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The Darlong Folk Literature: A Study on Deification of Characters in the Oral Narratives of the Darlong People during the Pre-Christianisation Period

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Abstract:

The objective of the paper is to study the paradigm of canonization in the oral narratives of the Darlong community aiming not at identifying the pattern. The materials of the article are primarily based on the oral tradition and orature collected among the community men and women in addition to the few documentations made in vernacular by different literary interested personage. The article trace diverge characterization as delineated in the folk narratives of the Darlong. The momentum of the canonization culminates in when deeds of the hero that are elements of crime in today's perspective are hailed by the people thereby capturing many of their old practices. In the mean time, certain characters are exalted to the state of deity eventually perpetuating them.

1. Introduction to the Study

The Darlong of Tripura belonged to one among the many communities of the Kuki-Chin group who are also known under the nomenclature of 'Zo-Hnathla'¹ or 'Zo mi'. "The Kukis are one of the autochthonous tribes of Tripura. According to the 1971 census, the Kuki population in Tripura was only 7,775 persons. They are tenth in the numerical position among the 19 scheduled Tribes of Tripura. They do not call themselves as Kukis but Hre-em. The Cacharis called them 'Lushais' and the Manipuri called them 'Khongjais'. In the early Sanskritik texts they have been recorded as 'Kirats' and in the Chin Hills and Burma border all their clans are known as 'Chins'. The Kukis are also known as 'Darlong' in present state of Tripura² who are also called 'Sikam' by the Tripuris. The Kukis of Tripura may broadly be divided into two major groups like 'Darlong Kukis' and 'Rokhum Kukis'. According to them, the Darlong are 'Hmar Mi' meaning 'Men of North' while the Rokhum are known as 'Sim Mi' meaning 'Men of South'. The Kukis belonged to the Mongoloid racial stock having a short, sturdy feature of men with a goodly development of muscle" (Singh. 8). The exact origin of the Tribe cannot be trace due to the lack of adequate account, clues of their historical past or authentic monuments except from the late 19th century onwards. At the same time, there are several interpretations made both in documents and verbal from rational as well as irrational imagination only to leave a question mark. Presently, the Darlongs, whose population have yet not cross the mark of ten thousands till today, mainly are concentrated in the North district (recently split into Unakuti and North) touching the border of Dhalai district of Present Tripura as can be seen in the figure below.



Figure 1: Picture showing the map of North District of Present Tripura (India)

1. Descendents of progenitor Zo.
2. North Eastern state of India.

1.1. Nomenclature

In regard to the nomenclature adapted by the Kuki-Chin groups, a web source stated that “Zo mi’ is the name of a major tribe found in various parts of South and South East Asia. They are a tribe of larger ethnic group which Britishers called Chin in Myanmar and Kuki in Manipur and Lushai in Mizoram which is why they are also known as Kuki-Chin group. They are found to have been geographically concentrated in such locations as the Tonzang district, the Tedim district (both in Burma), the north-east of Mizoram, the Naga Hills, the Somra Tracts, the Hkamti district, the Kale-Kabaw valley and the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. The close ethnicity is proved by the peculiarity that though variations in dialects exist, the ‘Zo mi’ unlike other tribes can converse with one another in their respective dialects with 70% comprehension. The ‘Zo’ people have common primordial name, common history, cultural affinities, belief system, economic life, and cherished the dream of restoring their glorious past”. As a result, there are many common stories, songs, riddles and legendary tales shared by them “though the names under which the various personages figure in them are not always the same” (Shakespeare. 91). Thus, the chain of their relationship is circumscribed not only by geographical bounds, but more often by racial unity.

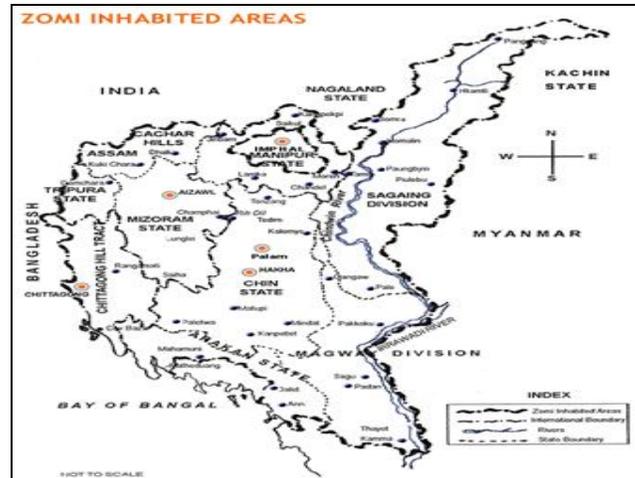


Figure 2: Picture showing the map of the ‘Zo Mi’ past inhabited territories

2. Deification in the Darlong Narratives

In the Darlong people, characters such Liandoi Brothers, Sulhlutea, Pangama, Thuitlingi, Kungawri, Tualvungi, Zawlpala and many others portrayed as heroes and heroine in the folk narratives of the tribe are today label as legend but are of orphan background who eventually overcome their respective adversaries. In the story of ‘Thangsua Puan’, the central figure was an orphan, who suffered much in the hand of his step-mother³. The torture went on to the extent of expelling him from his father’s home. The father never had any say on the boy being torture that sowed a seed of hatred against him in the mind of his son. The boy later grew up to become a wealthy man by marrying the daughter of a wealthy man in the adjacent village. Fate at the same time played a cruel role when famine strike the whole of the territory that compelled the cast away father and mother to go in searching op their survival where they eventually end up at the hand of vengeance. The son then evened the score by avenging his father and step mother for their action upon him. He tied up his father on the neck and step mother on her waist to a bull letting it run randomly. Similarly, in the story of ‘Naipathakboia’⁴, the characters are ruthless and their actions have no touch of conscience where father banished his two sons at the expense of his second wife. As a result, they had to wander through a dense forest and jungle to find their path where the elder brother transformed himself into a ‘Vapual’⁵ as a reaction of eating the eggs. The younger brother later met a happy ending when his marriage took place with a daughter of a wealthy man ornamented by the visit of his elder brother in bird form when he threw his feathers upon his younger brother as a sign of his blessing. The father, on the other hand, asked for the same to his elder son who instead of feathers excreted upon him that eventually becomes the cause of his dead in the end of the story. As a result of the insult, the father went back home in shame only to murder his wife. Despite the crime committed by the characters mentioned above, the Darlongs do not demoralized but instead deificated them whose act and conduct are replicated to the utmost. For instance, the ‘Puan’ or cloak wore after by the murderer after treacherous incident in the story of ‘Thangsua Puan’ is considered to be one of the most valuable gifts by the people and usually given to someone to proclaim or acknowledge one’s accomplishment. The term ‘Thangsua’ when translated in to English stands for ‘done with one’s purpose’. Similarly, Elder Liandoi murdered his father-in-law on the very day of his marriage with the daughter just because of the latter’s comment on the Liandoi’s poverty. In the pre 1919⁶ Darlong community, the philosophy of ‘eye for an eye’ was prominent or rather admired by the people that led to the cultivation of modern crime as rituals or cultural relativity act. Further, since the tribe was nomad like moving from one place to another and consistently fighting against other ethnic tribes, orphan must

3. Polygamy was once a socially sanctioned practice among the tribe.

4. One who exiled out his son.

5. Name of a bird common in the contemporary time.

6. The year of embracing Christian as a religion by the tribe.

have been the contemporary trend prevailing among them where they had to oversee every hardship and treacherous task to ensure their survival. Thus, when those characters are deployed to actions they are detached from mercy and other abstract for neither have they taste or learned to exhibit one.

Secondly, the infamous act of head hunting and others was another platform of transcendentalism. In one of the folksongs, 'Tuaizama'⁷ was recorded as having being slain by his enemy while hunting heads while his compatriot 'Chinhangang'⁸ narrowly escape because of his cunningness. The song was in praise of Tuiazam's courage, daring and expression of heartfelt sorry on the loss. The very act was performed as a ritual to offer a blood sacrifice to their ancestors. In other cases, head-hunting was also carried out when the chief passed away. Soldiers go out to hunt heads in order to bury them alongside their dead chief so that the chief can summon over those souls in the 'Thikhua' i.e. the abode of dead. According to them, in doing so, the glory and greatness of the chief was sowed beyond the reach of this mortal world. "Record has it that in the Jamatia⁹ Revolt of 1863 against the Manikya Ruler¹⁰, six hundreds Kukis were sent to fight against the two hundreds Jamatia Rebel who beheaded all the rebels and captured Parikshit, the leader of the revolt. The Kukis also brought all the female of Jamatia Tribe as a gift and slaves for the Manikya King. The Darlong were deployed in the fight and it was the last of their cruel headhunting game" (L. Darlong 168). According to C. Thuandinga Darlong, "a person must prove his worth by beheading his enemy and drinking his blood. In the process, the person would take the head and called upon his own name thrice so that the slain would remember his master when the former die or reach the 'Thikhua' or the abode of dead". Thus, these great hunters are exalted to the rank known as 'Ratha'¹¹ who are license to ascend at 'Pialral'¹² that was contemplated to be located beyond the abode of dead.

There are also stories where women characters are the face of evil. In the story of 'Naipathakboia', when the two brothers were lost in a jungle, the elder brother transformed himself into a bird. The bird then leads the path of the younger brother where he came across a tree own by a witch which in the vernacular was called 'Tairamnu'. The term specifically codes a woman character having the features of witch as in the English fairy tale 'Hansel and Gretel' when interpreted. Stories like 'Tlumtea', 'Sulhlutea'¹³, legendary story of 'Mairinthanga', 'Parual Sarika' and other all portrayed woman characters in the same scenario such as witches, protector of devilish villain like 'Muraitepu', 'Bakvomtepu' etal. In the story of 'Sulhlutea', when the hero 'Sulhlutea' take up the journey to avenge the murderer of his father, an old lady act as a protector who made several attempt to to break the hero's bow during his stay at her house before the fight. The old lady had success with the father of 'Sulhlutea' and his brothers who are then eaten up by 'Bakvomtepu'¹⁴. Her failure signifies the triumph of men over women. This, perhaps, was because of the fact that the Darlong society in the pre 1919, was strongly a male dominating society where every of the women actions are dictations of their men. Again, when we alternate the angle of our observation the old lady may not exactly be the kind of character as portrayed in the narratives. In the story of 'Tlumtea', we find the desperate love of the same old lady who captured the hero in the fear of being snatched away by other. At other instances, they may also have been miserable old women who are cast out from the contemporary society. As a matter of fact, strangers in the guise of an old lady has become a fear psychosis for the children even in modern times and exhibiting the character as an evil deity simultaneously. However, the narratives also juxtaposed evil with good in the figure of 'Khuachultenu'¹⁵, 'Fapite'¹⁶, 'Lasiri and Lasara'¹⁷, and others.

Lastly, canonization was also sanctioned in the affair of hearts. The famous story of 'Hrangsuana' and 'Chawngmawii' is another mention worthy narrative of the tribe. In the story, the former and the latter are lovers where 'Hrangsuana' meet his beloved every night and day. However, unfortunate enough petty war broke out between the two villages resulting in the restriction of the lovers' usual meeting. As a consequence, 'Hrangsuana' had to make a secret visit every night to his beloved where he frequently abduct every child whoever see him going or coming. Peripetia arises when Chawngmawii's villagers discovered the missing of children and decided to make a curfew in the village night and day. Eventually, Hrangsuana was caught and beheaded along with his beloved. According to the tribe, the lovers then transformed themselves into a celestial body who are said to be seen in the western horizon towards the dawn, the hour believed to be the goodbye period between the lovers when they are in mortal world. "They meet periodically and believed that one who gets married exactly during the meeting period was fielded to be prosperous" (L. Darlong 136). The fact that the community festival called 'Tharlak Kut' evolves being occasioned till date was an extract from the story of 'Pangama' and 'Thuitlingi'. In the story, 'Pangama' defeated the physical world when he went into the abode of dead with his living body in pursuit of his beloved 'Thuitlingi'. The lovers could not make their union in the mortal world hence had to settled it in another world called the 'Lungsiat Tlang' or 'Lovers World' according to the tribe. Similar is the story of 'Zawlpala' and 'Tualvungi' where the lover had to bargain his beloved in a fear of losing his wife but only to end in the same fate. In the view

7. One among the Ratha.

8. One among the Ratha.

9. Ethnic tribe belonging to Austro-Asiatic racial stock.

10. Ruler of the then Tripura.

11. Legendary hunters.

12. The Darlong believed that there are three worlds beyond this physical world i.e. Thikhua, Pialral and Lungsiat Tlang.

13. Born out of gooseberry.

14. Batman.

15. Goddess of Nature.

16. Goddess of agricultural Bounty.

17. Goddess sisters of beauty and wealth. They are the two goddesses chased by the god of wine, Neithangzaia in the story bearing the goddesses name.

of the people, these lovers do not need any interpreter for communication and even the border of mortality and immortality could exercise no power upon them for their love was far powerful.

Despite the heart-warming thriller, the tribe was hit hard following the embracement of Christian Mission in 1919 with “the preaching of the gospel among the community men and women beginning as early as 1917 by person like ‘Darthanchhunga’, ‘Dohnuna’ and others” (L. Darlong 237). The tribe, at present, has also lost its historical past by transforming themselves. As a result, the early cultures and traditions have appeared to be savage in the modern time with the acceptance of western civilisation in addition to their changing environment that is in no way compatible with their past legacies. Nevertheless, one cannot underscore the important changes that have taken aftermath of the 1919.

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