

ORALITY AND BEYOND

A NORTH-EAST INDIAN PERSPECTIVE



Edited By: Soumen Sen and Desmond L. Kharmauphlang

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Soumen Sen
Desmond L. Kharmawphlang



Sahitya Akademi

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Introduction

In the context of North-East India it is impossible to speak of one monolithic tradition, given its cultural and linguistic plurality. The term North-East India refers to the geographical location of the region that comprises the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Topographically, the region lies in an extension of the sub-Himalayan zone consisting of mountainous terrains and hilly tracts, of plateaus and valleys fed by rivers and streams. The presence of a baffling mix of ethnic communities add to the diverse cultural patterns which are reflected most strongly in the folklore and specifically, in the life breathing oral traditions of the communities of North-East India.

Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social organizations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of contemporary social order. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reform and redress.

Orality is a complex phenomenon which configures its own ways and means of expression and transmission. It is that great highway of information where an exciting intersection of ideas, forms and styles takes place at different levels, creating processes and dialogues with inter-linkages between form and content, genre and theme, visual and aural, local and regional, traditional and contemporary.

With the aim of bringing together the individual efforts of scholars in the field, sharing and exchange of ideas, methodologies and experiences, Sahitya Akademi and the Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong organized a two-day Regional Seminar on 'Orality and Beyond : A North-East Indian Perspective' on 26 and 27 July, 2005. This volume comprises papers presented during the seminar. As editors of the

volume, we have taken the liberty of including our own contributions to the seminar, one a seminar paper, and the other, the key-note address.

To speak generally about the papers that were presented during the seminar, it would be honest to state that all were, in their own inimitable ways, concerned with the ideas of orality as the authors understand it, in the context of the traditions and communities they were writing about. In the present volume, we have tried to retain the basic thematic structure of the seminar and the papers are grouped accordingly.

1. Orality and Historical Reconstruction

Sylvanus Lamare's paper, entitled, 'Orality and Beyond: The Story of U Manik Raitong' seeks to offer an alternative source for the legend of U Manik Raitong. The story, both riveting and tragic, revolves around the adulterous relationship between an orphan boy, U Manik Raitong and the wife of the chief of the *Hima* or the traditional state. The fruit of this liaison was a boy-child and as a consequence, Manik Raitong was burnt alive in a pyre. Legends, it is well known, have been used effectively for historical reconstruction and the legend under study reveals how crucial the oral-literary interface is for such purposes.

Kynpham S. Nongkynrih's presentation details the genesis of the Khasi oral tradition and provides illuminating examples of the various narrative genres and how this vast repertoire is being employed by the Khasis.

Caroline R. Marak's paper is an impassioned plea for the preservation of the oral traditions. Citing examples from her own Garo community, she laments the fact that narration of tales, myths, chants relating to the agricultural calendar, funeral poetry and the singing of folk songs are fast disappearing even in villages. The paper also questions the feasibility of relying on electronic formats of documentation and probes the issue by discussing, at length, the erosion of the A. chik language.

2. Orality and the Tale Type

Folklore is describable not only in terms of the genres of which folkloristic data are examples, but also on the basis of identifiable and distinguishable types. The study of traditional tales paved the way for the first successful attempts to be made in isolating type sets and laid the foundation for the conceptualization of the telling of a traditional tale as a folkloristic datum, on the one hand, and as a version of a tale type on the other. Two papers, the first by Mrinal Medhi and the second by G. Badaiasuk Lyngdoh Nonglait and Rimika Lanong were devoted to developing tale type configurations. Mrinal Medhi's paper entitled 'Folktale, North-East India and a Tale-type Index', makes a case for the classification and typology of North-East folktales into tale type index following the model of classification given by Antti Aarne and taking into account some Assamese folktales. G. B. L. Nonglait and Remika Lanong co-authored a paper entitled 'Promises are meant to be Broken : An Oicotype Study of Two Tales.' The paper is an oicotype investigation of a Khasi and Angami tale respectively and the exercise has indeed lent a new dimension to the perception of orality vis-a-vis cross cultural studies.

3. Orality and Worldview

Insights of the worldview of communities have, since the earliest times, generated much interest among scholars and have, to some extent, provided the scholar with vital information about the community. Esther Syiem, in her paper entitled 'Orality Alive: Reconstructing the tale', tried to bring out first, the status of Khasi females, taking an example from *Ka Noh Ka Likai* tale. Aligning her argument with the myth of the *Dieng lei* tree, which metaphorically accounts for man's first defilement of sacred space, she talks about man's alienation leading to his exile from a world of contentment and the abrogation of the bond with the tiger, his closest ally. The paper presented by (Sr.) Philomena Kharakor was entitled "Philosophy Behind Khasi Myths." Her paper provides an incisive reflection on a few myths and didactic stories associated with Khasi

beliefs. Badaplin War's paper was read by Wanda Shisha Rynjah, a research scholar in her absence. The paper was entitled 'Orality and Written Khasi Literature.' The paper does a study of the tradition of *Ka Longkur Longjait* or clan lineage as reflected in *Ka Tiew Larun*, a play written by the celebrated Khasi writer, S. J. Duncan. The paper, while analyzing the play, talks about how Khasi clans trace their lineage through the female member. R.P. Aphtaria's paper was entitled 'Tribal Oral Tradition of Origin and Migration of the Mishmis, Arunachal Pradesh.' In the paper, the author focuses on the origin and migration of the Mishmis as reflected in legends. R. L. Thanmawia presented a paper entitled 'The Mizo Values' (as reflected in oral traditions). In the paper, the scholar brings out the social values, qualities and belief of the Mizos as depicted in folksongs and folk narratives. The last paper in this group was presented by Julius L.R. Marak entitled 'Development of Garo Folk Music'. The paper is a summary of folk music and musical instrument of the Garos and the different occasions in which they are used. The paper is also an attempt in trying to systematize certain Garo sung utterances and genres.

4. Orality in (Con)text

The papers grouped under this heading, try to investigate the oral-written dichotomy in the context of the multi-ethnic culture of North-East India. Anil Boro, while conceding that early folklore scholarship recognized the dichotomy between orality and the written as two distinct (and sometimes opposing entities), underlined the inherent relationship between the two traditions. His paper entitled 'Orality and Literacy: Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Problems in Oral Traditional poetics in North-East', discusses the privilege of speech over writing, referring to the existence of the oral-written continuums in contemporary studies. The writer also mentions how and when the oral tradition of North-East, like tales, songs and proverbs have been found in printed form and how they played a role in expanding the oral tradition. Temsula Ao's paper begins with a series of valid questions about oral literature. The discursive work refers to native American poetry, African orature

and the writer also samples some poems (including her own) written by our North-Eastern poets to probe the texture of orality as it is understood as an identity marker, a creative metaphor and as a developmental paradigm. The paper 'Oral Tradition in Transition: The Koireng example', by a research scholar, T. Neishoning Koireng, talks about perception of story telling in the microscopic Koireng society and how the members of the community variously interpret the existing oral literature. P. Jhingan's paper entitled, 'A Semiotic Study of *Ka Shad Tyngkoh* of the Khasis' dwelt at length on the structural analysis of *Ka Shad Tyngkoh*, a performance which is pivotal in the superstructure of the Nongkrem festival. Koulie, a Tenyimia scholar presented a paper entitled 'Tenyimia Folklore and Verse: A Quest for Beyond'. The paper focuses on the folklore and verses of the Tenyimia (Angami). The writer gave examples of Tenyimia folklore from popular legends and made comparisons between folk and literary poetry. 'Oral Frames of References: Khasi Myth Chanting and Perspective of Definition', a paper presented by Desmond L. Kharmawphlang explores the definition of myth taking into account the parameters of form, content, function and context, outlined by a visual presentation of a myth chanting.

As editors, it gives us pleasure to present you a Biате folktale as a special supplement. The tale, 'Two Sisters', was collected by T. K. Darnei from Mualsei, a remote village tucked away in a corner of Jaintia Hills District of the state of Meghalaya. Shri Darnei is an indefatigable social worker who has striven hard for his community, the little known Biates, in the areas of education, health care and welfare.

We place on record our deep appreciation, first of all, to all the contributors for their generosity with their advice and time. We are thankful to the Sahitya Akademi for readily agreeing to publish the seminar papers in the conviction that they will represent a strong book. We owe a debt of gratitude to Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay, Regional Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, Kolkata and the Akademi office for all the assistance rendered during the shaping of the book. Two organizations, the Indian Council for Social Science Research, NERC, Shillong and North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur have been

pivotal in helping us get the Seminar on 'Orality and Beyond' together and for that we are indebted to both. Therefore, the labours of this book is as much theirs as ours. The supporting staffs of the Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies, NEHU, Shillong, have displayed exemplary devotion to work throughout the Seminar and also in the phase when pages of this book began their first few tentative steps. Shri Wallambor Nongrum and Shri Fabian Dkhar worked long hours typing the manuscript. To both of them a big *Khublei*.

Shillong, April 2006

Soumen Sen
Desmond L Kharmawphlang

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw the evolution of the study of literature focusing primarily on the historical approach. The important questions raised were: How is oral literature made and is it sustained? What constitutes oral literature and what possible investigative tools can be developed for an analysis of its narrative structure?

Since then, a number of conceptual models were built to explore this range of folk creativity reflected in the poetics, language, structure and symbolism in oral literature.

Orality and Beyond : A North-East Indian Perspective provides a refreshing insight into some of the narratives of North-East India and the different methods of analysis used by scholars to study this corpus of material. The book is novel in that it features the work of established scholars in folkloristics who have very adroitly and convincingly used, tried and tested canons of folklore research.

Soumen Sen is a well-known folklorist who lives in Kolkata. He retired as Head, Centre for Literary and Cultural Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He has written a number of books on folkloristics.

Desmond L. Kharmawphlang (b.1964) is a poet and folklorist. He has a number of books to his credit. He is presently Head, Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

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