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# Folklore and Its Motifs in Modern Literature

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**Dr. Kishore Jadav**

1998

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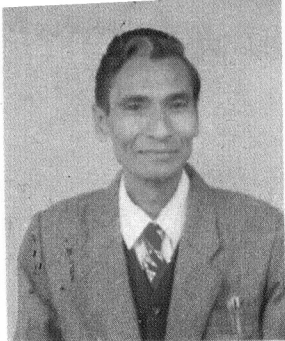
**Folklore is a wide-ranging expression of archaic culture of great wealth and complexities. It represents the ancient thought of mankind, the feelings and worldview, the shared experience and wisdom, the efflorescence of technical skills and artistic manifestation - the rich material culture. The folklore is a vital element in a living culture.**

**This in-depth study relates to the folk tales, myths, legends, rites and rituals, folk songs and deals with the most selective and representative items (aspects) of the tribal cultural heritage of North East India from analytical perspectives. Their significance is examined and discussed, though through scientific approach rendering mythological, morphological, structural, psychoanalytical and humanistic interpretations, their presentation is in the most appealing and readable form. Thus the critical examination of illustrative aspects of Folk Culture of the North East has been carried out by the author with exhaustive mind of penetrating brilliance.**

**The book takes a cohesive and multi dimensional view of the traditional forms and social practices, beliefs and rituals, tales and songs of this beautiful part of the country which is thriving with alround development into the rushing stream of modern life. The study would immensely benefit researchers of Social Sciences, Historians, Orientalists, Folklorists and Litterateurs.**

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**Born in Ahmedabad district (Gujarat) on 20th January, 1939, Dr. Kishore Jadav received his College education in M.S. University, Baroda. He took his M. Com, and later secured Ph.D. in English Literature from International University, California, and also took D. Litt. from Harmony College of Applied Science, California (USA). He began his career as a senior Officer under Nagaland Government and served the offices of Commissioner of Nagaland, Chief Secretary of the State etc. etc.**

**He is a renowned and prolific writer and has published about seventeen books. He is the recipient of World Intellectual, 1993 accolade from International Biographical Centre, Cambridge; awarded Gold Record of Achievement, International Cultural Diploma of Honor, the Nobel Order of International Ambassadors, Research Fellow Silver Medal by American Biographical Institute, USA. He was also awarded 'Best Contributor for enrichment of Human Values by United Writers Association, Madras, for his contribution in the fields of Literature, Social Sciences and Humanities. He has been Deputy Governor, Board of Governors and Advisor, Research Board of Advisors, American Biographical Inst., USA. He has also been fellow of both ABI and United Writers Association.**

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*To  
my mother*

# Preface

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Folklore is a wide-ranging expression of rich and complex, archaic culture. It is a vital element of a living culture. It represents the ancient thought of mankind, their feelings and worldview, their shared experiences and wisdom.

The North Eastern region of India is endowed with rich folklore material which, due to its diverse aspects, has not been systematically studied nor scientifically analysed till recently. However, it is my privilege to intimately know the hill races, and imbibe their labyrinthine social practices, religious ethos and cultural characteristics by living in the tribal milieu, cultivating close rapport with them, and sharing their life for upwards of thirty-five years during the most turbulent period. My efforts to present a study on the myths, folktales, songs, lyrics, legends, rites and rituals, some of the performing arts, and to a certain extent illustrative customs and traditions of the major tribes of North East India could take the concrete shape of a book, thanks to the opportunity provided to me to present the inaugural address at the national seminar on 'Interpreting Literature in Tribal Languages and Oral Traditions', organised at Tejgadh (Baroda) under the auspices of Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, in 1996. The three-day workshop witnessed series of in-depth discussions by scholars from different parts of the country which underlined the growing importance of the studies in folk literature and folk culture.

My approach in this book has not been confined just to the academic study of a particular tribe and its cultural life. But, I have embarked upon studying most of the selective and significant items (aspects) of traditional lores and divergent cultural patterns prevailing in large areas of North East

India, bringing out the wide ranging variations within their social structure and value system.

In my critical evaluation of folklore, I have resorted to mythological, morphological, structural, psychoanalytical and humanistic interpretations. My articles on various disciplines viz., Indology, Philosophy, Religion, Culture, History and Literature, attempt to focus on the closely related fields of Ethnology and Social Anthropology without slipping into pedantic abstraction. I have kept in mind not only the scholars, but also the common reader to make the book accessible to him to understand the richness and complexities of human life.

After all, not the lengthy and cumbersome disquisition, but the life-song itself often gives us a clearer insight into a people's soul. In order to reinforce this point, an extensive treatment has been given to the chapter on folk songs wherein lie certain important clues to the philosophy of life. While portraying various themes, the qualitative details of their life cycle have been highlighted. Numerous different and mutually not understandable dialects are spoken in the North-East, and this rich linguistic diversity coincides with the great cultural diversity in the region. Nevertheless, the comparison of the divergent cultural patterns would reveal that there exists a common bond of homogeneous character as far as their unique modes of living, customs and ideas of a singular people living in the most beautiful part of India, are concerned.

This painstaking work tries to present a cohesive view of the tribal people's psyche, their religious and spiritual phantasies, ritual practices, exuberant dances, songs and games, and their colourfully woven textiles. Even as it is, this book can hardly claim to be a comprehensive study of all the aspects of their folk culture. The possibility always remains that some important aspects of their culture which should not have been missed, may have actually been overlooked, notwithstanding the fact that most dominant and representative items have been selected from different parts of the region.

An additional dimension requires to be added to the practice of head-hunting, the folk tale of which is syntagmatically

analysed in the book. Although head-hunting had been banned in some parts of Konyak area under British administration, its traditions and meaning were very much alive till the middle of the twentieth century. And, to this day, the appropriate method of propitiating the terrible goddess Kali, (who is also Durga, 'hard of approach'), is by bloody sacrifices. The Saiva or Sakta form of Hinduism that came into being in Kama-rupa would therefore seem to be due to engrafting of Koch superstitions on the purer and humane religious ideas propagated in India by the Aryan settlers. From this point of view, it is important to recall that the Garos were head-hunters almost until the end of nineteenth century, and that the Chutiyas were conspicuous, in the North-East, for their addiction to human sacrifice.

Another focus of reader's attention is the description of courtship and pre-marital and extra-marital amorous relations prevalent in certain tribal societies. Even by Western moral standards, they appear to be quite free in this respect. Nevertheless, such sexual behaviour before marriage and outside of wedlock is governed by group membership and by standards of propriety that are very different from those customary in the Western culture. It has been made abundantly clear as to how sexual behaviour is culturally patterned, limited and restricted. For our understanding, these balances between freedom and restraint are of great importance, since some form of them is an integral part of all human cultures.

Now, *all* aspects of tribal life in the North Eastern region have changed drastically, initiating a process of social and cultural disintegration. The traditional form of tribal life has been disrupted and the spectrum of multi-dimensional social changes have brought its total transformation. The folk culture is slowly being overtaken by the present technological age. Of course, its dying process is very slow. Because, any item of folk literature is completely lost only when it ceases to exist in the memory of man. The purpose of this study is to document such disappearing phase of ancient life for the posterity to which, perhaps, its certain original descriptions may appear naive and extravagantly romantic.

I have devoted the final chapter to demonstrate the range of adaptation of folklore's modes and motifs - its structures and themes, and even its characters - in the modern short story by the practising masters of this genre, particularly in Western and European literature. The short story is the form most congenial to its Spartan aesthetic. Despite short story's various experimental phases - dream and magic realism, surrealism and irrealism, tremendous assortment of minimalism, and maximalism too - its brevity of form has helped sustaining kinship with oral narrative throughout past two centuries, especially by infusing it with vital folk elements bringing new vigor, to this art. This dimension, perhaps, is a special allure for the scholars in both literary and folkloristic studies.

It will be observed that the illustrations are not referred to in the body of the work. However, they form unconspicuously an integral part of the book, with an unwritten chapter on the tribal folk dances rendering an illustrative visual documentation. I contemplate to bring out a separate volume on these aspects covering visual folk arts and folk dances of the North Eastern region, in due course.

My first contact with the tribal people of the North East dates back to 1963 when the State of Nagaland was undergoing formation process. It was my good fortune to take up an assignment with Mr. M.L. Kampani, IAS (Rtd), then Deputy Commissioner, Mokokchung and later Lt. Governor, Andaman and Nicobar, and Advisor to the Governor of Nagaland, as his Personal Assistant to accompany him on several official tours to the interiors, even on foot where there were no jeepable roads, to the highest posts such as Chudi, Topsu, Meraktsu, Lotsu, Ralan in Lotha area. Though the journey used to be arduous, it was infinitely rewarding. Since then, I had extensively travelled in the whole of North Eastern region, right across the Burmese border, during my service career while holding responsible and important assignments, with Mr. S.C. Dev, IAS (Rtd), then Commissioner of Nagaland, who has authored 'Nagaland : the Untold Story', Mr. I. Longkumer, IAS (Rtd), then Chief Secretary of the State, and several other political dignitaries.

Whenever my main preoccupation permitted me any leisure, I utilised it on research and writings (creative works and criticism) on Literature, Philosophy, and Culture etc.. I have published seventeen books in the past thirty years. Some of them carry collections of short stories, articles on its art and aesthetics, interviews and novels. Three of my books had also been prescribed as text-books in post-graduate programme (MA) for two-three terms in South Gujarat and Gujarat universities. A few Post Graduate scholars have received their Ph.D. by undertaking research and dissertations on my works.

The present volume is a part of my current research project focussing on the larger aspects of north-eastern folk culture. Wading through several vicissitudes and upheavals, the region is now thriving in all-round prosperity, rushing into the stream of modern life. With the rapid progress resulting in material and socio-psychic development, the changes in life style and acculturation have brought forth a tribal identity crisis. Therefore, it is left to the competent intellectual elite to form their own opinion as to the relevance of this study based on a scholar author's own experience, under the present circumstances.

I wish to acknowledge my deep debt of gratitude to those friends and distant people relegated to the past who initiated me into this land three decades ago and extended exceptional help in shaping my destiny. It is my duty to thank those who have been good enough to stand by me at the hour of my trials and tribulations, particularly during my ordeal, so that I have been able to dedicate myself to this intellectual task. I am also grateful to my University staff who provided me the computer assistance in the preparation of this volume.

I am especially indebted to Manas Publications, Delhi who wholeheartedly accepted to convert my study into fine print for the wider readership, strengthening the bond of our friendship.

**Dr. Kishore Jadav**

# Contents

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<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>xv</i>
1. Introduction	1
2. Folklore : Conceptual Frame-work	4
3. Motifs and Interpretations	16
i) Mythological Interpretation	
ii) Mythological and Morphological Interpretation	
4. Folklore as Critique Culture	28
5. Folktale on a Taboo	36
6. Ritual	41
7. Folk Songs	65
8. Folk-tunes	120
9. Folklore Motifs and Interpretive Artistic Adaptation	122
<i>Glossary</i>	<i>137</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>146</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>163</i>

# List of Illustrations

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Yimchunger Folk Dance (Nagaland)

1. Yimchunger Folk Dance (Nagaland)
2. Zeliang Folk Dance (Nagaland)
3. Sema Tuluni Festival Folk Dance (Nagaland)
4. Sangtam Amongmang Festival Folk Dance (Nagaland)
5. Ao Folk Dance (Nagaland)
6. A Traditional Dance of Tagin Si-Donyi Festival (Arunachal Pradesh)
7. Ponung Folk Dance (Arunachal Pradesh)
8. Kherai Folk Dance of Bodos (Assam)
9. Deori Bihu Festival Folk Dance (Assam)
10. The Boisagu Festival Folk Dance (Assam)
11. Wangla Folk Dance of Garos (Meghalaya)
12. A Traditional Banai Folk Dance (Meghalaya and Assam)
13. Radha in Ras Lila (Manipur)
14. Krishna in Ras Lila (Manipur)
15. Nagas with the Log Drum (Nagaland)
16. Angami Gate Pulling (Nagaland)



Yimchunger Folk Dance (Nagaland)

Zeliang Folk Dance (Nagaland)





Sema Tuluni Festival Folk Dance (Nagaland)

Sangtam AMongmong Festival Folk Dance (Nagaland)

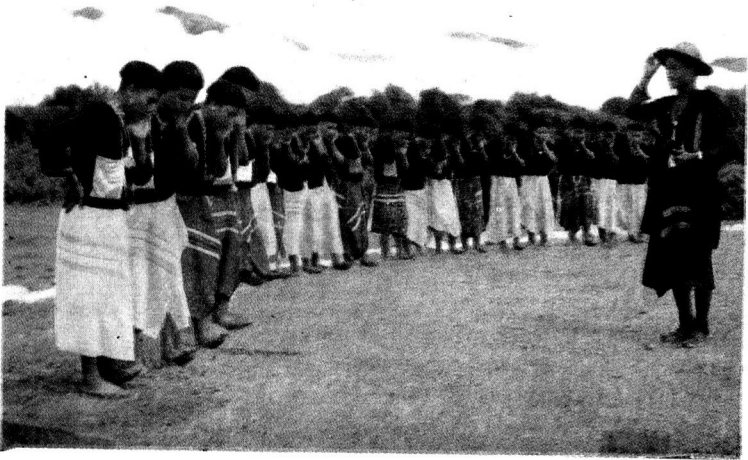




Ao Folk Dance (Nagaland)

A Traditional Dance of Tagin Si-Donyi Festival (Arunachal Pradesh)





**Ponung Folk Dance (Arunachal Pradesh)**

**Kherai Dance Being Performed by Bodo Girls (Assam)**





**Deori Bihu Festival Folk Dance (Assam)**

**The Boisagu Festival Folk Dance (Assam)**





Wangala Dancers in Action (Garo Girls From Meghalaya)

A Traditional Banai Folk-Dance (Meghalaya & Assam)





**Radha in Rasa Lila (Manipur)**

**Krishna in Rasa Lila (Manipur)**





Nagas With the Log Drum

Angami Gate Pulling



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

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The 'Tribal Literature and Oral Tradition' forms a major and integral part of the folk literature, i.e. folklore. Since no specific term has been coined so far to categorise this aspect of tribal wealth into a distinct category or a separate grouping for its exclusive study, it will be a futile attempt to tear it apart from the vast spectrum of folklore and its conceptual frame-work. Further, a question arises as to who are the folk? 'Folk' is synonymous with people. This term is defined succinctly in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (8th edition) :

*"The great proportion of the members of a people that determines the group character and that tends to preserve its characteristic form of civilization and its customs, arts and crafts, legends, traditions, and superstitions from generation to generation."*

Therefore, it is intended here to go with the current usage of this term and to undertake interpretations of folklore (special reference to North East of India) with the tools available to us.

Folk literature is the lore of unlettered peoples transmitted by word of mouth. It consists, as does written literature, of both prose and verse narratives, poems and songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, riddles and the like. Until about 4000 BC, all literature was folk literature. But writing developed in the years between 4000 and 3000 BC, in both Egypt and the Mesopotamian civilization at Sumer.

## 2 Folklore and Its Motifs in Modern Literature

Thereafter from Asia, North Africa and the Mediterranean lands spread rapidly the written literature over much of the world. Nevertheless, during all these centuries when the world was learning how to write, there still existed a large and important activity carried on by those actually unlettered and not much used to reading and writing. Even now, majority of men and women on earth are still carrying the tradition of oral folk literature, since it's the only kind they know.

Each group of people has handled its folk literature in its own way, and neither its origin nor its evolution can be explicitly spoken of. Its transmission from person to person and its exposure to various influences that affect it consciously or unconsciously has brought about its constant change. In the process, some items may find improvement and develop in to a new literary form or may die out from the oral repertory due to overwhelming alien influences. The skilled practitioners of the tradition, storytellers or epic singers have preserved their literary expression in the memory of folk. Though, the classical composers of written literature in 16th and 17th century had borrowed tales and motifs from oral narratives and forgotten their folk origins, these stories in their literary form have often lived side by side with the tales told by oral storytellers. Children also play an important role in carrying on certain kinds of oral tradition such as singing games, riddles, and dance songs. These are passed from generation to generation by word of mouth and enriched by continuous additions, always remain within the oral tradition. Even though books, radio and television etc. have replaced folk literature, in the present day urbanised culture it is still, as it has always been, the normal literary expression for the unlettered peoples of all continents.

The most obvious characteristic of folk literature is the fact that it is oral. The continued existence of an item of oral literature depends upon memory. It thus happens that in nearly all cultures, certain people specialize in remembering and repeating what they have heard. There

are some semi-professional storytellers around whom large groups of people gather in bazars, or before cottage-fires or in leisure hours after labour. They possess prodigious memories and with slight variations, from time to time, they pass on to a new generation hundreds of tales and traditions that they heard long ago. Certain bards, minstrels and songmakers develop special techniques of singing or narrating epic or heroic tales to the accompaniment of a harp or other musical instruments. In the course of time, at various places, special poetic forms have been perfected and passed on from bard to bard. In this way, remarkably skilful heroic meters of the Greek epics were developed out of the oral stream of narratives which after suffering many strange changes, eventually, ceased to be oral literature and are now enshrined in manuscripts and books. Elaborate religious rituals and the ideal of establishing relation of man with the higher powers carried on by religious leaders through generations have perpetuated the oral tradition of folk literature.

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