

INTERPRETING FOLKLORE THROUGH INSIDER'S CULTURAL LENS

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Interpretation has different facets based on the authors' experiences, inclinations, theoretical knowledge, and cultural backgrounds. An emic or etic explanation, shallow or deep play, thin or thick descriptions, watery or amorphous, form or formless, and the interpreter may tatter the curtains with daggers and murder the author. Yet contemporary explanations in the light of epistemological domains of thoughts and theories may discern a collage or decollage, a patch or a pattern, chaos or fractals. It is against this backdrop that two myths of Manipur, the 'Konhoujam Nongkarol' and 'Khongjomnubee Nonggarol', are being examined with the anthropological lens to explore the underlying anatomies of meanings - lines, angles, curves, cavities and the wholeness.

Keywords: Soraren, Nahuinu, Konhoujam, Khongjomnubee, God, culture

Introduction

Women in the early period of history in Manipur, as revealed from the ancient pages of *puyas*, were inferior to their male counterparts. It may be presumably said that the older the time period, the more they suffered from patriarchal trauma. The premise is based on the fact that man's stronger physical prowess acts as a determining factor of dominancy until the invention of many technological gadgets that can control humans and animals, irrespective of gender, that aids in enforcing modern jurisprudence came into existence. At present, a physically weak but technologically smart lady with

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a sophisticated weapon can butcher hundreds of physically stronger men or elephants. But in older times, women were mere pawns of men. The pitiable plight beyond the history in oral tradition reveals their trauma and tragedy. The reverse chronology from the present to the past shows their evolution of trauma and tragedy. The conquering of kingdoms and forcibly marrying of queens and concubines in history; the barbaric kidnapping of women still present in the 21st century in some cultures as found in the countries like Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Chechnya, Armenia, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, and South Africa (News.com.au, 2017, November 20); the monopolizing of women by an alpha man in prehistory and sex slaves of rich men (Briggs, 2002) or the divine power of men to curb and control over women in religion (Moder, 2019), myths and legends revealed all such trauma and tragedy of women.

Looking up the trauma and tragedy of women in oral tradition in myths and legends, the paper attempts to examine the plight of women in Manipur by picking up two different episodes. Another objective of the paper is in what way and how, the interpretation of an insider who experiences and understands the genre of the folklore of a culture and an outsider who simply listens or reads the text and interprets it in what way and how the differences in the two will give insights of our attempt to interpret folklores. In this backdrop, the present paper attempts to examine two myths of Manipur from the cultural lens of an insider, who can deep dive and explore the nooks and corners of the myth, or else, from an outsider, the vision may be myopic if not tinted or blurred.

Konthoujam Nongarol

Widely known as Konthoujam Lairemma (Goddess of Konthoujam clan) alias Nahuinu, it was a mortal of a group of people called 'Haorok Konthou' of Manipur. Lord Sorarel, who was reigning on the peak of the high mountain Koubru, where the peak touched the sky with clouds of rain, is considered the sky god who has tremendous divine power, and people on the earth pray to Him for showering rain and shine and for general prosperity. Once, He witnessed a little girl by the name of Nahuinu. He came and talked to Nahuinu's father to take care of the girl so as not to defile in her food and drink and told him to marry Him when she became a mature maiden.

In the course of time, Nahuinu became a beautiful maiden, and Lord Sorarel married her and enlisted among His multiple wives. In showing His gratitude and happiness, Lord Sorarel, the king of the sky (heaven), blessed the Konthoujam people with an immortal and prosperous life. Nahuinu, after marrying Lord Sorarel, is known as Konthoujam Lairemma and happily resided

in heaven. After a few months, she delivered a baby boy named Khoriphaba. It so happened one day, the goddess from her sky abode saw trails of smoke of cremation coming up in the sky from her maternal village, and on seeing it with hesitation and grief, Nahuinu asked her husband that He blessed the Konthoujam people immortal and why the cremation. Lord Sorarel explained that the cremation was that of the intelligent dog of Nahuinu's father. The dog was bitten by a poisonous snake while hunting in the forest. Since the dog was very faithful, intelligent, and lovable, the Konthoujam people, in honoring and releasing emotion, observed the death ritual like a human. It may be mentioned that the incontrovertible domestication of dogs by humans was at least 15000 years ago, and in some cases, dogs were ceremoniously buried, much like humans (Harari, 2015). So, the myth may be beyond history; hence, during the prehistoric period, on hearing that Nahuinu was very unhappy because the dog had grown up with her just like a brother. She requested her husband to allow her to descend to her maternal village. Lord Sorarel did not like her to go there. She was persuaded that it had been a long time since she had seen her parents and her people. At last, He descended the golden ladder from the sky to the earth. He warned her not to break the rules of the land of God and not to take His son Khoriphaba. Nahuinu, with good dress and makeup, happily descended to her Konthoujam village.

When the Konthoujam Goddess reached her maternal village, everyone was happy. There was total rejoicing. All her childhood friends, kith and kin, were happily chatting, singing, and dancing. Nahuinu's mother and her relatives offered food and drink to Nahuinu. She denied and reminded her husband's warning to them. However, her mother covered seven layers of clothes so that Lord Sorarel could not see under which Nahuinu's mother and her relatives persuaded her to take wine and meat. Nahuinu reluctantly ate and drank; instantly, Lord Sorarel, who is considered to have a hundred ears and a hundred eyes, spate and shouted in rage for her deception and disobedience, and she was declared divorced from the abode of the sky. Nahuinu cried and prayed for her follies and ran towards the golden ladder that led to heaven. But Lord Sorarel dragged the ladder up. Konthoujam Lairemma repeatedly prayed to Him to take her to heaven, at least for her small baby. All her requests were futile. With frustration, anger, and annoyance, she cursed her Konthoujam people to be mortal like earlier. She remained isolated and desolate. In her young married life, she lost her beloved husband and her lovely infant son, who needed her mother's intensive love and care and breast milk. From being a respectable goddess in heaven with status and privileges, she merely becomes an isolated and rejected woman. What more stress of

life change unit, and what more traumas can a young woman bear than this? Her tragic end is shocking. People in Manipur still worship her shrine at Konthoujam village.

Different Analyses and Interpretations of Konthoujam Nongarol

Symbolic Meaning of Nongarol/Nongkarol

The etymological meaning of ‘*nong*’ in Meiteilol/Manipuri is ‘rain’; ‘*kaba*’ means ‘ascending,’ or ‘to climb up’ ‘*rol*’ is a suffixed word for ‘*lol*,’ meaning ‘language’ or ‘study of,’ which is equivalent meaning of Greek word, ‘logus.’ Hence, *nong+kaba+lol* = *nongkabalol* = *nongkarol* = *nongarol*, which means the lore of ascending to the abode of rain, which symbolizes heaven. Rain-carrying dark clouds or white clouds almost always cover the topmost hills and mountains of Manipur. Rain comes from up the sky. The Meiteis believe that presiding deities and gods live on the hills and mountains. Thus, ecology also determines language and culture, and vice versa, and hence, the significance of cultural ecology in understanding myths or any story needs to be understood

Meaning of Gods in Heaven

The group of people on the high top mountains, where, rain and sky touch, may be an ethnic group who were highly advanced than the lower low lying group of people. Because of the capability and control over the people in low lying planes, perhaps they labeled themselves as Gods.

Why Lord Sorarel Choses Nahuinu?

From the early days of childhood, Nahuinu might have been a girl with a good-looking, pretty face and an attractive body posture. All males, God or human, rich or poor, young or old, like women, are good-looking, appealing, seductive, and feminine. The prior engagement of girls before maturity indicates the practice of a stage precursor of child marriage.

Why Did Lord Sorarel Get Angry and Divorce Nahuinu?

He warned her to take care of her conduct at her maternal place. He was not even allowed to take his son, who still was breastfeeding. He was very much doubtful and despised the earthly humans. When Nahuinu broke his words, the male ego of being a God and a husband was touched. When a girl or woman drinks, her sense of judgment is impaired. She becomes very vulnerable and fallible to menfolk who are compared to wolves who, within reach of an elbow room, flirt and seduce women. Perhaps Lord Sorarel might have a long-drawn corollary of suspecting the fidelity of his wife.

Social Hierarchy

Plato and Aristotle once gave the hierarchy of place of human and material objects along with God in the *great chain of beings* as plants, minerals, animals, humans, angels, and gods (Brake, 2009). God has power and control over all matters, including humans. Humans are subordinate to God and powerless in the hands of God. Thus, there are two opposites, the gods in the highest sky in heaven and humans down on the surface of the Earth.

Through fortune marriage with Lord Sorarel, Nahuinu skyrocketed her star of life, but again, after a few years, her life disasters and shoots down like a meteorite. It is an indication that achieved status is vulnerable and not permanent but transitory, unlike the ascribed status of the Gods, which is permanent.

The Ethnocentric God and the Cultural Relativistic Goddess

On seeing the beauty and natural gift of a pretty face and appealing body posture, Lord Sorarel proposes to marry Nahuinu when she becomes mature. Why do immortals belonging to different ethnic and cultural groups insist on marrying a mortal on Earth? The fond Lord Sorarel compromises all those differences and marries the Konthoujam girl. Like many men, is he too sex-centric? No doubt, he is considered to have multiple wives. The girl is from another ethnic group - different perceptions, ideas, attitudes, foods, and drinks. Yet after marriage, she left behind all that deep-rooted love and ties of parents and siblings, her native Indigenous culture, for the sake of love for her husband. But when Nahuinu, the consort of Lord Sorarel, came into her maternal village after a few years, she and her kin were persuaded to have good food, drink, and merrymaking. She couldn't keep the words of her husband because of her mother and relative's persuasion. Moreover, the enculturation of early formative inclinations, tendencies, and habits are all die-hard and reflected in later adult life; the Freudian concept seems to hold true here. On top of that, the Konthoujam goddess respects her maternal culture, food, and drink on Earth. She also respects and strictly observes her husband's food and drink, customs, and traditions in heaven. She is a woman who respects both the different cultures, her own native, premarital culture on Earth, and at the same time, her post-marital culture in heaven. She balances both cultures relatively from an insider's perspective. She is the epitome of a cultural relativist, the one who respects other cultures. On the other hand, Lord Sorarel, who is considered a god who has power and

privilege, shows a toady and egocentric attitude and character. When the girl is young and beautiful, he compromises the differences in food, drink, and behavior of the girl who belongs to another culture and marries her. He fulfilled his desire to marry her and enjoyed a happy, conjugal life. His consort's value after giving birth to a child and relatively aging and retarded youthfulness is undervalued. Just for disobedience of having food and drink of her maternal culture, he divorced her, a wife and mother. He could not respect cultures other than his own. Though he's a god, he is an egoistic and ethnocentric person who always thinks that his own culture is the best and other's bad.

Mind One's Own Business

In Six Maiden's story, Lord Sorarel has no role to play. He was not part of the comedy or tragedy. Yet he was empathic and hence blessed the six ill-fated girls to turn into Khongjomnubee, the constellation of plectras. But in his own life and family, he was very judgmental and cruel and took the decision to expel his own wife. His ego of being a male and God show prejudice and dominion of power to subordinates, who repeatedly prayed for forgiveness.

Khongjomnubee Nongkarol

Let's examine another myth about six maidens of Manipur who turned into the constellation Khongjomnubee (*saptarishi* in Hindi) as described below:

One day, six maiden friends of the Luwang clan came in search of fish for their families. They reached a lake and met six tribal Haoku youths. They could not get fish. They have fallen in love at first sight with the six bachelors. The six youths requested the six girls to stay that night with them, telling them that they could get fish the next day. The six girls hesitated because of their fathers' and brothers' anger. The lovers persuaded, and it became evening; thus, they spent the night with their respected lovers in the lakeshore that day. The next day in the morning, they went back to their own homes, but their parents and brothers beat them up and expelled them from their houses for their misconduct and their relationship with the lower ethnic youths. Without any option, they came and climbed up the mountain on the western boundary. One of the maidens gave birth to a cicada instead of a baby on the way to heaven. They climbed up and up, and at last, they reached the gate of heaven. They cried and prayed to the Lord Sorarel and narrated their story. The lord felt pity on them. Since the mortals cannot live with gods in heaven, the merciful God sent them into the sky, and they turned into

the constellation *Khongjomnubee*. The Manipuris, in memory of them, sing the song depicting the story of the maidens towards the end of the summer season and the beginning raining monsoon.

Different Analyses and Interpretations of the Myth

Significance of the Constellation, Khongjomnubee: A Functionalist Approach

From a functionalist perspective, every cultural trait has a function. There cannot be any culture without function. The socio-economic life of the early Manipuris was solely dependent on agriculture. Agriculture was purely based on the mercy of the coming of the monsoon rain. When monsoon rain is indicated by the song of the cicada in the month of *kalen* (June), and when the rain stops, indicated by the appearance of *Khongjomnubee* on the eastern horizon at dawn (Jhalajit, 2014) in the third week of August (roughly in the month of *Ingel*). Many of the coming generations attempted to see but did not know of this *Khongjomnubee* constellation. For agriculturalists, modern gadgets forecast weather, and hence, there is no need to see the constellation. Hence, the significance of *Khongjomnubee* is almost obsolete and has been forgotten.

Of the many theories of the origin of the myth, personification is one such theory. Every culture and society from that dim period of our early ancestry were in suspense on the mystery cosmos of the universe. When a child is toddling and following their grandpa or granny, seeing the red sun or the bright moon or stars, the grandpa and the granny need to reply to the child's curiosity. They may say *suraj devta* or *chanda mama*. The Greeks, the Hindus, and the Manipuris all cultures personified such wondrous objects of nature and somehow linked with myths and legends, though the personification of stories is different. The present *Khongjomnubee* Nongarol is a myth of the Meiteis of Manipur, similar to the *Saptarishi* of Hindu mythology.

Patriarchal Structure

In our normal perception of patriarchal structure, the six maidens were churlish and naughty, totally against the norms of what's so-called feminine idealism, that woman must be docile, subordinate to man, shy in nature, and so forth. Since the six maidens are against such feminine idealism, the patriarchal society punishes them badly. In such a patriarchal society, the act is justified. Likewise, in Konthoujam Nongarol, as observed earlier, the disobedient wife is punished. This is justified only in a patriarchal structure, where men have the upper hand, and women are always victims. Why not try to look from a gender-neutral viewpoint. If the girls are punished, why not the boys. Suppose if a boy denies the sexual invitation of a girl, the girl cannot

physically overpower him, but if a boy seduces a girl, even if she denies it, by his physical strength, the boy can overpower him.

So, males are not equally responsible for physical intimate relations. Rather, they are more responsible than females. But in the patriarchal structure, male's faults and injustices are covert, and only the females are victimized. If society happens to be matriarchal, or women are at the upper hand in socio-political power, the behavior of the six Luwang girls may be ignored or socially approved.

Social Hierarchy, Negative Sanction, and Bad Consequence

The six maidens were under the vigilant eyes of the male members of their respective families, parents and brothers. They went out for fish for their families. Because of not availability of fish in that day and persuasion by their lovers, they spent the night with them. The next day, when they returned to home, they were beaten and expelled from the houses. The boys were neither beaten nor expelled. The good thing is that the six boys didn't betray the girls and later met in heaven.

In the story, social hierarchy is observed. The tribal Haoku bachelors were of a lower ethnic group, as perceived by the Luwang clans of the girl's family. Had the girls had affairs with their own same category of bachelors, they might haven't be beaten and expelled away. In the story, on the way to heaven, one of the girls gave birth to a cicada (*sikada keet* in Hindi) instead of a baby. The Meitei believed that incest relation, clan endogamy, or marriage of a prohibited group led to the giving birth of a cursed baby- stillbirth, disease, handicap, and short life span. The story reinforces and warns the people not to breach the taboos and norms of matrimonial alliances in society.

The story also teaches people, particularly the integrity of a wife and the boundary of parents towards their married daughters. Had Nahoinu stuck to her husband's word or Nahoinu's mother and relatives not intruded on the matters and contracts of the husband and wife, the misfortunes of Nahoinu might not have been at all.

Myths in Real Life

Myths may have two large functions- one is the sacred concept of the story that people still believe and practice, and the other is no longer attended by the people because of its absurdity, obscureness, or profanity in nature. We have many beliefs and practices linked with such sacred myths of praying and offering to gods and deities in Hindu myths. In the present story, certain cultural beliefs and practices are related to myth. When the six

girls were ascending to heaven, one of them delivered a cicada. It is said that without any means to cut the umbilical cord, a locally available plant in the hills, called '*lam thangchou*,' cut it. Still, the Meiteis believe that the plant has the destructive power of hard substances in the human body. That's why the Meiteis still consider the plant to be ethno-medical. They boil the plant, and the liquid is drunk to break and cure the stones in the kidney or gall bladder of patients suffering from stone cases. Also, the old folks sing the song of romantic mysticism of the lovers and their offspring, cicada (*harinongnang*), in the month of the season when the cicada sings in a year.

Nature vs. Culture

One of the intellectual giants, Jack Derrida, the father of deconstruction, pointed out the 'scandal' of the binary opposition of Levi Strauss by citing examples of incest relationships (Masmodi, 2019). Everybody appreciated Derrida's critical inquiry into interpreting the text. However, Levi Strauss' concept of binary opposition also gives insight into understanding the wonder world of human minds, though there may be limitations and exceptions in understanding certain contexts of social reality, such as those cited by Derrida. Taking the benefit of Levi Strauss' structuralism, let's try to examine it in the context of the myth.

In the story, the girls were grown up and could take responsibility for family matters beyond the house. As such, they came out far to search for fish for their families. The girls were biologically and socially mature. The strong urge of human biology and psychology, 'to love and be loved,' is a human instinct that needs to be fulfilled, and humans crave it. However, their natural instincts were curbed and controlled under the strong cord of patriarchal structure. Somehow, when a weak situation comes up, the repressed emotional and biological instincts burst out. The meeting of the six boys in the late evening was the weak zone, and appeasing the carnal appetite was the irresistible outlet, the sheer truth that nature dominated over nurture.

The Death of the Author

Jacque Derrida, in his concept of deconstruction, says that there are no static structures, there is no fixed meaning, and all texts are fluid in nature (Mambrol, 2016, March 21). One should stop being loyal to conventional interpretations of concepts, thoughts, and theories. In the attempt to interpret the meaning and metaphors of text, conventionally, most people try to analyze

in the conventional ways of the author. Barthes (1967), in his famous essay “The Death of the Author”, says that the author has no sovereignty over his own words(images or sounds, etc.) that belong to the readers who interpret them and the function of the text is to be read, the author and process of writing are irrelevant. In other words, it may also be meant that instead of having inclinations, copying and glamourizing the author just to show respect and blindly appreciating him, the interpreters or readers must think that the author is no more and shall try in-depth analysis of the text with their original flow of interpretation without bothering that the original writer of the text may object or get criticized.

The unconventional concepts and questions of the text will reveal the underlying metaphors and meanings.

The Symbolic Metaphor of the Myth

Austrian-born psychologist Bruno Bettelheim was of the opinion that folktales were symbolic metaphors for puberty, sexual maturity, seduction, and death. Bettelheim (1976) was of the opinion that fairy folk tales are useful in resolving the inner conflicts of growing children. Perhaps he may have meant the pedagogical function of folktales for young people who, in their early teens and youthful days, face a crisis for love and sex. The present myth ‘*khongjomnubee nongkarol*’ fits into the scheme of division of symbolic metaphor stages of folktales. In their puberty stage, after which they reached sexual maturity, the six maidens went out of their homes in search of partners. The love at first sight and spending the night connotes seduction of youths in sex and love, which brings forth their own ruins. The myth narrates the unbridled seductive nature of youthfulness, which, if indulged without social sanction, ultimately leads to pain and death. It warns the youth not to hijack their emotion and lives with their hormones.

Conclusion

It’s my humble submission and opinion that there are different approaches to interpreting different genres of folklore. However, what and how to interpret is a very difficult thing because of the fluid nature of folklore or any text. Moreover, we interpret it from a different time zone, past narratives, or any genre that has a unique time, ecology, and culture. On top of that, through oral traditions, the genres that came across from different times and people who adapted the genres to suit their particular time and place

changed and modified. So, any interpretation is very fallible to reveal what's so-called reality, which the author himself cannot justify and reveal because of the limitations of sound, words, or letters, what Derrida called difference, which cannot replace real feelings and experiences. Despite that, a critic, a professional, a novice, an insider who shares and experiences the reality, or an outsider who has never experienced the socio-political and economy of the culture of the people whom he interprets will always have a gulf of difference. It's my humble opinion that professionals with sound theatrical understanding and sharing the real experiences of the culture which he or she likes to interpret can easily penetrate into the native's skin and can portray the more relevant underlying anatomy of meanings and symbols that decode the 'near-reality' if not the reality as it is. Being an Indian and experiencing the socio-cultural milieu, the interpretation of "Shakuntala" by Romila Thapar cannot be compared with Jacque Derrida or Levi Strauss.

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