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Songs Of The Ancestors: Exploring Cultural Continuity And Identity In Tangkhul Literary Narratives And Songs

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Abstract

This study explores the enduring continuity and dynamic transformation of Tangkhul Naga literary narratives and folk songs, emphasizing their continuity amid modern influences. As an oral society without a written script, the Tangkhul people have historically preserved history and cultural identity through storytelling and music. However, these traditions are challenged by the arrival of education and exposure to globalization. Despite these challenges, contemporary literature and music plays a key factor in reinventing the new folklore. Chansa Makan's *Living Ghosts and Other Uncanny Stories* reinterprets supernatural themes in his own way and musicians like Guru Rewben Mashangva and Featherheads Haokui merge and blend traditional folklore with the modern genres. Their works reflect how folklore remains a bridge between past and present, ancestral and contemporary.

Keywords: Tangkhul Naga, Folklore, Globalization, Cultural identity, Contemporary

Introduction

Folklore constitutes the oral history of a particular oral culture like traditional customs, tales, sayings, dances or arts forms preserved among people. In a society where people rely on oral tradition, the voices of their ancestors serve as the primary means of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge. One of the many communities in NorthEast India, the Tangkhul Naga is one of which depends on myths, storytelling, folklore and tales to maintain historical memory and reinforcing moral values that helped them shape their communal identity. Elders passed them down through generations after generations acting as custodians of these

narratives. Then with the exposure of global media, Christianity and formal education, the younger generations detached themselves from these oral traditions. Storytelling which was once a communal practice is now outdated and cared by very few.

All these challenges yet the Tangkhul folklore has not disappeared from the face of earth but evolved through new artistic mediums with the help of the new contemporary writers and musicians. This is evident in the work of Chansa Makan's *Living Ghosts and Other Uncanny Stories*. The writer employs the supernatural elements from traditional folklore to mirror and reflect contemporary traumas and anxieties. Likewise, musicians and bands like 'Guru Rewben Mashangva' and 'Featherheads Haokui' preserve the cultural heritage by blending folk songs with the new genre of music which is accessible and loved by the younger audiences. Their work of art demonstrates that Tangkhul folklore is still a living tradition, which is continuously shaping and is still being shaped even if the social realities are altered, ensuring its continuity in an evolving world.

Chapter 1: Zingtai Mansingla: Love and Fate: The Divine Intervention.

The folktale of Zingtai Mansingla is one that is loved and heard by everyone in the Tangkhul Naga tradition of oral storytelling. The tale reflects the bittersweet relationship of fate and divine intervention. The story follows a poor, childless couple who desperately prayed to the goddess of Rong Ngayi. The goddess not only granted them their wish of bearing a child but also great wealth. They are blessed with a beautiful daughter 'Mansingla'. Tragically their happiness is aborted when the goddess asks the child to be returned in due time. Growing up, Mansingla's beauty and weaving skills attracted suitors from across the land and horizons, one of which was a young, handsome lad 'Vahei', the son of the chief of Seitangphung. Their connection is immediate and it was love at first sight but their story is far from only being a romantic adventure.

On the day of their union, Mansingla is taken by a powerful, supernatural storm, a force that seems to embody the will of the divine. Villagers later claim to see her weaving inside a lake, eternally bound to her fate.

Beyond its narrative, the story not only is a fusion of love, tragedy, destiny and cultural duty but also reflects the cultural identity of the Tangkhul Naga community. Mansingla's weaving, the mystical lake, and divine intervention of the goddess of Rong Ngayi reflects the essential beliefs of the Tangkhul Naga community, where honoring the promises made to deities is an integral part of maintaining cultural identity.

1.1 Cultural Continuity and Symbolism

The tale of Zingtai Mansingla preserves the deeply rooted traditions, cultural values and societal beliefs that human existence is always intertwined with supernatural forces, across generations. Mansingla's exceptional weaving skills, credited to divine teaching from the goddess when she was still in the womb, not only emphasizes that weaving is also a sacred inheritance but also highlights the importance of textile artistry in

Tangkhul society till date. The renowned *Zingtai Kashan*, a very popular garment, is said to be her creation and is still significant as a cultural artifact symbolizing artistic and spiritual heritage.

Mansingla was taken away by the dark storm and was nowhere to be found. Some even say they saw her being swallowed by the earth. She was confined within a locked chamber that was guarded by a crab. Like all fairy tales, Vaheileng came to her rescue. This accentuates the struggle between deities and mortals, divine will and human agency.

The lake, where villagers claimed to have seen Mansingla weaving, acts as a metaphor for cultural endurance. Water here symbolizes continuity and transformation that suggests traditions also evolve while also preserving its essence. The tale is an example of how modern retelling reasserts folklore's ability to adapt while maintaining its cultural significance.

1.2 Gothic Horror and the Haunting Nature of Fate

Zingtai Mansingla is a folktale loved by the people of the Tangkhul Naga. But the gothic elements in it cannot be overlooked. Her already-decided fate before she was even born, her entrapment in the lake, bodily transformation, the storm that swept her away and removed her from the eyes of people are all elements of gothic literature. The storm that engulf Mansingla mirrors gothic literature's use of ominous natural forces to signify the impending doom of what is to come to her.

People claiming her to be seen in the lake still weaving also strengthens the gothic atmosphere that signifies that her spirit is still restless. She is still alive yet dead and is transformed into a ghostly presence. The sign of her weaving can be understood as unresolved existence, trapped in cycles of suffering. The lake functions not only as a supernatural space but also a psychological symbol of confinement where people are trapped in their own minds.

One other element is the bodily transformation where her genital parts were missing when the Maharaja tried to bed her. Parts of a person missing can also read as identity loss. She is no longer a complete woman. The Maharaja was so insulted, he put her in a box with a hole just enough for her to breathe and cast the box in a whirlpool. This emphasizes the gothic themes of burial and entombment where the heroines of gothic literature who are imprisoned or buried alive.

Chapter 2: Rai (Living Ghost) and the Persistence of Supernatural Belief in Tangkhul Society

'Rai' or as we call it, 'the living ghost' still remains as one of the most feared in the Tangkhul culture till date. It is thought to be an inherited supernatural affliction, granting individuals the power to possess or harm others through spiritual forces. Whoever is born into Rai Bloodlines are often ostracised as a stigma in the society. Most people would not associate with them, especially the older generation. No matter what, the elders would

not give their children in marriage to those possessing the Rai bloodline. Despite the coming of Christianity, Rai still exists as a powerful force and this can be seen in the story of Keimila, a woman feared by the villagers.

2.1 Myth and the Supernatural

In Tangkhul mythology, it is believed Rai associates with the physical and spiritual world and is inherited by the younger generation of that lineage which makes the bloodline of those permanent. It cannot be cured or removed. This is why the older generation refuses to associate with anyone of Rai bloodline.

In Keimila's story, the black eagle is suspected to be her spirit, which signifies that Rai has the ability to change their physical form, strengthening the idea of interconnectedness of human existence and supernatural influence. Evil spirits can be removed by performing an exorcism however in the case of Rai, it is impossible. Once you have it, you take it with you to your grave. It is hard to control as well. When Awon was possessed by Keimila, it took five strong men to hold her down but she was too strong. The voice that came out of Awon's mouth was not hers but Keimila's.

2.2 Cultural Continuity and the Persistence of Rai

We think, despite the arrival of Christianity and modernization, why is Rai still deeply embedded in Tangkhul society, persisting through taboos, adaptation and oral transmission? While open discussions about Rai are rare, its influence is evident in the continued avoidance of Rai bloodlines in marriage and social circles.

Christianity played a huge role in addressing those supernatural afflictions by replacing shamanic rituals with prayers and exorcisms as can be seen in the case of Kemila when the village pastor Rev. Shomi prayed for her. But this does not mean the people have completely eliminated Rai, instead it shows how the community has shifted from indigenous healing to religious deliverance. The endurance or persistence of Rai presents that while the external expression of belief has changed, the underlying fear of supernatural influence remains intact. It is not forgotten, Rai continues to function as a cultural marker, reinforcing community identity and shaping responses to the unknown.

Chapter 3: Kazeiram Kazang: Journey to Sheol and the Role of the Shaman in Cultural Identity

The flexibility of Tangkhul shamanism and the growing influence of Christianity can be seen in the story of Yarteo and his journey to the underworld. It emphasizes the deep connection between the dead and the living, where fate, ancestral influence and spiritual intervention are all connected in a web. Avü Koshue is the village shaman who plays the role of a middle man between the mortal world and the afterlife.

3.1 The Role of the Shaman in Cultural Identity

Avü Koshue plays a huge role here as someone who is both a healer and a guardian of traditions. Yarteo, the only son of Wungmareo falls inexplicably ill and is slowly dying, the parents run to the village pastor for help. This action highlights the slow shifting from indigenous shamanism to religious Landscape in the community. But when the prayers of the pastor fails to bring back their child, they again ran to Avü Koshue to save their son.

Avü Koshue was able to communicate with the dead and travel to the underworld. He prepared the sacrificial ceremony of five spotless, healthy bulls and instructed the family some traditional rituals to appease the supernatural forces. Tangkhul believes shamans to be negotiators of fate. His journey to Kazeiram, the realm of the dead, and his negotiations with Kokto, the one-eyed god of the underworld, illustrates the belief that shamans are the negotiators of fate.

Many villagers discourage the idea of consulting Avü Koshue as it challenges the idea and notion that Christian faith alone is sufficient. However, when he successfully brought Yarteo back to the living realm, there were volleys of questions thrown at him about how he brought back the life of a dead boy. Tradition and Christianity may often be in conflict yet both continue to shape the cultural identity of the Tangkhul Naga.

3.2 Ancestral Influence and the Negotiation of Destiny

Ancestors are believed to have a significant amount of power over the living, Familial bonds are not bound only within the living but extend beyond death with ancestors continuing to influence the Faye of their descendants. This can be seen when Kophule, the deceased grandmother of Yarteo, pleads with Kokto to allow her to take him to the afterlife. Yarteo's perception of his grandmother shifts from loving to a terrifying ghost. This highlights fear towards the dead. Spirits can be benevolent and be a menacing force at the same time. Destiny is not fixed, and Avü Koshue proves that by doing the impossible and altering the inevitable by offering sacrifices to the gods.

Chapter 4: Musical Composition: Cultural Revival Through Folk and Contemporary Fusion

Like literary works, music also plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity of a community. Music is also one aspect which bridges the past with the present. Musicians like Guru Rewben Mashangva and Featherheads Haokui, are epitomes of this fusion, embracing tradition with modernization to create music that resonated with both older and younger audiences.

4.1 Guru Rewben Mashangva: The Pioneer of Naga Folk Blues

Guru Rewben Mashangva, also referred to as the "Bob Dylan of the Nagas" is a renowned music artist of Tangkhul Naga community. His expertise is fusing Naga folk songs with ballads and blues and this alone

makes him a unique artist. He plays the guitar producing an ethnic folk sound like no one can, the 'Mazui' (indigenous mouth organ), the four-hole flute known as 'Yangkahui', the 'Tinteila' (folk fiddle) and his rare cow bell percussion. He has reinvented the traditional Tangkhul Naga flute 'Yangkahui' and also modified and polished the folk fiddle Tingeilla to synchronize with the western tonal scale. His prominent trademark is his 'Haokuiret' (the traditional haircut of the primitive Nagas) and his colourful traditional outfit which he wears wherever he performs.

One of his iconic tracks 'Chongkhom Philava', a blend of blues and traditional melodies' has played a vital role in introducing the Tangkhul Naga community to the world evoking the serenity of Naga landscapes.

4.2 Featherheads Haokui: Merging Folk with Rock and Metal

The band Featherheads Haokui fuses rock and metal with traditional folk music and is loved by the younger generations. Inspired by Guru Rewben Mashangva, he integrated folk instruments into his compositions. One of their most famous songs 'Ihao Thot' not only is pleasing to the ears but also serves as a wake up call to environmental degradation urging the younger generations to act before it's too late. It is time for everyone to wake up and be aware of the constantly changing environment and destruction of nature. The lyrics of the song portrays nature as a divine entity that speaks to its people:

Original Lyrics in Tangkhul:

"Yangkalu kazingram

Nganalu masikhon

Sholo amik khanã

Mathingsa mathuksa ithot

Kongrei, kongra thenghaira

Masairotra mathuklu

Shiri-shirã na hoda leiya ithumli hey...

Oh hey..oh hey.. heiya hey heiya hey" (*Ihao Thot*, 2024)

English Translation:

"Behold the sky,

And listen to the wind;

Open your ears and eyes.

Awake, my generation!

The rivers have dried up.

Awake, before it is too late.

All the creatures are calling us.

The whole world is calling us.

Behold the sky,

The eternal God is calling us.”

The song emphasizes the connection between nature and humanity. When the environment is destructive, we are failing as people. There is a need to save nature before it's too late. It is not merely an earthly concern but a divine warning to everyone.

Conclusion

The ongoing dialogue between past and present, tradition and modernity is reflected in the study of continuity and transformation of the Tangkhul Naga literary narratives and folk songs. Deep rooted in oral traditions of storytelling, these narrative expressions not only evolve but preserve their essence. Chansa Makan's *Living Ghosts and Other Uncanny Stories* modernises folklore through modern literary techniques all the while keeping the indigenous narrative still relevant. His work, along with the perseverance of Rai beliefs, bespeaks how ancestral philosophy and beliefs continue to shape present-day Tangkhul identity. Comparably, music serves as an overpass between generations. Musician Guru Rewben Mashangva created Tangkhul folk music by blending it with blues making it accessible to younger generations while also preserving its authenticity. Another band, Featherheads Haokui, also follows through this evolution of blending folk music with rock and metal, addressing cultural identity and environmental degradation. *Ihao Thot* and *Haonao* serve as a wake up call for reuniting people with heritage. Together, these musicians demonstrate how their works actively shape traditions and not merely inherited them. Still deeply rooted in ancestral wisdom yet adapted to the realities of the present, the contemporary writers and musicians ensure that the echoes of the past continue to shape the narratives and songs of the future.

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