
Oral Tradition and the Preservation of Local Ecological Knowledge: An Example from the Koireng Community

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Abstract

Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social organizations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of contemporary social order. Based on the data collected through participant observation method the paper has attempted an academic discussion on the structure, form and functions of story, and its indispensable role in shaping socio- cultural implications. This paper is referred to some literature and of the folktale of the Koirengs of Manipur. This paper has highlighted its textual beauty, aesthetic and literary values incorporated creatively in amusement to the ecology of the man and his environment. The tale continues to advocate knowledgeable of local environments enhanced implication of skill to escape from danger situations. Further, it reprimands to be cautious over arrogance which may ruin oneself. The folktale has been rendered from the childhood memory of the author, after having been verified from traditional bearers.

Keywords: Oral tradition, Preservation, Ecological Knowledge, *Genna*, Spoken Words, Ungrateful.

Introduction:

Orality is a complex phenomenon which configures its own ways and means of expression and transmission. It is that great highway of information where an exciting intersection of ideas forms and styles takes place at different levels, creating processes and dialogues with inter-linkages between form and content, genre and theme, visual and aural, local and regional, traditional and contemporary. Oral tradition also fabricated into folktales for dispersal know-how in the form of repertoire for the communities learning purpose. Folktales are found in prose narratives, which are simple and entertaining, with or without moral and easy to understand. Folktales deal with situations familiar to listeners and are not usually based on historical fact, but are mostly of fictitious nature and constitute a liberal number of fanciful ideas of the community. However, folktales are imbued with some moral lesson and they are perceived as true to the genius of the people. Folktales have no known originator and are transmitted spontaneously through the oral tradition from person to person or from generation to generation. The interesting aspects is though it has no known originator it belongs to the community. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reform and redress.

The Koirengs are one of the scheduled Tribe of the state of Manipur in North Eastern States of India, sharing borders with Nagaland in the North, Assam in the West, Mizoram in the South and international borders with Myanmar in East-South. Manipur, as the name indicates, is the Jewel Land of India was given by (L) Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (Kabui 1991), the first Prime Minister of Independent India is beautiful land with hills and valley, and homes of diverse community. Moreover the rich culture of various caste and creed including different tribal communities is interesting altogether. Among the tribal communities, the Koirengs are considered as one of the microscopic communities with the strength of less than three thousand population as per 2011 censes of India,

with rich culture and belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family group (Grierson 1967). The language spoken by the Koireng is known as *Koren chong* (Koren is what the community address to themselves and *chong* means language in Koireng). Language affinity with the Koireng is found in the state of Manipur and other neighbouring states like Tripura and Mizoram.

Methodology - Data collection: Folktales appear in variety of genres, and are classified according to their themes and construction, and it is often possible to find versions of these popular tales sung in the form of ballads, dramatized by professional travelling folk opera troupes, as well as narrated by amateur storytellers in family gatherings. To identify such tale genres extensive fieldwork and efficient training is required. Goldstein 1964 in his book *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore*, has also emphasise about the field techniques and method for successful data collection.

Most narratives in the Koireng community begin when the villagers come home from work, cowherds return from forests and hills, and after an early evening meal assemble around a fireplace. Children and parents gathered around the hearth or *meiphu* (portable *chulha* which uses charcoal or twigs) before retiring to bed. Then the father of the family picks the *rusem* or gourd pipe (a wind instrument) blows through the gourd's pipe and his fingers runs on the holes of the reeds that are attached to the gourd, the mother joins him by singing folksongs and beats *khuongbai* (mouth of the drum) or *sakhi* (mithun's horn) to the accompaniment of the music that produces from it, and children requested the parents to tell them tales. The author has witnessed and experienced such a joyful moment in her childhood. Proverbs, wise-sayings, riddles and even etiological episode find their way into the tales and a great number of them carry high moral lessons. Some tales focus on a wide range of subject-matter, recording the traditional dissemination of knowledge pertaining to arts and crafts, occupations, rituals and ceremonies and games and sports, migration of the race, evolution of polity and as the tales are narrated or sung to the audience, be it in the family or community gathering, and supplement as fundamental education in warfare, megalithic erection, craftsmanship and provide diverting entertainment to the village community.

There are also some tales that do not fit in the classification or cannot be separated into watertight compartments because of their incorporation of different characters like human beings and animals together in the tale. To study such types of tales that are current among the Koirengs, the author has proposed the title "other analogous tales". From such types of tales the scholar has singled out the tale *Kaletletngam* in which is constituted of one tale about one man and the others of animals. This folktale is being reproduced and rendered from the childhood memory of the author. During the field visit, prior to the transcription of the tale the author had consulted some traditional bearers such as T. Ngirsorang (M 60), Late. Z. Rang-eam (F 75), Late. Z. Thangchuong (M 65), R. Rangthang (M 66), T. Liengam of the older generation from different villages who knows about the tale.

Data presentation: The author's concern here is to evaluate critically the textual beauty of its attributes, the structure, form and functions of its stories, their aesthetic and literary values, and their socio-cultural implications along with local ecological knowledge tactically uses as a ruse to dupe his opponent for his survival.

The tale *Kaletletngam* is widely told among the Koirengs especially among children. In the tale *Kaletletngam* is an adult bachelor who live alone. The tale depicted the growing enmity of the tiger against *Kaletletngam* because of the his (tiger's) mischievous behaviour that led to seeking revenge till he dies in the hand of *Kaletletngam*.

Interpretation and analysis of the tale: The data has been analyzed from the perspectives of the psychoanalytical approach of the Freudian school and literary approaches favoured by folklorists such as Alan Dundes, Archer Taylor and Dan Ben-Amos.

Kaletletngam seems to possess some of the characteristics of the trickster but in the real sense he is not and remains human throughout the tale. Because of the greedy tiger that went to hunt for fowls in his surrounding in turn made him (Kaletletngam) his (tiger) enemy. This relationship also caused certain incidents which made it necessary for him to employ tricks in order to flee from the tiger's hand. The episodes are humorous which required him to perform unusual tasks. At the same time, it also conveys moral lessons to the society because of wise ruse he applied without planning it. It serves as an educates people against from remaining unmarried like Kaletletngam otherwise they will end up in engaging themselves in unusual manual work, as the Koireng society is indorsed with the types of work to be executed by male and female respectively. It is warning against people from becoming arrogant lest it will lead to one's downfall. It is also a reminder to people to be wise especially in time of sneak hour for own protection and defence.

As far as Koirengs oral traditions or folk narratives are concerned there is considerable mingling together of man and animals including wild animals especially with the feline family. According to oral tradition, the relationship of man and the cat-family is sometimes shown as friendly and sometimes as rivals. Among the Koirengs, there are certain clans which are believed to have the same origin as that of the animals such as monkeys, and cat family which obliges as totem to the particular clan. For instance, the Shong clan is believed to have come from the same origin with that of the tiger and cat family. Therefore, for this clan, consuming of tiger's meat is considered a *genna*. This belief is rooted in the creation myth and origin myth of this indigenous community which goes like this: As they (Koirengs) emerged from the cave, they encountered a tiger and some of them were killed by the tiger. For this reason, nobody dares to transpire out of the cave. While they were still hesitant a man named Neiroung from the Shong clan decided to face the tiger. He wrapped himself with a shawl called *Puonthal* which had the motifs resembling the hide of tiger. Seeing the motifs woven on the body of Neiroung, the tiger did not harm him. Then Neiroung asked the tiger to compare the hide with his own to determine which of the two had more colours. It was found that the tiger had only three colours whereas Neiroung had seven. Neiroung then convinced the tiger that the number of the colours of their skin will not be the factors to determine or differentiate their origins, but their skins will determine that. With these words the tiger was persuaded that they both belong to the same family and thus decided to make a vow that they will never harm each other. Since then, it was observed that the members of the Shong clan are forbidden to consume flesh of the cat family. With the successful attempt made by Neiroung the Korens were able to emerged out of the cave to dwell on an open land freely.

It is to be noted here that the shawl Neiroung wore (*Puonthal*), is meant to be used by *panchi* only. *Panchi* is appointed traditional positions of eminence in the village council which are comprises of adult male on the basis of seniority of the family clan. Among them the one from the Shong clan is the chief of the village and considered as the high priest who would take part and perform only in the rituals which are considered consecrated.

Here, it is also to be noted that since Neiroung was from the Shong clan he must have been the chief and priest of that dwelling place. As mentioned earlier that in traditional Koren society, the village council is known as *panchi* and its members are the only people who have the authority to wear that particular textile *puonthal*, a permission specially sanctioned for it. It is also true that in the *panchi*, no two people can represent the same clan. Here, one can safely assume that Neiroung may have been the chief and priest of that dwelling place and therefore took the courage to face the tiger in order to save his people.

The fact that the members of the Shong clan have to be the Chiefs of the villages they settled in can be traced back from the oral traditions which have been told since time immemorial. During her field investigation, the scholar was reportedly revealed that Neiroung might have been selected to be the chief of the village he lived in.

While on the other hand, there is another version of the origin of chieftainship among the *panchi* as told in oral traditions. Long ago, it was said that once there was darkness in the whole universe. This naturally created considerable difficulty for the people. So, they tried with every possible means to bring light back but all their attempts were in vain. Finally one man from Shong clan succeeded in his pursuit of bringing the light back by performing rituals and offering of libation to God. Since then the Shong clan was honoured by the community and was therefore given the topmost position amongst the people in the community i.e. to be the chiefs of the village they settled in. From that time, in every Koirengs village's members of the Shong clan has to be the chief. However, the same rule did not apply in those villages where no Shong clan can be found inhabiting the area. This tradition is still in practice till date.

Thus, it is clear that it was from that time that the Shong clan was given the opportunity to be the chief of any village they dwell in.

Now coming back to the relationship established between the tiger and the Koirengs. It is said that among the Koirengs, it is also *genna* to swear taking the name of this animal (tiger). It is believed that doing so will result in suffering death in the hands of the tiger. During the author's stay in the field, the scholar was told that even today taking an odd in the name of tiger should be avoided no matter how modern and advanced people are we in this day and age even when the possibility of a tiger appearing in the city among thickly populated areas is distinctly remote. While swearing, for the Koirengs this animal could be regarded as sacred but consuming it is not for all the Korengs clans except the Shongs. The reason behind this was that the tiger had first attacked and killed the first people who came out from the cave before Neiroung. Neiroung's life was spared by the tiger and with his wits the rest of the Koirengs were also able to safely come out of the cave as narrated in the oral tradition. Hence, for the Koirengs this animal could be regarded as sacred while at the same time being an animal consumed most of the time with fury.

In the tale the tiger is seen as cunning, greedy and an ungrateful animal. The tale begins with a note saying that on seeing the wild cat that is enjoying a great meal with the fowl he had stolen from a village, the tiger who also saw asked for some of the meat. The wild cat was not willing to share and told the tiger to get one for him. The poor tiger did not know where to get a chicken for himself and requested the wild cat to get one for him instead. But the wild cat was grudging that while he would be away the tiger would finish his meat. This line presumably denotes the greedy and deceitful character of the tiger even before it has really been accused of the same. From this it is possible to assume that most creatures would view the tiger as having these characteristics. This could be the reason why from the very beginning of the tale the wild cat shows reluctance and suspicion towards the tiger to leave behind the meat in his custody. In spite of his (tiger's) assurance of leaving the meat alone, it says that the tiger failed to keep his word and that he proceeded to eat the meat. This enrages the wild cat as he had obtained the fowl at great risk to himself. Nevertheless, thenceforth, the tiger knew the location of the village. Observing the nature of the tiger in the tale, he (tiger) could be assumed as the greedy and ungrateful animal in all time.

The greedy tiger after he learned from the wild cat where he (tiger) can hunt for chicken went to the village. Unfortunately it was the night that an elderly bachelor by the name of Kaletletngam was pounding dried fish for fermentation (traditional fermented fish which is known as *ngathu*). In Koirengs society though, man is considered to be socially superior to woman, pounding of paddy and *ngathu* is a practice among the women folk only, and this kind of manual work is performed by men except in cases of the family where there is no female member. Before the invention of the rice mills one had to pound paddy so that it can be consumed as food. But till date no machine has been found to substitute mortar and pestle for the preparation of *ngathu* so, the means of preparation *ngathu* is only through traditional mortar and pestle. Kaletletngam is *tangkhong* (elderly bachelor) who lived alone. Therefore, he is responsible for his own survival and has to make an effort to meet his needs. In regards to food recipe, for the Koirengs *ngathu* is a traditional food item without which food or meals are considered almost incomplete. Like Kaletletngam, a person who lives alone it is possible that one has to do any kind of manual work

which is required to be done for a living. On the other hand, this pounding of *ngathu* though denotes unusual action for a man like Kaletletngam, it reveals the kind of manual work that a man who is not married has to perform or endure irrespective of who he is.

Then, while Kaletletngam was pounding *ngathu*, he heard the disturbed clucking of the fowls and not being aware of what exactly it was, threw the pestle which he was pounding *ngathu* towards the direction where the tiger had been hiding and exclaimed “whosoever, be it animal or man may it rot as he lives on”. Then, the pestle hit the tiger and he ran off for his life. The tiger felt upset because of the curse Kaletletngam had uttered at him and so he sniffed himself. Unfortunately, he got the smell of *ngathu* or fermented fish and thought he was really rotting.

In desperation, the tiger went to long neck animal, deer and so on, narrating to them the whole story and seeking confirmation of the smell. They all convinced him that he was really rotting but no one could suggest to get rid off from that hum. It was only when the tiger encountered the boar that was considered and thought to be knowledgeable about human culture, told him that he was not really decomposing. Then, the boar told him that he (tiger) could get rid of the smell by bathing into mud or by exposing himself for many days to the natural environment. Here the interesting point to be noted is that domestic animals seem to be acquainted with human culture despite the tendency of humans to consider them to be dumb and to be taken for granted. More over, among the domestic animals the pig (boar) happens to be the most neglected and the least useful. They are also considered as useless animal meant only for human consumption. Some people also consider the pig to be an animal with the dirtiest habits of feeding and living, often feeding on excrement and wallowing in mud all the time. Some cultures even refrain from mouthing the very name of the pig. But, however, the tale is trying to portray that even the animal that is least considered to be useful is seen to possess qualities that are not usually attributed to it, capable of giving knowledgeable information regarding certain circumstances. Hence, it reminds us that domestic animals are acquainted with human culture; they can even sense our feelings and that relying on them could bring less harm upon human being. Whereas, here the tiger, which is a wild animal was determined to find human faults and instead of repenting for what he has done becomes arrogant towards Kaletletngam. His lack of knowledge about human beings does not prevent him from trying to seek revenge.

Becoming arrogant is one such attitude which usually is destined to bring about one's downfall. This perception is very common in most societies and especially in the Bible, it always warns man against becoming arrogant. Even here, the attitude to seek revenge is also the result of arrogance. While attempting to pursue, the tiger faces trouble and difficulty and even let himself of throwing into the situation that he will be killed. It also reveals and indicates two incidents where the tiger waited for Kaletletngam thinking that he (tiger) can devour him (Kaletletngam) but never succeeded but never succeeded in his effort.

The first incident was while Kaletletngam was collecting *kaang jam* or liana's vine, the tiger who wanted revenge on Kaletletngam saw him and threatened ominously that he was not going to spare him for what he (Kaletletngam) did to him that night. Liana's vine is generally used by the community for fastening fences and also to tie anything else that needs to be bind. Even in the construction of traditional houses the community used to use liana's vine to fastened pillars, posts and other household equipments. With the same intentions, Kaletletngam went to collects liana's vine in the forest to meet his domestic requirement. During that moment, when Kaletletngam was threatened dreadfully by the tiger, instead of becoming conceited he uses his clever thought being humble and replied, “Oh Brother, what a fortune to meet you, have you not heard that there is going to be a strong cyclone! I am really afraid to face it hence; I am gathering this vine to tie up myself to a tree”. The tiger, dim-witted that he was, believed what Kaletletngam said he surrendered himself into Kaletletngam's hand. Relating to the feat which Kaletletngam has demonstrated, there is a saying that goes like this 'if a man is clever enough he can tame the furious tiger'. Here, it is seen that Kaletletngam pertain his clever ruse to bargain with the arrogant tiger even in the sneak of time and by doing so he duped him (tiger). This conduct was a must for Kaletletngam in order to flee from the tiger and save himself from being harmed. The moral code of Kaletletngam's attitude is “based on

experience, which affirms that the world belongs to the clever, that virtue, if it is foolish is sure to be duped, and that men should therefore try to be clever at all costs, remaining honest if they can¹ is what Kaletletngam portrayed here. After Kaletletngam fastened the tiger to the tree he also hung a wooden hammer he fashioned. Then he told the tiger that there would not be any cyclone and he also said, "Now whoever passes by this way will beat and hit you by this hammer". So saying, Kaletletngam escaped and went on his way. This trick of Kaletletngam's made the tiger maddened and more furious, even then he remained helpless as he was already tied up to a tree.

The tiger was livid and requested those animals that passed by to untie him but nobody was willing to do so. This action of denial showed by other animals reveals that the tiger seems to be hated by many of them, which resulted in prevention from offering aid to him (tiger). Thus, the ungrateful attitude of the tiger has made the other animals wary of helping him in dire circumstances. But the deer on seeing the tiger being tied up to the tree, pranced in glee and fell on one of the trees and broke his neck and died. The deer pranced in glee because he (tiger) used to torture and killed his (deer) relatives and ancestor. The vulnerable position of the tiger encouraged the deer to take this opportunity to mock him (tiger). But one must accept that, sometime ridiculously mocking at other in spite of the justification meted out upon the matter should be avoided. Though, the mockery attitude of the deer towards the tiger was well meted out upon the matter, he (deer) also lost his own life. Thus, the deer causes the cessation of its own life after ridiculously mocking at the tiger who has been duped. In this regard the Korens are very cautious about reveling in the pleasure of revenge and the popular saying 'tit for tat' has also find a place among the popular usage of the Korens. This has helped in shaping the moral values and has promoted moral integrity in the society. Coming back to the tale, it was said that the dead body of the deer began to decompose and that rotting odour was presented itself as delicious to the tiger and made him hungry. The wild cat also appeared and came and ate the meat. Seeing this, the greedy tiger wanted to eat the meat and pleaded repeatedly with the wild cat to untie him saying that they were from the same family. This argument moved the wild cat's sympathies and he untied the tiger. Here, the tale reveals the innate bond of the family which does not end within the human society but it goes on even among the animal's world. The tiger has been portrayed as creature that has acquired characteristics of being greedy and ungrateful. However, he is also seen as cunning and being capable of being fickle. For that reason the tiger momentary humbled himself and with his fake humility attitude he (tiger) was able to move the heart of the wild cat that he was freed. With this action we are convinced that humility wins over friend and foe alike. But, it is also observed that the ungrateful tiger never repent after having experiencing of both good and awful incidence, and even to the extent of forgetting the aid he received. So, after the wild cat freed him, instead of being regretful he jumped over on to the wild cat and tried to kill him, but he (wild cat) escaped and the ungrateful hungry tiger enjoyed the deer's meat. This attitude is very much universal and common that Thompson and Balys have also pointed out in their studies and have given in the index number W: 154.2.1- Rescued Animal Threatens Rescuer. This act comes very close to poetic justice. Whatever the case may be, the tiger has been seen as the cunning, greedy and ungrateful always on the revenge temper as reflected in the tale. With this attitude the tiger waited again for Kaletletngam expecting that he would go to the forest.

To indigenous communities, the forest is their source of livelihood and making an effort to go there is usual and without which it would be impossible to sustain life. Knowing this the tiger ascertain to meet Kaletletngam. As the tiger met Kaletletngam for the second time he grinned evilly at him and said, "Today I will not spare you in any case; you have cheated me last time also". In spite of being cheated and duped, the arrogant tiger was never repented from his awful temper. To this clever Kaletletngam transient again his lowly aptitude to dupe the tiger which he answered "I will not be as delicious if you kill me now, so wait here for a while let me go and first relieve myself, so that I will be tastier". In saying so Kaletletngam pretended to defecate and he inserted a *doltel* (itchy stems) in his anus and offered himself to tiger. To this the tactless, wild and arrogant tiger instead of

¹ Shakespear, J 1912, *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, pp 97.

devouring him (Kaletletngam) gave a chance to dupe by asking which part of his body was the most delicious one. Here, Kaletletngam revealed his cleverness by creating a ruse by saying to the tiger: “all ancestor fats gathered around my buttock and is the fattiest portion”. This saying of Kaletletngam convinced the tiger to believe him and thereupon he started to eat Kaletletngam’s buttock and he (tiger) chewed the *doltel*. The itchiness of the *doltel* caused the tiger to stop eating and thus he went off running into the forest to get rid of the irritation. Even in the midst of irritation the tiger never stop to threaten Kaletletngam saying “you shall see next time”.

In the Koirengs tradition there is a saying that in the older generation spoken words are potent with and it is destined to happen. Taking this into consideration when it is spoken it really means and works like the power of spells. Therefore, even here when the tiger ran into the forest, Kaletletngam said to him “do not go upwards for my spear will pierce you nor downwards for I had fixed a trap for you”. So the tiger went sideway of the hill-range and it is said that from behind, Kaletletngam shot his arrow and slew the tiger. From these words safely we can say that kaletletngam had cleverly calculated in order that he could slay the tiger. That is the reason why from the spoken words he has prevented the tiger either to move upwards nor downwards and directed towards sideway which is painless for him to target.

Conclusion: The tiger’s character is reflected as arrogant, ungrateful and sometime as cunning capable of being fickle, whereas, Kaletletngam as polite reserved and wise. So, as mentioned earlier, becoming arrogant is one such attitude which usually is destined for one’s downfall. That is the reason why one should be always cautious from becoming arrogant. From the two incidents that were indicated, where the tiger arrogantly waited for Kaletletngam thinking that he (tiger) can devour him (Kaletletngam) but end up in being duped and killed proved its downfall. Therefore, it is found that wiser human thought always find and provides a way to save Kaletletngam from the tiger’s attack. On the other hand, the ungrateful and arrogant tiger could never succeed in taking revenge on Kaletletngam. Instead Kaletletngam uttered words of trickery which manages to slay the tiger with his arrow. Thus, humility wins over an arrogant attitude and here we see an opportunity to even dupe the angry tiger. Hence, lowly aptitude and humility pays to rescue oneself in times of trouble.

The study of the tale Kaletletngam reveals that becoming arrogant is one such attitude which usually is destined for one’s downfall. This perception is very common in most society and especially in the Bible it always warns man against becoming arrogant. Even in this very tale it reveals and indicates two incidents where the tiger waited for Kaletletngam thinking that he (tiger) can devour him (Kaletletngam). But it is found that wiser human thought always provides a way to save Kaletletngam from the tiger’s attack. We found that the ungrateful and arrogant tiger could never succeed in taking revenge on Kaletletngam. Instead Kaletletngam uttered words of trickery which slay the tiger with his arrow. This proves that man is superior and with his wise thought he saves himself from the dreadful tiger.

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