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Literature of North East India: Oral Narratives as Documents for the Study of Ritualization in the Darlong Community of Tripura

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Abstract

The abstract attempt to read into rituals of the Darlong community of Tripura pitched on different phenomenal vines. The Darlong believed that there exists spirits, shadows and supernatural elements in every living and non-living body of nature. In the orature of the Darlong community, there are many such instances where the people response the natural happenings and old practices that are rooted in the oral narratives there by developing their rites and rituals. This article will investigate into the oral narratives and the evolution of certain rite and ritual that are either abandoned or carried out till today. However, it must be remembered that the Darlong, accepting the Christian creed in 1919, no longer preserved the belief today.

[**Keywords:** Darlong community, ritualization, oral narrative, Christianity]

1. Introduction

Oral narratives are cultural materials and documents transmitted verbally from one generation to another in speeches or songs that later take up the form of folktales, folksongs, ballads, sayings or even chants. No doubt, the origin of this tradition may date back to some stone age when men knew not the art of writing yet watermark their every deed for their forth coming generations. It might also have originated in circumstances where a grandmother or a grandfather attempts to quench the thirst of their grandchildren about the outer world which according to them is a world full of adventures and strange happenings. In this way, it is possible for a society to transcend materials of the past across time. The Darlong oral tradition records the lives of the common people, their beliefs, simple joy and sorrow, customs and their encounter with strange forces of nature. It can be considered borrowing its accounts from an individual's or group's cultures functioning as a mediator to political decisions, validates conduct, release emotions and evaluate their social administration. The general themes of the tales are adventures, love, beauty hunting, hero tales, legendary tales, revenge and vengeance. The tales also manipulate the customs, rites and rituals of the people, beliefs faculty to form the plots and sub-plots or the wardrobe of it. On the other hand, they also records all the notable events of the past embedded with thought provoking stories revealing the historical, cultural, inhabitation, religious aspect and names of the kings, queens and chieftains of the community in the past. The folksongs also memorized almost all the drive made by the people. For instance, song for dead, song for harvesting, word play, song for encouragement, song celebrating success, song sang on their usual way of

challenging the evil spirits, songs celebrating their hunting spirits and their way of courting their beloved etc.

The Darlong community does not have any written document. Hence, the community preserved their traditions and cultures through oral tradition and artifacts, which too is in a dwindling state. Every materials with which the community define its identity, existence and world where he is living in, taking from the anthropological myth to fairy tales are transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition. Nevertheless, there are some writings maintained by early educated person on different subjects and those documents which the Village Council maintained in regard to their respective villages called 'Khuahniangsia', which of course is a product of later age. To begin with, the Darlong literature had its genesis of documentation with 'Parkam' (a collection of nine folktales) and followed by 'Tian Thephung Bu' (collection of folktales) by Pu. Siamkunga Darlong, Darchawi. Beyond these, there are monthly or weekly bulletins such as 'Darlong Eng', 'Varna Sirbi', 'Saibual Rawl', 'Vanglai' etc. which records sermons, tales, songs, poetry, jokes, sayings, fictional stories and articles giving an explanation on varieties of topics like the 'Tharlak Kut' and other fest of the community. In addition, there are some referential writings of Holy Bible's testaments in Darlong language like 'Johana Hrilfiahna' (reference on the Gospel of John) by Rev. Tlanglawma Darlong of Darchawi and 'The Darlong of Tripura' by Letthuama Darlong through Directorate of Tribal Research Institute, Govt. of Tripura. Recently, a successful effort on audio recording was made from Mr. Muana Darlong and as a result, the community could document their folksongs in 'Ngaibang'. In the latest Tharlak Kut held on 11th- 12th Jan. 2013, Venue; Lamkhuang Khuahlui, effort has been made to revive the oral tradition of the community.

2. Brief Account of the Darlongs of Tripura

The Darlongs of Tripura belonged to one among the many communities of the 'Zo mi'. 'Zo mi' is the name of a major tribe found in various parts of South and South East Asia. They are a tribe of larger ethnic group which Britishers called Chin in Myanmar and Kuki in Manipur and Lushai in Mizoram which is why they are also known as Kuki-Chin group. They are found to have been geographically concentrated in such locations as the Tonzang district, the Tedim district (both in Burma), the north-east of Mizoram, the Naga Hills, the Somra Tracts, the Hkamti district, the Kale-Kabaw valley and the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. The close ethnicity is proved by the peculiarity that though variations in dialects exist, the 'Zo mi' unlike other tribes can converse with one another in their respective dialects with 70% comprehension. The 'Zo' people have common primordial name, common history, cultural affinities, belief system, economic life, and cherished the dream of restoring their glorious past. Thus, the chain of their relationship is circumscribed not only by geographical bounds, but more often by racial unity.

The Darlongs believed that the genesis of mankind lies in the 'Sinlung' myth. The people recalls that their forefathers came out of a cave called 'Sinlung'. Nevertheless, the

story has a number of interpretations. The literal meaning of the word ‘Sinlung’ in English is ‘closed stone’ where from came out of the cave one after the other till the gate of the cave was



closed. But soon after the sub-tribe¹ ‘Fathlei’ came out, the guardian Gods closed the door of the cave because of their loud and noisy talks which made the Gods worry about the world’s population preventing any further exit of the human race of the cave. “The Darlong till today believed the cave to exist somewhere in the present South-China” (L. Darlong 13). However, nothing is found in details except for the oral stories. “In one of the rational interpretations ‘Sinlung’ is said not to be a cave but the name of Chinese prince ‘Chinlung’, the son of Huang Ti of Chin dynasty who built the great wall of China in 214 B.C” (L. Darlong 14). The Darlong has two sub-tribes i.e. the ‘Awmhroi’, concentrated in Unakuti and North district and the ‘Fathlei’, mainly concentrated in the village called

1. The Darlong are broadly divided into two sub-tribe viz. Awmhroi and Fathlei. Awmhroi is further divided into not less than fifty four small clans.

'Khalaigniri', located in Unakuti district in the present state of Tripura. Presently, except for the state of Tripura (India), the existence of Darlongs in some other location is a mystery.

3. Ascent of the Christian Religion

The religious belief was hit hard with the acceptance of Christianity in 1919 and the western education among the community in the process of civilizing² them. The impact of Christianization laid a deep foundation in the psyche of the Darlong regulating their every moves and then after 1919. Mr. Ngurkhuma Darlong, Mr. Ngurdingliana Darlong and Mr. Hmuna Darlong are some of the early Darlongs who first accepted Christianity. However, they 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 Darlong chief drove out the Christians from their respective villages. Hence, the Christians created a new village called 'Darchawi'³ 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. At present, the Darlong are confine into these denominations; (i) The Baptist Church (ii) Roman Catholic Church (iii) United Pentecostal Church (iv) Evangelical Free Church of India (v) Presbyterian Church and (vi) Kuki Christian Church. As a matter of fact, the community began to unconsciously abandon their early identities, customs, religion, rites and rituals blindly imitating the missionaries. The marriage style, prayers, funerals, dress code except for festive period, ways of worship and offerings have all undergone a change because of the influence forsaking their early traditions. However, no doubt, the tribe was able to make a huge progress in terms of education making them to be the leading tribe among the tribals of Tripura when one opens the state govt. employment file in compared to their little population.

4. Rites and Rituals of the Darlong

The Darlong life was closely marked with every little things and deeds or act they performed in their day to day activities. The music, the rituals, riddles, chanting, folksongs and the the tales are all but documents sustaining their identity thereby deriving customary rites and rituals in which many, no doubt, are abandoned in the present days. Firstly, since the community depends on a shifting cultivation, they keep on moving from one place to another and jhuming⁴ was the only art of production along

2. The western view of civilization.

3. Name of a village presently located in Kumarghat sub-division of Tripura state.

4. The art of cultivation practiced by most of the tribes living in a hilly geographical location of Tripura.

with hunting sustaining the community survival. As a matter of fact, the people had to wander in search of fertile land and looking for their appropriate hunting ground which often results in their encounter with strange noise, creatures or even phenomena. For instance, the existence of water in the most unexpected place was feared and offers prayers. Similarly, 'Si'⁵ was a natural phenomenon that attracts the attention of many animals during a dry season. Animals come to it to quench their thirst. In the process, often the animals get stuck up in the muddy spring and when seen by the people, they take it to be the work of supernatural elements. Thus, ritualized the happening and consider 'Si' as the abode of demons. According to Biahneliana Darlong, a residence of Saibual village, 'Si' has a shadow that can hypnotize an animal or even cast a spell on a person that will automatically lost himself into another world considering the 'Si' to be his Lotus land. This, perhaps, was because of their superstitious nature as they do not have any specified ideologies about their beliefs system and the environment they lived in. 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 ritual of the Darlong. Stepping further, as the tribesmen are primarily hunters, they would sleep in the jungle waiting for their prey to approach them. It is obvious that when a person sleeps in a deep jungle, he hears several noises which are equally familiar and unfamiliar. However, in the early Darlong, these unfamiliar noises, created probably by rubbing of bamboos, breeze or other natural elements, are feared and believed it as a sign of gods and goddesses theatricality. Thus, the term 'Ramhuai', meaning 'dreadful forest' came into being. They believed that in it lives the spirits of many insatiable demons who can cause sickness, possess souls and even curse to dead. At certain instances, it was believed that the spirits would possess the soul of a person and punishes him for his wrong doings. As a consequence, the guardian had to go out to the jungle in the middle of the night to challenge the evil spirits. If the guardian wins the challenge, the prize would be cure for his son. However, if any case the guardian failed to convince the spirit then the patient or the guardian is sure to die. Thus, call for a ritualistic applause for the insatiable demons. The Darlong till today believes the existence of the 'Ramhuai' and its abilities. Hence, fear to built houses at the meeting point of two valleys for it was believed to be the passage of the furies.

In other circumstances, the Darlong originated their ritual from the mythical tales as well. In the story of 'Liandoi Brothers', a goddess came to visit the 'Liandoi' village in

5. 'Si' is a spontaneous flowing of muddy water that remains wet even in a dry season having a salty taste. In the word of Biahneliana Darlong of Saibual village, there are various kinds of 'Si' attracting different species of animal. One of the nearest that is yet believed to exist till today is located in a place called 'Chidung'(which mean place of salt) in the vernacular which probably fall under the sub-division of Masmara of Tripura. He further argues that this Si' was once the source of salt for the tribesmen where men and women would go for months to manufacture salt from it.

the guise of an old lady where everybody awaits for her but deny her disguise any shelter only to finally end up in the house of the Liandoi brothers. With the passage of time, the brothers began to grow richer and richer in kind and fruitful in every aspect. In one occasion, when the brothers were asked to harvest their cultivation by the goddess, the two brothers after days of harvest grew tired and fatigue because the more they harvest the larger the field grows as the goddess laid a spell on it. So the younger brother told of his tiredness to the goddess who advised them to let face of the mouth of their 'Bem'⁶ towards the slope.

When the two brothers did as commanded, the ripe corn miraculously disappeared in no time. Thenceforth, the Darlong community till date never let the mouth of their 'Bem' face towards the slope for they believed that the corn would disappear or decrease and considered as a bad omen.



Fig.1. Picture showing a woman scrubbing her 'Bem'.

The practice of head hunting was another important canon through which the community derived many rites and rituals. The people believed that beyond this mortal world there lies a 'Thikhua' and a 'Pialrâl'. In the kingdom of dead, every human was dome to go through. However, in the 'Paradise', only the worthy 'Ratha' and widely recognized personnel are entitled to enter. The 'Ratha' are the legendary hunters who have earned recognition or a mark of approval from his tribesmen during his lifetime. It was a sort of lifetime achievement. Everyman goes out for hunting reaching the age of adult. However, each of their worth is proved only when he have eaten the heart of the first human he killed and drink his blood. After the assassination, the assassin would cry out his own name for thrice so as to enable the slain to remember his master in the 'Thikhua'. It is only then he receives the mark or in other words, the recognition from all his kinsmen as a man of 'Ratha'. In a nutshell, every worthy warriors and hunters are ordained by making a blood sacrifice to become a 'Ratha'. The people aspire to become a

6. A traditional craft used for carrying grain and other cereals made of bamboo to be carried on their back.

'Ratha' for they believed that only such worthy people are entitled to settle in 'Pialrâl'. This recognition is more ornamented by the numbers of both human and animal skulls he hanged at his home. For instance, in the story 'Zawlpala nih Tualvungi', it is said that the grave of 'Zawlpala' was decorated by a garland of skulls and skin of animals. Similarly, the story of 'Pangama nih Thuitlingi' portrays the ornamentation of fame with skulls of an animal when he entered the kingdom or abode of dead for the second time. The people of the kingdom remembered him because of skull and animal skins he hanged during his first visit. In another interpretation, head hunting among the Tribe was done to please their respective Muse by offering blood. Hence, losing heads also cause a deep grief among the family and the Tribe as a whole. One significant occasion that was accompanied by the practice was the death of their chieftain. The people believed that the spirit of the dead chief cannot find his way to 'Thikhua' or the abode or kingdom of dead on his own. Hence, his men had to send some companies for him who will guide and serve as slaves to the spirit of the dead chief to 'Thikhua' leaving the act as a mark of ritual for the tribe. "Record has it that in the Jamatia Revolt of 1863 against the Manikya 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).

One significant ritual that usually follows the head hunting was tomb stoning which in the vernacular was known as 'Lungdaw'. The tombstone usually bears inscription on it with names, ranks, some dates and a picture of an animal that was slain to feast the people who so



Fig.2. Picture showing the Lungdaw of Rawikhama in the abandoned village of Talan-II.

came for the funeral ceremony. In the present context, the practice of tombstone has become almost compulsory to what was not in the past for only the privilege class enjoy

rite. Some of the tombstone can still be visited randomly lying in the jungle kilometers away from the abandoned village of 'Talan' located in the Kumarghat sub-division of present Tripura.



Fig.3. Picture showing a tombstone lying in the abandoned village of Talan-II.

Besides head hunting, animal hunting was as well done collectively by dividing themselves into as many groups as possible and competing among the groups. In the word of Mrs. Roitinkhami Darlong, a residence of Saibual village, "when a groups of hunter go for hunting, 'Indon'⁷ was observed. During 'Indon' observation the people makes the best fresh wine for the hunters. To commemorate the sacrifices of the hunters, the villagers organized 'Indon' period where 'Hrak Zu'⁸ or a special wine was made and a 'Salu-ai' song, specially sang to celebrate and awaken the hunting spirit, was sung while waiting the hunters". This, according to the narrator, was one of the most interesting rituals periodically performed by the tribe in the early days. Again, the Darlong elders also claimed that the practice of 'Zuar Dar'⁹ was rooted in the story of 'Zawltleipuii'. The authenticity of the assumption is no doubt, a matter of controversy in many cases though there is a tales that support the assumption for the tale itself is a debatable one. "Once there lived a young man in a village called 'Sentai Ram', located in the present Mizoram. The name of the young man was 'Senairâwia', the only son of 'Rallêka'. The village is known for the presence of many peculiar form of being in it. One among them is Mr. and

7. It was a period of waiting for a group of hunter who goes out to hunt to feast the entire villagers.

8. In the Darlong there are two types of wine ('Zu' in the vernacular) viz. 'Hrak Zu' and 'Ram Zu'. Beside these, there exist another kind of wine called the 'Zawlkhum Zu' only made when a marriage takes place between two different villages and a third party was license to interfere when any one of the village passes through the third party to reach the other.

9. It is the price of a bride made in kind i.e. the forelimb of an animal mostly of pig or wild boar.

Mrs. 'Zialunga', who has a daughter by the name 'Zawltleipuii'. 'Zawltleipuii', known for her beauty and decency, young boys from her village and other flocked to her and family with a proposal wanting to marry her. But it so happened that all of them end up in vain. Finally, went the young man of 'Sentai Ram' i.e. 'Senairâwia' making the same proposal as did his predecessors. Zawltleipuii's father in return placed a demand to Senairâwia that if he could bring a 'Darsungsen'¹⁰ then he would readily let her daughter marry him. By the mean time, there also was a village adjacent to 'Sentai Ram' known as 'Thlibingsip Khua' where an old lady called 'Thaichimi', worshipper of snake from her father's time resides. One fine day, a huge snake appeared to Thaichimi and gave her a 'Tuiruangdar', also called Darsungsen, asking her not to disclosed to anyone but one who come looking for it as the price of 'Zawltleipuii'. Perhaps, the snake gave the treasure as a token of her loyalty and service for years and years. It is the same 'dar' that Zawltleipuii's father demanded from the young 'Senairâwia'. 'Senairâwia' then began his quest for the 'Tuiruangdar' as to fulfill the demand of his beloved's father. After a long ambitious and tiresome search, he finally came to know that 'Tuiruangdar' is in a village called 'Thlibingsip' and a lady namely 'Thaichimi' owns it. 'Senairâwia' then entered the village of 'Tlangingsip'. Finding the old lady, he asked "have you got the Tuiruangdar?" The lady gave an affirmative replied but asked him to accomplish a task for her. The task was to kill her 'Sanghal'¹¹ that is ruining her jhum. 'Senairâwia' did the job as asked but failed to convince the lady and the villagers as because while he went to inform the villagers of his hunt, the 'Sanghal' he killed disappeared. Ashamed of his failure 'Senairâwia' wander alone in the forest in search of his killed 'Sanghal' and ended up finding the hiding place of the 'Sanghals'. 'Senairâwia' questioned them saying why did they stole his prey? The Sanghals then decides to return his hunt and promised never to take away any prey under someone else 'Perngoi'. 'Senairâwia' returning home back with the 'Sanghal' was given the 'Tuiruangdar' in return of the favor he did for the old lady, 'Thaichimi'. Having acquired the 'dar', 'Senairâwia' returned home to claim his beloved in exchange with the treasure. However, by the time 'Zawltleipuii's' father, 'Zialunga' had passed away. When 'Senairâwia' reached his village, his villagers started shouting and singing in joy after which they head towards Zawltleipuii's home. The treasure was carried like a palanquin in a rope. But when they bearer came close to a lake called 'Sentai' lake, the rope that hanged the treasure broke and the treasure started to roll till it felt into the lake where the same snake, who gave the treasure to the old lady, sit on it. 'Senairâwia' immediately dive into the lake to find the treasure but was refuse by the snake. At the same time, the snake also asked him not to be worried of the treasure for he is 'Zialunga', the father of 'Zawltleipuii' and that he can marry 'Zawltleipuii' without any obstacles as he has accepted the price. Thus, the Darlong till today practice paying the 'Zuar Dar' in time of marriage.

Eradicated though, the Darlong in the pre- Christianisation period worshipped natural forces. 'Sakhua' is the vernacular word which stands for 'religion'. The early

10. Name of a huge bell.

11. Name of a wild animal in the Darlong.

Darlongs believed in the existence of shadows or secret spirit in every living and non-living creation of this world. Thus, they worshipped different gods and goddesses before they encountered the present religion. Some of them are 'Tarpa', 'Rikul Khawbâwl', 'Bungzut Ripui', 'Khuachultenu', 'Rihli', 'Si', 'Lungtan Pathian', 'Ramhuai', 'Khawbiak', 'Hrawlsenahei', 'Damrithla', 'Khuavang' and trees which they seen as the dwelling place of different spirits. 'Tarpa' is a water god who remains hidden under water. Mr. Hrata Darlong, a residence of Talan-I, claimed to have encountered the particular god during his childhood. He argues that "many years ago while he was yet a young boy, he had an encounter with 'Tarpa' whose wrath till toady he can never forget. The god shouted at him when he was trying to fish in a swampy lake which was kilometers away on foot from his present village. The shout was as powerful as cyclone bending all the bushes and bamboos to the ground. The Earth, to him, was shaking and was left in a state of madness for about an hour". This, perhaps, may be one among many reasons why the people of early days offer prayers and make sacrifices to 'Tarpa'. The Darlong still fear having bath late evening in a lake or pond or even a river for the fear of 'Tarpa' yet lives in them. In fact, in many instances, the name is taken to install fear in the heart of mischievous children. Again, 'Rihli' means a 'shadow' and can also be known as spirit. Every creation has spirits in them according to the belief of the Darlong. For instance, shadow of a house, shadows of trees, etc. It is these shadows that bring woe to a person, family or the village as a whole. The story of 'Khuangthli Rihli' delineates 'rihli' (shadow) friendly and equally threatening when the two sisters were helped by the 'Khuangthli Rihli' but asked for the hand of one in exchange for which towards the end was the cause of their dead for both the 'Khuangthli Rihli' and his wife. 'Khuangthli' actually is a name of a tree in the Darlong language. In fact, till today the Darlong still believes in the existence of shadows and spirits.

In the last stage, the Darlong pitch the whole creation of the cosmos in the story of 'Khuachultenu' where the character was read as distributing the providence of each present natural happenings taking from the formation of day and night to the shaping of individual fate. However, the story does not give the complete cosmological chassis as the narrative was in a form of an animal anecdote that has more a ridiculous input than seriousness. Thus, in accordance to the word of many elders, the Darlong believed in the existence an omnipresent over soul called 'Pathian' who takes different shape and side while interrupting in human life and govern the life after dead and the existence of three different world namely i) the physical world or 'Khawvel' ii) the abode of dead or 'Thikhua' and iii) the paradise or 'Pialral'. It was their deed and status that decides a person's life after dead. According to Biahneliana Darlong, "cruel and merciless murderer are avenge in the abode of dead by their action's victim as in the legendary story of 'Chawngkuala'¹² where 'Chawngkuala' waits the Lushai king, who shot him, in order to 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 by few privilege people only as mentioned earlier. All the

12. One among few popular legendary warrior of the Darlong.

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. Beside the above mentioned, the narratives discourses the existence of another world which was called the ‘Lungleng Tlang’ or the world of 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 ‘Zawlpala’ in the physical world. In the present Darlong, the entire cosmological argument is based on the Christian ideology and theological interpretation.

5. Conclusion

Conjunction to the late documentation, the Darlong oral narratives have long since been a vehicle to trace the community’s socio-cultural and economic face both in the past and to many extent the present. Nevertheless, some of the deities are meted to the tribe only after they come into contact with other tribes. It must be noted that since the community have come to reside in the present state of Tripura after a weary exodus, Neolithic evidences can no longer be traced. This, perhaps, may be because of the fact that the tribe has left out those evidences while leaving the place which is why, except for the few monuments belonging to century back, no remnants are longer to be seen. On the other hand, many of the elders of the community claim that there are some historical evidences in the adjacent area of present Longtarai range and the historical site of present Unakuti but yet to be proved. Again, some part of the present is also believed to have few traces of the early Darlong settlers who according to Mizo historians like ‘K. Zawla’ and other are believed to have named many rivers and hill range.

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