Globalization of Folk as a Genre in Northeast India

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The idea of the global is often conceived in terms of an appearance of the “simulacral” that presents the interior of a culture as “decontextualized” or “deterritorialized.” Instead of arguing that there is an ongoing dialectic or bind between the local and the global, I prefer to take a semeiotic stance; that is, how the material symbols and codes of stories and narratives get represented in the discourses emerging from within the life-world of the community. Such representations within the domain of folk literature, I would emphasize, could be looked at how genres are co-constituted and how they are designated a place within the site of an ongoing repertoire of construction of meanings. In order to accomplish this task, the paper is divided into four sections: section one delves into the nature of Global in the Folk; section two deals with the Representational artifacts; section three provides an analytical scaffolding of the genres in folk and delves into the simulacral content of Folk and section four concludes by way of prognosticating the interrelationship between identity and folk genres in a moment of the Global.

The notion of simulacra as explicated by Baudrillard and Jameson is of much relevance here. According to Jean Baudrillard, a simulacrum means a substitution, a precession of the signs of the real for the real. Such signs are meant to encounter the real through its representational and relational connection between the Subject and the object (1998:166-184). Fredric Jameson has added a further twist to this by defining simulacra as a copy of the copy for which no original has ever existed. In other word, it is a temporalization of the material and the spatial, which he calls “conversion of space into time” in order to strike only a resemblance with the real (1994). This also means a symbolic constitution of the human Subject, which no longer exists in space, but exists only in a temporal space that is configured by a temporally constituted subjectivity. In the case of folk genres that are supposed to be transmitted within a system of beliefs and practices not only bind a society together but also act as the identifying marker of that society. The representational and temporal dimension of folk can go as signs of
the real and can substitute the real. The cultural identity is constituted by such signs that substitute the world of living by some representation and that readily lends itself to all kinds of simulacral practices such as an advertisement in the media or surrounding the ordinary with the imaginary. The only thing that it distances itself from, is its very conditions of coming into being as it alters them beyond recognition (Deleuze 1994: 293).

The Semeiotic Stance of the Global
In the case of Northeast India, the practice of temporalization assumes the form of “assertibility conditions” of the folk. These conditions are both performative as well as pragmatic based upon some kind of semantic grounding in a discourse, which is constituted by a play of material and power relations. Such discursive construction of “assertibility conditions” structures the artistic and cultural freedom to express oneself from within one’s folk tradition. Contemporary writings on folk life in the form of tales to signify past assume those assertibility conditions that constitute and facilitate the purpose of rationalization. Such rationalizations occur through repetition and reiteration of the folk motifs and the symbolic nexus that they form within the social world. In a collection of Folk tales, entitled as Narratives of Northeast India (2002), the tales are divided into themes such as “origin tales”, “tricksters and numbskulls” and “demons, ghosts and the supernatural.” Such a thematic arrangement construes a web of both idealized and mundane notions of life in folk imagination. The way it affects the portrayal of the world for reasons that are given to justify some form of equivalence: Headhunting could be made equivalent to war, to primitivism or to insurgency. The situation could be understood in terms of dissimulating the character of the sign:

To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn’t. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign: “Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and pretend he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms” (Littre). Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between “true” and “false”, between “real” and “imaginary” (Baudrillard 1998:167).

Such a feigning of the real is possibly the only way to recover the Folk. This recovery assumes the form of a folk processing of contents of belief that occupy a place in imagination by way of turning it into an artifact of cultural reproduction of an identity.

Representations as artefacts of Identity
Representation acts as a norm that binds acts of making visible a performing self within the genre of the folk. A folk narrative performs within a representational artifact. The representational artifact is often situated in cultural practice and belief. The Mizo God Pathien in representational terms “resides above the clouds in heaven” and He is the “provider of rain and daily needs of man” (Sujata Miri 2005:30). Such a representation results in performances like enacting oneself as daughter of nature such as in the Mizo tale of “Ramenhawii.” The story goes like this:

There was a beautiful girl called Ramenhawii who was famous for her very long hair. All the young men in the village desired her but none could win her favour. One day she was washing her hair in the river, a fish swallowed her hair. A strand of the hair found its way to the plate of the king of the valley as he was being served dinner by the palace cook. Filled with curiosity at the sight of the beautiful hair the king ordered his guards to look for the owner of the hair as he wished to make her his queen. After a long search, the guards at last found the place where the girl lived but they were unable to approach her as she lived protected by barricades around her.
“Oh! Please tell us at least your name” implored the king’s guards.
She replied:
‘No name, no name have I, I live on pure water, I live on pure vegetables (Ibid: 51.’

What the story tells us is how Ramenhawii performs a notion of a self that is different from the notion of the self prevalent in the society by identifying herself with pure water and pure air. In a sense, she assumes the form of the sensible as opposed to corporeal. This is a representational substitution of the real by the imaginary and the self of Ramenhawii by way of decentring makes it an artefact of representation. This artifact does not confirm to any prevalent social norm as she does not agree to the King’s proposal, but merely shows up as a dream-object which she confirms by way of enacting a different definition of self, i.e., “no name” to refer to herself and yet “living” on nature. Such artefacts evolve from the imaginary to become the symbolic when the self is enacted artefactually in a narrative. Mona Zote in her poem, “What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril”, writes:

(...) and pious women know the sexual ecstasy of dance and peace is kept by short men with a Bible and five big knuckles on their righteous hands.
Religion has made drunkards of us all. The old goat bleats.
We are killing ourselves. I like an incestuous land. Stars, be silent

Let Esterina speak (Geeti Sen et al, ed. 2006:67).

There is a different enactment of the self in religious performances as well as in incest. The self is retrieved in the symbolic silence of the star when the heroine Esterina is in peril. Esterina is identifiable in the lived world of Mizoram within the social and cultural space. The self of Esterina is enacted in peril at the disjuncture of religion and incest or of the sacred and the profane. The binary of silence and speech and religion and incest, both modes of enactment transforms the simplified performative self of Ramehawi into the global Esterina within the representational artifacts. The global comes in through such transformed narratives of representation.

Folk as a Genre of the Global

United Nations resolution to conserve folk, based on recognition of “intangible heritage,” as a subject for protection, is one of the most significant recent developments of international cultural heritage law. However, identifying its character has been a major challenge. Understanding the significance of transmission of information (e.g., how a carpet is hand-woven) and the skill of the producer of this heritage is central to its definition (1998). The human (social and economic) context of the production of intangible heritage requires safeguarding as much as the tangible product itself and must be considered in evaluating existing or future protective measures. This perspective addresses the enormous economic and cultural impact of globalization which is mostly perceived as a threat to the continued existence of this heritage itself but which also has the potential to aid its preservation. This means allowing the continuation of production of those culturally valued symbols of an ethnic or cultural identity by way of preserving the social context. The task however is complex. To cite an example from Northeast India, one can look at some interesting folk narratives of loss and recovery. The loss of the script due to flood in the course of changing of the course of a river is a legend that Khasi construe to justify oral culture. In a very poignant tale of loss, the competition between two river goddesses Umngot (Myngnod) and Umiam to reach the plains of Sylhet is discussed. Umngot takes a short cut through rocky hills. Meanwhile Umiam flows down peacefully into the plains. Umian digs through the rocky surfaces and being slow and steady wins the race. Looking at Umiam glistening like a silver necklace, the river goddess Umngot splits herself in shame into five: Ka Umtong, Ka Torasa, Ka Pasbira, Ka Kajani and Ka Dwara (Sujat Miri 2005:20). All these are lost rivers signifying that rivers need conservation. With the increasing commercialization of forests and rocks, how can these rivers be conserved and if these are not conserved, how can folk culture be conserved?

Following the law of conservation, folk tales need to be preserved for regenerating/reproducing a tradition or traditions in a culture. As a genre, the folklore follows the norm of conservation and proposes an appropriate way of conservation of cultural resources and heritage. If the Folk itself disappear due to forgetting and due to a gradual undermining of heritage sites what happens then to conservation is a serious question that needs to be addressed. Can the intrinsic link between folk genres and sites of their enactment be retrieved and considered for conservation? The situation could be best understood from Ayinla Shifu Ao’s observation of changes taken place in Naga society:

The Nagas of my grandparents’ generation have seen changes in their lifetime that they could not have even begun to imagine. Women who cut with bamboo knives the umbilical cords of babies they had just given birth to have seen those children grow up to become doctors. Some of their husbands went to France during the First World War. One brought back a spiked Prussian helmet to decorate with horns and hair as he must have seen being done, or perhaps even done himself, to a human skull. Another boiled his army issue leather boots as they used to do to buffalo hide back home. He ate it and died, poisoned by the tannin in the leather. The next world war brought to their own villages Americans, British and Japanese soldiers. When I was a child one could still see army helmets being used as feeding troughs for pigs in the villages. American troop carriers that are locally called “Dodos” are still being driven in Nagaland. Now Nagas who did not even own mirrors see images from across the world on television screens (Geeti Sen et al, ed. 2005:112).
The use of army artefacts habitually as artefacts simultaneously shows ignorance about the modern ways as well as continuation of artefactual practices through objects that do not belong per se to the society, but symbolizes as the left over of the modern communities. The indigenous and ingenuous use of artefacts taken from other cultures show a mismatch with one’s own tradition. In this context, the representation of Nagas in the media produces a mismatch with how they see themselves. Therefore, seeing themselves in the media must surprise them only to underline an identity between how a community sees itself and how the world sees it. The conservation of indigenous ways of life and their own self-image by themselves do not readily find equivalence in the way they are represented.

The situation could be interpreted by way of understanding the cultural transition that has taken place in Northeast. In a traditional matrilineal society like the Khasis, the role of Khatduh or the youngest daughter of the family, who is traditionally supposed to inherit the property, is now merely its custodian. This is a big change that has taken place in that there is a move from an inherent right to a mere legal privilege. With the emergence of privatization of property, fragmentation of community land and idea of individual ownership, the matrilineal society of the Khasis has become merely symbolic of Khasi identity, while in practice it is tending to be more and more patriarchal in terms of power and authority. Such a transformation of the society has resulted in the transformation or rather deformation of the folk genre into a symbolic apparatus of production of a sense of identity, while the society itself is moving towards the global circulation of capital and wealth.

By Way of Conclusion
Moji Riba, a young filmmaker and cultural activist of Arunachal Pradesh could be a reference to conclude this piece. He cites a piece of poem to discuss changes in the context of Arunachal Pradesh (Ibid:113).

The rainbow is a ladder by which a god climbs from earth to meet his wife in the land of the moon.

The earth and sky are lovers and all living beings are born from the union of them.

Lightning is a star-maiden running across the sky.

Riba says, “The poetic vibrancy of the images like these, forming an intricate part of the folklore and myths in abundance in Arunachal Pradesh, hides much of the transformations occurring at the very core of traditional society today” (Ibid). One tends to generalize that such is the way in which folklore is appropriated within the global in the form of “hiding” and probably better as a form of cultural capital that is hidden within the transformations brought in by globalization. My own position is that such hidden resources reappear as simulacra in the cultural logic of late Capital in the form of substitution of the real by the sign. The signified that remains hidden within the new meanings of artefacts, as Riba maintains, acts as the source of hiding the change.

References


Indian Folktales from Mauritius
Dawood Auleer and Lee Haring

Eighteen magical, romantic, and comic oral tales, from the island of Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean, are here translated into English for the first time. The stories were taken down literally from the lips of storytellers in the Bhojpuri language. They are not rewritten or redecorated; they are translated literally, and some are given in Bhojpuri.

The ancestors of these villagers were forcibly expatriated from India, a century and a half ago, as indentured laborers. Today, through these tales, they maintain their ancient language and culture. Comparative notes place these Mauritian tales in the context of world folklore.

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