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Oral Poetry

Guest Editor:

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National Folklore Support Centre

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) *is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking, and publications. The aim of the Centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues and folklore advocacy with public programming events. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.*

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Oral Poetry

DESMOND KHARMAWPHLANG

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We generally assume that language is an adequate means of communication and transmission of thoughts and ideas. Accordingly, it is argued that interpersonal, including intercultural and interlinguistic, communication is not only logically possible but can also be sustained ideally. However, it has been a well-documented experience that while translation as a socio-literary exercise is adopted as an effective means of communication, it is also beset with difficulties, which are at once, unique and engaging. The fundamental problem of translation is that of recreating the context of a text translated from another language. This, then obviously, seriously affects the agency of interpretation which most would anticipate as an outcome. The imperviousness of languages and texts to translation is not a new phenomenon, but the exigencies of the problem were felt primarily by poets with an interest in folklore, anthropology, and linguistics and among folklorists, anthropologists and linguists with an interest in poetry. This led to the development of Ethnopoetics, which studies creative expression of non-western and marginal cultures through translation, performance, and criticism. Although ethnopoetics was developed initially through the analysis of Native American narrative, it has been applied to a variety of other oral traditions and has influenced the ways folklorists present and interpret transcribed narrative in general. It offers valuable insights into such folkloristic issues as orality, literacy, translation, cultural change, and the relation of language and worldview.

Admittedly, artistic expression of other cultures is encountered through literature, and ethnopoetics has been developed as a sensitive template to the concerns of aesthetics and translation, not only from one language to another but also from performance (as in telling and uttering) to print. The inspired experimentation of Dennis Tedlock in deploying typographic techniques to approximate the narration mode to Zuni chants influenced Jerome Rothenberg who coined the term "total translation" in 1969 for "translation (of oral poetry) in particular that takes into account any or all elements of the original beyond the words". [1]

Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics, a journal conceived to translate performance and founded by Rothenberg and Tedlock was impossible to ignore and its successful publication through the seventies facilitated an excellent "ground for experiments in the translation of tribal/oral poetry and a forum for the discussion of the problems and possibilities of translation for widely divergent languages and cultures".[2]

The influence of ethnopoetics has been felt in North East India and its rigours have been deployed by many scholars who have chosen to use the oral discourse of their own ethnic communities as worthy exercises.

Parag Moni Sharma and Anil Boro, belonging to the Assamese and Bodo communities, respectively, take a position affirming the centrality of the identity issue to ethnopoetics. Parag Moni Sharma eloquently argues that the value of ethnopoetics stems from the fact that it recognizes a peoples' expressive behaviour as veritable cultural production being shaped and determined by criteria uniquely evolved while, at times, even rejecting universal aesthetic paradigms.

Anil Kumar Boro contends that Bodo verse narratives, which are virtual performances, represent potent embodiment of ethnic voices, and discourses. They also seek to occupy the space of political and ideological contest and in the Bodo context effectively critique caste bias.

This edition of Folklife also features a contribution by Ezekiel Alembi from Kenya, a folklorist who has established himself as an authority in African funeral poetry. The Abanyole are a Bantu sub-group of the Abaluluyia tribe inhabiting the western province of Kenya. Ezekiel's scholarly article probes the socio-cultural dimensions of the community and its response to death through carefully evolved folk rhetoric. The translation rendered by the contributors does credit to the concept of ethnopoetics by implying psychic and biological unity. It is an attempt to accept the truth of an other's language.

Daphinda War illustrates the folk poetics inherent in lullabies. As a mother, she clearly understands the effectiveness of these poems which humans have responded to as a biological reality.

This edition also carries a special selection of word-power exemplified by the ethnopoetics of some largely oral communities. We are happy to include a selection of Mao Naga and Khasi folk poetry for good cheer and an enjoyable read.

Notes

[1] Rothenberg J., 1972, p. xxiii.

[2] *Alcheringa* 2.

Folk Poetry of the Mao Nagas

K. Nipuni Mao

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The Memai or Mao Naga tribe inhabits the northern part of Manipur and some pockets of the state of Nagaland. The Memai are known for their exceedingly rich verbal arts of which their folk poetry constitute an awesome repertoire. The songs are composed on a range of topics and sung at different occasions in connection with different purposes. The songs have various tunes. The salient themes of composition are head-hunting, valour and courage, love, tragic circumstances and in praise of the man of consequence. True to form, these songs are handed down the ages through word of mouth. A sample of these poems is reproduced below:

1.

Fellow Maiden/ Bachelor.
You may have a beautiful leg, but you can't eat your leg
You may have a beautiful face, but you can't eat your face
Put on your sarong
And start doing your agrarian works.
Then only you can eat, fellow Maiden/Bachelor.

2.

How many chicks did your chicken hatch?
My chicken hatched three chicks.
One will be gifted to God
One will be reared up in the mother-chicken's place
One, I will relish it to my mouth's and heart's satisfaction
It will be done that way.

3.

The more you eat, the more you relish
The more you drink, the more you relish
The food of God, the drink of God
You always have the urge for a little more.

4.

Let them eat the grains on the Northern side
Let them eat the grains on the Southern side
But let them not eat the grains in the middle.

5.

Ho-a ho hoyi ho, My younger one
Who is beating you? I am beating you
I will beat the person who beat you
Ho-a ho ho-a ho.

6.

O' Eagle do show us your dancing skills
We will send up
Grass hoppers (and the like) for you.

7.

If you reach early
Do distil the rice-beer
And prepare the chutney
For me
If I reach early
I will distil the rice-beer
And prepare the chutney
for you.
That shows signs of friendship.

8.

O' cock
Where do you go for your agrarian work today
(O! man)
A rice plant has sprouted behind my grandmother's house
Me, I will go and eat that rice plant.

9.

The person who wears a kilt
Sings a song, sings a song
Pulling the string of the kilt (2)
Don't pull it too hard,
Or you'll pull the skin off
Don't pull it.

10.

(You) Flat face moon
You and I will go roaming
But I don't have a shawl
Let your mom weave one for you
But my mom refused to weave one for me.

11.

When you are praised
You always tend to over-do yourself
You turn and twist, which
Ultimately will throw you down
And you will break your nose

12.
From afar you look beautiful
But getting closer you look
Like a broad-head keg.
When you sit and pick the chips of wood
You look beautiful
But when you get up, your bum looks like a
Broad base barn.

13.
O girl!
When you dress up,
You look beautiful and soothing to the eye,
Yet when you dislike a male friend
You become the big wide-eyed ugly girl.

14.
The grass of the swamp and the grass of the meadow,
Grows together, entwined together
Still have their own hues
The designs are woven and interwoven beautifully
Like the plants and its designs - the parents of male
Youths of the village do not press their will upon
Their children, But rather allow them to live their
Own life in the love, understanding, and care of their parents.

15.
You were born into a cosy, loving, and caring
Domain of your parents.
Your elder brothers and sisters loved you and took
Great care of you, carrying you in their arms and
On their back.
You were never put down on dirty ground
Nor dusty ground.
And as time passed you became the endearing
Child of everyone. You grew into a man.
Your manly voice was wonderful
The words that come out from your mouth was
Like the creamy brine
Man! My brother,
You cannot remain a bachelor forever
But do not marry this year
Man! My brother,
You will not be a bachelor anymore.
This year you will have to marry
Your mother and father together are going to
Seek a maiden's hand for you from a far-off land.

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Pleasant Dreams

DAPHINDA WAR

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The education of very small children is entirely in the hands of their mothers and grandmothers. It is carried on through the medium of lullabies. In these, the whole history and tradition of the clan and family are embodied and, by hearing these lullabies daily, it is easy for the children to assimilate this early teaching without any strain. This is one of the methods by which the history of the people is passed on from one generation to the other. The child's acquisition of the mother tongue could also be attributed to the utterances of the mother to the child on a daily basis. A great deal of the utterances is put into songs to amuse and teach the child. The lullabies and other songs continue to soothe the child especially when attention is most wanted.

Very simply defined, a lullaby is a type of song sung by mothers and nurses all over the world to coax their babies to sleep. It is in fact a cradle song. The simplest form of a lullaby is humming or a repetition of monotonous and soothing sounds, often accompanied by a gentle rocking of the child in the arms or in its bed or cradle. However, some scholars maintain that this is almost too slight to be called a song, as it obviously shows little musical development.

Whatever the case may be, lullabies are sung softly, with little expression, and repeated over and over until, as sleep claims the baby, the voice trails off to a whisper. Some are so constructed that stanzas can be added almost endlessly, following a cumulative pattern. Khasi lullabies are highly developed airs, imbued with splendidly conceived imagery inspired by natural phenomena, supposed infantile fancy, allusions to animals of the forests and augmented by other soporific devices.

The poems as a whole are concerned with the oral tradition of storytelling in the Khasi culture. Through various formats, the author attempts to reproduce the effect of the oral storytelling on a written Khasi form. The author is also concerned with the transformative power of storytelling in the lives of his characters and the role of storytelling in maintaining cultural traditions and intergenerational ties, particularly on a matrilineal line, from grandmother to granddaughter.

The mother in these lullabies is being portrayed as loving, caring, gentle, and tender. The affection she has for her child is so overwhelming, that her discomfort, tiredness, and weakness are being

compensated for by the sight of the child. However, this mother has also many demands to meet apart from nursing her child: she also has to cook, wash, clean and complete all household chores. The many roles that she plays cannot be efficiently carried out, if she lacks the skill of time management. Putting her baby to sleep is one of the means by which she can perform her other duties. The lullabies not only help the baby sleep, but also pass on knowledge about the customs and habits of the Khasi society.

Professor H.W. Sten in his book *Khasi Poetry* (1982) mentions an excellent piece collected, presumably from the Jaintia hills. It goes:

Kieh ka latkhur kur-kur
Ha ka nat saphoh,
Poi ka bei pho na jantapur
Kam ka labit tungtoh.

I have attempted a translation of this as follows:

The dove wails "kur-kur"
perched on a pear tree branch
your mother returns from Jaintiapur
Like a "*tungtoh*" sweated bat.

In the first line, the dominant imagery is of the dove cooing on a pear tree branch. As far as the meaning is concerned, it is complete in itself. In the fourth line, the dove is completely absent, and is replaced, as it were, by a bat. The mother who sings this lullaby likens herself to the bat returning from Jaintiapur. This has to be studied more closely. There is a suggestion of a trip that the mother has to undertake, and it can be implied that the destination is Jaintiapur, a thriving market place which once used to be the winter capital of the erstwhile traditional state of Sutnga, that fell under the domain of Jaintia Chiefs. Jaintiapur is now in Bangladesh. There is a reference to "*Tungtoh*" in the lullaby. "*Tungtoh*" is a pungent paste made of fermented soya beans and is a favoured delicacy of the Khasis. The song implies that the mother is trying to put her child to sleep so that she would be able to go to the Jaintiapur market to sell the "*tungtoh*" she had prepared, and would return as soon as she disposes of her ware.

The imagery shifts ground a little, in that we find the mother likening herself to the diurnal bat that comes homes when it gets dark, presumably, with the smell of the pungent "*tungtoh*" still clinging to her person. Or it could be a clever and oblique reference to the great distance she would have to travel to Jaintiapur and back, and coupled with the state of her anxiety to get back home, she must have exerted herself to the point of perspiring heavily. Hence, the reference to odour in the image of the "*tungtoh* - sweated bat".

Usually, lullabies have formula words, which are formed by syllables which are repeated. The most common ones are loo-loo, lalla, lullay, ninna-nanna, bo, bo, do, do. These are ofcourse of European currency. I say formula words, because, they have been known to be used constantly, despite the disparity in the actual text of lullabies found across various languages.

In the Khasi tradition, the most popular is "oi, oi", which will be found in various lullabies, be they of rural or urban origins. However, there are exceptions to the rule, also. I have heard and recorded a peculiar version which is completely dissimilar. It is not the simplistic two-syllable formula of "oi, oi", but "abjon, abjon".

The text of the lullaby goes as follows:

Abjon! Abjon! Thung saru ka miaw
Han thung ko iileh
Han thung ko ileh
Ym ioh o du u bam.
Abjon! Abjon! Thung saru ka miaw ka ksaw,
Han thung ko ileh
Han thung ko ileh
Noh lut cha khyndaw.

The translation:

Abjon! Abjon! The cat and dog are sowing Job's tears
So what of it
So what of it
They won't get to eat it
Abjon! Abjon! The cat and dog are sowing maize,
So what of it
So what of it
It all falls to the ground!

The expression "Abjon! Abjon!" is a baffling one, because it escapes direct translation, and does not conform with the traditional "Oi Oi". An old woman ventured an opinion saying it could denote the cawing of a crow as it flies overhead. The setting of the lullaby is indeed, above, in the sky, as I shall explain. "The cat is sowing Job's tears" refers to the folk saying "the cat is ploughing the sky" whenever there is a formation of evenly fragmented clouds in the sky, a common enough meteorological phenomenon here.

The singer, while singing, presumably sits outside, and relates the meteorological phenomena taking place overhead by applying folk description. By a clever twist, the singer shifts the scene to realistic terms, by saying that nothing can come out of that effort, because the clouds are not terra firma, and no Job's tears can be expected to grow on it. This is what is being conveyed in the first stanza.

The second stanza also begins like the first, and progresses similarly, till at the end of the stanza, we have the line – "It all falls to the ground".

This is a reference to the uselessness of planting Job's tears in the clouds, again for the reasons stated which would result in maize falling to the ground. Although simplicity marks the lullaby, yet it is imaginatively

constructed, making use of folk wisdom, improvisation, and what I would say, is a comic inversion of folk sayings, by supplying a hard-nosed realism to its application.

Another very interesting lullaby which I have heard and recorded is one which involves handling of the infant's fingers by the singer. I shall first reproduce the lullaby:

Ong kani e ja bei
Ong kani nei wan u ioh
Ong kani pan ram pan chah
phet sha khlo
bam da u sla patho.

The translation:

This one (finger) says give me rice, mother,
This one (finger) says for whom is the rice,
This one (finger) says let's borrow some,
run to the jungles
let's eat pumpkin leaves.

This one is sung by the mother who takes the infant's fingers one by one, starting with the small finger, going on to the next, and next, as the succeeding lines come, ending with the thumb, and lifting it to the infant's mouth. There are five lines in the lullaby, each meant for one finger of the infant's single hand.

The text of the lullaby suggests some kind of food scarcity which is reflected from lines two to five. The reference to pumpkin leaves, which is an item of a poor man's diet, suggests this. Pumpkin leaves grow abundantly in the jungle and when cooked proves to be very wholesome and filling rice and cucurbits. But inversely, the song might reflect that the baby has been fed and the singer thinks it is time for it to go to sleep, which can effectively be induced by making it suck its thumb. Seen in any way, the lullaby is a highly creative one, aided by some action on the part of the singer.

An aspect of this paper that I would like to discuss is the kind of influence that the folk experience has on a conscious artiste and in this case, I would like to take up for discussion Chosterfield Khongwir, a renowned composer and an indefatigable collector of folklore. He is a prolific writer and his research work in the field of Khasi folk music have been well acclaimed. His contribution through his talent, to the society, by his relentless efforts of teaching the various musical art forms of the Khasis, is tremendous indeed.

Now the lullabies of Chosterfield Khongwir will be discussed. '*Khun Thiah Shuwa*' and '*Thiah noh Syiem Kynrad*' will give us an insight into the habits and customs of the Khasi society. In '*Khun Thiah Shuwa*' (Sleep first my Child), we see a mother who despite her extreme tiredness is still cuddling her baby to sleep. Her arms are aching and her heart is on the verge of bursting. The future of her child is lurking behind. She lulls the child to sleep on her lap, requesting him to close his eyes as his future is still far away. In her song, she gives him a picture of the different phases of man, which is being equated with spring, summer, autumn and winter. The child is made acquainted with the hardships of life. One has to struggle and survive if one wants to live. The mother did not gloss the picture of this world with anything that is unreal or artificial. In fact, she is bombarding him with the hard facts of life as she wants to prepare him for a successful life journey.

Chosterfield Khongwir in his book *Ki Saimuka Ka Duitara* mentions an excellent piece:

Sleep sleep my child,
Oh, please sleep, I'm tired
... ...
Rest your head on mother's lap,
Hasten not, your time, ripen not,
... ...

The original Khasi of this is as follows:

Thiah Thiah noh khun
thiah noh she ba nga la thait
... ...
Dem ia la ka khlieh
Ha pneh jong i Mei
Wat sngew kyrkieh
Por jong phi kam pat dei.

In this writeup, this particular composer is introduced as one who has closely studied and interacted with the folk. The habits and manners of folk life is deeply ingrained in his work as a composer and the lullabies reflect the sum of the lifestyle of the folk.

In *Thiah Nob Sylem Kynrad* (Sleep my Sweet Prince), Khongwir gives us a picture of a mother who is immensely moved and touched by the crisis of her child. She is a mother who wants everything that is good for her child. The happiness and joy of her child means everything to her; she also wants to take all the pain and sorrow of the child. The pain and suffering that her child goes through affects and traumatizes her more than it does the child. When her child cries, her heart aches and burns. Unable to bear her child crying, she asks him to stop crying or else the fox would come and look for him. The fox has just been mentioned only to scare the child so that he would stop crying. The mother is very tactful in dealing with the child. No harsh words were spoken nor does she resent her child for not sleeping.

Yet in another lullaby *Khun Thiah Shuwa*, the author gives us a glimpse of the habits of the Khasi society. The mother here, is seen lulling the child to sleep as she does not want the child to feel any discomfort or uneasiness. The mother goes on to promise the child both, green and yellow bananas as this fruit, proves to be the main course in the meal of the child. Bathing, oiling, and toning up the child is the mother's first duty of the day. She would be eager to finish all this before noon so that she can perform other household

chores. The child's father, a farmer, would be happy and satisfied after a hard day's work, to see his child smiling in his sleep. It renews his energy, his life and he kisses the child and blesses the child with a name.

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Why Ethnopoetics?

PARAG MONI SHARMA

PARAG MONI SHARMA, Professor and Head, Department of English, Assam University, Silchar.

Ethnopoetics can be grounded on the simple notion of appreciative paradigms from within, as distinct to theoretical inputs from outside to understand the expressive domain of an ethnic entity. Ethnicity is a flexible cultural description loosely based on an attachment or a perceived sense of belongingness to any or all of the categories signified by ideas such as homeland, cultural heritage, belief system, and language. Ethnicity and race are often used interchangeably. However, while admitting to overlapping contours, I use the term ethnic to denote social and cultural markers in the positing of identities. Ethnicity need not always have such visible external markers of differences in physiology (like between Assamese and Bengalis or Bodos and Garos), but can also be based on a perceived or voluntary sense of belonging to an ethnic group, that generate visible cultural markers such as dress, language, folk songs and music. An ethnic group's expressive domain can be truly revealed if it is approached with the awareness of the aesthetic imperative that went into its making. American Folklorists such as Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock have shown through their work how apparently innocuous details such as numbers or meaningless vocables in songs and narratives of the Native Americans are basically aesthetic markers with antecedents in their basic worldview and religious faith. Dell Hymes had pointed out the great value of the number four among the Zunis, and how it is essential to understand the cultural value of that number if one were to understand the literary domain of the Zunis based on oral traditions. Western generic categories emanating from text-based practices often become inappropriate categories to understand traditional expressive domains from realms of orality, because they are not so neatly divided into genres, as we understand them. Ethnopoetics is thus based on a rejection of aesthetic universalism and flows from an acknowledgement of heterogeneity and uniqueness of people's expressive behaviours with their own cultural hinterlands.

Ethnopoetics, identity, and folklore

Contemporary assertive idioms have co-opted the notion of ethnic cultures in the spawning identity debates all over the world. Ethnic groups are trying to cohere themselves into composite identities, and a principal mode is a re-expression of what Roger Hewitt terms as "essential folk identity" which have become principal rhetorical devices for fights "concerning religious or linguistic rights within the larger national plurality" where "means of expression becomes a symbol of collective identity" (Hewitt 2003: 188). While folk performative forms are often used as expressive and coercive mediums to put across ideological formulations, cultural markers from the realm of folklore as in dress, music and other manifestations of material culture are being increasingly appropriated in assertive ethnic idioms all over the world. Thus, retrieval from the folkloric vaults and re-energizing of folkloric forms is often perceived as revivalist / assertive nirvana.

An ethnopoetic approach would be worthwhile to examine the plausibility of appropriating traditional expressive forms into identity debates. The phrase "means of expression" used by Hewitt can give us a lead. By associating the expressive domain with folklore, Hewitt was restating an obvious truth that sadly seems to be lost on those who try to appropriate folklore forms into identity debates. Folklore traditions are often perceived as the impersonation of an unaltered, stable, and desirable "lost world" that can be a balm for the marginalized in a fractured and divisive socio-polity.

However, as Roger Hewitt points out, such forms of frozen culture can only be practised by "consenting adults in private" (*ibid:* 189), or to offer a variation on Hewitt, by "scheming adults in public". Ironically, the notion of unalterable and frozen inheritances has quite a different effect. The "strategic stressing of some clearly defined ethnic culture for political purposes contributes to …erosion of clear boundaries" (*ibid:* 192). Ethnicity in itself is not a one-dimensional notion and it can also be understood in the term of the multiethnic or polyethnic. Ethnicity cannot also be always understood in terms of the dominant and the peripheral, but also in the sense of a mosaic of contiguous groups. Thus, one can perceive "…a constant reworking, casting off, and reviving of elements into ever-changing complexes" (Monaghan and Just 2000:44), and changes "…in people's basic conception of time and space are to be explained by historic transformation in their mode of life" (Dentith

1995:53). Peoples' conception of time is "...fundamentally generative, creating and dissolving in the manner of the productive forces of nature itself ..." (*ibid*). This can lead one to the notion of *liminality*, which refers to states and stages of continuous transition of identity. Thus, liminal phases can be suggestive of both acquisition and renunciation of roles, erection, and dismantling of structures. Contemporary identity debates are informed by multiple factors under negotiation: religion, nation, language, ideology, and culture-specific expressions. It is interesting to explore the notion of received identities as an agential factor in subsequent recasting and redefinition that might finally lead to the dismantling of the us/them binaries with a paradigm of negotiation, a shifting space where cultures encounter and deal with each other.

The ethnopoetic approach should also flow from the recognition of this liminality, an indeterminate plane where identities are ready to enter into new or break out of older configurations under revisionist socio-cultural and political equations. In such a liminal state, notions of ethnicity are dynamic concepts. Thus, subscribing to static notion of unsullied and recoverable expressive artefacts is fraught with the risk of generating fakelore in the sense that the contexts that nurtured those forms are utterly changed and irrecoverable. Nostalgia for a past epoch is fine, but nostalgia is also an insufficient cultural category. Forms extinct in the live cultural context but extant as documented and archived form can hardly be revived; only when there is a muted and residual continuum at work, foregrounding can take place that can influence identity debates. But what are foregrounded will not be the archival forms preserved in the museums or anthropological records. And early anthropological records, with their imperial bias are themselves dubious categories.

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Krud Ksing Songs

Documented and translated
by Desmond L. Kharmawphlang

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The *krud ksing* songs are work songs, representing the agricultural calendar of certain Khasi villages located in the North Khasi Hills. Full of jibes and banter, and liberally lascivious in tone, they often focus on courtship.

1

Pound till the mortar is full, O mother
Half a mound of soy rice
When this is done, O mother
I shall go fetch that Toi's sister

Sweep the house quickly, O mother
Clean the front yard, too
Once the visit is made for real, mother
I'll choose Biha of the yellow heels

Go on, cat this piece, O Long
This mouth-filling *kwai*
Sure, I'll cat, O Biha
But Kili Lymphuid might get jealous

Eat. Go on, cat O Kili
This folded betel leaf so tasty
Sure, I'll cat, O Biha
But Long Mynsong will grow furious

Go bear the true words, O mother,
From us and from the out-villagers
For when I spit on the ground
It will fall on someone's forehead

Five men, five men, O mother,
Are not enough, says Biha
Only these five, O mother,
They'll last like the flickering of the light of a
Dried burning leaf

2

About your height, I have nothing to say
It is as God makes
It is your long whisker, O Sin,
That my mother dislikes in you

Kil's sister wears her hair in a bun
A bun like the nest of the wasp
But the whiskers of brother Sin
Are like the flower of the maize

What vegetables are boiling in the pot, O Kil,
A curry of brinjals?
No, I will not have any, says Sin
They stick to the whiskers of the wasp's nest

3

This year, this very year, says Ben,
A year of great scarcity
I'll make a herbal *pukra*[1] from
the sap of *la pathuh*[2]

Strengthen your luck, come,
Tall one, like the *la panew*[3],
Lest that brother, Edwin, with fat cheeks,
Beat you in the game

O Ben, why do you insult him?
That Kro of the Langngi
Look at your own knees,
They have the grace of a cow's

Look, Pris and her sister are sweet
To the boys of Mathen
While Ben and his brother have
Hastened for *pukra* from U Jan

Why do you raise such an alarm?
Ben, that will give you a bad name
The shawl you have in your hands
Belongs to her mother, not her

4

It's no matter, all I want is a son
I'll follow you to the rat's burrow
No matter only to get a daughter
I'll follow you to the pangolin's hole

5

You come to the house with indolent steps
While tears fall,
She stands in the corner
Why so, O squint-eyed Silin
Every night you wait near the gooseberry bushes.

The black hat you're wearing is ignored
even by the evil spirits of the village
The red hat you're affecting is rejected
even by the *Karimaw* insect.

6

Krung's sister goes to ensnare a man
with a tender young gourd
He, the poor
has fallen in the trap

Listen younger sister,
they call you away to help
O me and my husband are free
to do as we wish in the backyard.

Ari Hoi Hali Bihoi (A Ploughing Song)

(Collected from the Bhoi Lasa area of North Khasi Hills, this song is immensely popular during the cultivation periods)

Together, O together, *jrup*,
Pounding rice together, *brup,*
Sticky rice, sticky grain,
Together on the aunt's verandah.

The moon is in full glow,
The stars also glitter,
The *duitara* pulsates at the hearth,
Ari hoi hali … … … … … … … … (Ho i t).

Thuk thuk the strings sound
The poet keeps on singing
The *marynthing* and the *maryngod*
the spinning loom chimes in tune
the old deaf woman chews *kwai*
till her heart becomes rusty.

The plough scars the earth
come and lend your strength
let's plough the paddy field
Cut straight the earth columns
Hur hur to the right, *ti ii* to the left
Slowly draw to the middle.

Song of creation

(This chant was rendered by late Manjli Tador Kbet of Raid Umsaw Nongbri in the Ri- Bhoi District of Meghalaya)

On the first day, on the first breath
created were the stones, created were the metals
created were the rocks of the sky, created rocks of earth
who put them all there? Who created all these?
God put them there, the *Hukum* put them there.

Then came the rivers, then came the depths,
then came the rocks, then came the metals,
came the huge rivers, came the small rivers,
came the great mountains, came the small hills,
then came the waters, then came its breadth,
then came the egg, then came the bread,
then came the green, then became the grass,
then came the plants, then came the trees,
then came the stag, then came the deer,
then came the squirrel, then came the goat,
then came the locust, then came the insect,
then came the ant, then came the termite,
who put them then? Who created all these?
God put them there, the *Hukum* put them there.

Then came the seven houses, came the seven clans,
then came the race, came the seven families,
then came the bag, came then the basket,
then came the religion, came then the law,

then came the weights, came then the lengths,
then came the *ryngku,* then came the priest,
then came the community god, came then the village god
who put them there? Who created all these?
God put them there, the *Hukum* put them there.

Notes

1 A concoction supposed to make a girl fall in love with a boy if she accepts it from him.

2 A kind of plant.

3 A tall plant.

The Oral Poetry of the Bodos: Ethnic Voices and Discourses

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The Bodos of Assam have a distinctive and rich tradition of oral poetry and prose narratives inspite of the fact that their contribution to the growth and development of Assamese society and culture in general can not be denied. The Bodo language, although an ancient one, did not attain the status of a standard language as it did not have a tradition of writing until recently. The language has a rich tradition of oral poetry, prose narratives, proverbs, riddles, and sayings.

The oral poetry of the Bodos includes narratives and myths that recount the origin of creation and the role of the deities. These oral verses were originally chanted in the ritual context of *Kherai* worship, where a good number of them were sung by skilled singers to the accompaniment of the *serja,* a stringed musical instrument. The *serja* brai, an elderly player of the musical instrument of the bygone days was an expert singer and narrator who narrated the ballads and narratives of heroes and heroines of the past in the style of narrative singing or reciting to the accompaniment of the *serja*. The religious verses chanted in the context of *Kherai* and Garza worship are invocations addressed to the deities. These verses and chants are closely entertained with traditional religious faith and worldview. Although identified by western ethnographers and anthropologists as animists, the Bodos have an indigenous religious tradition with features of tribal and folk religion. These religious verses of the Bodos are prayer songs in a rudimentary form. The verse is chanted by the community priests during *Kherai* worship for the well being of the people and devotees.

Oh god, our father
Protect your ignorant Bodo children
You are the creator, preserver, and destroyer
All in one, you are peerless
The altar of Bathou has five bamboo rings
The siju plant has five edges

(Brahma: 1960:189)

Verses such as this embody the religious faith and worldview of the Bodos who have retained their traditional religion in the teeth of exterior and interior pressures. It is interesting to see the community's belief in the concept of the trinity. The verses also manifest this aspect of Bathou religions which centre around the five basic principles. Some of the religious expressions take the form of short hymns that spring out of the most sincere hearts of the devotees:

Oh lord, the creator
We bend our knees,
And pray to thee
With a lamp lighted
Thou dost love us
And dost shower boon on us

(*Ibid* 189-190)

The Bodo ballads that worship heroes are befitting tributes to the legendary heroes of the past who fought heroic battles against the enemies of the tribe. The ballads of Bachiram, Daoharam, Cheobar, Gambari sikhla, and Birgahri sikhla recount the heroic battle fought by the Bodo heroes and heroines. For example the ballad fragment of Bachiram Zoholao is as follows:

Drive fast your steed, Bachiram
A hero you are
The Bhutiya soldiers are marching
Tighten the reins and use your stirrups
Drive your steed fast, Bachiram
Look use, they come
Oh! Dear Bachiram
Get on the saddle with your legs in the stirrups

Put the spurs to the horse
And march forward to battle
There the battle breaks with the Bhutiyas
Let (if) Bhutiya soldiers die
Thats no concern of mine
Get on horseback
Advance and climb the hill

(*Ibid* 131-132)

Besides goading the hero into action in the battle field, the ballads that worship the heroes invite the entire community to come out with their sword and shield in hand to resist the enemy attack. Thus, ballads of this type are charged with feelings of patriotism and

nationalism. Heroic poetry such as the following, clearly takes us to the unrecorded epoch of the past when the Bodos fought heroic battles against the enemies.

Come, oh sons of Bodos
Come out you, sword and shield in hand
Lets go and rout the enemy
Brother Bachiram, ride forward
Pursue the enemy hard.

(*Ibid* 132)

The oral poetry of the Bodos is enriched by a good store of lyrical poetry dedicated to the themes of love, nature, and the countryside. The folk poet is almost outspoken in eulogizing the beauty and glory of his motherland:

How lovely is the dear motherland
Beautifully created by god
Oh, you awake not
But lie fast asleep
Awake, awake mother dear
And arouse the sleeping country

There are verse narratives in Bodo which are a strong embodiment of counterpoint and contestation of the higher Brahminical discourses. These narratives exist in counterpoint to the established narratives that form an inseparable part of Indian epics and puranas. The way in which the narratives of the ethnic group contest the cultural and religious values of the dominant caste groups makes them a meaningful medium of intercultural communication.

There are mythical narratives in Bodo, which embody the ethnic group's perception of cultural difference. They reveal how the narrator and his audience handle their experience of cultural difference, their perception of the self and the other. *Gibi Bithai* a verse narrative comprising Bodo mythical narratives, reveals the images of Bodo religion and culture in counterpoint to other religions and cultures. The long verse narrative contains elaborate descriptions on how the universe, continents, and human beings were created, how groups of Aryan-speaking people came and settled in Asia along with the Mongoloids. The verse narrative records how the great flood was brought in inorder to punish the wicked people and how the world was recreated. It purports to establish Bathoubrai as the principal and most powerful deity in comparison with all the deities venerated in the Brahminical tradition. The narrative tells us how all the races in the world, at one time, worshipped Bathoubrai only; but in course of time everybody except the yellow-skinned Mongoloids forgot Bathoubrai and started worshipping Vishnu and Brahma. They began to consider only these two as the gods to be venerated and propitiated. They considered other deities inferior and their followers as low castes with whom food should not be shared. So Bathoubrai wanted to teach them a lesson. Seeing this, the Brahmin priests invoked Brahma to protect them from the wrath of Bathoubrai. First came a tiger, then a snake, and then a bullock in support of them. The already enraged Bathoubrai became more ferocious and danced a *tandava,* which according to the narrator-poet was to smash and destroy the temple — the place of worship of Hindus. Seeing this, Vishnu rushed to Bathoubrai and begged him to forgive him and his followers. Bathoubrai replied "the proud and arrogant Brahmin priests cannot be forgiven. They must be taught a lesson. Let Brahma do what he can to save them." Vishnu rushed to Brahma who was also concerned and ashamed. Both of them came to Bathoubrai and requested him to forgive their followers. Bathoubrai continued his *tandava* that caused great tremors. So they requested Bathoubrai's consort to pacify him. She came and joined Bathoubrai in a slow pace and rhythm. From her dance, the narrator-poet of *Gibi Bithai* proclaims, came *tala* and *lasya*. Brahma clapped his hands to the rhythm of the dance while Vishnu played on the *Siphung*. Khoila played the *kham* and the other Bodo deities played other traditional musical instruments. All the deities came down from Kailash and accepted Bathoubrai as the principal deity. The narrative has features of intertextuality and interpolation that facilitates indigenous discourse as a counterpoint. The narrator-poet uses the puranic narrative of Siva to challenge the Brahminical discourses that sought to undermine and silence the religion and culture of the Bodos. Thus the narrative contests the supremacy of the Brahminical religion and claims that Bathoubrai is the supreme one among all gods. It was the explicit agenda of the narrator-poet's discourse to counter the colonial and post-colonial ethnographic endeavours to brand the ethnic group as "savage" and "semi savage". Let us have a look at what he pronounces as a preface to the long narrative verse. The poet says,

> *The Vedas, the Ramayana, the Puranas have identified the people of the North east India as "savage" [man without any civilization]. Rev. Sidney Endle, Edward Stack, Major Playfair, and other scholars and ethnographers from outside the country also called them "animist" and "semi savage". The aboriginal people of North east India worship the almighty God as Bathou, Baitho, Washy, Baikhu and so on. Bathou is nirakara [disembodied], adrisya [unseen] omnipotent, omniscient and eternal——— Thus the people of the North east India [the Bodo and the other Mongoloid people] are not animists*. (Introduction to *Gibi Bithai*)

The narrative verse contains different elements of intercultural communication in the way it deals with the anthropological categories based on biological differences. The narrator-poet focuses on the racial differences between the white-skinned Aryans and the yellow-skinned Bodos and other Mongoloids. The Mongoloid people of Assam and North-East India are well known for their common physical and linguistic features. The Bodos of Assam share this common feature with all other ethnic groups that come under the common Mongoloid stock. The tribes of this region

were called Kirata, Mlecha, Asura, and Khacsha or Kacahri by the historians and the ethnographers of early times. The narrator-poet draws sustenance from these accounts and uses the same categories to contest the dominant discourses that tend to degrade and look down upon their social status.

The following excerpt from the text (*Gibi Bithai* by Bihu Ram Boro) will testify to this:

In the fertile land of the Sind
Arrived the group of people thus scattered
The white-skinned people worshipped Brahma
As the black coloured worshipped Vishnu
And forgot all about Sibrai
The origin of all deities
Thus the black and the white-skinned laughed at
And hated the ways of the yellow-skinned
Thus they hated the horned figure of Sibrai
Knew not the wicked priests the might of Sibrai
In ignorance because of which they neglected Sibrai
And worshipped Brahma and Vishnu
The black-skinned people knew Vishnu only
Considered him to be the only god
The white-skinned knew Brahma only
And considered others as non-entity
Day by day they forgot Siva
The origin of all the creations
The first incarnation of Bathou
Nor could they tolerate them
So thought Sibrai to teach them a lesson
They knew not his might
Listen, o! Thena, the affectionate disciple among men
He is the custodian and head of all the gods
How do we mortals know about him?
The wicked priests thus one day
Propitiated Brahma with offerings and prayers
Burning incense stick and aroma
For their well being
They forgot the teachings and ways of Sibrai and his followers
Nor could they tolerate each other
Bellicose they were, as they knew each other's wickedness
Thought Sibrai as he saw them
He should teach them a lesson
Of a yellow-skinned beggar
He took the guise and appeared before them
As the white-skinned priest saw him
They flared up in wrath like the fire
They addressed him as dog and pig
Threatened to kill him with a log
Father Siba in the guise of a yellow-skinned beggar
Pretended to run gasping in fear
They followed — the white-skinned priests
But could not they catch him
Tired and gasping they returned
Sat there in the place of worship
Father Siba in the guise of the beggar
Returned with a tattered bag
A hue and cry they raised
Chased everywhere with shouts of alarm
Thus pretended father Siba to flee
Disappeared all at once and re appeared on another side
With the power of divinity he showed them his strength and might
Misconstrued and stupefied, the wicked priests
Fought and quarrelled amongst themselves.

[*Gibi Bithai*.Canto XXXII]

The narrator-poet focuses on the features of racial and cultural differences that he discerns among the Mongoloid Bodos, the Aryans and others. The text of *Gibi Bithai* and other texts are heavily loaded with the ideas of difference and contest. This type of discourse can be understood as a particular ethnic group's aspiration for status and contestation of the established Hindu narratives. Similar to the caste puranas extant among the low caste and tribal people of Andhra Pradesh, and the oral narratives of contest extant among many ethnic communities in India, the Bodo mythical narratives have a strong voice of contest and defiance. The narrator-poet makes deliberate use of his knowledge of the narrative of the Indian deities to fit into his discourse of contest and resistance.

The Bodo verse narratives related to religion and culture can be identified as more critical because these provide strong support as the authority of tradition even today. These narratives can be considered as those that mark the cultural boundary of the ethnic group as distinct from the others. The myths of *Kherai* worship and the related musical instruments tell us the origin of the form of worship in relation to the traditional religion of the Bodos and the different deities propitiated to the accompaniment of the musical instruments. Bodo religion and music centres around the worship of Bathoubrai or Sibrai, very often identified with lord Siva of the Hindu pantheon. These narratives related to religion and culture are strategic tools to negotiate any possible threat of disintegration. These narratives point to the existence of a heritage of indigenous culture not intermingled with the elements of the classical Hindu tradition and culture. Some scholars endeavour to show these cultural traits in evolutionary terms as pre-Aryan or pre-Vedic (Chatterjee 1951 and Kakati 1967). The narratives on the mythical characters and events are preserved in the collective memory of the community and thereby affirm the continuity of the indigenous past. They bring alive, to the present moment, the past of the community and provide us with clues to their culture.

Each community makes its own choice from the vast body of narratives and fits them into their culture-specific context. The earlier generation of folklorists believes these narratives to be the soul of the people [volks seele] and a treasury of national heritage that has to be preserved. Contemporary folklorists,

however, try to deconstruct these narratives in the culture-politics of representation and identity. In the day of ethnic assertion, they function as markers of self-image or auto-stereotype of a group. Bodo origin myths including those on religion and culture proclaim the origin of the ethnic community from a primeval creator and attempt to establish the antiquity of the community (that it originated simultaneously with the universe). Thus it is claimed that the ethnic group has a sacred and divine sanction at par with other larger communities. Some of these narratives project the ethnic group as equal or even superior to other *harsha* or non-Bodo communities. Such myths proclaim the origin of the ethnic group and argue that Bathoubrai is superior to other Hindu gods. The traditional religion as the Boros practise it, along with the regular *kherai* worship to the accompaniment of the musical instruments and ritual dance is considered a blessing from Bathoubrai and hence is sacred, divine, and in no way inferior to other religions. Many of the religious verses and hymns testify to this. Many of their religious narrative verses have been collected and reproduced in print to "interact with other media, including traditions and writing" (Blackburn 2003:4) and thereby construct an identity for a suppressed and marginalized ethnic group that had past glory.

The verse narratives of *kherai* worship contain the elaborate myth of the origin of Bodo clans [*mahari]* which no longer plays a role in social stratification. The verse narrative entitled *Borohar*i collected and retold by Kamakhya Brahma Narzary recounts the method by which the Bodo clans such as Goyary, Basumatary, Khankhlary, Swargiary, Owary, and others were created on the basis of the labour assigned to them during the *Kherai* worship. For example Goyary provided all the betel nut, Basumatary supplied the necessary soil for raising the Bathou pedestal, Khankhlary provided the required khankhla (a species of herb), and Owary supplied the bamboo.

Another interesting feature of the oral narrative verse of the Bodos is their role of inter-cultural communication. Bodo oral narratives and myths appear to be independent of the classical Indian puranas. But in reality, they have thrived as a result of constant dialogue and interaction. The Bodo myths apparently have nothing to do with the whole or part of the Sanskrit puranas, but they have incorporated many characters and episodes from the Sanskrit texts. For example, Sibrai or Bathoubrai is very often identified with Siva. The Bodos worship Bathoubrai as their principal deity. Besides Bathoubrai they worship deities such as Aileng, Agrong, Khoila, Karzi, Rajkhandra, Sangraja, Alaikhungri, Bhandari, Ranchandi, Bulliburi, and Laokhar Gosain. Along with the Bodo deities there is the traditional worshipping of non-Bodo deities such as Laokhar Gosain and Nabab Badsha and so on. The prevalence of a number of non-Bodo (*harsha)* gods speaks volume about the cultural communication these indigenous people have with other people. Culture codes and modes of worship remain completely different but the Bodo narratives have incorporated some of the Brahminical deities. Bodo mythical narratives as well as religious discourse have created a space for interaction between the Bodo traditional deities and the Brahminical deities. The way the traditional deities are identified with the Brahminical deities not only points to the extent of cultural contact of the ethnic group with the Hinduized groups of eastern India and Assam, but also to the similarities in their religious beliefs and practices with the primitive form of Hinduism. It is difficult to say when the process started; there is a viewpoint among some members of the community that the process of identifying the Bodo deities as identical with the Brahminical deities was initiated by the Brahmin priests themselves. A Bodo speaker from the North Bengal area and a follower of the Bathou religion had said in an interview that the Brahmin priests initiated the process of identifying the Bodo deities as similar in status and function to Hindu deities. However, there is a tendency among the Bodo followers of Bathou religion as well as others to identify Bathoubrai as Siva. Similarly other Bodo deities and Hindu deities are shown to be similar and identical: Mainao is equated to Lakshmi and Monsri to Saraswati; Jomonbrai is equated to Kamdev and Okhrangmodai to Indra. It is interesting to note these in an ethnic group which has remained outside the pyramid-like stratification of the caste system. The prevalence of *chaturdas devata*, that is, fourteen gods and goddesses among the Borok speaking Tripuris of Tripura provides an interesting example of cultural contact and communication. The Manipur puranas too have accommodated a number of Brahminical deities along with their local ethnic deities. There is no denying the fact that the local ethnic groups came into some form of contact with the Brahminical religion and culture. Chatterjee has dealt with the aspects of contact in his seminal book. His emphasis is on homogenization and progressive Indianization or Aryanization of the local Mongoloid groups. Similar to the other ethnic groups, the Bodos came into direct or indirect contact with Brahminical Hinduism. It may be noted that the local ethnic groups came into contact with the Indian epics and puranas as a result of their contact with the Aryan language speakers of the subcontinent.

As an embodiment of the image of the self and the other, the Bodo oral verse narratives communicate and interact with the traditions and culture of higher castes. In a bid to plead in favour of ethnic assertion, the narratives stress on the narrator's discourse for authoritative interpretation. They are the embodiment of indigenous discourse as "collective memory and the media for debate and political struggle about authoritative interpretation of present circumstances" [Marcus and Fischer 1986:98] Some narratives contest and challenge the prevailing narratives of developed cultures. The verse narratives can be meaningfully examined in the context of cultural politics of identity and representation where "cultural difference is no longer a stable exotic otherness; self – other relations

are matters of power and rhetoric rather than essence" (Clifford. htm documents). "The narratives in an emerging ethnic group aspiring for an equal status with developed nationalities can in all possibilities be used as tools to contest and critique the caste biased representation of society and culture and thereby to uphold the point of view of the self". In the present day world of cultural aggression, narratives like these can function as a defense mechanism to contest and resist the onslaught of more advanced and developed cultures. Thus the Bodo verse narratives become potent embodiments of ethnic voices and discourses. Besides presenting the images of the self and the other, there is at the same time an endeavour to challenge the higher discourses to strengthen the point of view of the ethnic self.

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Issues in the Socio-Cultural Perception of Death as Reflected in the Abanyole Dirges

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Introduction

The permanent annihilation of life through death is a natural phenomenon that not only strikes human beings but all living things. When death occurs among people it leaves families and friends socially, economically, and psychologically baffled and devastated for a long time. The fact that death is irreversible makes it a dreadful occurrence. For this reason, most African communities do not accept that death can strike on its own. Whether this is a defense mechanism or not could be a subject for another day. In this presentation, I focus on the perception and assessment of death as reflected in the *Abanyole* dirges of western Kenya.

To begin with, one of the most disturbing issues when death occurs is to explain or seek to determine its causes: Why did she/he die? This is a question that charges the mourners. Even when a medical examination report is presented to explain the cause of death, people try to find a "proper explanation". Most often, this explanation resides and finds its justification in the metaphysical. The *Abanyole* are a Bantu sub-group of the Abaluhyia tribe who occupy the Western Province of Kenya in East Africa.

The mystic influence and death

In the first part of the article, I discuss the mystic socio-cultural causes of death. A close reading of the poems reveals that *Abanyole* strongly believe that these are the major causes of death in the community. In his study of the Kaguru people of Tanzania, Beidelman (1963:63) observes that the belief in mystical powers, especially witchcraft, is common. Evans-Pritchard (1972:18) who studied the Azande of Sudan concurs with Beidelman's position on the cause of death among the Azande. Both scholars argue that there is no misfortune that comes arbitrarily. There must be a human agent behind it, they insist. My discussion focuses on causes of death owing to mystic powers and other overt causes such as murder.

The majority of deaths among the *Abanyole* are blamed on people exercising mystical powers. People who use evil mystical powers are dreaded and hated in this community. So great is the hatred that the sons and daughters of such people often find it difficult to get marital suitors from the neighbourhood. They then marry from distant ethnic groups or families within Bunyore or outside of it with the same characteristics.

A similar belief exists among the Azande people of Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1967:5). The Azande insist that death is due to witchcraft and that those behind the death must be punished. The punishment could take the form of beheading of the witch, accepting of compensation, or hitting back by the most lethal magic. Among the *Abanyole*, if it was confirmed that one had killed by magic, the person, with his family, was isolated. This was a very severe punishment, a curse. For example, the home of an old magic worker who was accused of killing the chief of South West Bunyore in June, 2001 was torched in accordance with *Abanyole* customs. His family was also excommunicated. All this was in an effort to rid the community of the spirit of killing that was believed to have possessed the murderer. The murderer and his family were also believed to have been contaminated by the act of killing fellow community members. Expelling him and his family was one way of avoiding contamination of the rest of the community.

Among the Kisii, a Bantu ethnic group in the Nyanza province of Kenya, there have been many incidents reported in the Kenyan media where such people have been bludgeoned or even lynched. The explanation for such a drastic and weird action has been that whenever they are taken to court, these witches are often set free owing to lack of evidence. I have indicated later in this chapter that it is difficult to present evidence against witches, if at all evidences exist. Because members of the community know these witches, they argue that the best way to deal with them is to beat or kill them. This is similar to what Beidelman (1963:71-72) records about the treatment of witches among the Kaguru people of Tanzania.

In the poem below, for example, the death of *Omwana wa Anjichi* (child of Anjichi) is blamed on *Inyumba Esimbanga* (The Jealous House).

Omwana wa Anjichi	Son of Anjichi
Ukholle mbwena?	What have you done to me?
Sese wa Anjichi	Sese of Anjichi
Nagwe mbwena?	What have you done to me?
Nandeletenge khulusina bane?	What shall become of me? On what shall I lean?
Omwana wa Anjichi	Child of Anjichi
Ukholle mbwena?	What have you done to me?
Omwana wa Anjichi	Child of Anjichi
Ukholle mbwena?	What have you done to me?
Ye, ye, ye, ye	ye, ye, ye, ye
Sindi nomulembe bana befwee	I have no peace my people
Otemba oboye mukoloba ye,	Otemba only said yesterday Ye Ye
Inyumba esimbanga	The jealous house
	We shall meet there
Khuliakana iyo	Oh jealous house
Inyumba esimbanga ye	Oh jealous house!
Inyumba esimbanga ye!	
Murebe Emuseno	Enquire from Maseno
Murebe Emuseno	Enquire from Maseno
Murebe Emuseno	Enquire from Maseno
Tsia murebe Anjichi Emuseno	Find out from Anjichi at Maseno
Omwana wanje wandatola Bululu bane	My child whom I got with pain
Rebanga butswa Anjichi waikholle	I am asking you Anjichi what have you
Mbwena eh?	Done to me?
Ye, ye, ye, ye	ye, ye, ye, ye
Sinde nomulembe bana bwefwe	I have no peace
Otemba aboye mukoloba ye, ye, ye	Otemba only said yesterday ye, ye, ye, ye
Inyumba esimbanga	The jealous house
Khuliakana iyo	We shall meet there
Inyumba esimbanga ye	Oh jealous house
Inyumba esimbanga ye!	Oh jealous house, ye!
Murebe Emuhaya[1]	Enquire from Emuhaya
Murebe Emuhaya	Enquire from Emuhaya
Tsia Murebe Oluhano Emuhaya eh	Find out from Chief Oluhano at Emuhaya
Omwana wanje wandatola bululu bane	The child I got through pain
Rebanga Anjichi waikholle mbwena?	I am asking Anjichi what did you do me?
Ye, ye, ye, ye!	Ye, ye, ye, ye!
Sindi nomulembe bana bafwe	I have no peace my people!

Otemba oboye mukoloba ye, ye	Otemba only said yesterday ye, ye
Inyumba esimbanga	The jealous house
Khuliakaba iyo	The jealous house
Inyumba esimbanga ye, ye	The jealous house
Inyumba esimbanga ye!	Oh the jealous house

In the last three lines of each stanza, the mourner repeats the blame, threatening in each third-last line of the stanza, *khuliakana iyo* which means 'we shall meet there': 'there' being an apparent reference to the final judgement. It is not clear how the Jealous House killed the child of Anjichi, but we can infer that it is through witchcraft, a common method of using mystical powers in Bunyore. The 'Jealous House' in this poem stands for the enemy family that is blamed for killing the child of Anjichi. We can infer from the poem that the son of Anjichi was wealthy. For instance, the person wails singing: 'On what shall I lean?' (line 7 of the first stanza). This means the deceased supported the mourner materially. The deceased was also famous. For example, he was known to Chief Oluhano, one of the most important and influential people in Bunyore. He is also known in Maseno. Maseno is a very old mission and educational centre in Bunyore. The fact that the deceased is known in Maseno may mean that he is either highly educated (from Maseno high school and more recently a Teacher Training College, and University) or a prominent religious person or both. The family that killed the son of Anjichi is likely, therefore, to have had ill-feelings against him because of his possible achievements.

The death of an old man and his wife in 1977[2] in a village in Bunyore led to a widespread opinion that the man's cousins had bewitched them. At the funerals, people wailed throwing veiled attacks at the cousins whom they blamed for the deaths. The medical reports at Maseno hospital, however, indicated that the couple had died of dysentery. The husband died first and was followed by the wife a week later. Among the *Abanyole,* there is no belief that dysentery kills. It is believed that there must be an agent of evil for any death. Agents of mystical powers were believed to have caused the couple's death. In a study on the Kaguru of Tanzania, Beidelman (1963:63) observes that death does not occur on its own. This view also holds true of the *Tiriki*, also a Luhya sub-clan (see Sangree 1966:41). Evans-Pritchard (1972:18) observes the same attitude among the Azande of Sudan. Deaths are therefore to be traced to some external force in nature that controls life.

The above discussion does not discount the fact that the people are aware of the different ailments in their environment. They are well aware of illnesses such as malaria, typhoid, dysentery, fever, measles, meningitis, and even HIV/AIDS. Studies on other African communities also reveal that the Meru of Tanzania and the people of Mberengwa district in Zimbabwe, for example, are also aware of the existence of illnesses. For example, a study based on a Meru medicine man, Harjula (1980:67-73) points out clearly that Mirau has good knowledge not only of the different ailments that afflict the Meru people, but also of their causes and cure. Dahlin (2001:178-184) reveals that the Mberengwa people are also well aware of the illness, their causes, and remedy.

On the event of death among the *Abanyole*, however, a medical explanation on the causes of malaria would not be readily accepted. The question everybody asks is, 'who caused the malaria?' According to the *Abanyole* beliefs, malaria can be cured. Either evil spirits or magic workers engineer the malaria that kills. In June 2001, there was an incident in South-West Bunyore location, which adds weight to the above-said view. The chief of the location died. Medical reports indicated that he had died of meningitis. The villagers, however, disputed this saying he had been bewitched. In July, the same year, a medicine man from the neighbouring district of Bungoma was invited into the area to establish the cause of the chief's death. This medicine man had the power to make witches come out and confess their bad deeds. This is what happened. An old magic worker came out and confessed to have killed the chief. He also brought to the medicine man a book in which he had recorded the names of all the people in Bunyore whom he had killed, including that of the chief. The list also included those yet to die. The policemen from the Luanda police station were called in and they arrested the man. The book with the names of people who had been killed was kept at the police station as an exhibit in this case. The man, however, died in police custody before the ruling of the case. The book still lies at the police station in Luanda.

Influenced by the belief that the cousins had killed his parents, the couple's son wailed chanting the poem reproduced below:

Owera papa	He who killed dad
Owera papa alakailanga	He who killed dad wails in the
Khulubanda Munanguba	valley at Munanguba
Eeeehh eehh	Eeeehh eehh
Ooooh alakailanga	Ooooh he wails in the valley at
Khulubanda Munanguba	Munanguba
Owera mama	he who killed mother
Owera mama alakailanga	He who killed mother wails in
Khulubanda Munanguba	the valley at Munanguba
Eeeehh eehh	Eeeehh eehh
Oooh alakailanga	Oooh he wails in the valley
Khulubanda Munanguba	at Munanguba

In this poem, though the boy is currently mourning his mother, it is the death of the father that really moved him and he still has not recovered from the shock caused by it. In this song, he expresses the belief that his father's death was brought about by evil people. He chanted *Owera papa alakailanga kulubanda Munanguba*. 'He who killed father wails in the valley at Munanguba.'

According to *Abanyole* belief, it is evil spirits that wail in valleys mostly at night and in darkness. Evil spirits in this community are associated with darkness, forests, deserted places, and so on. This will explain why there is a belief among the *Abanyole* that the spirits reign supreme at night. It is believed that sick people experience more pain at night because these spirits come to torment them before retreating into their living quarters at daybreak. There is no scientific evidence to support this, but it is a deep cultural belief that cannot easily be explained away by scientific knowledge.

This boy is not saying that the person accused of killing his parents is literally crying in the valley, nor is he saying that the evil spirits killed his parents. What he is saying is that the accused person is as evil as evil spirits that cause so much suffering to so many people and their property in this community. The boy is, thus, using allegorical techniques that are frequently used and highly appreciated at funerals in Bunyore. The point that underlies this is that funeral poems are steeped in people's culture and one needs to have a good understanding of the idioms to understand and appreciate the boy's message. He would be foolish to attack the accused directly, as the accused would then take the matter to court and the family might suffer another tragedy if the boy is jailed. Beidelman (1963:73) notes that Kaguru do not like open conflict on matters such as witchcraft; they would rather approach the issue in coded words.

I have already noted that the manipulation of mystical powers is an extremely furtive and mysterious act. It is almost impossible to bring evidence against anybody in such circumstances. The relatives of the deceased may suspect the accused but they cannot produce palpable evidence to bring a case against such a person. Similar views are held by Maquet (1954:172) who carried out a study on death among the Rwandese of eastern Africa.

This explains the use of heavy symbolism, allusion, and imagery common to this and similar kinds of songs. It is important to note that among the *Abanyole*, direct confrontation in art is neither accepted nor appreciated. There is no power in direct reference. For example, if the boy in the above poem mentioned the names of the people he suspects to have killed his father, it would not be as effective as when he projects them into the minds of the audience as evil spirits. Because this association makes such people dreaded, the boy presents a stronger case by the use of metaphorical language. What is more, it keeps him on the right side of the law as nobody can accuse him of libel. By this means, he is operating within the culturally acceptable limits of singing oral funeral poetry.

Another poem I collected blamed the death of the deceased on witchcraft perpetrated by Aberanyi, a clan in South-West Bunyore.

Solo:	Enimba omukhana	If I were a girl
All:	Enimba omukhana	If I were a girl
	Sindakhatekha Ebwiranyi	I would not be married in Ebwiranyi
	Aberanyi nabalosi	Aberanyi are witches
	Aberanyi nabalosi	Aberanyi are witches
	Balokananga nabarende	They bewitch their neighbours
Solo:	Enimba omusiani	If I were a man
All:	Enimba omusiani	If I were a man
	Sindakhatesya Ebwiranyi	I would not marry in Ebwiranyi
	Aberanyi nabalosi	Aberanyi are witches
	Aberanyi nabalosi	Aberanyi are witches
	Balokananga nabarende	They bewitch their neighbours

This poem is sung by the young people during their night performance in the event of a death in Bunyore. Note that this song is not sung at a particular funeral but in many funerals where the young people turn up to mourn with the rest of the community. Any other clan that is blamed for the death of whoever is being mourned can replace Aberanyi in this song. What the poem implies is, therefore, the popular belief that death in Bunyore is caused by someone or a group of people playing tricks (witchcraft) on others.

An even more interesting example to support the point I am making is to be found in the poem reproduced below:

Abasyubi bakhola emisangoo	Abasyubi performed rituals
Batsila Akunda nafwa	That caused Akunda's death
Ee-eye	Ee-eye
Akunda wakwa amaloba	Akunda has now turned into earth

This is another example of poems performed by secular groups of young people during their night performances on the occasion of death. The version of the text under study was collected in 1994[3]. At his death, my grandfather was estimated to be 120 years old, yet in this song it is said that: *Abasyubi bakhola emisango batsila Akunda nafwa* 'Abasyubi performed rituals that caused Akunda's death'.

This implies that Akunda did not die a natural death or, despite his advanced age and the fact that he was then partially deaf and blind, he did not die of old age. Abasyubi, his kinsmen, are blamed for playing tricks on his life that led to his death. To the *Abanyole*, therefore, the concept of natural death or dying because of old age is not readily accepted. In studying death among the *Tiriki*, another Luhya sub-ethnic group, Sangree (1966:41) observes that 'No one Tiriki, either young or old, is felt to die simply because his or her time has come. At every death, a human agent is suspected.'

In the following poem, Omenya's mother-in-law is blamed for the death of the members of her family. It appears that she was deceived by a manipulator of mystical powers into taking a drug that eventually caused the deaths of all the members of her family (lines 3 and 4). The mourner sings:

Niwina owakata nyakhusala Omenya	Who cheated Omenya's mother-in-law
Ole omusala	To take a charm
Nakila abandu babe bahuela mmaloba	That caused her family to die
Oooo- nyakhusala Omenya	Oooo-Omenya's mother-in-law

Men among the *Abanyole* commonly believe that women are easily deceived into doing things that bring disaster to their own families. For example, women have often been accused of accepting potions, which they administer to their husbands as aphrodisiacs. Several cases have been reported, initiated by men, that show the effects of these charms. For example, they claim that there are some men who have been turned into half-fish and half-human, half-snake and half-human, zombies, violent or even mad by such potions. Some of the stories are exaggerated with the aim of instilling fear in women to desist from using such charms. It must be restated that this is a male-dominated society where the men want control over the women. Institutions such as polygamy perpetuate such control. Through this institution, men own women and they can marry as many as they want, even when they are unable to cater adequately to them. The use of potions may make a man love one woman and remain close to her. Such a woman may then begin to have control over the husband, thereby interfering with the power structure mentioned above.

The accusation that Omenya's mother-in-law is the bearer of the charm that has caused the family so much suffering should be treated with caution. It may be one of the stories initiated by the men to humble the women. If, however, it is true that she ever brought the charm that has killed her family, then there is a warning in the poem that people should avoid drugs that have not been scientifically certified and could result in untold suffering of individuals as well as whole families.

Death by murder

Murder is a very serious offence among the *Abanyole* (Alembi 2003:37) as indicated by the fact that the penalty for anybody committing murder is extremely high. Firstly, the offender is arrested and presented before a court of law. Sometimes justice is done and such offenders are given life sentences or even the death penalty. Often, however, families of such offenders bribe the authorities to have the person released for "lack of evidence" or on a lesser penalty of manslaughter that could only lead to a short imprisonment. Whichever way it goes, the perpetrators and their families are stigmatized and are either ostracized or evicted and their homestead burnt to ashes. This action is meant to cleanse the society because allowing such murderers to freely mix with other members perverts them. Consequently, the heavy penalties that murderers might suffer deter potential killers.

Very few poems exist on murder as a cause of death among the *Abanyole*. Out of all the poems I collected on the theme of death, only two mentioned murder as the cause. The two poems are not exclusive on this cause of death. They have also been performed in cases where it has been claimed that somebody has died from witchcraft or sorcery. The poem below is an example:-

Omwana wa Angose omwoyo nokukwo	Child of Angose this wailing is for you
Muyonga ubeleye muno	Muyonga is very sad
Mwana ninzikhaye door side	When I'm seated by the
Nesibabi	With a dagger
Sianje mmmakhono	In my hands
Nakholenge mbwe etalanyi	What shall I do the strong one
Muyonga ubeleye muno wee	Muyonga is very sad
Baremakile omusala kwo	They have cut down the tree
Ommonyo	that provides
Yekamanga mwo	shade for Ommonyo
Ekampala	In Kampala.

The death of the person in this poem is blamed on the cruel acts of human beings. The expression *Baremakile omusala* "They have cut down the tree" in the tenth line symbolically implies that the deceased was murdered. *Baremakile* "They have cut" denotes a violent act. Again, the deceased appears to have been killed by jealous people. Note that the deceased was a very helpful person, symbolized by the "shade tree." This means that people in the community with different problems would seek help from the deceased. We can conclude that because he was such a useful person in society, he must have been loved by many to the chagrin of a section of members of that community.

The disgruntled people may have been responsible for the deceased's violet death. Jealousy as an incentive for the killing of an African is supported by Mbiti (1969).

Other causes of death

There are other causes of death in this community that do not come out through the poems. *Tsisila* (this is a Lunyore word that has no English equivalent. I have, however, described it in this section) is one of them. This condition affects mainly babies. It is instructive to note that if either of the spouses has extra-marital sex, then it affects the baby with *tsisala*. Consequently, the baby becomes sickly, thin and eventually dies. The adulterous spouse can avoid infecting the child by taking a bath or giving the baby a gift (say a coin etc.) before holding it. Gifts and bathing, therefore, remove the lethal impurity caused by the immoral act. Frequent bathing and dishing out of gifts to the baby, however, raises suspicion with regard to the fidelity of the offender. This may end in tension in the family and even divorce.

Ebiila (it has no English equivalent) is another condition that is believed to cause death in Bunyore *(Mama Mauwa Likhutsa)*. This condition is contracted through irresponsible sex-especially sex with close relatives. *Ebiila* takes several forms. Firstly, *ebiila* may kill instantly, for example, if a man has with a brother's or cousin's wife, he is prohibited from eating the ritual meat of a bull or he-goat that is slaughtered on the occasion of the death of the man who has been offended. If the offender (adulterer) eats such meat, he dies on the spot. About three years ago, for example, a man who had allegedly committed such an offence in *Ebwiranyi* village choked on a piece of ritual meat and died instantly.

There are times when clan members may want to expose a man who has been involved in an incestuous relationship. At this time, they would ask the member to pierce the ruminant of a bull slaughtered for the dead brother or cousin. If the man is guilty and knows the *Abanyole* culture, he would decline. The necessary rituals would be conducted and he would be cleansed. If the man, however, stubbornly proceeds to pierce the ruminant without going through the purification process, he is believed to die immediately.

The worst form of *ebiila* is contracted when a man has sex with a father's or uncle's wife (a step aunt). In this case, the offender becomes sick and starts growing thin. He coughs frequently. This type of *ebiila* is very similar to HIV/AIDS. In fact for a long time members of this community believed that HIV/AIDS was actually *ebiila.* Many of them to date still believe so.

What emerges out of this discussion is the fact that the *Abanyole* place a big premium on morality. One is expected to have sex only with a husband or wife. Outside of this, a man risks infecting their baby with *tsisila* and himself with *ebiila.* As a result of the harsh natural penalty, would-be adulterers are scared when it comes to have sex with close relatives.

Curse is another cause of death in Bunyore. In this community, only older people can curse, the kind of curse that can cause a death.

Conclusion

In view of the above, I conclude that death among the Abanyole is a reality whose cause is primarily the work of evil people within the community and the evil spirits. These two cause death at a rather mysterious level. Whereas it is possible to counter evil people and punish them, it is impossible to punish the evil spirits. The whole argument boils down to the vulnerability of man to death. Certain questions, however, abound concerning the mystery of death among the *Abanyole*: Why does the community not believe that death can come on its own? Could it be that death is too powerful for the community to confront as to look for scapegoats for its cause? Or is it that man lives in perpetual fear of himself that he condemns himself for the occurrence of death? Why should a baby suffer and ultimately die in the case of an unfaithful parent? Why shouldn't the cheating parent suffer or die? What is responsible for the uniform perception of death in the African communities? Why shouldn't death be viewed as a partner in progress because of life after death? Isn't it ironic to expect life after death if the causative agents of death are cursed and even reprimanded, or equally killed? How does the witch relate to the mystic world of evil spirits?

Notes

[1] The name 'Emuhaya' is an inflexion on 'Omuhaya', the name of a shade giving tree.When the first chief was installed in Bunyore, he could preside over cases under this tree which provided a big shade when it was hot. In time, the place took the name of the tree.

[2] I collected this information in 1997. I attended this funeral because the couple were my relatives.

[3] I collected the song and information when attending the funeral of my late grandfather, Mzee Zakayo Akunda Monde in 1994.

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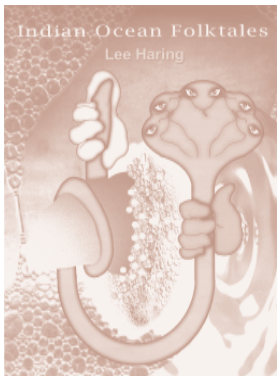

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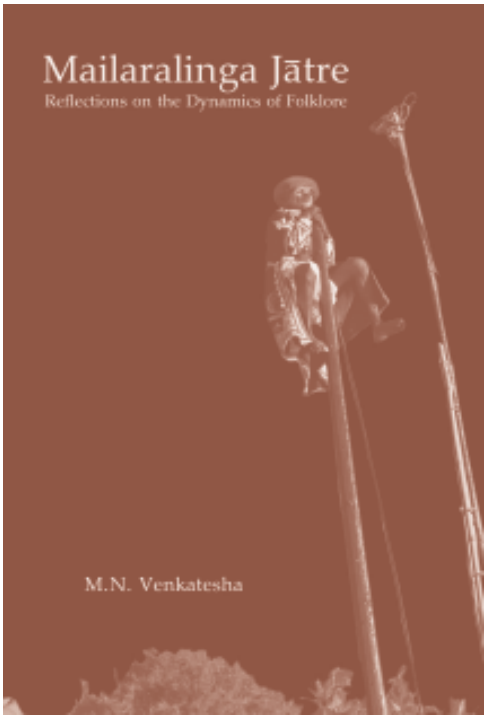

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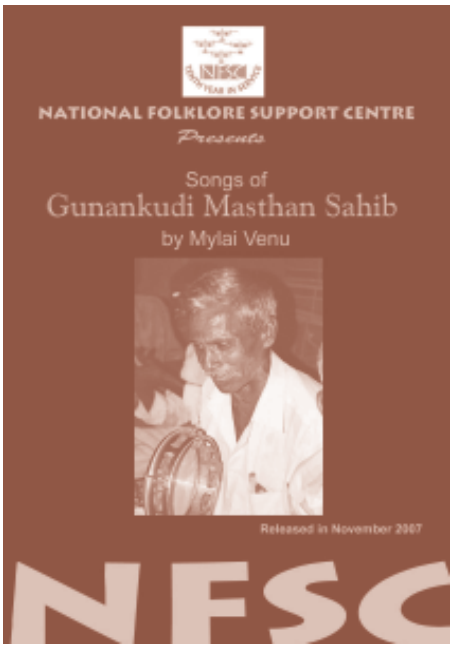

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Songs: 1. Manonmaniye... 31:23 2. Aiyayo yen vidi vasam... 14:29 3. Suuthira Pavaiye... 7:13
4. Aandavan Yen Ceyvaano... 10:31 5. Paarkka Palavidama... 26:41

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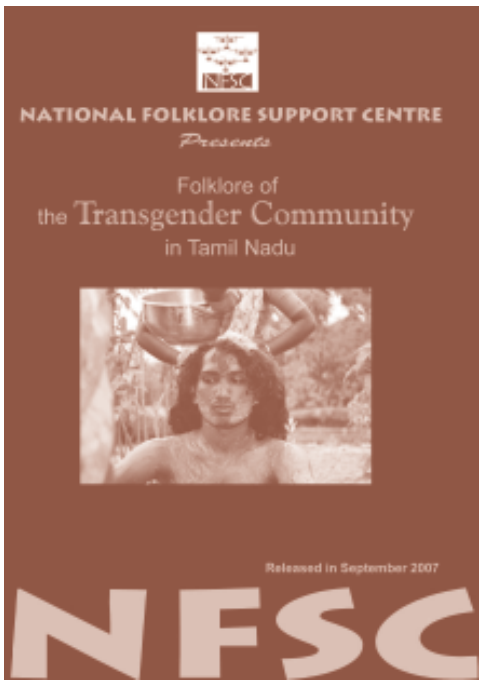
Edited out of a year-long field documentation carried out by NFSC researchers and collaborators from the transgender community, this documentary depicts the life cycle ceremonies of transgendered persons in Tamil Nadu, India. Starting with adoption and initiation in the form of milk-pouring ceremony after the fortieth day of the surgery, the documentary presents the community gathering in Koovagam village, (Vilupuram District, Tamil Nadu) for marriage with the God Aravan, widowhood, and return to the society after his beheading in Mahabharata theatre/ritual/festival. Apart from interviews with the transgendered persons, the documentary includes excerpts from traditional epic singing in praise of God Aravan. To obtain a copy, send demand draft or international money order in the name of National Folklore Support Centre, payable at Chennai, India.



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