Whither Folklore? The Mizo Context

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 Mizoram, like its sister states of the Northeast region, has been in a state of flux and transition for the last few decades. Globalization is now part of everyday jargon just as the IT Revolution and the MTV generation are a reality and not a passing fad. Under such circumstances one may well ask, whither folklore? Does it still hold interest, relevance and value for the present generation?

On the other hand, since folklore is an integral part of a culture and its people, it remains an intrinsic part of one’s identity. So when we talk of a generation pervaded by new values and interests on the one hand, and on the other that the foundation of its identity is inseparable from its ethnic roots, we begin to have a situation rift with conflicts. For example, we have folk stories that depict heroes who belong to the social order, “culture heroes” who represent the common values of the people. Today, we prefer to see ourselves as individuals first, who need not necessarily conform blindly to tradition. Thus, the degree of admiration and identification with such heroes may be fleeting and tenuous for most, and perhaps not accepted as role models at all.

The status of folklore in Mizoram today is that our folk artifacts are seen as mere showpieces for museums or the archive. Our folk stories are unable to compete with TV cartoons. Folk games, songs and dances, alas, are reserved for annual displays at cultural meets and festivals. This situation is further compounded by the fact that despite its potential, serious scholarship in folkloristic studies is yet to make a meaningful impact.

But all is not lost. Folklorists have, through the years, been raising basic questions about the field of folklore and brought about a shift in study and focus. They are not only asking questions like, “Who are the folk?” but also changing gear from the texts, (myths and folktales), to the study of its contexts, and folklore as performance and enactment. Extending the study of myths and folktales beyond the written texts can lead to a fuller understanding of their nature and role in human life. It was Malinowski who drew attention to the importance of context and said, “The text of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless.” Keeping such trends of folkloristic studies in mind, innovative ways of depicting and fusing folklore into the modern context through the performing arts like modern dance and drama must now be seriously explored by the Mizo. Our neighbouring states of Manipur and Assam have already developed this aspect into a fine art. Filmmakers have successfully revived interest in their reinvention of world famous folktales, while today a folk singer and musician can perform for a worldwide audience through television networks and thus extend his particular brand of folk art beyond his circle. “In sum,” says Dan Ben-Amos, “the materials of folklore are mobile, manipulative and transcultural.” So, paradoxically, the very tools of our contemporary world which usurp folklore and make it redundant, can actually be used effectively for its propagation and revitalization. We may venture to state here that the dividing line between folklore and popular culture could wear very thin.

Of course, not all folk values of the past can fit present society. One obvious reason, of course, is that ideas and values are susceptible to cultural change. “But living lore reminds us of interests and values still current; folklore is not mere antiquarian. If we are interested in people, it is not unlikely that we will be interested in folklore. Such lore gives a fascinating sense of continuity with the past in both pleasure and wisdom.” The collection of articles in this issue reflects many such facets.

C.Lalsiamthanga and Lalsangzuala through their contributions on “Rih Dil : A Lake that Lures” and “Reiek Tlang and its Lores” respectively, reveal interesting samples of just how rich the
Mizo folklore scene is with regard to place-lores, which is an emerging trend in contemporary international folkloristics. Ulo Valk states that “Without place-lore man would be surrounded by an empty physical space of alien natural surroundings; place-lore links generations and provides them with a shared identity – the narratives of belonging.” The article on “Mizos and the Afterlife” from C.Vanlallawma showcases the rich body of myths and tales associated with sacred beliefs while the article on “Khuangchawi” from R.Lallianzuwa provides insight into cultural traditional practices wherein feats of merit occupy an integral space and social relevance. The article titled “Machiavelli in Mizo Folk Tales” from R.Thangvunga highlights the possibilities that folktales can open up to new interpretations and this versatility is what gives relevance to old tales in today’s world.

The contribution from Lalrindiki T.Fanai on “Narratives of Mizo Puan and Mizo Indigenous Patterns” is a sampling of the wealth of cultural material that has evolved alongside the history of the community, revealing the linkage of memory, culture, and creativity with indigenous products. The article “Narratives in Mizo Traditional Dances” from Margaret L.Pachuau unfolds the possibilities of folk tradition and culture being given a continuity and relevance through performance and dance forms for the present generation. The article from R.L.Thanmawia on “Heritage of Mizo Traditional Song and Music” provides a study of the emergence of Mizo indigenous song and music as well as the lores that accompanied it. “Mizo Folk Songstresses” from Ruth Lalremruati makes an interesting statement about how women composers and songstresses left their indelible mark on a society that was strongly patriarchal and gender discrimination was an accepted norm.

While examining the status and future of folklore and indigenous culture in Mizoram, an interesting dimension that cannot be ignored is the influence of the Church and its ambivalent mindset towards the practice and continuance of some aspects of old traditions. An example is the celebration of annual cultural festivals which, in their original form were marked by community drinking, feasting and dancing, but have now been sanitized to the extent where even the dance performances and enactment of traditional practices smack of fabrication. The dominant idea now is to sell and mass produce for tourists and the export market. The Church’s influence on the mindset of a state that claims to be 100% Christians cannot be brushed aside. Can folklore survive and have meaningful contribution to a society that is for the present much too preoccupied with the culture of materialism, and one whose yardstick for social acceptance is dictated by the Church?

This becomes a complex issue, for at the other end of the spectrum, culture and folklore are a means of maintaining the value and self-respect of a people. It serves the need for a national identity and pride. If we are keen to preserve and cherish our folklore, let it be the genuine stuff and not just a “fabrication of fakelore.”

Endnotes