



## **Preliterate Vaiphei Rites, Rituals and Superstitions: Communication of Cultural Nuances through Oral Narratives**

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### *Abstract*

*Looking into the oral literature and lore is an important part of understanding culture of any community around the world. With special reference to the Vaipheis belonging to the cognate Chin-Kuki-Mizo/Zo ethnic group located in the north-eastern region of India, a study of the rituals, superstitions and traditions of the people is necessary to decode cultural symbols embedded in the oral narratives of the people. The popular tale of the two brothers, Liando and Thangho, Liandote Unau, well known for its rag-to-riches theme and depiction of brotherly love will be the focus in this paper. The issue of communication and interpretation of the cultural signs and symbols will be examined using folklorist methods of research. The paper is based on research conducted on the valuable ancient oral tradition, published and unpublished literature available on the Vaiphei community. An analytical study of available literature, visual media, interviews with people who had knowledge and experience of traditional festivals, ceremonies, and celebrations was conducted to translate the songs and arrive at interpretations of the text.*

**Keywords:** *Folktales, Oral Narratives, Folk Literature, Vaiphei, Zo, North-East India.*

### **Introduction**

The term 'Oral Narrative' refers to the tales, legends and myths that are passed down orally from generation to generation. It is part of a larger body of works or literature that is delivered by word of mouth known as oral literature, traditional literature or folk literature. This collection of traditional material is preserved and passed on from one generation to the

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other. As it is being handed down the ages, it has versions and variations shaped by memory, an immediate need or purpose, and the degree of individual talent. The tales preserved become the invaluable immaterial possessions of the people.

Formed out of the interpersonal interactions of the people, the stories, myths, and legends reflect the socio-cultural traditions of the people. As Stith Thompson had denoted: “The common idea present in all folklore is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record.” (Thompson as quoted in Leach 403). This in turn indicate the past is not a dead past, rather it is a past which is, in some sense, still living in the present. The folktales then are more than survival of the past but also the presence of the past in the present, albeit in new shapes and structures. The symbolism of elaborated narratives and rituals encapsulate and intensify the experience and provide a release from reality.

Constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth, oral literature includes those utterances, whether spoken, recited, or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic character of accurate observation, vivid imagination, and ingenious expression. Alan Dundes claims, “It is not easy to find a rationale for the irrational, to make sense of ‘nonsense,’ but that is what folklorists seriously interested in interpretation must try to do” (Dundes 27) The narratives become the points of identification made within the discourses of history and culture, formed through an enquiry encompassing the academic disciplines of linguistics, cultural studies, anthropology, ethnography, psychology, comparative religion, mythology, and literature.

The North-Eastern region of India consisting of eight states, namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, is home to many indigenous communities with distinct languages and cultures. A total of two hundred and twenty languages are spoken in a geographical area of 2,62,179 square kilometres. The communities were under their own rule until the white colonisers came to their land and brought them to a modern Westernised way of living. Among them, the Vaiphei community hailing from the hills of Manipur and found in pockets in the neighbouring states is one of the lesser known.

The community mentioned belong to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo ethnic group, also known as *Zo* people. Identified by John Shakespeare as one of the ‘Old Kuki’ clans in his seminal work titled *The Lushai Kuki Clans*, the Vaipheis are noted to have arrived in Manipur along with the Aimol, the Chothe, the Chiru, the Koireng, the Kom, the Purum, the Anal, the Lamgang, the Moyon, the Monsang, and the Gangte in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Shakespeare 147). Prior to the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the North-Eastern region of India, the Vaiphei language had no writing system. Impressed by the success of J. H. Lorrain and F. W. Savidge in creating a Mizo alphabet from the Roman script, a similar Vaiphei alphabet was made by the efforts of Rev. Watkin R Roberts, a Welsh missionary, with the help of the first Christian converts of the community, Pu Thangkai and Pu Lungpau, in the year 1911 (Chawnmang 5). Literature came into print from this time heralding in a new chapter in the

progress of the community. However, tales of the people continued to be passed down orally recalling the days before the light of the Gospel came to them.

As mentioned above, the Vaipheis belong to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo/Zo ethnic group. The tribes followed similar customs and have linguistic affinities with each other. Like the other cognate tribes, the Vaipheis are a patriarchal community where genealogy is traced through the male line. Their villages are found on the hill ridges covered with forests. A Manipuri historian, Jyotirmoy Roy, gives the reason why people from the hills selected sites for their villages: 'They must have been guided by two considerations viz (a) security and (b) health.' (191) In olden times, these sites gave them security from frequent inter-tribal conflicts and are more hygienic than the damp, insect-ridden thickly wooded river valley. Therefore, the primitive Vaiphei villages were built along ridges at the top of hills.

A study of oral cultures indicates a query of '... ancient customs and surviving festivals, old ditties and dateless ballads, archaic myths, legends and fables, and timeless tales, and proverbs' (Ben-Amos 11). On the other hand, it also implied irrationality: beliefs in ghosts and demons, fairies and goblins, sprites, and spirits; it referred to credence in omens, amulets, and talismans. As people with similar physical, linguistical and cultural features, the legends, myths, and tales of the Zo people are similar as well. As mentioned previously, all the languages of the tribes of the Zohnahthlak community have a close affinity to each other as they belong to the same language group but, at the same time, it serves as a distinct marker of identity between the tribes. For instance, the Vaiphei tale of *Chemtattepu* is known as *Chemtatrawta* among the Lusei speaking people. Likewise, *Liandote Unau* (Vaiphei) is called *Liandovate Unau* (Lusei), *Liendohai Unau* (Hmar), and *Lendoute Ucha* (Thadou). These are the common literary and cultural artefacts of the cognate group passed down from time immemorial. The Vaipheis believed in one Supreme Being or God who they gave the name *Pathian* or *Nungzai*, whom they believed to live somewhere above. They believed that God was good, grants health, children, human wishes, and never did any harm to human beings, He was omnipotent and omnipresent as well. *Nungzai* and *Pathian* were both appeased and worshipped by performing sacrifices. Every object in nature is believed to be the abode place of spirits referred to as *Huai*. These spirits could bring bad luck and accidents on humans if disturbed. Sacrifices were made to appease the spirits as well as to seek good fortune, be it in times of harvest or war. The blood and flesh of pigs, dogs, fowls and mithuns were used for sacrifices.

Rites were performed at the location selected for jhum cultivation to cleanse the land of spirits before work began. These practices of sacrifices to spirits through the village priest known as the *Thiampu* led to the assumption that the people were animists and savages who had no notion of 'civilization'. That the Vaipheis worshipped trees, mountains, rivers, rocks, etc. is a mistaken notion as they believed in *Pathian*, and nonetheless they also respected the living things and the spirits around them. Another superstition is that one must never treat death in a flippant manner or perform the rituals and ceremonies as a source of merry making. In the case of death in the family, the corpse would be propped against the middle post of the house in a sitting position while the family prepared for the funeral. A ladder like

contraption was made from bamboo poles and placed near the head of the corpse. This is known as '*Sanglai*' and the dead body would be dressed. The family members would put cooked rice near the *Sanglai*, to be eaten by the dead person. An animal was killed to ensure that it may accompanied the soul of the dead person to *Mithi Khua* as well. His/her coffin would be packed with provisions for their journey to the afterlife. During the burial ceremony, two persons holding an arrow and shield would go before pall bearers, performing a war dance known as *Thigalnaw* (chasing the enemy of death). Then the dead was buried in front of the house. In those days they did not have a cemetery. This custom was seen as a proper farewell for a family member, and it was also a mandatory ritual for family members (Paukhawkai 3).

With regards to the afterlife, the Vaipheis believed the soul heads either to the *Mithi Khua* (Village of the Dead) or *Pialgal* (Home of the Warriors). Entry to *Pialgal* was only for the brave warriors who had successfully hunted different animals and had collected the heads of enemies. *Mithi Khua*, on the other hand, was the place everyone could enter regardless of their status. The entry to the afterlife was through the *RihDil* or Rih Lake situated in Mizoram. The legendary lake is believed to have been the inevitable passage that spirits of the dead crossed on their way to the *Mithi Khua*. In the legendary tale of the star-crossed lovers 'Suiting leh Ngambawm' (Suiting and Ngambawm), the female love interest, Suiting had passed on before Ngambawm. They had been inseparable since birth and even in death, Ngambawm followed a wild cat *Sangak/Sanghar* to visit his beloved in *Mithi Khua*. Not unlike the world of the living, Ngambawm would go hunting with the male spirits of the village, help with the chores, and sleep in a common dormitory with the youth. By day, the inhabitants appeared as humans, but by nightfall they became a pile of bones. Ngambawm did not know this, and he would fling those bones aside whenever he happens to awake during the night. His friends would wake up sore and bruised from the rough treatment. From this episode, we may deduce that in the *Mithi Khua* (land of the dead), the souls of the dead continue their earthly occupations. They even constructed houses for their dwelling. The souls of the dead feel pain and hurt, eat, and sleep and work in the *Mithi Khua* as life there is supposed to be only an imitation of the earthly life.

In the third chapter of *The Golden Bough*, James G. Frazer asserts that magic is based on the principle that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause which is interesting to see as an act of pretence can turn true (Frazer 19). It can be as simple as lying about an event or it can become an activity with the purpose of intended harm to a person. The most familiar application of the principle that like produces like is the attempt which has been made by many peoples in many ages to injure or destroy an enemy by injuring or destroying an image of him, in the belief that, just as the image suffers, so does the man, and that when it perishes, he must die. In a similar manner, the pre-Christian *Vaipheis* did have certain actions that has to be avoided, lest the spirit release harmful effects upon that person or group. The acts to be avoided were known as *Zek* (taboo). The taboo was applied to persons, natural objects, actions, and words. They believed that contact with those was dangerous, involving the wrath of supernatural and can bring harm.

The tale of *Liandote Unau* orphaned by the death of their father and the remarriage of their mother is a known tale preaching familial love and loyalty. The brothers had a hard childhood filled with neglect, abuse and near starvation. At one point, they even had to split a millet grain into two to fill their hungry bellies. As they had no immediate family to look after them, the brothers were ridiculed in the village. They would get the leftovers when a feast happened and their requests for food grains would be answered by baskets of rice husks. Their fortune, however, changed when the villagers gave the bladder of a python as their share of the kill. It contained bells, gongs, necklaces, and gold coins which made them wealthier than the village chief. Liando married the daughter of the village chief and gave them a bride price befitting her status.

The news of the wealth of Liando and Thangho spread to the neighbouring villages and their mother came to confirm the rumours. She did not recognize them initially and she asked Thangho about the brothers. Thangho, however, recognized his mother and suspected her intentions. He lied saying they had perished a long time ago. Liando, on the other hand, came to know of this and welcomed their mother in his home. He, however, does not confirm the rumours of his wealth to his mother. Meanwhile, the mother spends the night unable to sleep due to the noise of the mithuns and in annoyance cursed the animals and her sons. Liando heard her and confronted his mother in the morning. She lied saying that she was blessing the hearth of her sons. Liando was not fooled and after another hearty meal send her off. He warned her not to turn back or try to return if she is to depart again. On reaching the top of the hill, the mother, however, glances back and sees the shawls, beads, necklaces, and mithuns in the backyard of her sons. Realizing the truth, she throws herself from a tree and dies instantly. Liando is reluctant to conduct the last rites for his mother and instead buries her corpse in his granary. He kept worms to feed on the maggots and a dog to lick the floor of the granary clean. This act of disrespect to their birth mother and to food was and is still a taboo in Vaiphei culture. This precipitated the downfall of *Liandote Unau*. Their mithuns died one by one, and the rice grains were inedible because of the foul smell of the corpse. Liando's wife drowns while crossing a river, and the wealth of the brothers declined dramatically until they return to the impoverished state of their childhood.

This tale can be interpreted as a moralistic story of familial love and bonding. Alternatively, it is a cautionary tale of the perils of greed, revenge, and disrespect to elders. Several symbols are embedded in the story which will make sense if the audience is well-versed in the myths of the people. A *Gulpitek* (python) is a source of wealth and prosperity in tribal lore. They are said to carry diamonds in their mouth which give a brilliant light. They can bless a person and in the case of the brothers, Liando and Thangho, the wealth of the brothers gained from the bladder of the dead python was sudden and unexpected. They, however, chose to keep quiet about the origin of their wealth as it would incite jealousy in their neighbours.

Like mentioned previously, superstitions of the community were clearly defined and the brothers in disregarding the taboos of death cause their own downfall. As like produces like, Thangho's claim that the brothers are dead can be interpreted as hastening their own

deaths. Moreover, Liando did not perform the last rites for a dead family member. The brothers also disregarded the proper place of a corpse and that of food. As the end of the tale suggest, the benevolent spirits that took pity on *Liandote Unau* likely abandon them by this point due to their ignorance of the rituals of the community. The cultural nuances embedded in the text are varied and understandable only to the discerning listener well-versed in the lore of the community. A single narrative may be interpreted in multiple ways which will all be accurate. The documentation done is of the verbal kind, and through the power of memory and creativity the past does not completely disappear. It rather reveals the contemporaneity of the past in the present.

In this regard, oral narratives are the major source of information of the past and memories of the people are tattooed in these verbal performances. It was the means of communicating tradition and culture to the younger generation in olden times. The space folklore occupies in saddling several fields of study is enormous, and we get glimpses of our history, our culture and our heritage from the folksongs, dances, legends, myths and tales of yore. And more so in the North-east of India, which offers a great wealth of material with its diverse population and cultures to work with, and the hope of meaningful discourses not only between history and literature, but also involving several disciplines of study will catapult the region into further prominence as well.

There are many other more tales, proverbs, and songs of the community that remains undiscovered. The study of Vaiphei traditional literature is a saga of a community which attempts and is still striving to create and establish an identity in the ever-changing heterogenous society that the process of reclaiming the heritage and culture through folklore is a dynamic one and that a space for peripheral communities in the multicultural modern society can be created with the help of the folklore of the community.

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### **Endnotes**

1. The inability of *Zo* people to accept a common nomenclature to represent their collective identity has resulted in being identified as '*Chin*' in Myanmar; '*Mizo*' in Mizoram; and '*Kuki*' in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Tripura, and Chittagong Hills Tract. Many tribes within this group are recognized as separate tribes under the Indian Constitution due to difference in dialects and absence of a common language.
2. *Nungzai* also called *Khuawang*, is known as the consort of *Pathian* by some historians, while others believe *Nungzai* is the negative energy to *Pathian*'s positive energy. *Pathian* remains the Most High Being, followed by *Nungzai*, and the different spirits and beings that inhabit the environment surrounding them.

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