

Some features of Thadou Folktales

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1. THADOU - A KUKI-CHIN LANGUAGE

Thaadou, Thadou, or Thadou-Kuki is a widely spread language of the Kuki-Chin group of languages spoken in the Manipur Hills, and in some parts of Mizoram, Nagaland, Assam, and adjoining areas. In this short note, I present some features of the folktales of Thadou.

Thadou is a Tibeto-Burman language and, as a member of the Kuki-Chin sub-group within the Tibeto-Burman sub-family, it shares several linguistic and ethnographic similarities with the languages or dialect of Kuki-Chin. In particular, the themes of the folktales in Thadou are shared by languages such as Paite, Simte, Vaiphei, Gangte, Teddim-Chin, Lushai/Mizo, etc., (but not necessarily the characters of these folktales).

2. STRUCTURAL COMPARISONS AND CLASSIFICATION OF FOLKTALES

Scholars of Indian folklore have made several studies to make structural comparisons of the content and forms of the folklore of India. However, study of the folklore of the communities in the North-East needs greater attention, especially because rapid socio-economic changes in the region may result in the loss of these valuable resources very soon.

A simple and common sense classification of folklore identifies three major categories:

- Myths which are sacred narratives.
- Legends which are usually twisted and broken fragments of history.
- Popular tales which are told purely or mainly for the entertainment of their hearers.

3. SACRED AND NON-SACRED

Myths may be sacred, non-sacred, and secular. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines myth as "purely fictitious narrative, usually involved supernatural persons, etc., and embodying popular ideas on natural phenomena, etc." There is no doubt that supernatural persons, etc., can be relied upon to play a non-sacred and secular, if not profane, role in folklore materials! The Thadou-Kuki folklore materials, thus, can be classified into two broad categories, namely, religious (which is sacred and secretive) and non-religious (which is secular and meant for popular entertainment). In both these categories the supernatural persons and beings, etc., have their field day.

4. A TALE OF IMMORTAL LOVE

Thus, for instance, a folktale in Thadou-Kuki purports to describe the immortal love between a girl and a boy in the moon. The hero from the earth flies and goes on flying in the sky. After crossing a certain height in the sky, the hero is not able to climb down to the earth. So, he has to continue his travel further. Finally he lands on the moon where he meets the girl and instantaneously (like what many of us did in our teens) falls in love with the moon beauty.

But, alas, the girl's family won't allow her to marry him, and she is married to someone else. The hero, then, builds an earthen image of the girl and places it by the side of a river in the moon and earnestly starts doing his penance. It rains and the river is flooded; the earthen image dissolves completely in water. As a consequence the girl also dies. Then the hero dies or commits suicide. After their death, the immortal lovers meet each other in the skies once again.

This is a beautiful story, and the hearts melt when Thadous listen to the narration of this tale. This tale is poignant, but it is not considered sacred by the Thadous and is in no way a religious tale from the Thadou animistic religious point of view. It is purely secular and is a heart-rending story for the Thadou Kukis.

5. TRACING THE HISTORICAL AFFILIATIONS

I believe that, while typological classification of folktales is important, we need to focus more on the collection of genuine folktales from the linguistic communities of Kuki-Chin and other sub-groups of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family. We may

devote our time fruitfully for the study of those aspects of folklore materials which can throw light upon matters like the sub-grouping of several languages of a major group or family, fragments of history to understand their migration patterns, psychology or reasoning of the people and the attitudes of a community toward their neighboring, related and unrelated, language groups.

Let me illustrate these points in a very "folkish" way with the help of materials drawn from Thadou folklore.

6. FOLKTALES IN AID OF LINGUISTIC CLASSIFICATION

A cursory comparative study of the phonologies of Kuki-Chin languages reveals some interesting phonological variables that can help us to group these languages more or less decidedly into several subgroups. One such variable is the plus or minus trill phonetic segment. The minus trill feature neatly brings Thadou, Paite, Vaiphei, Gangte, Teddim Chin, Zoute, and Simte under a single subgroup.

This classification, based on a purely linguistic variable, is supported one hundred percent by the folklore materials. Thus, Thadou-Kuki has a large number of folktales of non-religious type revolving around a single, humorous and unique personality called Benglam. He is clownish, generally foolish, and at times extra-ordinarily brilliant. Even the mention of his name to a Thadou will provoke him into laughter.

This humorous character is called Penglam in Paite, Teddim Chin and Simte; he is called Banglam in Vaiphei, Gangte and Zoute. There is no necessity for us to be misled by the identity of the usage of the name only. If we go still further collecting Benglam tales we will find that the content and form of the Benglam stories in all these languages will be more or less identical.

The non-Benglam and plus trill feature subgroup of languages such as Hmar and Lushai do not mention the name of Benglam at all and the seemingly identical stories (of Benglam type) in these languages vary very much in their content. Thus this additional support from the folklore materials confirms the linguistic classification in a general way.

7. HISTORY OF THE PRE-LITERATE (TRIBAL) COMMUNITIES

In preliterate societies, like the ones we find among the members of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family in our Himalayan regions, we have to depend almost entirely on the folklore materials for an understanding of the history of these communities. Many of the incidents or episodes narrated in the folk tales that purport to give the history of the tribes concerned, may be at least partially fictitious or imaginary. However, some "facts", structural or otherwise, can be sifted and compared profitably with "facts" from the folk tales of other neighboring and related communities.

In Thadou Kuki, there are two tales that describe the origin and the spread of Thadous. The first tale involves partially fictitious or imaginary events, whereas the second one gives the genealogical tree of the Thadou tribes. Thus, the first tale describes the life of a community under the earth /xúl/ from where a group of persons emigrated to the surface of the earth after a quarrel with their relatives under the ground over some ritual matters. The persons who emigrated to the surface of the earth are listed and today there are separate tribes or clans after their names.

The second folktale is about the origin, multiplication and establishment of a tribe named after Milun (=Mr.) Thadou. Milun Thadou was not one among the persons who emigrated to the surface of the earth. In fact, he was not at all born at this time. He is a descendant of one of the persons who emerged on the surface of the earth. Because of his valor and heroic deeds, the tribe adopted his name for itself and a genealogical tree is drawn with Milun Thadou as the progenitor.

However, most of the relationship between the progeny of Mr. Thadou and the descendants of the persons who emigrated to the surface of the earth are still preserved and maintained in the customs and manners such as the distribution of the meat of the hunted animals. Thus a collection of folktales like these will help us to identify the closely related tribes and chalk out the linguistic classification of the tribes involved.

8. FOLKTALES IN AID OF EXPLAINING THE SITUATION: PSYCHOLOGY OR REASONING

Another interesting aspect, which the folklore materials can help us to understand, is about the psychology or reasoning of the community concerned. For example, the Thadous had contacts with various communities, especially the Meitheis in the plains, who possessed an ancient script of their own. This might have induced the Thadous to explain away the absence of a script of their own. Thus, a folktale says that God once gave scripts to the Thadous, Nagas, and the Meitheis on leather scrolls.

Being careless or carefree by nature, the Thadous slept on the ground with the leather scrolls on their backs. While they were sleeping, the enterprising white ants (termites) ate the scrolls completely. The Nagas, being always hungry, ate the scrolls completely. But the Meitheis, being frugal and miserly, according to this Thadou folktale, removed the scrolls from their sacks and preserved them very carefully. That is why the Thadous and Nagas do not have the scripts of their own whereas Meitheis do! (Christian missionaries helped develop a script system for Thadou using the Roman script, in the beginning of the twentieth century.)

Apart from explaining away the absence of a native script for the Thadou language, this folktale reveals the subjective observation or attitude of Thadous towards the adjoining communities that are distinct or different from their own in many aspects.

9. ATTITUDE TOWARD NEIGHBORING COMMUNITIES

The attitudes of Thadous towards neighboring and related language communities are also revealed through folktales and proverbs. These stories offer a taste of the pre-literate community's cynicism or rivalry. For example, a folktale, again from the Thadou Kuki, may be mentioned here. The folk etymological genius of Thadous has resulted in a folktale which purports to explain why a well-developed large pre-literate (tribal) community among the Kuki-Chin preliterate communities is given the name they have now.

The Thadou folk etymologist plays with the syllables of the name of this community to poke fun at it, in a disparaging manner. This may be considered tribal cynicism or tribal rivalry or something of that sort! Like this tale there are quite a few proverbs in Thadou that would ridicule or praise the related and neighboring tribes for their alleged behavior. Though much of these may not be of use for bringing communities together on a friendly footing, there are several others that can be profitably used for a better understanding of these communities either from the linguistic or from the non-linguistic point of view!

Courtesy: Language in India

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