

## Oral Frames of References : Khasi Myth Chanting and Perspectives of Definition

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A significant corpus of scholarly efforts is devoted to oral tradition and the exploration of the fundamental issues that it excites. While some folklorists are concerned with the poetics that constitute the underpinnings of orality, others engage their energy in broad and often tedious comparative analysis tasks. All these investigations have yielded brilliant results and have produced an explosion of activities in folklore research the world over.

To borrow a term from filmdom, the more significant full screen research are those of the Homeric epics which were purely oral and which were primarily standardized during the Panathenaic Festival of the sixth century B.C. Investigation into these oral derived texts have to contend with a little known period of history stretching from the eighth century B.C. to the tenth century A.D. – i.e. nearly two millennia.<sup>1</sup> Other earlier academic enterprises of equal scale worth mentioning were the efforts of Theodore Benfey whose contribution to Indian studies was the translation of, and commentary on, the *Panchatantara*, which he completed in 1859. Not only did his translation popularize Indian story literature in the European imagination, it also raised new questions in academic circles concerning the diffusion theory of story-theme migration.

Oral is a variously construed term to apply to the myriad genres of composition and performance around the world that can be placed in the rubric of oral traditional texts. Oral literature research is a stupendous task, which stipulates a disciplined pursuance of the various methodologies to be employed. North East India offers a vast scope for the prosecution of oral tradition studies, which, if properly conducted, will contribute unique dimensions to the discourse. While there are generic dynamics inherent in the orality shared between and among the ethnic communities of the region,

each community, I believe, could again exhibit traits that are at once idiosyncratic and heuristic. There are ethnic communities that have had for a long time, the advantage of script (whether borrowed or indigenously evolved), others have experienced the iconic written paradigm only as a result of white colonial and proselytizing interventions. These situations offer ideal opportunities for the study of the text and its transmission models, archaeo-graphical details or the examination of 'concordance interpolation',<sup>2</sup> (a process of adding lines to the canonical text). In the societies where written cultural productions were attempted only as recently as less than two hundred years, academic stimulations could be directed towards the oral-derived texts, genre dependence and tradition dependence studies.

The multi-layering of other socio-cultural and political dynamics creates a fantastic canvas that would require the investment of resources and the convergence of professional interest to take up for inquiry the almost inexhaustible material that make up the ethno-noetic plenum<sup>3</sup> of our own North East India. Suffice it to say, at this point, that all this is being said with the singular objective of making a plea to all here to prepare ourselves as stakeholders and stewards, to shoulder the responsibility of articulating this oral and intangible heritage.

In trying to address the issues of orality, I shall try to examine the referential constructs provided by canonical exegesis and locate the performance of a Khasi myth chanting as a diorama for case study.

A host of folklore scholars have stubbornly maintained that myth is always connected with ritual whether as a description or a mode of justifying the efficacy of it.<sup>4</sup> Having studied the present myth in its totality of performance, application and contextual innateness, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint where the myth ends or ritual begins and vice versa. What can be said with certainty is that myth chanting involves a specialized system of knowledge employing its own dissemination canons. The egg divination ceremony myth is a classic example of the kind of myth that has been excellently defined by the late Lauri Honko, as having four criteria i.e. form, content, function and context setting out clearly the different levels relevant to the concept of myth.<sup>5</sup>

Myth chanting or singing is intrinsic to indigenous Khasi religion and constitutes a very important oral discourse used as they are during the performance of ceremonies and rituals and during the performances of augury and divination. Khasi commonly used water, leaves, lime, rice grains, oil and the egg for divination purposes. This last is extremely important not only because it is only used by the very skilled augur, but because of the way in which it is done and the things which are used. This performance is called *Ka shat pyrlein*. The things used in this ceremony are: (i) *Ka lengkhan* or an egg used for divination (ii) *Ka Diplin* a rectangular wooden slab with a small hollowed out projection for keeping soil (iii) a fistful of mud (iv) rice grains (v) water.

The divination myth has a *form* that is both narrative as well as dramatic. It is an enactment in which the celebrant virtually assumes the different roles of the characters involved and at the same time, sustains the main-line narration through chanting. The performance is suffused with great drama and remarkable telling skill where word power, actions, gestures and voice modulation conflate into a total experience. The *content* of the chant is cosmogony-oriented in that it talks about significant universal events. It contains lengthy discourses on traditional governance systems, animal species classification, cosmology, geographical descriptions and assorted knowledge systems. The myth is driven by an ontological concern that constitutes the *function* and lastly as a *context*, it is apprehended by a ritual performance.

One of the most skillful augurers who do this performance is U Dising Marin of Pahamshken village on the Northern slopes of Khasi Hills. I am fortunate to have been accepted by him and his village and I have seen him to perform many rituals on countless occasions during the ten years of our friendship.

He would carefully prepare for the ceremony by washing the *Diplin Diknor* and would have the necessary things near at hand. Then he would start chanting while taking the egg in his right palm and rice grains in his left. He would place some rice grains on the four corners of the *Diplin Diknor* as he chants. He would then engage in a dialogue

with the egg all the while rolling it slowly in his palm. The dialogue that he engages in is a recounting of a myth by chanting. While still chanting (and the chant is sometimes of one hour duration) he would smear mud on the egg while continuously rolling it in the palm of his hand.

The way in which the story element in the myth is presented is not in a style popular with ordinary hearthside audiences, because the performance is too intense, too powerful in a totally involved and absorbed way.

All the while he is occupied with the egg, smearing it with mud, rolling it in the palm of his hand and placing it on the *Diplin*. He urges the egg to show him the signs that will manifest themselves in *ka lar* and *ka kem*, broken egg shells lying, respectively, on their convex and concave sides.

U Dising Marin's narration is fraught with terms and usages, sounds and exclamations, which are impervious to direct translation and I have reasons to believe that many are esoteric. I have also rendered some sense translation, which is opposed to 'meaning' translation. The point I am trying to make is that one has to be there to even begin to absorb the telling power.

The performance of *Ka shat pyrlein* is an extremely elaborate affair and from it emanates one of the most important myths of the Khasis which recounts the fetching of the sun by the rooster from the *Lamet Latang* cave. This myth constitutes a belief, which is central to Khasi religious thought and system.

In the *Shat Pyrlein* ceremony, we find a combination of elemental things used to supplement the human role and aspect: the egg, *ka diplin diknor*, rice grain and mud. *Ka diplin diknor* is exclusively made of the wood of a tree, which has been felled by lightning. It is a metonymic device used to represent the veranda of the sun. Dising often refers to it as containing stories which is a figurative way of saying that the use of *ka diplin diknor* effectively keeps alive the folk memory and history.

The divination chant is used and reused for as long as there is a need for it and in this, it presents itself as a multiplicity of variants. By

going through the process of repetition, it gets reinvented. In the village community, I detect no attempts made to record the chants either by scribal or electronic agency although there are sufficiently literate individuals and some do possess tape recorders. On enquiry, I was told, 'these stones are there always'. This reply quite perturbed me although I knew that the Divination Myth chanting is something that the performer, U Dising Marin had inherited from his maternal uncle, U Niwan. The tradition has been passed down through five generations.<sup>6</sup> In fact U Dising disclosed to me that when he was a small boy, his clan identified and 'dedicated' him, as being special because his deceased grand maternal uncle had made a visitation (*sajan*) on him through signs and portents recognizable only by the clan. From that stage onwards, he was treated differently and he had to go through a long apprenticeship under the tutelage of his maternal uncle. He is now, in turn, passing on this knowledge system to his nephew, U Hasing Lyngdoh Marin who assists him nowadays in the performance of ceremonies.

This information made me recognize the workings of the cognitive patterns of a memory shared by a community and which operates in the present even if the traditions are thought of in the past. While recollecting this past, the tradition gets processed through reinterpretation so that it becomes applicable to contemporary needs and realities.

The myth is driven by an ontological concern that constitutes the function and lastly, as a context, it is apprehended by a ritual performance. As I had mentioned earlier, the chanting involves the narration of a sacred myth of Khasis, which is dramatized in very bold strokes. The 'fall from grace' paradigm is brought about by human covetousness, avarice and disharmony with the natural world (to name a few transgressions). The periods of darkness and deprivation are depicted in frightening details. When order is restored and the sun is brought out from the Lamet Latang cave, there is great rejoicing in the mythic community of humans, animals and the natural world, which is palpably experienced by the audience as well.

As an effective and often performed chant, the divination myth, during the process of transmission, carry endogenous systems of knowledge, that are meaningful to the recipients (audience and the party for whom the divination is performed) although the cognitive responses may differ.

The performance of the chant as a complete ceremony creates the essential spatial environment intrinsic to the tradition. The use of the metonymic objects such as the egg, *ka diplin diknor*, rice grain, mud and water (which are elemental in nature) are part of the spatial and contextual dispensation of the ceremony. The actions, motions of the body, intonation, voice modulation, while having their own unique semiotic value, infuse as sense of aura that couches the ceremony in arcana.

The tradition of chanting proves to be a significant genre for comprehensive research. As a conduit of expression and communication, it thrives on an autonomous existence, without indicating any need for rescue from obliteration or resorting to be inspired by a written parallel. It has been vibrant over hundred of years because the community that has use for it sustains it by collective interpretation and re-interpretation.

#### Endnotes :

1. West Stephanie, *The Ptolemaic Papyri of Homer* 1967 pp12-13.
2. Foley, John Miles, *Traditional Oral Epic* 1990, p 21.
3. Cantwell, Robert, *Ethnomimesis : Folklife and Representation of Culture* 1993, The University of North Carolina Press.
4. Hooke, S. H. *The Labyrinth*, New York, Macmillian ed. 1935
5. Honko, L, *The Problem of Defining Myth in Alan Dundes ed. Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* Berkeley 1984.
6. Kharmawphlang D. L. *The Healing Chants* Manuscript, IGNCA 1998.