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The Revenant in Some Urban Legends of Shillong

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One of the most common aspects of urban folklore is the urban legend, which this chapter will primarily focus on, attempting to rediscover the supernatural beliefs of a modern urban community and also the rhetoric and other techniques through which those beliefs are presented. The study of two Shillong-based urban legends and their versions will be used to analyze the dynamics of what constitutes citylore. Urban legends are a genre of folklore consisting of stories often thought to be factual by those circulating them. Urban legends are not necessarily untrue but they are often false, distorted and exaggerated. Despite the name, urban legends do not always necessarily take place in an urban settir.g. The name is designed to differentiate them from traditional folklore created in pre-industrial and pre-modern times.

Collections of so-called modern, contemporary or urban legends are widespread phenomenon and the role of the media, Internet and movies has enhanced their exoteric features. Contemporary legends may be defined as stories dealing with unpleasant fearful stories or repressed subjects, which take some unexpected turns.

Urban legends are contemporary stories continually reinvented and shared among the members of a society. They contribute to the reconstruction and reaffirming of community identities and help reinforce social bonds through elaboration of the psychosocial communicational mechanism spawned at their narration.

Contemporary legends are widely regarded as the lore of modern society transmitted orally and electronically by young, school- and

college-educated urbanites (Brunvand 1981: xvi). They are set in everyday life yet they are charged with a sense of peril that is often accentuated with an ironic twist. While these stories reside in the present and are regarded as disputable truth, they contain elements of ancient myths.

The study of urban folklore in the United States began in the late 1960s and 1970s, and the first occurrence of the term in its conceptual aspects was made by Jan Harold Brunvand in *Too Good to be True: The Colossal Book of Urban Legends* in which he collected more than two hundred of the most-repeated and best-known examples of modern folk-legends. This classic is not only a handy work of reference for scholars of narratives but also a good introduction to the study of urban folklore itself. This has attracted the attention of folklorists, anthropologists and culture specialists and made others pay more attention to the folklore of cities.

In the last thirty years or so, Shillong has undergone tremendous changes, the most noticeable being the explosion of its population as a result of the immigration of people from rural areas, and the influx of people coming from other parts of India and the neighbouring countries. As such, one can notice that there is widespread diffusion, assimilation and acculturation of different cultures, which has generated a great variety of folklore materials. The tremendous growth and pace of change that has occurred in Shillong city has produced social and cultural phenomena that can be considered and studied as representative examples of urban folklore. The processes of modernization coupled with the large-scale assimilation of peoples of diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds have made this city a teeming laboratory in which cultural dynamics can be examined minutely. On the streets, in homes and open spaces, in shops and stores, in schools and colleges, universities and different campuses (the list is inexhaustible!) new folklore is being created daily. To a conservative folklorist, this changed scenario would seem unfit for the generation and perpetuation of folklore but this perception has over the years changed. Folklorists now realize that such a mixture of traditions, customs, usages and beliefs produce vibrant and different kinds of folklore which reflect the contemporary life of the city.

These phenomena are of immense interest to the folklore scholar and the study of some of these aspects constitutes a very important task. In part, this chapter is also an attempt to indicate one of the concerns of folkloristics, in that the discipline is not to be viewed as a subject obsessed with the bucolic and the fanciful; rather, its strength lies in its ability to address modern-day issues and critique contemporary cultural dynamics.

The city of Shillong has undoubtedly generated urban folklore of various kinds and the concern of this chapter is to study the phenomenon as urban productions. Examples of the kind have been represented very artistically in innumerable modern creative writings, especially in novels and this corpus of material has indiscriminately made use of folklore. This wealth of material has not been studied except for their literary value. A proper analysis of this material would unearth and reveal the pervasive influence that folklore has had on these writers, thus establishing that society finds reflections in folklore.

When I was growing up in the early 1970s, there was an extremely popular story, which I shall call the 'Marina legend', revolving around the ghost of a woman of that name.

On the eve of Christmas or New Year, a young man went to a party at Pinewood Hotel where he met a beautiful woman whose name, he later came to know, was Marina. The two had fun, dancing and merrymaking till past midnight. When the party got over, he offered to drop her to her place which was somewhere in Upper Shillong. Seeing that the young woman was cold, he offered his jacket, which she gratefully accepted. On reaching the gate to her house, they bade each other farewell. The following day the man remembered about the jacket he had lent the woman and he decided to get it back. When he arrived at her house he knocked on the door and an elderly woman greeted him. When he introduced himself and stated the purpose of his visit, he was informed by the woman that Marina had expired three years ago. The man refused to believe this despite being repeatedly assured that this was the fact. Finally, in exasperation, the elderly woman offered to take him to the cemetery to which he also agreed. They went there and when they came upon Marina's grave he found his jacket hanging on the cross, on which was also inscribed the name Marina.

Folklore is replete with examples of the revenant phenomenon and surveys of documented folktales exhibit this. This reflects the working of the memorate or the personal experience story, which has great value in showing tradition actually in process, at work, shaping everyday experience. The process of traditionalizing and interpreting is accelerated when an experience is spoken of to others and this assumes the form of a narrative. From that point onwards, it becomes public, the account being, as it were, a 'discussion document'.

Folklorists have laboriously studied the socio-psychological factors of urbanization largely brought forth by massive social structure changes and folklore, being grounded in human experience, guides us to look at the ways that individuals deal with these experiences in a symbolic and

expressive manner. At the core of this argument is the anxiety about resisting or coping with these changes. Taking the Marina legend, what can be detected is a subtle assertion of the way in which tradition can be interpreted through the prism of religious beliefs.

The arena where the most significant actions take place is the ballroom of Pinewood Hotel, a landmark known to most people of the city. The hotel strongly conveys a colonial heritage, both of the flattering kind as well as the dubious variety. A young man goes to a party and there he meets a complete stranger amidst possibly hundreds of other strangers in a neutral place bereft of personal and emotional ties. There, social transactions take shape in, we can assume, dimly lit circumstances. And of course, it is night-time. They get to know each other and the story suggests that they get along famously. There are also hints of familiarity if not intimacy. It is evident from the story that the couple engage in dancing and merrymaking and that their actions are not inspired by the solemn occasion of Christmas or New Year's celebrations. Traditionally, and especially on Christmas Eve, families spend time together, the more devout ones in prayer. There is also the singing of carols and feasting. All this suggests intimacy experienced in family and neighbourhood situations, the opposite of what we see happening in the story.

When the party breaks up and the couple goes on its way, the man, obviously thinks nothing of the fact that the woman, while being unaccompanied, is also hardly dressed to combat the wintry nights of Shillong. He offers his jacket, which she accepts and takes into her house when he drops her there. The following day, which was supposed to hold the promise of delighted expectation for the man, turns nightmarish and traumatic.

The legend seems to broadly hint at anxieties about transformed lifestyles when individuals are seen to abandon familiar and familial surroundings and display a readiness to fraternize with unknown people. The moving away from socially and religiously sanctioned traditions is also taken seriously with an even more serious penalty awaiting those who abrogate this coda. While analyzing the implications of the legend, we discover that its existence (or construction) is intimately linked to sociocultural factors. It is a response to the transformed lifestyles in Khasi society (at that point of time) when individuals are seen to abandon familiar and familial spaces, displaying a readiness to fraternize with unknown people. This interpretation particularly applies to the legend because the occasion of Christmas is normally associated with domestic celebration and is the one annual festival that brings most Christian families together.

As evident in the legend, the unnamed young man ventures out of home on Christmas Eve, thereby choosing the alien public sphere as a source of pleasure and entertainment. Moreover, the young man represents the Khasi youths' altered perspective, which looks at strangers and not family members as reliable and perhaps more 'exciting' counterparts. This development can be explained as a repercussion of pressurizing Western influences, making social interaction with complete strangers de rigueur in Shillong in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Marina legend also engenders multiple symbolic connotations. It is in the young man that the public and private, convention and change battle. By choosing to go to Pinewood Hotel instead of observing Christmas with his family, he is reprimanded through the traumatic experience. The traditionally sanctioned family gathering is superseded by the 'modern' gathering at a hotel with strangers. Thus, as opposed to the familial symbolism of life and regeneration, the young man who transgresses traditional practices encounters death. Hence, the crucial discovery of the death of Marina highlights the didactic nature of the story. Furthermore, the clothes and apparels of the two subjects of the story are also endowed with symbolic importance. As mentioned before, the woman is lightly dressed for a winter night in Shillong, thus prompting the young man to offer his jacket. The woman breaks the cultural dressing code by abandoning the traditional Khasi shawl called the *tapmoh*. In refusing this apparel, Marina also rejects notions of dignity and respect, which the *tapmoh* represents. Moreover, the spectacle of the young man's jacket hanging on the cross of Marina's tombstone carries the idea that the gesture of care and protection (offering the jacket to the woman) is now diverted to a stranger rather than to family. This is similarly met with a confrontation with death.

Another interpretation of the episode would be the unwelcoming attitude of society vis-à-vis the growth of private enterprises such as restaurants. Again, considering the occasion of Christmas being a domestically celebrated affair, the blooming fashion of 'eating-out' even on such occasions is received as a threat by the community in general. Now, we witness the transfer of domestic functions like cooking to private enterprises. Gary Alan Fine (1980) opines, "A recent societal change is that government and profit-making organizations have assumed social functions which formerly the family, neighbors or local charitable organizations handled." This is an overarching statement which underlines transformations even in the nature of family ties and threaten their closeness. A simple 'eating-out' on Christmas indicates the weakening

family values as well as the limited (or lack of) communication within the family. Moreover, unlike homemade food, food from restaurants is looked at with suspicion, as the contents of the dishes are never known to the consumer.

The Marina legend, like several other urban legends, is born at the cusp of two consecutive (though conflicting) modes of sociocultural traditions. The variant parts, which constitute and mould the telling of the Marina legend, can be read as a reflection of the collective conscious or unconscious of the Khasi community. The inherent didacticism of the story is attributive of the existing anxieties of the community, when faced with cultural transformation, also resulting in changes in the social and familial structures.

An interesting feature of a certain post-cremation ceremony of the Khasis is the *pyngrei* which is performed a year after the cremation of a male member of a clan who died as a bachelor. The ceremony involves a mock marriage between two actors—a male and a female—who are hired for the purpose. The two actors are also required to eat rice from one common plate and jump over a mortar and pestle. It is only after the performance of this ceremony that the bones of the male member of the clan can be prepared for deposition in the clan *mawbah* or cairn.

It is interesting to draw an analogy between what happens in the legend and what constitutes the requirement of the *pyngrei* ceremony if one is open to see the paradigms constructed with inverse characteristics and features, which is a widely prevalent construction of folk psychology. The legend involves the relationship between an unmarried woman and man on an occasion, and in an environment, of celebration. They share drinks and meals and also participate in the merriment. However, there is no hint of resolution because the story produces a critical episode that culminates at the graveyard, a space usually associated with spectral experiences. This crisis is brought about by the man who is interested in sustaining his liaison with the woman and even when informed about her death years ago, refuses to believe it and insists on seeing the evidence of her death personally. The semiotic significance of the jacket being left hanging on the cross cannot be missed as it provides the more-than-expected evidence of her demise. The jacket proves that his one night's relationship or affair was with a revenant, a relationship that could not be contemplated as one is seen as belonging to the realm of the living and the other to the dead.

Pinewood Hotel, in the minds of many, represents a colonial or semi-colonial edifice. It is also my experience that structures associated with

colonial times are believed to have an aura of supranatural characteristics. There are innumerable narratives about houses and sites used by colonial civil and military officers being haunted. There are still many of these houses in the city and also dotting across the length and breadth of the Khasi and Jaintia hills (many of which are lying in dilapidated condition). I have personally visited many of them and have collected anecdotes about abnormal happenings in many of them. A well-known Khasi novelist, Remy Phankon, has made use of such material to write a splendid novel entitled *Ka Dak Bangla* (1987). In the novel, contemporary characters have horrifying experiences during a night of revelry in one such house. While it is not one's intention to say that Pinewood Hotel is a site where paranormal things occur, one suspects that the creators of the Marina legend cycle cannot resist suggesting it as a place (because of its iconic position) where abnormal transactions may take place.

In 2004, a young pregnant woman whose name was Corphelia was brutally murdered by her husband. Five years later, immediately after the pronouncement of sentence for the accused (life imprisonment), the tale of a young woman hailing cabs and asking to be dropped at Riatsamthiah, a locality of Shillong, began to make the rounds in the city. What was strange was that on reaching a house in that locality, she would produce a five-hundred-rupee note and offer it as fare. The taxi driver would not have the necessary change and she would request him to wait while she got it from the house but she would not come back. The driver would go inside and be informed that the woman he described as the passenger died some years ago.

It would appear that belief in this type of reverent gains its impetus from experience of bereavement. Through the memorates (people) tell of this type of supernatural encounter, we are able to see tradition at work, interpreting and transforming experience, turning the strange states of mind and emotions common while grieving into objective encounters with the dead. This is especially true in the case of an unnatural death (murder, death by accident, suicide, etc.), which causes the coming into order of a phenomenon called *tyrut*. During my interviews with knowledgeable persons and those who have actually experienced its effects, the *tyrut* is described as an aura, a felt presence at a certain location of the most ominous kind (of evil), which threatens to unleash a repetition of the horrific acts of violence it is a product of. I know for a fact that homes and entire villages have shifted due to fears about the effects of *tyrut*. It is believed that on a particularly dark night, sounds of the agonizing torment of the dead are heard and this is referred to as the moaning of

blood. It brings with it all the associations of the ominous and requires a cleansing ritual to stop its recurrence.

The concept of the revenant is not new to the Khasis and there are spectacular stories, both old and new, about them. What causes them to appear and negotiate the realm of the living is usually due to a sense of dissatisfaction of being denied something. In fact, those who die unnatural deaths are kept in a makeshift arrangement outside the house pending the funeral. It is also believed that those who perish in circumstances where their bodies are not retrieved, their spirits become disturbed and tormented. They may also trouble people. The reports of the sightings of Corphelia can be attributed to a host of factors which are grounded in folk belief and practice and one cannot downplay the role of the media in this because the gruesome murder and the protests and agitations it created were an important feature. The trial and subsequent sentencing of the murderer–husband was also followed up and reported in newspapers, on television and radio.

Bereavement, its physiology and psychology has been a subject of study by psychiatrists interested in pathological grief reactions. Researchers have noted that apart from the obvious physical and mental symptoms, what is also detected is the prevalence of hallucination, through intense and consistent memory sustenance of the dead person.

Modern study of the revenant, who is a victim or subject of unnatural death, has not been attempted much in Khasi folklore studies although substantial work has been done on the ancestor revenant phenomenon in ceremonies and religious practices of clans. This chapter is also an account of the work being done on urban legend collection, formulation of terms, definitions and creation of types and subtypes.

References

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