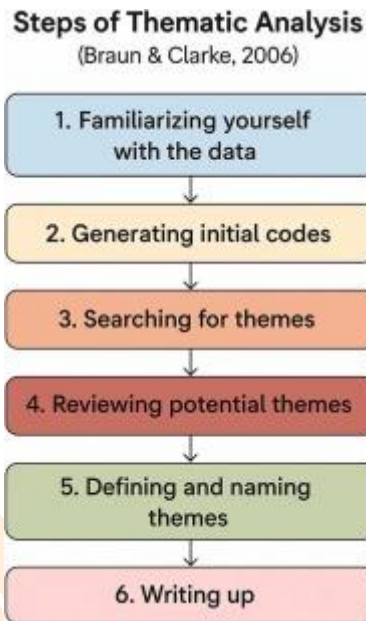


Fig. 2. Six phases in thematic analysis

Phase 1: Familiarization. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Hindi, with translation to English for analysis. Transcripts were checked against recordings for accuracy. Repeated reading/listening enabled deep immersion in each participant's account.

Phase 2: Initial Coding. Using NVivo, open coding captured features of interest across the dataset. Codes were descriptive and stayed close to participants' language (e.g., "deity chooses you, you don't choose," "tourists don't understand," "we show some things, keep some hidden").

Phase 3: IPA Case-Level Analysis. For each Goor participant specifically, a detailed IPA analysis was conducted: examining linguistic content, narrative structure, and the sense-making strategies employed. Emergent themes were identified for each case before any cross-case comparison.

Phase 4: Theme Development. Codes were grouped into candidate themes through iterative discussion between researcher and supervisors. Mind-mapping in NVivo visualized relationships between codes. Themes were reviewed against coded extracts and the full dataset.

Phase 5: Theme Refinement. Candidate themes were checked for internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Sub-themes were identified within major themes. Final themes were named with attention to capturing participants' own phrasing where possible.

Phase 6: Writing. Analysis continued through writing, with themes illustrated through participant quotations and observational vignettes. Translation decisions were documented, acknowledging the interpretive choices involved.

Moral principles were very important, with "ethics in practice" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) being the most important. The study strictly followed rules that kept sacred information secret. Participants were instructed in clear terms not to share any sensitive or dangerous inner-sanctum knowledge. If sensitive mantras or secret mechanics were accidentally brought up, they were immediately taken out of the transcripts to make sure that the research did not cross or violate the community's epistemic boundaries.

4. FINDINGS

The findings of this study show very clearly how Kullu shamanism fits into global heritage frameworks while also being a deeply localized, self-sustaining socio-spiritual system.

4.1 The Convergence of Shamanic Practice and UNESCO Domains

Table 3 shows how these indigenous practices are connected across the five UNESCO ICH domains. This shows that for the local community, these are not separate academic categories, but an integrated way of existence.

Table 3: The Intersection of Kullu Shamanism and the Five UNESCO ICH Domains

UNESCO ICH Domain & Sub-domains	Interpretation within the Devta Institution of Kullu
1. Oral Traditions & Expressions	
Legends (Bartha)	Origin narratives of Devtas encoding village history, territorial memory, and moral authority.
Myths	Cosmological accounts linking local deities to wider Hindu metaphysical hierarchies.
Epic Songs & Narrative Ballads	Oral recitations performed during festivals, reinforcing genealogy and divine sovereignty.
Mantras & Chants	Performative speech acts enabling divine embodiment during trance; sonic precision is central to ritual efficacy.
Prayers	Invocations for agricultural prosperity, protection, and justice.
Proverbs (Lokoktiyan)	Moral aphorisms embedding Devta authority into everyday speech.
Lullabies (Loriyan)	Early transmission of sacred cosmology through domestic oral culture.
Ritual Songs (Harul, Jhanjet)	Community-performed songs sustaining intergenerational continuity in the Kullvi language.
2. Performing Arts	
Ritual Dance (Khel)	Trance performance through which the deity becomes present in the Goor's body.
Music (Dhol, Damoun, Karnal, Shehnai)	Sonic framework facilitating possession and validating divine presence.
Community Dance (Nati)	Collective devotional participation integrating villagers into sacred encounter.
Processional Performance	Public enactment of divine sovereignty during festivals and villa rituals.
Gesture & Oracular Expression	Embodied communication of divine verdicts during trance states

UNESCO ICH Domain & Sub-domains	Interpretation within the Devta Institution of Kullu
3. Social Practices, Rituals & Festive Events	
Major Festivals (Kullu Dussehra)	Assembly of multiple Devtas enacting a functioning “cosmic polity.”
Seasonal Festivals (Fagli, Kahika, Bhunda)	Ritual regulation of agricultural cycles and communal welfare.
Rites of Passage	Divine consultation during birth, marriage, and other life transitions.
Dispute Resolution	Oracular adjudication delivered by the Goor within trance; parallel legal authority.
Oaths of Allegiance	Collective recognition of deity sovereignty, especially under Lord Raghunath.
Communal Feasting (Dham)	Ritual meal reinforcing equality, hierarchy, and social cohesion.
Devta Committees	Institutional governance structure managing temple property and ritual organization.
4. Knowledge & Practices Concerning Nature and the Universe	
Sacred Geography	Mountains, rivers, and landscapes recognized as abodes of Devtas.
Sacred Groves (Dev Vans)	Taboo-protected ecological zones preserving biodiversity and water sources.
Ethnobotany (Jadi-booti Knowledge)	Medicinal and ritual uses of local flora integrated into healing practice.
Traditional Healing	Combined herbal and ritual treatment addressing physical and spiritual imbalance.
Cosmology	Hierarchical worldview integrating local Devtas with broader Hindu metaphysics.
Ecological Stewardship	Community-led conservation regulated through belief rather than formal law.
Possession & Shamanic Calling	Divine election and initiation into ritual authority.
5. Traditional Craftsmanship	
Palanquin Construction (Rath)	Mobile throne of the Devta, central to public ritual enactment.
Metal Iconography (Mohra)	Silver or brass deity faces embodying divine presence.

UNESCO ICH Domain & Sub-domains	Interpretation within the Devta Institution of Kullu
Ritual Attire	Specific garments worn by the Goor during trance performance.
Musical Instrument Craft	Handmade instruments sustaining ritual soundscapes.
Temple Architecture (Kathkuni Technique)	Indigenous architectural system integrating wood and stone for sacred structures.
Ritual Objects (Ghanti, Chowri, Chhater)	Functional items enabling ceremonial enactment.
Jewellery & Ornamentation	Sacred adornment reinforcing divine identity during festivals.

4.2 Superordinate Qualitative Themes

Beyond the structural mapping, rigorous thematic analysis revealed four superordinate themes detailing how the community internally manages, protects, and sustains this heritage.

Table 4: Summary of Superordinate Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote (with Source)
Theme 1: The Shaman as the Community's Living Archive	The Goor (shaman) functions as an embodied repository of community memory, local law, and sacred knowledge. This knowledge is stored somatically and transmitted orally, extending into the landscape itself as a mnemonic archive.	<i>"This knowledge is not in books. It is in the blood, in the breath. When the Devta comes, the body remembers what the mind forgets... he must feel the rhythm, must tremble with the drum, must learn to become empty."</i> (Goor, Ramesh)
Theme 2: Internal Cohesion and the Sacred Agrarian Economy	The Devta institution operates on a localized "gift logic" (<i>bhet</i>) of voluntary offerings, which sustains the temple, funds communal feasts (<i>Dham</i>), and supports the community. Rituals are strictly timed to agrarian cycles, binding the community to the land and each other.	<i>"When a villager comes for pooch, they bring whatever they can—some grain, a coconut, maybe just their folded hands. The Devta knows their heart. This is how the village survives together."</i> (Kardar, Mohan Lal)
Theme 3: Epistemic Sovereignty and Sacred Secrecy	The community strategically uses secrecy as an active assertion of control over their tradition. By withholding core knowledge (e.g., true	<i>"If we tell everything, what remains ours? The power in what we keep. The shakti [power] needs the container of secrecy."</i> (Goor, Baldev)

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote (with Source)
	names of deities, <i>bija mantras</i>) and maintaining graded internal access, ritual authorities protect the perceived power and efficacy (<i>shakti</i>) of their practices.	
Theme 4: Intergenerational Transmission and Modernity	The community's primary internal challenge is transmitting embodied knowledge to younger generations facing the pull of secular education and urban migration. Despite this, elders show resilience by adapting roles (e.g., <i>Deulu</i> assistants) and using cultural pride to maintain ties.	"Young people go to school, they learn English, they want jobs in the city. Who will learn the Bartha? The mobile phone remembers many things, but it cannot hold the Devta. The body must be pure to hold the god." (Goor, Hardyal)

4.2.1 Theme 1: The Shaman as the Community's Living Archive

Participants consistently articulated the *Goor's* role as an embodied, living repository of community memory and local law. This archive function operates organically, bypassing the need for textual documentation.

Embodied and Somatic Knowledge: The *Goor's* physical body constitutes the primary storage medium for the sacred. Knowledge is enacted, not read.

"This knowledge is not in books. It is in the blood, in the breath. When the Devta comes, the body remembers what the mind forgets. I cannot teach my son by telling him—he must feel the rhythm, must tremble with the drum, must learn to become empty." (Goor, Ramesh) The precise somatic patterns—the specific tremors distinguishing a regional *Nag* deity from a local *Yogini*, the stamina required for a multi-day *Kahika* festival—are deeply ingrained incorporating practices.

Oral Tradition Custodianship: The *Bartha* (origin chronicles) encode territorial claims, historical village migrations, and stringent moral precepts.

"When I speak the Bartha of our Devta, I speak the history of our village... If I die without passing it, that history dies with me." (Goor, Rajinder)

The Landscape as Mnemonic Archive: Shamanic knowledge extends inextricably into the local geography. Every geographic anomaly holds an origin story accessible only through the *Goor's* ritual mediation, transforming the physical environment into a profound epistemological text.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Internal Cohesion and the Sacred Agrarian Economy

The Devta institution operates on a strict, localized "gift logic" (*bhet*) that functions to bind the community internally rather than generate external capital.

Gift Logic vs. Modern Transactions: Offerings made to the temple are voluntary expressions of agrarian devotion. They sustain the temple's internal functions, fund the communal *Dham*, and support the poorest villagers during harsh winters.

"When a villager comes for pooch, they bring whatever they can—some grain, a coconut, maybe just their folded hands. The Devta knows their heart. This is how the village survives together." (Kardar, Mohan Lal)

Agrarian Rhythms: The scheduling of rituals is dictated entirely by local agricultural cycles (sowing, harvesting), lunar phases, and the spontaneous, unprompted will of the deity. This rigid adherence to internal, spiritually dictated rhythms ensures that the community remains irrevocably bound to the land and to each other, fiercely resisting modern, synchronized homogenization.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Epistemic Sovereignty and Sacred Secrecy

A profound finding was the community's deliberate, highly strategic use of secrecy. Secrecy is not merely a traditional artifact; it is an active assertion of epistemic sovereignty and internal control.

The Power of Withholding: By strictly withholding certain mechanics of the trance or the translation of archaic mantras, the ritual authorities maintain absolute authority over their tradition.

"If we tell everything, what remains ours? The power is in what we keep. The shakti [power] needs the container of secrecy." (Goor, Baldev)

Graded Internal Access: Access to sacred knowledge is heavily graded even within the village itself. Not all locals hold the same information. The *Pujari*, *Kardar*, and *Goor* protect the "inner sanctum" knowledge—such as the deity's true, hidden names or the specific seed syllables (*bija mantras*)—to prevent the ritual efficacy from dissipating.

4.2.4 Theme 4: Intergenerational Transmission and Modernity

The most pressing internal challenge identified by the community is navigating the transition of this immense, embodied knowledge to younger generations amid the rapid influx of secular modernity and urban migration.

The Challenge of Secular Education: As youth pursue formal education and seek employment outside the valley, the pool of individuals willing to undergo the rigorous, austere, and often financially unrewarding training required to serve the Devta shrinks.

"Young people go to school, they learn English, they want jobs in the city. Who will learn the Bartha? The mobile phone remembers many things, but it cannot hold the Devta. The body must be pure to hold the god." (Goor, Hardyal)

Internal Adaptation: Despite these anxieties, the community exhibits internal resilience. Elders are finding subtle ways to integrate youth into the *Deulu* (assistant) roles earlier, utilizing local pride and the unifying joy of the *Nati* dance to tether the younger generation to the Devta's court before they migrate.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Reframing Heritage Custodianship

The results of this study significantly complicate and enhance traditional academic interpretations of shamanism and heritage preservation. Localized data strongly suggests that the shaman is the ultimate guardian of the village's social, legal, and historical identity, rather than seeing the Goor mostly as a religious mystic or a medical healer (Eliade, 1964; Winkelman, 2000). This custodial role fits with Berkes' (2012) IKS framework, but it goes further by stressing how active and regulatory this guardianship is. The community doesn't just keep a static archive; it uses the five UNESCO ICH domains as useful, everyday tools for farming, settling disputes, and protecting the environment.

5.2 Ritual Stakeholders and Legal Pluralism

The findings require an important reconsideration of stakeholder theory in the context of indigenous governance. Standard frameworks presume that stakeholders are entities possessing secular, economic, or legal status (Sautter & Leisen, 1999). The people who work for the Devta institution don't fit this model at all.

This study introduces the formal theoretical construct of "Ritual Stakeholders" to encapsulate this unique form of standing. Ritual stakeholders include individuals in a community who have the power to govern land, set agricultural practices, and manage heritage derives primarily from:

Cosmological Legitimacy: A community-recognized relationship with divine entities.

Genealogical Connection: An inherited, caste-specific, or communally validated position.

Embodied Epistemology: The physical possession of tradition stored within bodily practice.

Divine Mandate: Ongoing, continuous recognition of election by the deity, validated by the constituents.

Recognizing Ritual Stakeholders acknowledges the robust "legal pluralism" (Berti, 2011) operating in Kullu. The Devta's court is a sovereign space. Heritage management policies that rely solely on secular "community consultation" will fail if they do not recognize the *Kardar* and the *Goor* as absolute rights-holders with unquestionable veto power over village affairs.

5.3 The Paradox of Preservation and Sacred Secrecy

The strategic use of secrecy described here is a significant issue for global heritage models that value visibility, documentation, and open access. Most UNESCO frameworks say that protecting heritage means making it visible by recording, explaining, and storing it.

But the Kullu community has a "heritage paradox": the very act of protecting through outside exposure destroys what it is trying to protect. The community's refusal to fully disclose their ICH is not a loss of culture, but the most important way to protect it. This is because ritual potency (shakti) depends entirely on limited circulation. This is in line with Johnston's (2006) call for recognizing epistemological "no-go zones," which means that true preservation sometimes requires institutionalizing the right to remain hidden.

6. CONCLUSION

The Devta tradition of Kullu District exemplifies one of the world's most enduring, dynamic, and fiercely preserved systems of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This qualitative study shows that the *Goor* and the ritual functionaries who work with them are not just practicing a religion; they are also actively using a very localized way of knowing that combines oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, ecological wisdom, and traditional craftsmanship.

The results contest the portrayal of indigenous communities as passive victims of modernity. Instead, the Kullu village ecosystem reveals a community exercising profound epistemic sovereignty—strategically safeguarding its internal gift economy, managing graded access to sacred knowledge, and actively grappling with the internal challenges of intergenerational transmission in a rapidly secularizing world.

For sociologists, anthropologists, and policymakers involved with these living traditions, the theoretical necessity is evident. We need to broaden our frameworks to officially acknowledge "Ritual Stakeholders" whose authority surpasses secular metrics. To protect this rich, intangible heritage, we don't need to put it in state archives or make it visible. True protection means helping the community's own ways of passing on knowledge, respecting their traditional legal boundaries, and recognizing that the local community and their Devtas have the sole right to protect, change, or keep this heritage secret.

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