**LACHMI JAGAR: GURUMAI SUKDAI’S STORY OF THE BASTAR RICE GODDESS**


**Review by Heda Jason**, a freelance scholar who has worked on the genres of folklore, sacred legend, and epic, in the fields of semiotics and classification of oral literature. Her publications include *Ethopoetry: Form, Content, Function* (1977), and *Motif, Type, and Genre: A Manual for Compilation of Indices* (2000).

We have been given a wonderful present: a new great work of Indian oral literature has been found and is on its way to publication for both national and international readership. The work is a myth, sung and enacted by speakers, mostly women, of the Halbi language of the Dandakarya Plateau region, which is drained by the Indravati River, a tributary of the Godavari River, in the region of Chattisgarh, in the state of Madhya Pradesh.

The story was performed by Ms. Gurumai Sukdai Koram, a member of the local musician/watchman community, who is accustomed to singing it as part of the relevant rituals. It was recorded and transcribed in 1996 by Harihar Vaishnav, a poet and writer in Hindi and a native speaker of Halbi. Chris A. Gregory (of the Australian National University, Canberra), is the co-translator of the text.

As the transcription of the performance is 31,000 lines long, its scholarly publication (in the original language and English translation, with commentaries) will be a multivolume affair, and it will take a while for the work to be published. Therefore the collectors have decided to publish a preview with a detailed summary of the story for the benefit of the lay reader, especially the Halbi speakers of Bastar. The summary is published in Halbi, Hindi, and English (in parallel columns).

In the Chattisgarh area, northern Indo-Aryan and southern Dravidian-speaking people live side by side, and Western millet growing and Eastern rice-growing economies mingle. The myth is performed during the cold season; other similar myths are performed in the neighboring districts during the wet season (*Bali jagar* or *Dhankul*). These three (and possibly more) works are performed by women who use a two-meter long hunting bow as a musical instrument. (This genre is not to be confused with the “bow songs” of the South, whose stories are not myths and which occupies a different position in the religious system of the community; see Blackburn 1989, pp. 208-211). The Chattisgarh region is also the home of the secular semi-epic story of *Caudaini and Loriki* (see Blackburn et al. 1989, pp. 212-215).

The *Lachmi jagar* myth tells a family story: two divine families cooperate to introduce rice cultivation. Meng (meaning, cloud) the husband, and Mengin, the wife, descend from the upper world to the human world and are enthroned by people. Mahadev and Parvati, while in the upper world, invent rice cultivation and they both grant to Mengin a pregnancy. She gives birth to a baby girl who is named Mahalachmi (*Lachmi* in Halbi, Lakshmi in Hindi). On the allegorical level, this girl represents rice. Mahadev obliges the parents to marry the girl to Narayan, Mahadev’s younger brother. When Mahalachmi comes of age, Narayana has already twenty-one women (who represent various kinds of millets and pulses), but he still insists on marrying Lachmi. A struggle starts among the wives in which Lachmi (rice) gains the upper hand over the other wives (millet and pulses).

*Lachmi jagar* can be classified in several frameworks. It belongs to a group of works which form “scripts” for rituals. Many such works have been found in India; consider the Tulu *Siri* story of northwestern Karnataka (Honko et al. 1998), and the Telugu *Palnati Virula Katha* of southern Andhra Pradesh (Roghair 1982). The ethnopoetic genre of these three works is not identical. *Palnati Virula Katha* is a martial epic about the struggle for power and property between two groups of relatives, modeled after the *Mahabharata*. The other two works are not of the epic genre. *Lachmi jagar* is a myth about the introduction of rice cultivation. The *Siri* story, which is sometimes classified as an epic, is in fact a sacred legend about the punishment of sinners (who did not fulfill a vow), and the establishment of a temple.

The collectors and editors of these works tell us much about the “lives” of these works in their respective societies, including: who performs the works for whom; when, where, and how the performances take place; the chains of transmission and ways of learning, etc. We would like to also learn about the socio-psychological functions of the works. Such analysis requires ethnographic investigations, and this is not a task for philologists, but rather for ethnographers, be they anthropologists or folklorists. We hope that ethnographers will be found who are interested enough in these rituals to participate in the investigations.

**References:**


Honko, Lauri, Chinnappa Gowda, Anneli Honko, and Viveka Rai, eds. and trans., *The Siri Epic, as Performed by Gopala Naika*, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica (FF communications no. 265-266), 1998

“At first all was water; the earth was below. Even the rocks were soft as wet mud. It was very, very difficult to create life on it…” – Beginning of Adi Creation Myth

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