



THE LIMBU COMMUNITY: BELIEFS, MYTHS AND CULTURE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Oral communication is often seen as a significant indicator of culture and identity. Oral tradition has been preserved for many years. Folklore can be conveyed not only via narrative genres including myths, legends, stories, jokes, fairy tales, ballads, epics, proverbs, and riddles, but also through folk painting, folk costumes, folk theatre, and several other types of folk performances. Folklore is a comprehensive branch of study that examines all aspects of human culture, including both spiritual and material elements. The restoration of ancient beliefs, traditions, and rituals has been achieved by employing folklore as a methodology. The profound folklore and enigmatic heritage of our forebears may be comprehended more effectively through the discipline of folklore studies, which offers several advantages in understanding this topic of study. By understanding and appreciating the folklore of our ancestors, we get insight into their culture, which is the genesis of our own. This article will explore into the North Bengali tribes, specifically the Limbus, and doing so via a study of a number of indigenous queer tales. The purpose of this investigation is to demonstrate that folktales and myths contribute to the illumination and enrichment of the cultural background of individuals by shedding light on their history.

Keywords: *Folktales, Limbu community, myths, cultural beliefs*

Introduction

Folklore refers to the collective knowledge and understanding of cultural behaviours and traditions. The mere usage of the term “folk” evokes the notion that it is linked to those who lack literacy skills and are socially marginalised. The oral tradition, which serves as the basis for folklore, is often employed by marginalised communities to articulate the difficulties they encounter. Folklore theories aim to explore the significant significance of folklore and uncover the roots of the stories that are shared. Studying folklore can enhance an individual’s understanding of their own cultural heritage. Oral communication is often seen as a significant indicator of culture and identity. Folklore can be conveyed not only via narrative genres including myths, legends, stories, jokes, fairy tales, ballads, epics, proverbs, and riddles, but also through folk painting, folk costumes, folk theatre, and several other types of folk performances. Folklore is a comprehensive branch of study that examines all aspects of human culture, including both spiritual and material elements. The restoration of ancient beliefs, traditions, and rituals has been achieved by employing folklore as a methodology. The profound folklore and enigmatic heritage of our forebears may be comprehended more effectively through the discipline of folklore studies, which offers several advantages in understanding this topic of study. By understanding and appreciating the folklore of our ancestors, we get insight into their culture, which is the genesis of our own. Folklore was examined for several purposes, including nationalism, which contributed to the reinforcement of ethnic identity and played a significant part in the struggle for political autonomy. Utilising folk culture can facilitate the creation of unity among the diverse population residing inside a nation. This paper focusses on traditional culture as both proof of the distinctiveness of different civilisations and indication that a society may be based on oral traditions. Throughout history, people have experienced common feelings such as love, wrath, misfortune, fear, worry, sadness, jealousy, egotism, ambition, courage, and compassion. As a result, many versions of folktales have been shared across diverse regions, despite geographical obstacles. This is because individuals have been affected by these emotions from the inception.

Folklore: background

Folklore is comprised of a variety of aspects, including performing folk arts, material culture, social folk customs, and folk tales. Many of these elements are utilised to communicate messages regarding human sorrow and misery. Folklore is all about the anguish and suffering of everyday people. In spite of the fact that individuals hailed from a variety of various ethnic origins, they all shared at least one fundamental cultural feature in common, and that was tradition. Groups are able to share some components that are common to them as a result of this history. This helps to foster the establishment of a shared identity for the groups, which is a beneficial outcome. People who study folklore have the objective of gathering, preserving, and documenting the history of certain locations. People that appear in folktales have often been portrayed as being of lower social strata, lacking in education, and being barbarous. Scholars have been of the opinion for a considerable amount of time that folktales are passed down verbally through a wide number of unauthorised channels across centuries. Due to the fact that folktales are often passed down orally, they are prone to major changes in substance between transmissions, according to their argument. Through the medium of folktales, a wide range of human experiences are intended to be glorified. Stories that have been passed down through generations in indigenous cultures frequently emphasise the interdependence of all things, including people and the natural environment in which they live. A significant component of this is the information that is passed down from one generation to the next through oral tradition, as well as the arts and practices that are associated with a certain historical period.

The Limbus: An Ethnic community of North Bengal

This article will explore into the North Bengal tribes, specifically the Limbus, and doing so via a study of a number of indigenous queer tales. The purpose of this investigation is to demonstrate that folktales and myths contribute to the illumination and enrichment of the cultural background of individuals by shedding light on their history. Through the use of a multitude of examples, this article will illustrate how myths and folktales contribute to the study of cultural history and background, shedding light on the move from traditional masculinity to a category that is more associated with femininity. The objective of this work is to provide evidence that tribal males are more complicated than their outward look and the attitude that is traditionally associated with men would lead one to assume would be the case. One of the most common misconceptions about indigenous people in India is that they act as a military proxy for the ancient people who lived in woods and were used for hunting. This viewpoint is held by a notable number of individuals. It would appear that these Limbu folktales, which originate from the several ethnic groups that live in the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, represent a form of resistance against this image. This purpose is attained by associating the male member of the tribe with the musical genre known as ethnomusic. Their mythology (*Mundhum*), history, and everyday life are the main sources of inspiration for their folktales. Mountains, caverns, rivers, waterfalls, flora, animals, flowers, stone, and many more natural components are the subjects of their folktales, which recount their histories and legends.

Mundhum and Myths

The practice of recounting or reciting *Mundhum*, as well as executing specific rites and observing ceremonies in their own unique ways, is a long-standing tradition among them. The sculpture known as *Mundhum* is a live example of oral tradition. In other words, *Mundhum* is a sculpture that does not exist in textual medium. Because of this, there are a few different ways that *Mundhum* might be interpreted and understood. It is for this reason that we are able to see some minor variations in the performance of rituals. Particular artists, such as those who perform *Phedangma*, *Samba*, *Yeba*, and *Yema*, are the only ones who can recite *Mundhum*. In addition to being the traditional healers and performers of certain rituals, they are also the sources and authority of *Mundhum*, rites and rituals, traditions and manners, norms and standards of behaviour. They are also the people who execute specific ceremonies. Some of the *Tumyahangs*, also known as gentlemen or respectable laymen, are also considered to be resource individuals in this regard. They are also referred to as shamans, which is a term for priests who interact with the supernatural realm. Those who believe in them are said to act as intermediaries between the realm of humans and the world of spirits. Shamans are responsible for carrying out all of the rituals in their natural environment. Geographical considerations are the primary elements that have an impact on religious practices, myths, and rituals. Nature is revered by the Limbu people since their ancient ancestors lived in a location that was geographically close to nature. Pets and animals in the Himalayan religion, animals are considered to be among the most significant components of indigenous or ethnic belief systems or religions. This is due to the abundant biodiversity of the Himalayan region and the significant role that animals had in the survival of the nomadic civilisations of the Native Himalayans. Shamans in this culture were known to experience changes into animals while on spiritual trips. They donned animal skins and feathers and experienced transformations. In addition, animals carried out the roles of people, guides, rescues, ancestors, totems, and victims of sacrifice. Shamanism, which is a religion of nature, was practiced across the Himalayan area. It was characterised by a special regard for the relationships that exist between the sky, earth, and water. Additionally, it was thought that trees and mountains had a magical significance.

Folktales of the Limbus and their symbolic importance

There are stories that tell the narrative of the sky, earth, and stars that are found in folktales such as the Creation Myth. *Porokmi Yambhami*, also known as God, was the one who brought them into being with the blessing of *Tagera Nigwabhumang*, the highest of the gods. Therefore, the *Mundhum* of the Limbu people is the subject of this specific story. In a

similar vein, the tale of Limbu dance and music describes how the Limbu cultural dance known as the *kelang* Dance was created by imitating the motions of various animals and birds, such as the peacock. In addition, the moral of the narrative Flower Death is that there is a ban on marriages between members of the same clan, and that it is forbidden for brothers and sisters to gift or trade flowers or flower garland during celebrations. As a result, the flower, which is a plant, is considered to be a symbol of reproduction and romantic love between people in the Limbus culture. This narrative is also featured in the *mundhum* that is referred to as *sangwa nu:mangena lumoo fung wathchingma menumana mundhum* among other things. There is also a well-known Limbu tale called “The Papoo Fish,” which is referred to as “*Limbuni boju machha*.” The narrative tells the tale of a grandmother who was tossed into the river because she was a burden at her home. She underwent a metamorphosis and became a Papoo fish. Her long grey braided hair is claimed to have created the silver braided back of the fish, according to the legend. Currently, the Limbus do not consume the Papoo fish because they revere it as a vessel that contains the spirit of the past. As a result, the narrative reveals that the human spirit may take the appearance of various animals.

The ancient spirit of the Limbu people, as well as the relationship between God and human beings, is metaphorically represented by plants, aquatic or animal life, stones, mountains, and other natural components. As a result, the purpose of the thesis is to get a deeper understanding of the folktales of the Limbu culture, which emphasise the intricate link that exists between humans and the natural world.

The folktales of the Limbu people include a wide array of subjects, including mythology, tradition, customs, and natural features like as stones, caves, rivers, lakes, animals, birds, trees, flowers, and hills.

In his book “The Culture and Religion of Limbus,” Dr.Chaitanya Subba asserts:

“Oral tradition of Limbus is rich in folktale. Most of the folktales are related to *Mundhums*, traditions, customs, origin and migration of Limbus. They are in the forms of myths, fables, fairy tales, war stories, fictions, biographies, etc. and present the vivid picture of Limbus material culture, social structure, economy, religious belief, history and way of life of the remote past often revealing their aspiration, values, ambition and goals. There are many stories in the form of almost unwritten memories relating to certain clans of Limbu”. (68)

Limbu folktales are characterised by narratives that revolve around themes of marriage, relationships, and dialogues between humans and deities. The Limbu folktales revolve around the origin story of *Fedangba*, *Samba*, *yeba (man)*, *Yema (female)*, and their esteemed status within the Limbu society. These tales also explore their extraordinary magical abilities.

Limbu *Mundhum*, Limbu religion, Limbu customs, and Limbu celebrations are the subjects of Limbu folktales. Similar to how Limbu folktales trace the origins of Limbu clans through the names of places, plants, and relatives, etc.

Oral literature embodies the distinctive cultural identity. Thus, folktales serve as a means of cultural expression in the form of oral literature. Limbu folktales have rich cultural elements that authentically depict reality. Folktales serve as a medium for the representation of traditional values and practices. The majority of folktales are interconnected with the *Mundhums* heritage, customs, origins, and migration of the Limbus. There exist several narratives in the shape of nearly undocumented recollections associated with specific clans of Limbu.

The Limbu people revere the sun, moon, plants, soil, wind, and many other natural phenomena as manifestations of a supreme deity. They revere the natural world since it provided them with the means to survive throughout their prehistoric era on Earth. Essentially, the kirat Limbu community’s cultural worth is reflected in these well-crafted and orally transmitted Limbu folktales. Numerous natural symbols that stand for the kirat Limbu community’s cultural worldview are interwoven throughout the stories and narratives. The stories have a purpose in informing and orienting the younger generation of Limbu community members about the beliefs and practices of the older generation in relation to social situations and values. Through the Limbu Myth, the spirits of animals, birds, and the elements of the soil, I have attempted to portray all the story symbols that symbolise the religion, culture, festivals, and beliefs of the Limbu people in my thesis.

Myths are stories that are considered to be so inventive that at least some of them are believed to be genuine. Myths are considered to be holy. An explanation of how a specific culture is comprised of a collection of beliefs, the construction of culture, and traditions is provided by the myth. According to the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, a myth is a narrative that was told in ancient times, particularly one that was told to explain natural occurrences or to chronicle the early history of the people. Different people have different ways of comprehending the nature of myths due to the fact that myths are supposed to convey and codify the beliefs of individuals. Myth, on the other hand, is characterised by Eliade as a straightforward description of a holy history, which is to say, history that is not associated with the profane events. Myth serves the purpose of explaining how reality comes into being and how the profane is related to the sacred. This is because myth is tied to the ultimate reality of the sacred. Existential issues, such as “why are we here?” can thus be answered by myths. In a same vein, *Mundhum* is treated as a myth, and as a result, it is considered to be the most sacred in Limbu society. Since the beginning of time, *Mundhum* has been passed down through the Limbu culture by oral transmission. It is a holy story that teaches us how the earth and humanity came to be in their current stage and explains how they got to be in that stage. According to Jash Raj Subba’s Ethno religious ideas of the Limboo *Mundhum*, among other Limbu academics,

“As sacred stories, Mundhums are often endorsed by learned forefathers (*Yehangs* and *Tumyahangs* in *Yumaism*), rulers and *Phedangma* shaman priest and closely linked to religion or spirituality. In the Limbu society in which it is told, a *Mundhum* is usually regarded as a true account of the remote past.” (29)

The archetypes and symbols found in folk tales serve to illustrate the human condition. The folktales serve as social rules and symbols that confine individuals to the religious and social standards of their own clan or community. In a similar vein, the Limbu people of Nepal have their own set of cultural symbols and rules. A social group, clan, or natural force is believed to represent its ancestors, protectors, or tutelary spirits in the form of plants, animals, or inanimate objects. Ancestors are seen as having power and representing nature. Thus, this thesis examines the Limbu folktales through the lens of their own mythology and nature-based symbols and codes.

The discourse of the Limbu folktales serves as a symbolic communication in the unification of society during the sacred time of the ritual. It symbolises and represents the past that we are revivifying today through the ritual. According to Jash Raj Subba,

“The Limbu *Mundhum Tongsing Tokma* is a ritual imitated or re-actualized from the mythical event for acquiring their reality, their identity, only to the extent of their participation in a transcendent reality. By imitating the exemplary acts of a god, the man of an archaic society detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the great time, the sacred time to achieve reality or value such as winning co-operation of ancestors and divinities for the family/clan.” (129)

The majority of the folktales within the Limbu group convey the traditional beliefs and teachings of that particular community. It delineates the mythological aspects rather than only focussing on moral narratives. The prevalent folktales of this people are considered for the symbolic analysis of their culture. The stories mostly centre around the analysis of symbols rather than addressing other topics. The archetypes may be classified into two primary categories: characters and symbols. In the folktales of the Limbu people, both the characters and symbols are significant. Nature holds significant cultural and religious relevance in the Limbu folktales and *Mundhum*, as seen by the prominent use of symbols. The majority of the symbols are interconnected with the natural world and its genesis. Research on cultural symbolism is primarily inspired by elements such as aquatic creatures, flowers, birds, rivers, forests, and soil/earth. In the narrative of “Papo fish,” the protagonist Papohang and his companion Changwahang devise a scheme to murder their grandparents by transporting them to the banks of the Tamor river and allowing them to drift away. They transported their grandmothers in bamboo baskets called dokos and took them to Tamor, where they discarded them individually. However, Papohang’s grandma was unable to stay afloat and requested assistance in order to preserve her life. Finally, Changwahang became aware of the ruckus and instructed Papohang to forcefully push his grandmother into the water. He repeated the action and forcefully pushed her into the water, causing her to float downstream in the river. After seeing their grandma, they returned home. Changwahang’s granny was coughing at home. Papohang realised that he had been tricked by Changwahang at that moment. He discovered that Changwahang had tossed a counterfeit grandma constructed from banana tree stems, which effortlessly float in the river. Papohang ultimately comprehended the consequences of his actions against his grandma. During one evening, he experienced the presence of his grandma in his dream. In the dream, my grandma conveyed that she was transported to the Koshi river after I gently released her into the flowing waters. I have undergone reincarnation as a fish and it is imperative for my lineage to acknowledge me as Papogna. Prohibit any offspring of Papohang from consuming Papogna. If they consume food, it will evoke feelings of unhappiness within me, leading me to express curses upon them. Consequently, they may experience the unfortunate outcome of having children with disabilities or, in some cases, they may not have any children at all. Currently, the Papohang Limbus still regard Paponga as their ancestor and refrain from consuming it. In the narrative, the river serves as a metaphor of mortality, representing the place where the grandmother was abandoned to perish. The Papo fish undergoes a metamorphosis into a human form. The essence or consciousness of a human being takes the shape of an aquatic animal, namely a fish. The Papo fish is emblematic of the ancestral essence of the Papo clan. It symbolises the curse that affects the Papo clan. The grandson’s dream has largely influenced the tale, leading to a different interpretation. Papohang’s longing for his grandma is manifested in his nightmares as he becomes aware of his error. The tension between desire and reality manifested itself in the shape of a dream.

In the fabled narrative of “Sekmuri fung,” a human woman gives birth to two offspring: a tiger son, known as kesamee, and a human son, named Namsamee. They were unable to sustain their brotherly relationship and decided to engage in a combat. In order to determine the outcome of the battle, their mother selected two symbolic flowers: Sekmuree fung for her human son, representing long life in Limbu culture, and Andang/babari fung for her tiger son, symbolising omens and failure in Limbu culture. She positioned both varieties of flowers, along with a water vessel and oil light, at the base of the central pillar and carefully examined them. Finally, the human son (Namsamee) emerged victorious against the tiger. Since then, Kirat Limbu people have been utilising Sekmuree fung as a kind of reverence at propitious events. Symbolically, the narrative contains animal motifs that represent the savage nature inherent in humanity. In this narrative, the Tiger serves as a representation of devastation, adversary, fury, and a fully animalistic nature. Alternatively, it might be perceived as the attributes or essence of a human being. The flowers Sekmuree fung and Andang fung hold significant symbolic importance within the Limbu culture due to their association with auspiciousness and omens, as believed in the Limbu mythology, distinguishing them from other cultures. These blossoms hold great significance in the indigenous Limbu community, where they are employed as powerful

symbols in ceremonies. In the narrative, flowers were positioned alongside the oil lamp, which represents a fire that symbolises spiritual insight. Hence, a symbol deeply embedded in a culture's mythology holds significant importance in their execution of rituals and traditions. In the conventional Limbu civilisation, the cultivation of Andang flowers is avoided due to the prevailing belief that they bring about misfortune and have malevolent consequences for the community. Due of its cultural significance, individuals unquestioningly adhere to these beliefs. The creation of culture in Limbu civilisation is not only a reflection of their cultural practices, but also a manifestation of their deeply held beliefs that shape their way of life. In the fabled tale of "Forbidden Flower", there was a period when Kejung fekwa, a member of the sawa yethang yakthungsa clan, produced exclusively male offspring. The pair harboured a perpetual desire for the birth of a daughter within their household. The spouse expressed his intention to eliminate all of his boys following the birth of his daughter. Fortunately, the lady conceived and became aware of her pregnancy after five months. The husband threatened to kill all of his boys if a female kid is born this time. Indeed, the husband began constructing the tombs. However, the woman was discontented with the idea of burying her boys. Due to the sons' innocence, their mother devised a scheme to save them from being executed. She dispatched all of her boys to the jungle to conceal themselves till she delivers her baby. She discreetly informs her boys that if their sister gives birth, a red flag will be raised on the roof of the home. So that you never return to your residence. However, if another boy is born, a white flag will be raised on the roof of the house. Subsequently, you can return to your residence without any risk or danger. However, a daughter was born in the house on this occasion, prompting their mother to place a red flag on the roof's apex.

Upon witnessing the red flag, they refrained from ever returning to the house at the risk of their own survival. After a few years, the girl matured and expressed a desire for siblings. Her mother recounted the tales of their brothers' departure from the household following her birth. Subsequently, she made a solemn commitment to refrain from going back to her residence until she successfully locates her siblings. Subsequently, she meanders aimlessly across the bush for a number of days. Eventually, she encounters her siblings. However, her brothers were unable to identify her. She recounts all the stories that her mother shared with her. They have ultimately consented to acknowledge her as their biological sibling. She began residing with her siblings in the wilderness. One day, she conceived the idea of crafting floral garlands for her brothers and proceeded to gather exquisite flowers from the hilltop. However, as soon as she attempted to gather flowers on behalf of her brothers, all of her brothers underwent a metamorphosis and took flight as crows. She was unaware of her surroundings. She began weeping and beseeching the divine to bring back her siblings. Upon observing her profound melancholy, the deity manifested in the guise of a saint. Then the saint informs her about the flowers and their symbolic significance in Limbu culture. Flowers are symbolic of romantic love, so it is prohibited to exchange or give flowers between siblings. Upon realising her inadvertent error, she sought divine direction and performed the ritual of Mangenna to restore her brother's dignity after he had been insulted. Eventually, all of her brothers returned and she had a sense of joy at their arrival. Within the realm of mythology, the flower serves as a didactic symbol for the Limbu community. The story illustrates how flowers may serve as a representation of malevolence and wrongdoing when given as a token of affection between siblings. In the narrative, the forest serves as a metaphor of security or refuge. The narrative discussed a flag that consisted of two colours. The colour red is seen as a representation of death and danger, whereas the colour white is interpreted as a symbol of survival and purity, as explained in the narrative.

Conclusion

Every tale has special symbols that foster a collective belief in the society, representing the cultural and traditional values. The chosen folktales depict the presence of nature in the specific community through the inclusion of woodland imagery, vibrant colours, flowing rivers, diverse bird species, aquatic creatures, animals, and blooming flowers. Symbols hold great importance in the Limbu culture. The Folktales of Limbu culture mostly revolve on the Mundhum of Limbu culture. Mundhum serves as the guiding principle for their existence. The members of this group hold a firm conviction in the significance of the symbols that embody their culture and identity. The chosen folktales depict the presence of nature in the specific community through the portrayal of forests, colours, rivers, birds, aquatic creatures, and flowers. Symbols hold great importance in Limbu culture.

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