

From Oral Memory to Institutional Recognition: A Historical Study of Bnei Menashe Identity Formation

Kshetrimayum Malemngamba Singh, Rajneesh Kumar Gupta

Doctoral Scholar at Centre for Diaspora Studies, Central University of Gujarat
Associate Professor at Centre for African Studies, School of International Studies, JNU

ABSTRACT

The Bnei Menashe of Northeast India have attracted sustained scholarly attention, largely framed around debates concerning origins, authenticity, and religious legitimacy. While existing studies have provided valuable ethnographic, theological, and institutional insights, they have often approached Bnei Menashe identity as a claim to be verified rather than as a historical process to be explained. This article advances a different analytical perspective by examining the historical formation of Bnei Menashe identity through the interaction of oral memory, colonial and missionary encounters, religious reformulation, and institutional mediation. Drawing on memory studies, constructivist diaspora theory, and postcolonial analyses of knowledge and recognition, the study traces how dispersed oral narratives concerning migration and ancestry were gradually reconfigured into a coherent identity capable of institutional recognition. It argues that oral memory functioned as a dynamic historical practice, continually reshaped in response to changing epistemic and political conditions, rather than as a static repository of ancestral truth. The article further demonstrates that recognition by religious and state institutions did not simply affirm identity but transformed it, standardizing narratives and practices within regulated frameworks of belonging. By reframing the Bnei Menashe case from questions of authenticity to processes of historical formation, the study contributes to broader debates on diaspora, memory, and the governance of identity in postcolonial and transnational contexts.

Keywords :

Bnei Menashe; oral memory; identity formation; recognition politics; colonial knowledge; Jewish diaspora; Northeast India

INTRODUCTION:

The Bnei Menashe are a community from Northeast India, primarily from Mizoram and Manipur, who claim descent from the biblical Tribe of Menashe—one of the “lost tribes” exiled by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE. They emerge from among the broader Chin–Kuki–Mizo peoples, who are collectively referred to by many within the community as Zo. The term Zo has gained increasing acceptance as a self-designation because there is no single universally agreed-upon

Address for correspondence : Kshetrimayum Malemngamba Singh
Doctoral Scholar at Centre for Diaspora Studies,
Central University of Gujarat
Email: kshetrimayumsingh6521@gmail.com
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5419-2241>

© The Author(s) 2024. Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third-party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

For reprints contact: voiceforvoiceless2013@gmail.com

Received	Reviewed	Accepted	Published
02-June-2025	27-Sept.-2025	22-Oct.-2025	01-Dec.-2025

Volume	Issue	December	ISSN
No. 7	No. 2	2025	2583-1852(P), 2584-0878(O)

How to Cite this Article: Singh, Kshetrimayum Malemngamba. & Gupta, Rajneesh Kumar. From Oral Memory to Institutional Recognition: A Historical Study of Bnei Menashe Identity Formation. THE THIRD VOICE REALITY AND VISION. 2025. Vol No-7. Issue No-2. December. Pp: 48-60, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19411893>

ACCESS THIS ARTICLE ONLINE

Quick Response Code:



Available online at :

thirdvoice.voiceforvoiceless.in

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19411893>

Article No - TVRV00096

nomenclature encompassing the Chin, Kuki, and Mizo groups across India and Myanmar. Within this larger Zo population, only certain sections adopted Judaizing practices and articulated claims of Israelite descent. It is these Judaizing Zo groups who came to be known as Shinlung/Bnei Menashe.

Their claim to Israelite ancestry rests on oral traditions and ritual practices interpreted as echoes of biblical heritage. The Sikipui festival, for example, is associated with a memory of crossing the Red Sea, while the invocation of “Menasseh” in moments of danger is understood as a remnant of tribal identity (Hmar, 2019). Over time, these narratives formed the foundation of their aspiration for Aliyah—immigration to Israel. Recognition of the Bnei Menashe as Jews has been highly contested and politicized. In 2005, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, designated them as Zera Yisrael (“seed of Israel”), enabling immigration under special provisions (Parfitt, 2024). This decision was not grounded in genetic validation—DNA studies found no direct link to other Jewish populations—but in sustained Judaizing practices, oral tradition, and political advocacy by religious-Zionist organizations (Devir, 2017). The contrast with groups such as the Lemba of southern Africa—who possess genetic markers associated with Jewish populations yet remain unrecognized—underscores that Jewish identity is shaped not solely by ancestry, but through religious, institutional, and political validation (Parfitt & Semi, 2013).

Today, the Bnei Menashe population is estimated at approximately 10,500, with more than 4,500 settled in Israel and around 6,500 awaiting Aliyah (Schejter et al., 2023). Migration requires preparatory religious training, Hebrew instruction, and demonstration of knowledge of Jewish law. Upon arrival, immigrants enter absorption centers and undergo formal Orthodox conversion. NGOs such as Shavei Israel have played a central role in facilitating this process (Egorova, 2016).

The Bnei Menashe have consequently become a prominent case in Jewish studies, diaspora studies, and the anthropology of religion. Existing scholarship has documented their religious transformation, migration trajectories, and encounters with rabbinic authorities,

NGOs, and the Israeli state. Much of this literature, however, approaches their identity through questions of authenticity, conversion, and recognition—treating Jewishness primarily as a claim to be evaluated.

This article shifts the focus from authenticity to historical formation. It argues that Bnei Menashe identity is not an ancestral essence awaiting confirmation, but a historically constituted process shaped by oral memory, colonial and missionary encounters, postcolonial transformations, religious reformulation, and institutional mediation. Rather than asking whether the Bnei Menashe are “really” Jewish, the study examines how narratives of belonging emerged, gained coherence, and became institutionally recognizable.

Drawing on secondary literature—including ethnography, historical scholarship, and analyses of institutional discourse—the article adopts a historical-interpretive approach attentive to process, contingency, and power. Colonial governance and missionary activity introduced classificatory regimes that privileged written scripture, genealogy, and linear historical reasoning over oral tradition. These epistemic hierarchies persisted into postcolonial regimes of recognition, shaping how religious and state institutions evaluate belonging. Recognition thus operated simultaneously as inclusion and governance: it enabled migration and citizenship while regulating identity through conversion requirements, legal categories, and bureaucratic procedures.

By conceptualizing identity as a dynamic product of interaction between community agency and institutional power, this study contributes to broader debates on diaspora, memory, and recognition. The Bnei Menashe case demonstrates how imagined homelands are historically constructed and how recognition both enables and constrains belonging. In doing so, the article advances a process-oriented framework for understanding how identities are produced, stabilized, and governed within postcolonial and transnational contexts structured by unequal regimes of knowledge and authority.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the emergence of Israelite ancestry claims among the Bnei Menashe of Northeast India. This literature spans

anthropology, Jewish studies, migration studies, and religious sociology, and has been instrumental in bringing the community into academic visibility. Yet it reflects distinct analytical orientations—some privileging cultural comparison and memory, others emphasizing religious transformation and institutional mediation, and still others situating the Bnei Menashe within global debates on “lost tribes.” A critical engagement with these strands reveals both their contributions and their limitations.

One influential line of scholarship focuses on indigenous intellectual production and the construction of Israelite ancestry through oral history, ritual memory, and material culture. Zaithanchhungi (1990) represents one of the earliest and most significant indigenous voices articulating a Mizo–Israelite connection. Drawing from village elders, ritual chants, sacrificial customs, and symbolic motifs, she identifies parallels interpreted as evidence of descent from Manasseh. Her reading of the “dog ate the script” legend as a metaphor for the loss of Torah, and her comparison between the Mizo Naupuakpuan shawl and the Jewish tallit, illustrate how material symbols become sites of identity-making. Jenkins (2019) demonstrates that Zaithanchhungi’s work shaped not only local discourse but also Israeli rabbinical deliberations during the 2004–2005 recognition process. Carmichael (2025) similarly characterizes these traditions as a “living archive,” suggesting that memory operates as an alternative mode of historiography.

By contrast, Parfitt (2013) argues that Lost Tribes narratives in Northeast India emerged through missionary mediation and were later appropriated by local actors. From this perspective, Israelite identification reflects modern religious encounter rather than ancient continuity. Across these debates, however, a common analytical orientation persists: the privileging of verification. Whether through theology, genetics, or rabbinic authority, much of the literature implicitly asks whether Bnei Menashe descent claims are authentic. Oral traditions are evaluated for plausibility, genetic studies are invoked to confirm or deny ancestry, and institutional rulings are treated as final arbiters of belonging.

A second strand of scholarship emphasizes religious transformation. Weil’s (2003) “dual conversion” model proposes that the Shinlung/Bnei Menashe moved first from indigenous religion to Christianity and subsequently from Christianity to Judaism in a process of re-traditionalization. Weil (2004, 2016) further argues that Judaization synthesizes biblical motifs, local myths, and geopolitical imaginaries—particularly Israel as homeland—into a new ethnic-religious identity. Samra (1996) traces this second conversion to the prophetic revelations of Challianthanga (Pu Chala), whose emphasis on Sabbath observance and ritual reform initially operated within a Christian framework before crystallizing into a distinctly Jewish orientation. Hmar (2019) situates these developments within broader religious imagination and socio-economic hardship, noting how biblical notions of chosenness and promised land resonated with the Chin–Kuki–Mizo experience.

A third body of work foregrounds institutional mediation and transnational networks. Samra (2019) documents interactions with Amishav, Shavei Israel, and key rabbinic figures such as Rabbi Avichail and Rabbi Amar, demonstrating how legitimacy, conversion, and aliyah became tied to bureaucratic procedures and geopolitical considerations. Weil (2016) highlights how organizations translate local identity claims into globally recognized Jewish categories, facilitating migration while imposing Orthodox frameworks. Parfitt (2024) situates the Bnei Menashe within a global category of “new Jews,” mediated by NGOs and religious activism, while Elazar (2023) argues that Zionism has transformed Lost Tribes narratives into projects of recognition and settlement that often reproduce hierarchical distinctions between established and “outsider” Jews.

Despite their differences, these strands frequently treat identity as a claim to be evaluated rather than as a historical process to be explained. This study departs from that verification-centered orientation. Instead of adjudicating authenticity, it examines how Bnei Menashe identity emerged, gained coherence, and became institutionally consequential over time. Three interrelated theoretical perspectives guide this approach: memory studies, constructivist diaspora theory, and postcolonial analyses of knowledge and recognition.

From the perspective of memory studies, oral traditions are understood not as static survivals but as historically situated practices. Halbwachs (2020) argues that collective memory is socially framed and continually reconstructed in light of present conditions. Applied to the Bnei Menashe, this perspective highlights how narratives of migration, exile, and ancestry were reshaped through missionary education, colonial classification, and engagement with Jewish institutions. Memory becomes a dynamic resource through which belonging is negotiated rather than a fixed archive of historical fact.

Constructivist approaches to diaspora further help explain this process. Classical diaspora models assume dispersion from a clearly identifiable homeland accompanied by sustained collective memory. The Bnei Menashe case complicates this assumption. For much of their history, the Kuki–Chin–Mizo peoples understood themselves through indigenous cosmologies and later Christian frameworks. Israelite motifs existed as diffuse references—such as memories of Manmasi—but did not initially constitute a coherent ethnic narrative. Only in the mid-twentieth century were these fragments consolidated into a unified story of descent from the Tribe of Manasseh. Benedict Anderson’s (2006) notion of imagined communities clarifies how collective identity is sustained through shared narratives and ritual performance rather than genealogical continuity. Anthony D. Smith’s (1988) ethno-symbolist framework further explains how older myths and symbols are reinterpreted to construct modern ethnic identities

Postcolonial scholarship provides a critical framework for understanding how such identity claims become legible within regimes of recognition. The identification of the Bnei Menashe with Israelites can be understood as a form of historical reclamation shaped by colonial governance and missionary encounter. Colonial regimes introduced classificatory systems that privileged linear historical reasoning, written scripture, and documentary evidence over indigenous oral traditions. Within these epistemic hierarchies, tribal knowledge was frequently dismissed as anecdotal or emotional rather than rational or factual—a process described in discussions of tribal marginalization as

“epistemicide,” the systematic devaluation of indigenous modes of knowing (Bodhi & Jojo, 2019). These epistemic structures persisted into postcolonial regimes of recognition, where state and religious institutions evaluate belonging through their own interpretive frameworks (Bodhi & Jojo, 2019).

Recognition thus operates as a mode of governance. While it enables migration and citizenship, it simultaneously regulates identity through conversion requirements, bureaucratic procedures, and doctrinal standardization. These dynamic produces what may be termed epistemological mutation: the restructuring of communal self-understanding in order to align with dominant epistemic norms. Communities such as the Bnei Menashe therefore engage in strategic adaptation, translating their narratives into forms legible to hegemonic institutions. In this sense, knowledge production becomes inseparable from power.

By integrating these perspectives, this study conceptualizes Bnei Menashe identity formation as a layered historical process. Oral memory supplied narrative resources; colonial and missionary encounters reshaped epistemic legitimacy; and religious and state institutions translated claims into regulated categories of belonging. Identity emerges neither as a timeless inheritance nor as a mere fabrication, but as a negotiated outcome produced through interaction between community agency and institutional authority. In shifting attention from authenticity to historical formation, this framework reframes the Bnei Menashe case as a revealing instance of how identities are produced, stabilized, and governed within postcolonial and transnational contexts structured by unequal regimes of knowledge and power.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF ORAL MEMORY

Prior to colonial rule, societies inhabiting the hills of present-day Northeast India—particularly the Kuki–Chin–Mizo groups among whom the Bnei Menashe later emerged—were organized around kinship, clan affiliation, and customary authority. Political life was decentralized, with sovereignty exercised through village chiefs rather

than territorial states. Mobility was integral to social existence, shaped by shifting cultivation (jhum), ecological constraints, inter-group conflict, and strategic relocation. Villages functioned as autonomous units, and frequent movement in search of arable land contributed to social fragmentation and localized identities (Vumson, 1986). The absence of a sustained writing system meant that historical knowledge was transmitted primarily through oral forms. Although oral accounts refer to a “lost script,” written documentation only emerged following Christian conversion; much of the earlier record derives from colonial and missionary observers (Suantak, 1988). Linguistically and anthropologically, the Zo are classified within the Tibeto-Burman family, a position supported by genetic studies (Suantak, 2011).

Within this oral milieu, collective memory was expressed through ritual, genealogy, song, and storytelling rather than through linear chronicles or territorial historiography. A widely shared origin myth recounts emergence from a cave known as Chhinlung (Jinlung or Sinlung), preserved in songs and legends such as Tuanbia and recorded in colonial ethnographies (Das, 2021). While some narratives situate Chhinlung in regions of China and link migration to ancient Chinese imperial periods, such claims remain speculative in the absence of written corroboration (Gangte, 2010). These origin traditions emphasized social continuity, migration, and kinship solidarity rather than a singular homeland consciousness. In this precolonial orientation, belonging was relational and situational, not anchored in an enduring territorial return.

The later association of sections of the Chin–Kuki–Mizo peoples with the ancient Israelites exiled by the Assyrians in the seventh century BCE emerged within modern historical and religious discourse. Unlike the cave-origin narratives, the Israelite connection was not a continuous ancestral memory, but a reinterpretation shaped by new epistemic environments. Colonial administration and missionary pedagogy introduced classificatory regimes privileging scripture, literacy, and genealogy as markers of civilizational legitimacy. These epistemological hierarchies redefined what counted as authoritative knowledge and marginalized indigenous modes of remembering.

Missionary encounters in the mid-nineteenth century played a decisive role in this transformation. Protestant missionaries, highly successful in spreading Christianity in the region, drew parallels between local traditions and biblical narratives, framing indigenous motifs through scriptural lenses. Millenarian expectations and narratives of lost knowledge resonated with existing cultural themes of exile and restoration. Drawing on Scott’s (2009) work on Zomia, such heterodox religious movements can be understood as responses to state encroachment and coercive control. In this context, the Bible introduced by Baptist missionaries was sometimes perceived as the restoration of a lost sacred text, reinforcing the appeal of scriptural frameworks. While the majority of Mizoram and Manipur remained Christian, some groups adopted Judaism, forming the nucleus of what would later become the Bnei Menashe. Elazar (2023) situates this development within broader reactions to Indian state control in the 1960s, when religious reorientation provided an alternative idiom of identity and resistance.

Under these combined colonial and missionary pressures, oral memory underwent gradual reconfiguration. It did not vanish; rather, it adapted. Motifs of migration, loss, wandering, and the recovery of a sacred book acquired new significance because they could be aligned with biblical narratives of exile and redemption. Memory, in this sense, functioned not as a static archive but as a dynamic practice responsive to changing historical conditions. For marginalized communities navigating asymmetrical regimes of knowledge, the reframing of oral tradition offered a means of engaging institutions empowered to validate or exclude.

Central to this mnemonic transformation is the figure of Manmasi, remembered as an ancestral leader associated with migration and survival. Oral accounts describe a homeland to the west, a dramatic river crossing, prolonged wandering, and the loss of a sacred text to be restored in the future. Although the community historically lacked Torah scrolls or Hebrew manuscripts, these narratives were preserved through songs and ritual performance. Carmichael (2005) argues that such oral memory functions less as empirical documentation than

as a symbolic map sustaining belonging across temporal rupture. Klein (2000) further suggests that modern memory discourse “re-enchants” the past, sacralizing recollection and investing it with moral authority. The reinterpretation of Manmasi as the biblical Menashe exemplifies this process: an ancestral figure embedded in regional tradition is recast as a progenitor of ancient Israel, collapsing temporal distance and anchoring contemporary identity in sacred history.

The Sikipui festival provides a particularly illustrative case of mnemonic reinterpretation. Celebrated primarily by the Hmar subgroup as a spring harvest festival, Sikipui includes a ritual chant describing a great sea divided, communal peril, and divine guidance through cloud and fire—imagery reminiscent of the Exodus narrative (Exodus 14:1–31). While such motifs appear across various ethnic traditions in Northeast India and reflect shared experiences of migration and survival, Judaizing groups increasingly interpreted them through an explicitly biblical lens. Scholars such as Green (2014) caution that the identification of Sikipui with the Exodus depends upon prior assumptions of Israelite descent. Supporters nevertheless cite its ritual centrality as evidence of retained Israelite memory (Zaithanchhungi, 1990; Hmar, 2019). From an analytical standpoint, the significance lies not in proving historical continuity but in understanding how selective elements—particularly the motif of sea-crossing—were privileged to support claims of ancient origin.

Hendel’s (2001) concept of mnemohistory clarifies this dynamic. The biblical Exodus itself was never a fixed historical record, but a tradition repeatedly reshaped to address evolving theological and political concerns. In a similar fashion, the Bnei Menashe reinterpretation of Sikipui demonstrates how collective memory operates as a resource for identity construction. By aligning local ritual with sacred scripture, the community articulated a past that authorized contemporary aspirations for recognition and return. Cultural parallels documented by Zaithanchhungi (1990) between Mizo–Chin–Kuki festivals and Jewish holy days, along with references to pre-Christian monotheism, further illustrate how selective comparison functions symbolically rather than evidentially. Traditions were not

merely recalled but revalued, modified, and reclassified within a biblical framework.

By the late twentieth century, this mnemonic reinterpretation developed into organized religious reformulation. The Judaizing movement among Chin–Kuki–Mizo communities unfolded in two phases. The first, from the 1950s to early 1970s, combined Christian elements with pre-Christian practices and selected Old Testament observances, such as Sabbath-keeping. These early expressions were largely syncretic and locally interpreted. The second phase began in the 1970s, when contact with Jewish communities in Kolkata and Mumbai introduced normative rabbinic standards. Subsequent engagement with Rabbi Avichail and Israeli religious authorities accelerated the shift toward Orthodox Judaism. Ritual practice was standardized, genealogies systematized, and community members trained in rabbinic institutions, marking a transition from mnemonic flexibility to institutional legibility.

Engagement with transnational religious networks further consolidated this transformation. These networks provided symbolic authority and material support while simultaneously introducing hierarchies of authenticity. Identity narratives increasingly emphasized covenant, continuity, and ancestral return in forms resonant with global Jewish discourse. This process entailed both empowerment and constraint: it expanded access to transnational belonging while narrowing acceptable expressions of identity. Oral memory was not abandoned but disciplined and oriented toward recognition. Through these layered transformations—from precolonial oral consciousness to missionary reframing and organized Judaizing reformulation—Bnei Menashe identity emerged not as an inherited essence but as a historically produced formation shaped by shifting epistemic regimes and institutional mediation.

RELIGIOUS REFORMULATION AND INSTITUTIONAL MEDIATION

The transformation of Bnei Menashe identity from a localized origin narrative into an institutionally recognized Jewish category unfolded through a sustained interaction between internal religious reformulation and external gatekeeping authorities. During the late twentieth

century, segments of the community began articulating their identity explicitly in Jewish terms, adopting ritual observance, dietary laws, and calendrical practices aligned with normative Judaism. Local leaders reorganized oral traditions into standardized genealogical and theological forms that could be rendered legible to rabbinic and transnational religious institutions. Identity thus became institutionally actionable through translation into accepted religious and bureaucratic norms, reflecting both community agency and the structuring power of authoritative institutions.

This process must be situated within broader Zionist engagements with the idea of the Ten Lost Tribes. In the early twentieth century, figures such as Yitzhak Ben-Zvi explored Jewish communities in the Middle East and Central Asia, linking them to dispersed Israelite tribes in an effort to preserve Jewish heritage. By the late twentieth century, however, the focus shifted toward religious Zionist circles that framed the rediscovery of “lost” tribes as part of a messianic project of national and spiritual redemption. Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, active from the 1970s, identified communities including the Pashtun, Kashmiris, and Bnei Menashe as potential descendants of the Lost Tribes. Supported by religious Zionist leaders such as Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook and Rabbi Shlomo Goren, Avichail’s efforts were embedded within a theological narrative that linked reconnection with lost tribes to biblical prophecy and historical continuity (Elazar, 2023). What began as marginal speculation gradually gained traction within certain religious-nationalist circles.

Direct institutional mediation began in 1979, when Bnei Menashe groups distancing themselves from Christianity came under the influence of Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail and his organization, Amishav (“My People Returns”). Avichail’s mission was to identify and reconnect “lost” Jewish tribes with mainstream Judaism and facilitate their return under the Law of Return. His suggestion in 1980 that the community adopt the name “Children of Menasseh” provided a formal Judaic framework for their identity. Subsequent visits to Manipur and Mizoram, along with the distribution of ritual items and opportunities for religious training in Israel, institutionalized this connection (Weil, 2003;

Thangtungnung, 2015). Parallel efforts by Michael Freund through Shavei Israel further expanded this mediation. However, tensions emerged between Amishav and Shavei Israel over funding from Christian organizations, reflecting broader dilemmas regarding ideological purity and financial pragmatism (Halkin &Thangiom, 2022). Shavei Israel has been criticized for favoring those close to its leadership in the aliyah process, while sidelining Bnei Menashe members historically aligned with Avichail’s Amishav, effectively creating a monopoly over immigration pathways. It was only in November 2025 that the state government formally handed responsibility for Bnei Menashe aliyah to the Jewish Agency, marking a significant institutional shift (Business Standard, 2025)

Early interactions with established Jewish communities in India reveal both partial inclusion and boundary enforcement. While some students from Northeast India studied alongside Bene Israel Jews in Bombay and received limited institutional support (Weil, 2003), others encountered exclusion, as in the 1996 incident when Shinlung members in New Delhi were not counted toward a minyan due to lack of formal conversion. These encounters reinforced the centrality of recognized conversion pathways in determining legitimacy. By the 1970s and 1980s, deputations to Israeli authorities and appeals to Prime Minister Golda Meir signaled a deliberate effort to secure recognition, while religious training in Israel further aligned communal practice with Orthodox norms.

Organizations such as Amishav and Shavei Israel operated within a messianic Orthodox framework that regarded the return of “lost Jews” as part of a divine plan for redemption. Integration was structured around Hebrew acquisition, Orthodox ritual observance, and formal conversion, embedding Bnei Menashe identity within a specific interpretation of Jewish authenticity. As Charmé (2012) argues, this model privileged European-based Orthodox traditions and limited space for alternative expressions of Jewish culture. Recognition, in this context, did not celebrate diversity but sought conformity to established halakhic standards.

At the same time, these processes intersected with demographic and geopolitical concerns. Shavei Israel's alignment with the Chief Rabbinate ensured halakhic recognition while simultaneously contributing to broader objectives of strengthening Israel's Jewish population amid declining immigration and demographic competition (Charmé, 2012). Michael Freund framed immigration of communities such as the Bnei Menashe as a response to demographic imbalance, emphasizing national security and Jewish continuity. The positioning of Bnei Menashe migrants in areas such as Gush Katif—where they were described as replacements for Palestinian laborers—illustrates how religious inclusion intersected with territorial politics (Abu El-Haj, 2012). Recognition thus operated within intertwined theological and national frameworks.

Debates over genetics further underscores the politics of authenticity. The absence of genetic evidence linking the Bnei Menashe to Middle Eastern populations did not prevent their recognition as Zera Yisrael in 2005 by Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar, whose decision was grounded primarily in religious commitment rather than biological proof (Carmichael, 2025). By contrast, the Lemba, despite genetic studies identifying the Cohen Modal Haplotype, have not received comparable rabbinic recognition. David Goldstein (2008) cautions against reducing religious identity to DNA markers, and Kirsh (2021) similarly notes that genetic findings often reinforce rather than overturn institutional authority. These cases demonstrate that rabbinic interpretation, not genetic science, ultimately governs recognition.

Recognition of self-identifying Jewish groups without established documentary continuity remains mediated through institutional gatekeeping (Afsai, 2016). In Israel, Jewish identity is determined through a complex interplay of rabbinic authority, state policy, and political considerations. Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar's 2005 designation of the Bnei Menashe as Zera Yisrael acknowledged ancestral connection but did not confer full halakhic status; Orthodox conversion remained a prerequisite for immigration and citizenship. This graded recognition underscores how belonging operates along differentiated categories rather than simple inclusion or exclusion.

Theoretical perspectives on recognition clarify these dynamics. Charles Taylor (2021) conceptualizes identity as dialogical, formed through engagement with “significant others,” and distinguishes between equal dignity and recognition of difference. The Bnei Menashe sought not only formal inclusion but affirmation of their historical narratives as legitimate expressions of Jewish identity. Axel Honneth (1995) further identifies love, rights, and solidarity as spheres through which recognition enables self-realization. In this case, rabbinic endorsement provided legal and religious rights, while advocacy organizations affirmed communal worth within a broader redemptive narrative.

At a deeper level, these processes reflect what Michel Foucault describes as the productive nature of power embedded in knowledge regimes. Rabbinic authorities determined the criteria of valid religious truth, while local traditions were repositioned as incomplete until translated into Orthodox discourse. Power operated relationally: between secular state actors such as Interior Minister Avraham Poraz and religious authorities such as Rabbi Shlomo Amar; between advocacy organizations and governmental institutions; and between communal aspirations and institutional norms (Abu El-Haj, 2012). Identity was not discovered but produced within these intersecting structures.

Yet power was not unidirectional. The Bnei Menashe mobilized the Lost Tribes narrative strategically, engaging institutional frameworks while asserting agency in shaping their own historical claims. Recognition therefore generated ambivalent outcomes. It enabled migration, citizenship, and integration into global Jewish networks, transforming imagined affiliation into tangible belonging. Simultaneously, it subjected identity to regulation, surveillance, and normalization, narrowing acceptable forms of practice even as it expanded opportunity. Religious reformulation and institutional mediation thus reconfigured Bnei Menashe identity within a postcolonial and transnational landscape in which belonging is negotiated through structures of authority rather than inherited as immutable essence.

DISCUSSION: IDENTITY, POWER, AND RECOGNITION

For communities without a script or sustained written literary tradition, oral history serves as the

principal medium through which the past is reconstructed and transmitted. As James C. Scott suggests, where history is not fixed in written form it retains a degree of flexibility, whereas written texts function as authoritative benchmarks that stabilize interpretation by providing standards against which deviation can be measured. Among the Zo peoples—whose earliest written records were largely produced by colonial administrators, missionaries, and ethnographers—oral memory operated as an adaptive resource through which displacement, religious transformation, and aspiration were interpreted. When missionary education and colonial administration introduced new epistemic frameworks privileging scripture, literacy, and genealogy, oral traditions did not disappear; rather, they were reformulated in ways that rendered collective memory legible to transnational religious organizations, the Chief Rabbinate, and state institutions.

This transformation exposes the epistemological hierarchies embedded in regimes of recognition. Legitimacy was not determined solely by historical continuity but by the capacity to articulate identity in forms intelligible to authoritative institutions. The translation of memory into genealogical and textual language did not constitute fabrication; it reflected the uneven distribution of authority in defining valid knowledge. Memory became historically consequential insofar as it could be aligned with prevailing religious and institutional criteria.

Recognition as Jewish thus depended not only on descent claims but on the presentation of those claims within normative religious frameworks resonant with religious-national institutions. Numerous communities in Asia and Africa assert Israelite connections, yet many remain unrecognized; even groups such as the Lemba of southern Africa, despite genetic discussions linking them to Jewish ancestry, have not received formal recognition from Israeli religious authorities. Recognition operates through defined religious and institutional standards. The Bnei Menashe, whose organized Judaizing movement began in the 1970s, struggled for decades before being recognized in 2005 by the Sephardi Chief Rabbi as Zera Yisrael (“seed of Israel”), a decision

that facilitated their aliyah (Shashoua, 2016). Following sustained contact with mainstream Jewish institutions, they increasingly aligned their practices with normative Judaism, and Orthodox conversion in Israel became a prerequisite for citizenship, reflecting the authority of the Chief Rabbinate in matters of personal status law.

The institutional context within Israel further clarifies the regulatory dimension of recognition. The Chief Rabbinate controls marriage, burial, and other aspects of religious status, while the Law of Return (1950) grants automatic immigration and citizenship to Jews, with its 1970 amendment extending eligibility to certain non-Jewish family members. The Bnei Menashe were not automatically eligible under the Law of Return because their Jewish status lacked halakhic recognition, and their Aliyah was halted in 2003 by Interior Minister Avraham Poraz (Abu El-Haj, 2012). It was ultimately the Chief Rabbinate’s 2005 ruling recognizing them as Zera Yisrael that enabled their migration, subject to Orthodox conversion. Recognition therefore functioned not as a purely humanitarian gesture but as a mechanism embedded within institutional authority, defining criteria of belonging while simultaneously granting access to mobility and citizenship.

At the same time, the Bnei Menashe were not passive recipients of institutional power. By adapting ritual practice, standardizing narratives, and aligning their aspirations with established frameworks, they strategically positioned their claims within structures that regulate belonging in Israel. Religious organizations advocating on their behalf maintained ties with the Chief Rabbinate and segments of the religious-nationalist camp, including actors concerned with demographic and ideological consolidation. Through sustained lobbying and advocacy, organizations such as Amishav and Shavei Israel cultivated relationships with rabbinical courts, officials within the Interior Ministry, and political elites—including figures aligned with Benjamin Netanyahu—connections that proved central to advancing recognition and facilitating Aliyah (Devir, 2017). In this sense, recognition emerged through negotiation within unequal power relations rather than unilateral institutional benevolence.

The historical trajectory of the Bnei Menashe also complicates classical diaspora theory. Traditional diaspora models described by Safran, Clifford, or Cohen often assume a continuous homeland consciousness sustained through collective memory. By contrast, the first recorded claim linking the Zo people to Jewish identity emerged in 1951, and a more organized Judaizing movement developed only in the 1970s, followed by gradual interaction with mainstream Jewish institutions. Earlier origin myths located the Zo in sites such as Chhinlung/Shinlung, often identified with regions in China, whereas later narratives connected them to the northern Israelite tribes exiled by the Assyrians in the seventh century BCE. After nearly 2,700 years without documented continuity as Jews, they were recognized in 2005 as Zera Yisrael (Shashoua, 2016). Israel thus became meaningful as a homeland not through uninterrupted attachment but through narrative reinterpretation, religious reformulation, and institutional mediation. Homeland consciousness in this case was historically produced rather than merely preserved.

This trajectory must also be situated within a postcolonial framework. Colonial and missionary encounters reshaped the conditions under which history could be articulated by privileging scripture, literacy, and genealogy as markers of civilizational legitimacy. When missionaries arrived in Northeast India in the late nineteenth century, Zo communities were frequently portrayed as “tribal” and uncivilized due to shifting cultivation practices and the absence of a written script. Engagement with the Bible enabled reinterpretation of pre-Christian rituals and figures—such as “Manasseh”—within Old Testament narratives. Similarities between local practices and Exodus motifs were recast as signs of Israelite ancestry. This was not a sudden discovery but a gradual reconfiguration of memory in response to changing structures of power, later reinforced by efforts to conform to normative Judaism in pursuit of recognition. Despite formal recognition, the community continues to encounter suspicion and racialized challenges in Israel, underscoring that inclusion does not eliminate social hierarchy.

The regulatory character of recognition becomes clearer when viewed through Michel Foucault’s conception of power/knowledge. Institutional authorities determine what counts as valid religious truth, and subaltern forms of knowledge are reclassified as incomplete or deficient. The religious knowledge of the Bnei Menashe was treated as insufficient until translated into the authoritative discourse of organizations such as Shavei Israel, whose interpretation of Judaism became the legitimate framework through which recognition could be secured. Rabbinical courts, as gatekeepers of Jewish identity, issue rulings based on maternal descent or recognized conversion, decisions that determine who may marry, who belongs to the Jewish community, and who is entitled to religious burial (McGonigle & Herman, 2015). The Bnei Menashe achieved recognition not through genetic validation but through affirmative institutional endorsement by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, illustrating that Jewish identity is produced within institutional regimes rather than determined by biology alone.

At the same time, recognition has ongoing social consequences. Bnei Menashe migrants in Israel frequently adopt religious and social practices prevalent in the broader Orthodox environment, practices that are then transmitted back to communities in Manipur and Mizoram. Because these practices originate in Israel, they acquire enhanced legitimacy, and those who have undergone Orthodox normalization are often regarded as authoritative custodians of communal tradition (Elazar, 2023). Through this feedback loop, engagement with Israeli orthodoxy reshapes the Bnei Menashe as a Lost Tribe fashioned increasingly in the image of mainstream Judaism.

Jewish organizations themselves operate through divergent frameworks of recognition. Amishav ties legitimacy to Orthodox conversion, strict religious observance, and immigration to Israel, reinforcing halakhic authority and Zionist authenticity. American pluralist organizations, by contrast, emphasize sustaining Jewish life locally and valuing cultural diversity; groups such as Be’chol Lashon promote multiracial Jewish identity and inclusion. Concerns regarding immigrants

from the former Soviet Union who did not meet strict halakhic standards have further entrenched Orthodox insistence on conversion, a policy extended to the Bnei Menashe (Charmé,2012). Across these cases, recognition reveals the normative and hegemonic assumptions that structure definitions of “authentic” Judaism.

Ultimately, the Bnei Menashe case demonstrates that recognition is not an endpoint but an ongoing process. Recognition inaugurates new phases of regulation, negotiation, and adaptation within institutional frameworks. Identity continues to evolve as it interacts with religious authority, state governance, and everyday social practice. Memory, power, and institutional mediation remain intertwined, shaping not only who is recognized but how recognition itself is produced and sustained.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the historical formation of Bnei Menashe identity by moving beyond debates over authenticity and origin to focus on the processes through which belonging was produced, stabilized, and institutionally recognized. Rather than treating identity as a fixed inheritance, the study has approached it as a historically constituted phenomenon shaped by oral memory, colonial and missionary encounters, religious reformulation, and institutional mediation. In doing so, it situates the Bnei Menashe within broader debates on diaspora, memory, and recognition.

A central argument has been that oral memory functioned as a dynamic and adaptive practice. Narratives of migration, loss, and ancestry were not static survivals of an ancient past but resources through which the community interpreted changing historical conditions. Under colonial governance and missionary influence, new epistemic hierarchies privileged written scripture, genealogy, and linear history. Within this transformed landscape, Israelite descent narratives emerged as historically situated responses to new regimes of knowledge and authority.

Religious reformulation and institutional mediation were crucial in translating memory into

recognized belonging. The adoption of Jewish ritual practice, standardized genealogies, and formal conversion procedures rendered identity claims legible to religious and state authorities. Recognition thus operated simultaneously as inclusion and governance: it enabled migration and citizenship while regulating identity through legal, bureaucratic, and religious norms.

The Bnei Menashe case also contributes to diaspora studies by demonstrating that homeland consciousness can be historically produced rather than continuously preserved. Israel became meaningful as an ancestral homeland through processes of reinterpretation and institutional recognition. More broadly, the study shows that identity formation in postcolonial contexts unfolds within unequal regimes of knowledge and power. The significance of the Bnei Menashe experience lies not in verifying descent, but in explaining how particular narratives became socially effective and institutionally consequential. Identity, as this case demonstrates, is historically made through the interaction of memory, power, and institutions.

FUNDING :

The authors received no financial support for this “research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

COMPETING INTEREST :

The authors declare no competing interests.

REFERENCE :

1. Abu El-Haj, N. (2012). *The genealogical science: The search for Jewish origins and the politics of epistemology*. University of Chicago Press.
2. Afsai, S. (2016). Nigeria’s Igbo Jews: Jewish identity and practice in Abuja. *Anthropology Today*, 32(2), 14–17.
3. Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso.
4. Business Standard. (2025, November 25). Israel clears proposal to bring remaining 5,800 Jews from India’s northeast. Business Standard. <https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/israel-clears-proposal-to>

- bring-remaining-5-800-jews-from-india-s-northeast-125112500782_1.html
5. Carmichael, A. J. (2025). Lost tribes of Israel: A journey of adventure in history, myth, and memory [E-book]. AJ Carmichael.
 6. Charmé, S. Z. (2012). Newly found Jews and the politics of recognition. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80(2), 387–410.
 7. Das, N. K. (2021). Indigeneity, cultural memory, and hybrid identity: Politics of ‘belonging’ among Zomi–Chin-Kuki people of India–Myanmar borderlands. In *Cross-fertilizing roots and routes: Identities, social creativity, cultural regeneration and planetary realizations* (pp. 217–242). Springer Singapore.
 8. Devir, N. P. (2017). *New children of Israel: Emerging Jewish communities in an era of globalization*. University of Utah Press.
 9. Egorova, Y. (2016). Lost Tribes communities, Israel, and notions of Jewishness. In T. Parfitt & N. Fisher (Eds.), *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and emerging Jewish communities in a globalized world* (pp. 36–48). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
 10. Elazar, G. (2023). Finding lost Jews in Asia: The search for restored authenticity and the rewriting of Zionist history. In R. Kowner (Ed.), *Jewish communities in modern Asia: Their rise, demise and resurgence*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009162609>
 11. Gangte, R. S. (2010). Understanding Kuki since primordial time: Essays (A. K. Singh & P. M. Gangte, Eds.; 1st ed.). Maxford Books.
 12. Goldstein, D. B. (2008). *Jacob’s legacy: A genetic view of Jewish history*. Yale University Press.
 13. Green, D. B. (2014, March 30). This day in Jewish history 2005: Sephardi Chief Rabbi recognizes ‘Lost Tribe’ of Indian Jews. *Haaretz*. <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2014-03-30/ty-article/2005-lost-indian-tribe-recognized/0000017f-dc41-db22-a17f-fcf18c540000>
 14. Halbwachs, M. (2020). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1950)
 15. Hendel, R. (2001). The exodus in biblical memory. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 120(4), 601–622. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3268262>
 16. Hmar, L. (2019). Jewish movement among the Chin-Kuki-Mizo. *MZU Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 45–56.
 17. Honneth, A. (1995). *The fragmented world of the social: Essays in social and political philosophy*. State University of New York Press.
 18. Jenkins, L. D. (2019). *Religious freedom and mass conversion in India*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
 19. Kirsh, N., & Hashiloni-Dolev, Y. (2022). mtDNA tests as a vehicle for Jewish recognition of Former Soviet Union Israeli citizens: Religious and political debate. *BioSocieties*, 17, 461–484. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41292-021-00228-6>
 20. Klein, K. L. (2000). On the emergence of memory in historical discourse. *Representations*, 69, 127–150. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902903>
 21. McGonigle, I. V., & Herman, L. W. (2015). Genetic citizenship: DNA testing and the Israeli Law of Return. *Journal of Law and the Biosciences*, 2(2), 469–478. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jlb/lsv027>
 22. Parfitt, T. (2024). The new Jews and Zionism. In *Routledge handbook on Zionism* (pp. 489–502). Routledge.
 23. Parfitt, T., & Semi, E. (2013). *Judaizing movements: Studies in the margins of Judaism in modern times*. Routledge.
 24. Samra, M. (1996). Buallawn Israel: The emergence of a Judaizing movement in Mizoram, Northeast India. In L. Olson (Ed.), *Religious change, conversion and culture* (Sydney Studies in Society and Culture, Vol. 12). University of Sydney.
 25. Samra, M. (2019). The Benei Menashe: Choosing Judaism in Northeast India. *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, 12, 45–56.
 26. Schejter, A. M., Shomron, B., Abu Jafar, M., Abu-Kaf, G., Mendels, J., Mola, S., Shacham, M., Sharha, A., & Tirosch, N. (2023). The Bnei Menashe immigrant community. In A. M. Schejter et al., *Digital capabilities: ICT adoption in marginalized communities in Israel and the West Bank* (pp. 185–197). Palgrave Macmillan.
 27. Shashoua, G. (2016). Messianic religious Zionism and the Lost Tribes: The case of the Bene Menashe. In T. Parfitt & N. Fisher (Eds.), *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and emerging Jewish communities in a*

- globalized world (pp. 282–292). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
28. Smith, A. D. (1988). *The ethnic origins of nations*. Wiley-Blackwell.
 29. Suantak, B. S. (1988). *The making of the Zo: The Chin of Burma and the Lushai and Kuki of India through colonial and local narratives 1826–1917 and 1947–1988* (Doctoral dissertation, University of London).
 30. Suantak, J. (2011). Inferences from analyzing the traditional and scientific data in the process of tracing genesis. In N. Haokip & M. Lunminthang (Eds.), *Kuki society: Past, present, future* (1st ed., pp. 29–81). Maxford Books.
 31. Taylor, C. (2021). The politics of recognition. In *Campus wars* (pp. 249–263). Routledge.
 32. Thangtungnung, H. (2015). Ethnic history and identity of the Zo tribes in North East India. *Journal of North East India Studies*, 5(1), 39–50.
 33. Weil, S. (2003). Dual conversion among the Shinlung of North-East India. *Studies of Tribes and Tribals*, 1(1), 43–57.
 34. Weil, S. (2004). Lost Israelites from the Indo-Burmese borderlands: Re-traditionalisation and conversion among the Shinlung or Bene Menasseh. *The Anthropologist*, 6(3), 219–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09720073.2004.11890864>
 35. Weil, S. (2016). The unification of the Ten Lost Tribes with the Two “Found” Tribes. In T. Parfitt & N. Fisher (Eds.), *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and emerging Jewish communities in a globalized world* (pp. 25–35). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
 36. Zaithanchhungi. (1990). *Israel-Mizo identity*. St. Joseph’s Press.

