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Folk Behaviour of the Darlong: Investigating the Buried Traditions of the Darlong Ethnicity from the Eye of 'Bukpui', a Traditional Institute of the Tribe

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Abstract:

The Darlong, belonging to one among the many communities of the 'Zo Hnathla' nomenclature, had dairies of folk behaviours to unfold. However, the tribe leaping over a vast ocean of time dropped almost their past cultures adopting a new one thereby leaving them almost in a state of vacuum. The materials of the article is primarily oral narrations collected from the tribesmen in addition to the secondary materials in a form of personal interviews and govt. as well as non-govt. records available at my disposal. 'Bukpui' was a traditional institute of the Tribe where the heritages are contained and preserved. The ethnic institute had been acting as a wagon train in carrying out the orature, artefact, the oral narratives and other bygone elements or traditions of the people as a whole in a varied form when writing and documentation was yet a mystery to them. However, 'Bukpui' failed to stand against the diverse cultural forces encountered by the people incourse of their voyages. Malsawma Darlong in his journal, 'Looking into the Transitional Paradigm of Darlong Traditional Institute from Bukpui to Church' remarks, "it is a matter of shame and emotional discourse that an institute which stood by the tribe throughout the vast ocean of different environmental metamorphosis have lost its values and significances to the people in the eclipse of the alien ideological confluences". Thus, the article attempts to draw an observation upon the images and imaginations of the people as quoted in the 'Bukpui' days.

Keywords: Darlong, Bukpui, imaging and imagining, traditions, buried

1. Bukpui, a Traditional Institute of the Darlong

The genesis of 'Bukpui' dates back to the ancestors' time though the chronological frame cannot be presented as the topic host ample of controversy. According to C. Thuamdinga Darlong, whose source I believe to be the most reliable in regard to the subject, the word 'Bukpui' was introduced after the Darlong war with the 'Pawi' tribe who were one of the most feared and ruthless plunderer of the forefathers' contemporary. Mr. Thuamdinga argues that the tribe, incourse of their migration to the present state of Tripura, took shelter in a mount called 'Arte Sertlang' meaning 'mount of finding baby cock' named after the incident of the tribe finding a baby cock as they enter the mount. There was a fierce war between the tribe of 'Pawi' and the 'Darlong' where the latter eventually won. After the victory over the 'Pawi' tribe, the need for unity and discipline among the youth was strongly felt by the elders in order to continue protecting themselves from their enemies. As a result of the psychosis, the grand institute 'Bukpui' was born. Mr. Thuamdinga further remarks that this was the same incident where the appellation 'Darlong' took bath named after the strategy applied by the Tribe to defeat their enemy. To him, 'Darlong' etymologically is a 'Pawi' language where 'Dar' means 'bell' and 'Long' means 'sound'. No doubt, there are other interpretations as well.

'Bukpui' in the early ages was a grand traditional house built in a structure of a dormitory where number of young boys and girls can accommodate themselves. It was a sort of a community hall having four sides, about 2/3 feet above the ground level climbed through a wooden staircase. The house consists of rectangularly long windows with a small gathering space at the front and at the back. Reaching a stipulated age, every youth was admitted to 'Bukpui'. In the process, the youths are enlightened with the rich customary heritage where faculty of manners, discipline, cooperation, unity, loyalty, trust, love, responsibilities etc. are given prime significance. The common people anchored themselves to the benevolence of 'Bukpui' for their welfare in every respect. For instance, whenever any calamities incurred harm in a village, it is said that 'Bukpui' members would go out and rendered help to the needy.



Figure 1: Picture showing a traditional house built in a format of the 'Bukpui'.

According to the elders, the stronger the 'Bukpui' the longer the village was believed to survive. It acted as an institute to the past carrying out the orature and literature of the tribe thereby sustaining them from being lost in the new environment. The religious priests, council of elders, and almost all the leaders are the graduates of 'Bukpui'.

At present, 'Bukpui' no longer exist in the Darlong villages except for the village called 'Muruai' which too is a modified version losing all of its ancestral touches but the name. The present 'Bukpui' is almost like what in present time is called 'community hall' for it no longer functions as neither a traditional institute nor learning centre as it does before.

2. Short Account of the Advent of Christianity

Several attempts had been made by the missionaries to spread the gospel of God in the North East India, but much could not be achieved due to strong objection from the people. "In the year 1890, J.H. Lorrain, a Baptist Missionary from London attempt to enter the present state of Tripura for twice but in vain. Eventually, under the initiative of Rev. W.R. Roberts, a renowned London based evangelist, 'Dohnuna' was sent to Tripura who stationed himself at 'Tlângsang' located in the present Jampui Hills of Tripura in 1917" (L. Darlong 229). As a consequence, Mr. Ngurkhuma Darlong, Mr. Ngurdingliana Darlong and Mr. Hmuna Darlong are some of the early Darlongs who first accepted Christianity. The new Christian had to undergo many hurdles and difficulties as they were despised, hate and discriminated by their other kinsmen especially from the chief. "The Christians were asked to abandon the village but they were willing to face the consequences then leaving the village. As a result, many of the Darlongs chief drove out the Christians from their respective villages. Thus, the Christians created a new village called 'Darchawi' where from they begin to spread the gospel" (L. Darlong 230). In this way, the Christian grew in numbers and celebrated their Darlong Christians Jubilee in the year 1969 and translated the Bible which was recently released. At present, the Darlong are confined into these denominations; i) The Baptist ii) Roman Catholic iii) United Pentecostal Church iv) Evangelical Free Church of India v) Presbyterian Church vi) Kuki Christian Church.

3. Darlong in the Bukpui Age

The 'Darlong' as a community is read as belonging to the 'Zomi' nomenclature whose anthropological roots goes back to the 'Sinlung' myth. The myth stated that human are born of a cave called 'Sinlung' located somewhere in the present China thereby leaving a wide range of controversial interpretation upon the statement. In fact, there are several interpretations on the very appellation of 'Darlong' considering both the account of the natives and other interpretations.

During the 'Bukpui' age, discipline, unity and obedience were some of the major virtues that commonly bind the tribe without any written customary laws or laws directory. It was only after the advent of the Christian Mission that the Tribe came up with the idea of customary laws. In the traditional institute all kinds of instructions are made to the young generations by the older one. It is said that the 'Bukpui' was designed to accommodate all the youths of a village thereby teaching them the ordinance of co-existence and mutual productiveness. In the words of Mr. Suaroidinga Darlong, every activities taking from individuals to socio-cultural activities were done by the 'Bukpui' youths. In addition to it, they act as a shield and life line of the village concern. In the 'Bukpui', all matters were discussed and strategies are made allowing nobody to leak out any secrets. All the youths of a village are asked to report to 'Bukpui' after they have taken their respective meal. Nevertheless, some the youths make the institute their home. They spend their time singing, dancing, wrestling and other games that acts as a medium for courting their love ones as well. Offenders were severely punished and no parents could raise a voice against it once the punishment was sanctioned. In short, Darlong 'Bukpui' is a Venice of every Rome. Besides, the institute is also a platform where one can find and have every right to choose his/her life partner from. It is said that if a girl is ready for a marriage, she gets the opportunity to choose her partner by shooting a 'Puantom¹' at him when all the young boys are ask to stand in a line. On the other hand, love ones are also merely won by skills and strength keeping side the looks or appearance. It was this same practice of 'Puantom' throwing that leads to the suicide of 'Thuitlingi' in the legendary love story,

1. Folding of a piece of clothes in a shape of a ball.

'Thuitlingi and Pangama' when she failed to hit her lover. The 'Bukpui' also act as a wagon train for the oral tradition of the tribe for years. The elders, often, refer to the institute as a guideline for code of conduct till today as the tribe had lost almost all of its trace. 'Bukpui', no doubt, recognises the authority of the chief. During the chieftainship, the Chief was the all in all powerful and was the verdict for all matters to his subjects. However, as it is a fact that no man can be on his own. Thus, the chief had few assistants like 'Khawnbawl', who are the advisors of the Chief, 'Khawpa', who act as a what in modern term is called secretary and lastly the 'Tartlang' that comprises a body of village elders. The 'Khawnbawl' functions as advisors to the chief and also takes part in the village affairs like keeping a smooth relationship with the adjacent village. The 'Khawpa' do not mind any of such affairs but keep the records of every incident and happenings of the village. He is the representative of the common people as well. Every meeting and activities of a village was an undertaking of the 'Khawpa' with the consent of the chief. Finally, 'Tartlang' is a compound word which means elder group. It is solely up to the 'Tartlang' to see into the welfare of their villagers and guide them to the part of their ancestors. In addition to these, there also are 'Leikham' who acts as a bridge when any dispute is to be settled between the accused and the judges. "The last chiefs of the Darlong known are Palian chief, Lallianthuama and his contemporary Lahuavela of Thangur clan who were ruling in the Northern and Southern Division of the North District of Tripura respectively in 1940s" (L. Darlong 108). However, it is stated that towards the second half of the year 1933, movement to boycott the chieftains began where Village Council (V.C) and 'Hnam Committee' were formed upon whom large amount of power are invested. In the Council, the Chairman of the council was the highest authority and President of the Hnam Committee act as the supreme power over the entire Darlong tribe. However, "the two Committee body came into function only in 1936" (L. Darlong 108). From then on, the customary laws has been formed, revised and modified from time to time in order to suit the cultural adaptations and changes. At present, an organisation called 'DHI' is the highest authority within the Tribe. Every circular made by the DHI is accepted as final and carried out in every possible ways. Under it runs every other organisation including the churches.

The Darlongs, in the yester years, worshipped 'Nature' and some 'Supernatural' forces which came to an end with the acceptance of the Christianity in the year 1919. As such, the Darlong had ample of usual as well as bizarre religious culture bringing about a wide pattern of sacrifices, offerings, prayers, rites and rituals with some of their deities being 'Khawbiak²', 'Lungtan Pathian³', 'Tuitarpa⁴', 'Ramhuai⁵', 'Si⁶', 'Khuachultenu⁷', 'Fapite⁸', 'Zingngawrtenu⁹' and many others. For instance, "during illness the people called upon 'Tara hei Pafa' usually known as 'Tual Pathian' meaning god of the Earth who was believed to ensure healing and blessings" (L. Darlong 127). At other circumstances, if the illness was cause by the 'Ramhuai', the parent of the victim had to go out in the forest at midnight to challenge the spirit by making a conversational rite thereby bringing a healing bond for his patient. However, if the parent failed to overcome his fear instinct during the performance, he or she is entitled to die. Besides these, it was said that the people also worshipped the likes of 'Longtarai' lately as a result of their encounter with other ethnic group. In the words of Mr. B. Hnela Darlong, the 'Longtarai' was more likely worshipped by ethnic tribe like 'Reang', 'Tripuri', 'Debbarma' and few others when the encounter took place in 18th Century.

Since the early Darlongs were a nomad-like moving from one place to another, they looked for places where the gods and goddesses have not spell their curse on. According to the elders, the Tribe had this habit of taking a cock along with them in their journey. When they stop at certain place, they would release the cock on its own which is a process of checking the places. If the cock survives and crows without fear in the morning then the people take it as a good sign. If in any case, the cock do not survive or dare not to crow in the morning then they abandon the place immediately. According to C. Thuamdinga, "this process of checking the place was born when the people found a wandering domestic cock in the hill range known as 'Arte Sertlâng'. It is this cock that they takes everywhere from thence. He further argues that in the story of 'Thaiseni Khua', a cock which crowed in the morning giving message to all the visiting guests to leave the village immediately was the same cock which the Tribe had found in the mount of 'Arte Sertlâng'. Every little thing they see, saw or dreams of becomes a sign to them. For instance, sneezing during sickness, ants in a rainy days, itching of palm, swinging of spider in front of a spinter, encounter of tortoise by hunters, dog climbing the roof of a house, stumbling at doors, crying of an eagle hovering around a village, shivering of eyebrows, running away of pets and others have their respective interpretations by the people. It is also claimed that whenever the chief die a boy is buried alive along with the chief so that he can retain his chieftainship in the kingdom of dead giving evidence to the existence of slavery system in the community at certain point of time. The grave is dug in 'Vakal' style. However, this 'Vakal' system is no longer practice in the present Darlong community and is replaced by another one called 'Pangkhek' which means digging side wise after reaching sufficient depth which too was abandoned. At present, the Darlong simplified the style as shown below.

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2. God of Community.
 3. God of rock.
 4. God of Water.
 5. Spirits of Forest.
 6. Abode of Demons.
 7. Protector of Natural happenings.
 8. Goddess of Agricultural plentifulness.
 9. Goddess of Dawn.



Figure 2: Picture showing the grave style of present Darlong

According to the Darlongs, there are two type of dead i.e. natural and unnatural. The general custom the the people was that they decorate the dead body with a 'Tuampuan'¹⁰, before final disposal, wash and anoint it with oil. A baby dead in his pre-birth or so immediately after birth was called 'Lairu'. The body was placed in a pot and buried. However, if a child die before having teeth, they are called 'Ramte' and the body was taken out of the house through window and get buried by a lady. In another case, if an old person died of natural dead, he is carried with a pair of bamboo called 'Rilang' where as one who does not meet his dead naturally are carried with a piece of bamboo called 'Langkhat' to be buried outside the village. During the dead of their chief, the Darlongs do not bury them but rather put it in a wooden box and let it to decompose by continuously heating the box for months. It is said that the box is often opened to check the speed of decomposition of the body which was mainly done by the 'Tlangasuan'¹¹ for the people claim the sub-clan to be regardless of any taboos. After the completion of decomposition, the bones are collected and later buried or used it as a symbol of ancestors. No doubt, nothing can be done before the 'Thi Ni' which was observed just after week of a person's dead continuing till date. Erection of monuments and other documentation was practice in the contemporary times as well. During the previous days, the erected stones have writings and some sketches of animal. According to Mr. Hrata Darlong, a residence of Talan village, "the sketch of animal on the tombstones gives clue to the kind of ceremonies and feast organized in the time of dead". The 'Roikhama Lungphun', located in the present 'Talan' village of the Darlongs, has a sketch of pig on the tombstone which means pig was slay for his burial feast. In the Post-Christian period, the Darlongs bury themselves in a coffin like that of the Western culture. However, the tradition of feast during burial still continues to be a part of the present Darlongs rituals too.



Figure 3: Picture showing the tombstone of 'Roikhama Lungphun', located at Talan village

"The Darlong believes in the life after death" (L. Darlong 129). According to my research, "there exist three worlds in the Darlong psychology i.e. 'Khawvel' or the 'Mortal World', 'Thilkhua' or the 'Shrine of Dead' and 'Pialral' or 'Paradise'. It was their deed and status that decides a person's life after dead. Cruel and merciless murderer are avenged in the abode of dead by their action's victim as in the legendary story of 'Chawngkuala'¹², where 'Chawngkuala', the protagonist await the Lushai king, who shot him, in order to

10. Wrap cloak meant for a dead person that may be any kind of cloak wore by the tribesmen.

11. One among the 50 sub-clans in the Darlong.

12. One among the many great warriors.

avenge his dead while the good men and women are more likely to return back to physical world with a mark. Hence, babies with a pierce mark on their ears are considered to not to be a new born but the return of some good person from 'Thikhua'. However, 'Pialral' was inherited only by few privileged people only as mentioned earlier. Regard to rites and rituals, all the prayers and sacrifices are made by a mediator called 'Thiampu' or a priest who dictates the medium and degree of sacrifices to be made for the gods that are done to appease the over soul, who was the chief ruler of their life after dead and other deities. In my journal, 'The Darlong Folk Literature: A Study on Deification of Characters in the Oral Narratives of the Darlong People during the Pre-Christianisation Period', I also stated the existence of another world which was called the 'Lungleng Tlang' or 'Lungtlaleng', meaning the world for lovers who could not unite with their respective lover and beloved. The world had its mention in the famous love song sung by "Thuitlingi" and 'Tualvungi' when they failed to be united with their respective lover, 'Pangama' and 'Zawlpa' in the physical world.

The Darlongs, without any doubt, are also lovers of music and festivities. Some of the famous festivals observed during the 'Bukpui' days are: i) 'Ramzu Kut' ii) 'Khangdai Kut' iii) 'Thlantawi Kut' iv) 'Tharlak Kut'. Nevertheless, except for the 'Tharlak Kut', other festivals have lost its significances and values. The people had their own music instruments such as 'Theitele', 'Tapual', 'Theikhang', 'Rosem', 'Dar-teng', 'Dar-ribu', 'Darkhuang', 'Chawngpereng', 'Kaikawng', 'Tuithei', 'Khuangpui' et al which most of them by now has been forgotten. The folk literature of the tribe entirely tends to create an ethnic Darlong space both psychologically and culturally. As a matter of fact, the tales and the songs entirely note down the historical past, rites and ritual, customs and the rich legacy of the people which act as a wheel to communicate the community's past. "In the legendary love story of 'Pangama and Thuitlingi', the protagonist, 'Pangama' defeated the mortal world and entered the shrine of dead in order to meet her beloved 'Thuitlingi', who committed a suicide when she fail to marry her lover. Reaching her beloved, 'Pangama' found that her beloved was extremely lean and thin. After enduring a period of stay in the shrine of dead, 'Pangama' returns back to the mortal world after which he made food offering for his beloved that eventually becomes a widespread cultural rite and traditional feast of the Darlong. Presently, the tradition is observed annually as a grand festival of the tribe known as 'Tharlak Kut'¹³. Every festivity was initiated by the 'Bukpui' as a whole where 'Lamzawl' was often created. 'Lamzawl' is nothing but a traditional hall for dance where all the villagers are sealed for their presence. No doubt, the dances were usually performed by the budding youths especially from the young girls which draw the line of women importance in the community from time antiquity. Some of the dances that the tribe has may be 'Parkam', 'Chemlam', 'Vathu Indi', 'Pualvachang Lam', 'Sate Tual Phit', 'Fahrel Inkan', 'Khual Lam', 'Silai Lam', 'Lam Palak', 'Sumpui Inchawm', 'Riki Fachawi' and few more. In short, 'Bukpui' to the Darlong act as a 'Magazine' in term of survival, 'Multi-medium cannon' in term of learning centre and a 'Rest House' for one who seeks. Despite of all the fact, the present Darlongs have lost their ancestral appetite for music that results in the amnesia of the cultural music instruments, folksongs and desire to invent adventurous tales of their people.

Another important infamous practice was the game of head hunting¹⁴. Despite the anonymousness of the genesis of the game, it was a popular practice of the Darlongs during the pre-Christianisation that earned them the mark of recognition from their kinsmen. According to the elders, the game of head hunting was done to mark the birth of their flowering manhood that was believed to eventually lead them to 'Pialral' or 'Paradise' after their dead. These legendary hunters are known as 'Ratha' in the vernacular. "On the death of the chief, several heads are buried alongside their leader as his company to the Kingdom of Dead. The Chief or 'Lal'¹⁵ who counts more murders at his credit and hunted heads attains greater happiness in the life after dead as because all the heads he hunted and heads buried with him becomes his slaves in the abode of dead. It is also said that the favourite slave of the dead chief was half-buried leaving his upper portion on the ground and keep on ringing a bell till his dead proclaiming the dead of his favourite Chief. At other instance, the dead body of the Chief was placed in a huge dug-out log and encircling the log with a ring of fire that was kept on flame for ninety days. With the completion of ninety days, the bones and the other remnants of the deceased are buried in a pre-selected hole with ceremonies and grandeur alongside the heads hunted to commemorate his dead" (Singh. 42). "Record has it that in the Jamatia Revolt of 1863 against the Manikya¹⁶ Ruler, 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).

4. Observation

The entire approach of the Darlong imaging their past may be studied from post colonial perspectives. The tribe attempt to fabricate their cultural space, as in the writings of Chinua Achebe, through 'Bukpui' which was once a careful and political product and eventually felt to the rise of other institute. According to Cultural Materialist, the phenomenon is called 'Transcendent'¹⁷ (Barry 176). Thus, the Darlong are in a state of 'hangover' pining back to their past as their glorious days where 'Bukpui' act as a Hemlock¹⁸.

13. The Festival observed every year in the month of January which was believed to be the second harvesting period called 'Ring' in Darlong.

14. Whenever a person beheaded his enemy, he called upon his own name thrice hanging the hunted head just in front of him. This was done in order to make the deceased remember the name whom he will serve in the Immortal world.

15. King.

16. The then King of Tripura.

17. Elements are 'not limited by the historical circumstances in which they are produced.

18. Wine, a Greek mythological construct.

Secondly, it may also be studied from the angle of Cultural Isolation i.e. the separation of a particular culture from the larger cultural group within its proximity. In other words, Cultural Isolation is a subculture's relative lack of participation in, or communication with, the larger cultural system. Besides natural barriers, Cultural Isolation can also be due to government decisions and sometimes due to a culture that resists learning from other cultures. Thus, the act of imaging and imagining can be interpreted as the Darlong's attempt of negating the larger cultural group thereby creating an individual identity in the vast pool of literary domain holding on to 'Bukpui' as a pillar.

Finally, the act of imagining may also be studied from the stand point of poaching which I called 'The Art of Typicalisation'. The method is a conscious act of manipulating the truth to suit one's own contemplated image, be it in a form of literary text or an oral text. By the art of narration, the Darlongs are manifesting a typical Darlong space in a labyrinth of culturally blended pool.

5. Conclusion

To the Darlongs, the very term is a symbol of a tribe with high esteem and confidence. All aspects of lives and activities are changing rapidly making it blurred to decipher what is good and what is bad from any perspectives. One should not be too surprised to come across occurrence of undesirable stray incidence as the turbulent waves are new to them and are learners in sailing in the big world of crisis¹⁹. Even so, none can be blame for this act of ignorance among the Tribe. Whatever may be the reasons, the invaluable cultures has been out of practice for decades and are being buried in the coffins of the dying elders. Looking from the post-colonial perspectives, the Darlongs had been colonised physical and mentally so much that their traditional entity is completely drenched in the western influence resulting with the misconception of their glorious past as savage pictures. No doubt, attempts are being made out to recover the lost and some of them gain momentum where as other result in vain.

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19. Identity, Individual, Political and Socio-cultural.