

Oral tradition: An anthropological insight on the folktales of Meitei

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Abstract

Folktales occupy a very important place in oral tradition of a community. Folktales can be defined as the stories or tales that came out from the ways of living and imagination of the people which are handed down orally from one generation to another. Such tales are known as "*Phungga Wari*" by the Meiteis. In earlier days these tales play a very important role in imparting education to the younger generation. Folktales are also known as *Chakngai Wari* since the tales were narrated to the children when they were waiting for their meals at night. Varieties of folktales are found in Meitei society in which they can be clubbed into different category based on the messages conveyed or the nature of the tales. The main aim of these tales is to give certain sort of message to people. In addition to this, they also reflected the cultural values, beliefs, past and present customs and traditions of the community. The custom of narrating folktales by the grandparents to their children has been declining under the influence of modernisation. Such tales can be inculcated during socialization process or through text books and media.

Keywords: meitei, oral tradition, folktales, *phungga wari*, *chakngai wari*

Introduction

Folktales are a genre of oral tradition which existed with the existence of mankind. They can be defined as stories or tales that came out of the ways of living and imagination of the people which are handed down verbally from one generation to another. They are a source of knowledge and convey various messages to people. Every folktale that exists in every society has something in common. They are characterized by some features. Generally, they began with "Once upon a time" or "Long ago". They are all about animals and people and also have both good and bad characters. Cultural values and beliefs are embedded in such stories. Happy ending is one of the characteristic features of folktales. The aesthetic value of folktales varies from one storyteller to another depending upon their skill to present them. Sometimes the storyteller added something new to the stories to make them more interesting and fascinating to the listeners. Thus, being an oral tradition, there is some kind of flexibility in narrating the stories. There are often various versions of the same story as the storyteller uses his technique to add or remove that is fit for the listeners.

In Meitei society, folktales occupied a very important place in their lives. It was through these tales that they imparted family governance and shaped the behaviour of the individual in early times before the introduction of formal education. The Meitei used the term "*Phungga Wari*"^[1] for folktales. It is known by different names as *Chakngai wari*^[2] and *Chin bung wari*^[3]. There was a place for hearth^[4] in Meitei traditional house. At night, people would put fuel in the hearth. The grandparents used to sit around the fire place, called their children and would narrate the folktales. Such tales were also narrated when the children were waiting for their meal at night, for this reason the tales were also known as *Chakngai wari*. The first kind of stories narrated was that of *Paorou*

wari^[5] and *Paotak wari*^[6]. By sitting around the hearth, the elderly people narrated the stories about *Yumbanlon*^[7] to their children and grand-children. While narrating the stories, they did not use slang or insulting words as they regarded the place (hearth) as sacred where Goddess *Emoinu* resides. Since the tales were often narrated by the fireplace, they were popularly known as *Phungga wari*.

During the monarchical rule, folktales were also narrated to *Pakhangphan*^[8] and *Leishaphan*^[9] by their respective leaders, *Pakhanglakpa* and *Ningollakpa* who were in charge of the respective dormitories. The stories narrated were mostly of the norms that state how to run a family and other way of lives. *Ningollakpa*, the in-charge of the female dormitory could be male or female but a male was assigned to be the in charge of *Leisaphan* only when the female could not control the youths. Both *Pakhanglakpa* and *Ningollakpa* should be elder persons who were knowledgeable. Apart from these, folktales were also narrated during *leipung phamba*^[10] and also while carrying out agricultural practices and other household activities. The Meiteis have large number of folktales which are of varied and diverse forms. The tales cover almost all aspects of human activity, ways of lives and experiences. The main aim of these tales is to give certain sort of message to people. Most of the stories contain an element of joy and excitement. One of the characteristics of them is that the writer was unknown.

Categorization

Folktales are found in plenty in the Meitei society. Based on my observation, I classified them into seven different categories viz Step-mother tales, Magical tales, Tales of birds and animals, Joke tales, Deception tales, Parables and Proverbial tales. The tales which I have categorized under different types can also be fitted in a single category based on

the respective messages conveyed by them or the nature of the tale. For example, the story of *Nongoubi*, *Sahing Chaba Machil Manao* and *Meege Huiga Leiminnaba* can also be put under etiological tales as they explained the reason why and how something exists or happens particularly, how custom or certain practices came into existence. The story of *Nongoubi*, gives the reason why this particular bird does not drink river water as she deceived the communities of Gods and all living beings for she was busy consoling and feeding her baby while they were digging the river and thus did not extend any help to the Gods and other living beings in their work. As a result, they cursed her that her hip would rot whenever she came to drink river water. Out of fear, she never drank the river water. However, in *Sahing Chaba Machil Manao* ^[11] and *Meege Huiga Leiminnaba*, the tales reflect how human beings started living with the animals (like cats and dogs) as their own companions. Thus the above categories are not rigid and therefore it would be a difficult task to sort them into different concrete categories.

Analyzing the different types one by one, the step-mother tales mainly depict the ill-treatment of step-children by their step-mother. The nature of step-mother is portrayed as wicked, merciless, harsh and with odd behaviour. Sometimes it is presented with the help of a simile. For instance, the step-mother of *Haosi Namoinu* was described as sour like citrus, hot like ginger and behaves like mad dog. The message conveyed in these folktales is – not to ill-treat one's adopted or step-children rather love them as their own. The step-mother tales also highlight the way how the step-mothers mistreated their step-daughters. The step-daughters find a way to escape from the harsh behaviour of their step-mothers. So, they turn into birds and fly away with the flock of birds. The message being communicated is that everybody wants to live independently. When a weak or miserable person wants to become independent, they often take the help of others. The birds in these tales depict free and independent life of human being. In contrast to step-mothers, the mothers are portrayed as the source of everlasting love. It reflects both in human tales and birds and animals tales. The mother (widow) in *Kei Tongba Lukhrabi Macha* loved his only son so much that she did not even let him cross the gate of their house. She begged from door to door just to fill her son's stomach to the full. She worried about her son when he brought a tiger mistaking that it was a horse. In *Makok*, the mother took utmost care of her son as he was born handicapped. She was in deep pain when her son did not return from the voyage in the sea. The mother python in *Lamhuigi Tat* who lost all her children in the mouth of the fox used many ways to take revenge on the clever fox. In *Houdong Lamboiba* and *Pebet*, the *Pebet* mother knew the danger coming around her small children, so she trained her children to escape from the danger. The message given in these tales is to love one's mother and take proper care of one's parents. The story of the step-father and the system of polyandry is not found in the folktales of Meitei.

Magical tales reflect that the people began to use supernatural elements from the very early period. With the help of magic they produced whatever they wanted and carried out things which were beyond the capability of human. In *Makok*, Makok lifted the burden of poverty and lived happily with his mother with the help of the diamond ring ^[12] he got from the

python king. Another example can be cited from *U Na Saba Saktam* which is the story about a middle-aged lone bachelor who does all the house-hold chores by himself. In order to ease some of his pain of being without his wife, he made a carpenter carve a beautiful face of a woman. The story goes on how the statue takes a human form (a woman) and gives company to the man just like his own wife. Again the stories of *Mina Tenawa Onba*, *Taibang Mina Lairrel Onba*, *Kei Onba Komgi Esing* talk about how a human is transformed into a parrot, a python and a tiger consequent upon their misdeeds and disobeying the words of the members their family. In addition to this, in the story of *Nupi Amasung Laiphidibi* the girl came to know the language of birds and animals by the grace of her doll and in the story *Sanagi Saji amasung Sanagi Tenawa* the prince and the noble's son could turn their souls into a golden parrot and a golden deer with the help of the incantations they studied and memorized for a year.

The tales of birds and animals reveal the close relationship between human and animal. The most common characters are of tiger and fox which depict the character of being strong and ferocious in case of tiger and cunning and tricky in case of fox. The most important characteristic of these tales is that all the animals in these tales are capable of communicating with human beings and among themselves.

The tales which have the element of jokes/funs like *Apang Shamu Faba*, *Apang Thumlotpa*, *Apang Chumchat*, *Ningol Mawa Apang* are placed under joke tales. Here, the term "Apang" means foolish. These stories portray the level of stupidity and foolishness a person can be and its consequences on the part of them. *Lengbiro Madap* is a very amusing story. Madap and his wife led a very miserable life due to poverty. In order to ease off their poverty to some extent, Madap came to the house of his master to beg for a pair of oxen with the little money he had. On reaching the place of his master, Madap narrated his situation and the purpose of his visit. His master told him that they would discuss it the next day as for that day it had become dark. Then the master asked him to come to witness *Bhashak* ^[13] at the palace. Madap was very happy to learn that there would be *Bhashak* in the palace so he freshened himself quickly and went towards the palace to witness the show. On the way he wanted to defecate so moved his bowels at the foot of a plum tree with his clothes on. While doing so, a plum fell down near him. He reached out his hands and it turned out to be a fully ripe plum. Thus he ate it while defecating. By the time, he reached the palace; the song had reached the portion when Radha was angry with Krishna for having been to bower of Chandrabali. The lead singer in a high pitch implored Lord Krishna (also known as Madap) to move away. And it was synchronized with the arrival of Madap. As he listened to the song, his heart throbbed with shame as if his defecation and eating of plum alongside had been seen by the singer. He mistakenly thought that the song referred to him. Meanwhile the singer sang "Lengbiro Madap, Lengbiro Madap" with her hands swinging at a high tone. Madap could no longer remain seated out of shame. In order to stop her, he thought of offering money to her, so he did. On the other side, the lead singer assumed that Madap was quite satisfied with her song and addressed him as Madap of black complexion, dishonest one. Then she kept on repeating the same thing with different form of dances. At last, Madap

drained out his purse offering the money just to prevent her from referring “*Lengbiro Madap*”.

In addition to this, the husbands who stay at the residence of their wives are often depicted as being foolish. Their level of foolishness is up to the mark that considered feces as having life. The husbands in such stories are not only portrayed as foolish but also lazy. The irony may be a sign of ridiculing them for behaving beyond the societal norms as the Meitei society is patriarchal and patrilineal.

As the name indicates, deception-tales talk about how an individual is being deceived or tricked for the gain of oneself or to escape from danger. In other words, these tales can be considered as an outcome of intelligent minds. The story of *Lai Khutsangbi* reflects the way how Leirikma (name of the child’s mother) escaped from the evil witch by deceiving the witch that her husband was away from home. The witch believed her words and pushed her hand in through the hole of the wall to catch and eat them. As soon as she did it, Leirikpa (child’s father) cut off her hand. In consequence, the witch ran away crying and never returned to that village again. Another interesting example can be given from the tale of *Sana Thaba* where the thief proved everyone including the king and his aides that everyone happened to steal in one way or other and hence he was rescued from the mouth of death.

Apart from other tales, parables focus to give a moral or spiritual lesson at the end of every story. They intend to illustrate the truth to the people with the help of the tales.

Proverbs are found in good numbers in the Meitei society. They are still in use in daily conversation as well as in public speaking. Yet there also exist a story behind most of the popular proverbs. The stories seemed to have been taken out of the real experiences of people that happened in the past. Such information is evident from the years and the name of the kings mentioned in the stories. For instance, the proverb *Tongjei Marilda Shamu Litpa* ^[14] is taken from the incident of Oinam Bijando during the reign of king Chandrakirti. He was a great humorist and expert orator who won in all arguments held between him and the noble men. Even the king suffered shame and defeat to argue with him. The story goes on how he gave reason for his absence to attend the palace which was ordered by the King Chandrakirti. Later on he gave the reason that he could not turn up because of his ill-tempered child who insisted to make an elephant pass through a very narrow pipe (*tongjei*).

Inside the folktales

Folktales can be looked into and analyzed from different angles. They are an important tool for understanding a society. By just analyzing or studying the folktales one can know how one society is distinct from another as folktales reflect the cultural values, customs, traditions, beliefs, myths, food habits and ways of living of a society. Similarly in Meitei folktales, the tale of Sanarembi and Chaisra is a notable one. In this single tale, one can understand most of the aspects of Meitei society. The story is about the two step-sisters. The elder one Sanarembi is a soft, honest, beautiful and well-mannered while the younger Chaisra is ugly and wicked. Chaisra and her mother are always jealous of Sanarembi and her mother. Thus, they always plan an evil way to destroy Sanarembi and her mother. The message conveyed in this tale is that “truth

always triumphs”. Though it gives a simple and very obvious message the tale presents many aspects of livelihood in the early period. Sanarembi’s mother and Chaisra’s mother go for fishing in the lakes and also collected firewood to earn their living which indicates the source of earning and ways of living during that period. The use of implements like *long* ^[15] and *tungol* ^[16] in fishing and utensils like *Pun* ^[17] and *Sanapun* ^[18] in fetching water point out that people had started using such implements and utensils from the very early period. The belief that a human soul takes the form of another living being after death is also apparent in this tale as Sanarembi and her mother take the form of a dove, a lime and a tortoise after their death. The Meiteis believe that the soul of a deceased person incarnates a dove after death. So, whenever a dove comes in the estate of the house, the family members feed the dove with rice grains and pure water with the thought that the departed souls are visiting them. This is clearly portrayed in this tale as Sanarembi came to the palace incarnating a dove. As a result the king (her husband) came with a handful of grain and implored the dove to eat what he is offering. On the other hand, the tale also shows how evil a human could be and how much the recipient could bear his/her harsh nature. In short it reflects the consequences of practising polygamy in the society; the enmity builds up between step-siblings; the evil-treatment of step-mother and how the evil step-mother is punished at the end.

From the story of *Uchek Langmeidong, Keibu Keioiba, Lai Khutsangbi and Mina Tenawa Onba* it comes to light that men usually went for work at far off places to earn their livelihood. While from the story of *Ita Thaomei, Sanagi Saji amasung Sanagi Tenawa, Nupi Chaora Langdum Chaora* and so on, it is evident that women folks were engaged in weaving practices. Another example is from the tale of *Keibu Keioiba* ^[19]. It is the tale of a girl called Thabaton who is the only sister of the seven brothers. The brothers brought her up with utmost care. An old widow was also living the next door. One day, the brothers left for work to a far place for a couple of days. During this time, Keibu Keioiba came to the house of the widow in quest of his food. The widow was terrified at the sight of Keibu Keioiba and told him to eat Thabaton in place of her. In this tale, the role of neighbours is clearly shown. We often land in danger if our neighbours are dishonest and wicked or if we do not have healthy relationship with them. Another thing is also evident in this tale is that people once used bamboo tube to fetch water as Keibu Keioiba was given a hollow bamboo tube to get water by Thabaton.

The story of *Mina Lairen Onba and Yenakha Paodabi* clearly depict that people had started eating sheath fish (*Shareng*) as one of the most favorite dishes and it is continuing till date. A food habit of a society is also apparent from folktales. Example can be cited from the story of *Hanubi Hanuba Pan Thaba and Sanarembi Chaisra*, it is obvious that people had begun eating pumpkin, arum, *hentak* ^[20], tortoise, dove, lemon and so on. In addition to this, the beliefs are also depicted. The Meiteis have a custom of believing in dreams and it is reflected from the stories of *Sanarembi Chaisra* and *Mina Tenawa Onba*. In the beginning of the *Sanarembi Chaisra* tale, Sanarembi’s mother was killed by the wicked Chaisra’s mother by pouring snakes into her mouth from a fig tree. Then she appeared in the dream of Sanarembi at night and narrated

the way in which she was killed by Chaisra's mother. She also told Sanarembi to come fishing in the lake, the next day at dawn and catch the tortoise which was a transformation of her soul. As it was said, Sanarembi went to the lake and could catch the tortoise after a tiring effort. A similar incident also happens in the story of *Mina Tenawa Onba*. The daughter (Songri) committed suicide out of shame by jumping into a river as she came to know that the one whom she had physical relationship was none but her own father. Songri's mother was restless as Songri did not come back, she spent the night crying and without food. During the small hours of the morning, the mother went to sleep slowly. Songri came in her dream and said that she could never be seen as she jumped into the river to die and turned into a tiny fish called *Nungga* [21]. She could return into human form only if the mother took the fish up with a *long* and kept it under six layers of clothes for six days. The mother woke up instantly and headed towards the river to perform the task as directed in her dream. The mother could finally catch the fish.

Death bodies are always cremated in Meitei custom. But in case of infants who died before the attainment of three years of age, they are generally buried directly to the ground. The baby is put inside a pot along with pebbles and black roasted peas. It was done so because such infants were considered evil who came to take the happiness of their parents. Thus, in order to stop them from being born to their parents again, they were buried along with those pebbles and roasted black peas which signify that they could be reborn only when the pebbles were dissolved in earth and roasted black peas grew as plants. Such belief is revealed from the story of *Machil Manao Ani* where the elder brother, who is also a priest, buried his nephews right after their birth. He does so because he, being a priest knows that the children born to his younger brother are none other than those evil ones.

Most of the folktales of Meiteis revolve around the stories that happened in different kingdoms. This let us know clearly that the land was once ruled by different kings in different periods. Settling of disputes or justice is usually done before the king and his aides; this means that the Meiteis also have the authority to bring out the truth from early times.

Messages of folktales

All folktales convey certain sorts of message at the end of the story. The messages circle around giving moral lessons to the people. Some tales are trying to show the importance of being wise or witty which helps them to rescue/escape themselves easily from difficulties. They also proved to the people that being wise is better than being foolish. While some other tales portrayed the negative side of doing things in anger. The story of *Shamu Angoubagi Machanupi* spreads the message that parents should never use stern curse to their children out of anger. The tale of *Mapu Ningba Tenawa* conveys that one should not do violent things in anger. It also shows the consequences of performing such actions since the old couple spent their whole lives repenting when they came to light that the parrot was innocent.

A folktale does not convey only a single message. Perhaps they carry variety of messages in a single tale and it is depicted in the story of *Yenakha Paodabi* where a female monster is trying to steal a husband of a woman by

impersonating herself as his wife. The female monster eavesdrops the conversation between the conjugal groups. The lesson being communicated is 'do not eavesdrop'. She transforms herself into his wife's person - the message communicated is 'do not indulge in any fraud'. The female-monster confronts the man's wife - the message is that one should never be greedy, one should not fight one's claim on lies and fictitious grounds, for eventually one will be caught, as the female monster was caught. There are always strategies to catch the liar, the cheat, the fake. However, those in authority must be kind, compassionate - the king was kind, he pardoned the female-monster. Further the tale also ensures that the female-monster would never repeat her nefarious design because she knows fully well that she would always be caught. So, the female monster lives away from the human world. The conjugality of relationship is maintained, the husband and wife are a happy lot.

Conclusion

Folktales are of great help in studying a society. They can be served as a source of primary research material thereby giving a better understanding of the society through the analysis of them. They are also a very useful tool in displaying the variability of different societies. Though the tales are often considered as a kind of fantasy and a product of imagination, there is always a close relation between folktales and reality. Cultural values, social organization, beliefs, past and present customs and traditions of the community are reflected in folktales. Moreover in some tales messages are given in the form of metaphors and symbols to the younger generations. The meanings are embedded inside the tales.

Folktales have an aspect of aesthetics. They entertain; they are a great mental treasure. Besides providing an identity to people in their own way they inculcate among people the moral values and virtues. That is why they play an indispensable role in socialization. Transmitted over generations they link the generations, they provide solidarity among generations, eventually cementing the identity of people.

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Notes

1. Tales associated with hearth. *Phungga*- hearth and *Wari*-story.
2. Tales narrated when children were waiting for their meals.
3. Oral tales.
4. The hearth occupies a very important place in Meitei society as it was believed to be the place where from folktales originated.
5. Proverbial tales.
6. Parables.

7. Domestic governance.
8. Dormitory for unmarried males.
9. Dormitory for unmarried females.
10. Gatherings of aged-males near the locality at dusk.
11. An etiological tale that shows how tiger lives at jungle and cat lives at home as a domestic animal.
12. A magical ring that can produce everything at our command.
13. A form of religious song.
14. The proverb means 'Insisting the impossible'. It is generally used when someone is asked to do something beyond his/her capability.
15. Fishing net.
16. A basket for keeping fish used at the time of fishing.
17. Earthen pitcher used for storing water.
18. Metal pitcher.
19. Half-human half-tiger creature which turned from the use of black magic.
20. A food prepared by mixing fermented fish and inedible kind of arum plant.
21. A tiny river fish (*Psilorhynchus microphthalmus*)

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