

## Oral Tradition in Transition: The Koireng Example

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Story-telling is perhaps as old as man. It is a common practice among many communities since time immemorial. It is also possible to regard it as an informal means of imparting education. Through this process, the oral (folk) literature embedded with cultural traits of a society has been handed down from a particular period of time to the next generation and this process goes on. The practice is rooted in the pre-literature mode and passed on to succeeding generations through a process of inculcation by many communities despite the existence of a parallel though recent trend of published texts among both the *pr*-literate and literate groups of people. It is possible to assume that the time and space of story-telling might differ from community to community provided by the cultural specific. For example, among the Koirengs of Manipur folk tales are usually told at night after the evening meal. (They also have a celebration called *chadel* that lasts for four days of which the first night is meant exclusively for telling tales).

Story-telling after the evening meal is usually around the hearth in the kitchen or prior to retiring to bed was the kind of story-telling practice I have experienced. This, in fact, is the practice usually followed by the community I belong to as far as the tradition of story-telling regulates. All socio-cultural traits are subject to the dynamics of change and in the case of the present paper, mobility in the quest to conform to modern requirement dictated by my responses to education, the given folk culture was accustomed underwent a transformation. From the middle standard of schooling onwards, I was sent to boarding school away from home and this dislocation temporarily put a stop to the story-telling sessions which virtually were instructional and informative for me. Since then I became more exposed to the formal academic environment and other activities which constituted another dimension of experience.

Thenceforth, during that period I felt that folk literature exists for the people living in the remote villages and for children who craved stories that had nothing to do with and irrelevant in these days and times. After continuous exposure to the academic orientation I was unable to value the folk literature which to a large extent exists in the form of oral tradition. Moreover, when compared to the stories found in conventional literature which are sometimes highlighted with pictures, they seem to be superior to those of folk tales. By this I mean that I was led to believe that stories which appear in the printed format were far superior to those that get perpetuated through the oral form, and this becomes much more critical when we were required to learn these stories as part of our education upbringing.

Right after my graduation, I happened to join P. G. diploma in folkloristics. The diploma course revived in me the motivation to introspect the tales I used to listen more than a decade ago, that in turn became study material for the course. The enthusiasm to seek for an academic direction in the discipline of folkloristics has become a strong motivation for me to pursue higher studies.

Having been groomed in the discipline for the last four years and after having gone through a three year extensive field work among the Koirengs of Manipur convinced me that the folk literature of a particular society expresses basic relatedness to the world, to the cultural norms and dynamics of that society. A minute interpretation and analysis of the folk literature of a particular society would give us significant information of that society.

Earlier on I had stated my perception on how I view on folk literature of both pre and post exposure stages to the discipline. I am now convinced that a careful study of how the people of a community perceive and look at the items of folk literature is as important as the studies made by the scholars. The field work I carried out among the Koirengs has enabled me to vindicate the kind of emphasis made by the pre-literate and literate persons who are both culturally sound while narrating tales.

As a point of illustration I shall go forward with the general assumption that Koirengs have regarding tales. To many, tales exist

for the sake of story, for amusement and some provide moral value. I remember the time when the ballad called *ramvoi thakpa* was sung to me by my grandmother. The ballad is about the two lovers, the girl who persuaded her lover to pluck the *ramvoi* fruit, unknowingly sending him to his death. Beneath the fruit tree was the *rulleng* serpent disguised as an earthworm. The boy thought nothing about the harmless earthworm and he climbs the tree to pluck the fruit. He found that everything he threw was devoured. Later on he discovers that he would have problems descending from the tree and realizing his plight, he requests his girl to spread the shawl for him to jump into. But even then he gets killed because the place was full of spike and sharp stones. The tale implies an adage 'one should not force her lover to do anything against his will.' At the end of the ballad my grandmother who is pre-literate did not point out the adage. But my father who is literate was present throughout the story-telling and singing of the ballad prompted to my grandmother to convey the adage of the ballad for the sake of information. From the above statement we see that the pre-literate narrator narrates a tale or sings ballads just as it exists not much pondering about the context. It is possible that pre-literates, are overwhelmed by the realisation that folk literature appears to them as partially realistic and it is difficult to relate to the present world but to some literate narrator though, interpretations and analysis of tales might be far from his reasoning power without the theoretical guidance. But he is concerned about the moral value provided by the tale and feels the need to be informed about the adage. Concern of the adage by this literate person could be, because of being culturally sound and having exposure to the modern way of life, parallel to traditional culture. It is possible that he is aware of what passes for cultural conservation.

In the field, while I was collecting folk tales from different persons, I again noticed the same as above, that is, a culturally sound and literate person often conveys the adage of tales than pre-literate or non-literate narrator. But from the scholarly view point a tale does not only reflect a moral value. Indeed, it reflects the socio-cultural life of the society when interpreted and analysed.

It is obvious that with the fast growth of printed material the elements of folk literature have found place in creative writing. Unlike other communities, the Koireng though still in an infantile stages of development as far as literature is concerned, folk tales have been collected and brought out in written form in two series of publication by Thangchuong Zeite. This exists purely in the Koireng language. At the time when the earlier series came out, most literate Koireng both young and old were enthusiastic to grab a copy with great zeal. At the same time they treasure and learned only through word of mouth. Indeed, these series have established some foundation of Koireng literature. It has also provided an opportunity for younger generation to learn about the folk tales of their community despite staying away from home. I am very certain that if this had not been rendered the Koireng folk literature would have been pushed to the verge of extinction with the every passing away of an older generation. As far as the Koireng literature is concerned, the already published two series of folk tales which exists in the Koireng language captures even tonal, sound and ambient inflexions. Reading of folk tales from these books does not make much difference as hearing from readings of those in oral form. The collector used devices such as onomatopoeia, exclamations, non-phonetics etc which would normally be expunged from the printed form. This, I believe, is to transmit the spirit of the language.