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Mizo Myths and Folklore: A Posthumanist Study

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Abstract

The origin myths of the Mizos, a time when humans and non-humans lived together in harmony will be taken into study. The time when humans interacted with non-humans, speaking with each other and understanding one another will be analysed alongside the historical aspect of Mizo society. Mizo tales speak of a time when *Keimi* (weretigers), *Khuavang* (beings that resemble goblins and are sometimes regarded as nature's guardians) and *Bakvawmtepu* (a bear-like non-human creature) roamed among the humans. Mizo indigenous belief system *Sakhua* whereby Mizos of the Pre-Christian era worshipped plants, trees and spirits of forests and animals will be studied to enable an understanding of Mizo folklore. Thus, this paper will show a post-humanistic study of Mizo myths and folklore.

Keywords: folklore, animistic practices, archetype, Mizo culture, Sakhua, Keimi, Bakvawmtepu, non-human, posthumanism.

Introduction

The Mizos, a people living in the northeastern region of India, were once worshippers of forest spirits and animals. From 1894, with the entry of Christian missionaries, they gradually changed their belief system and practices. In the hill areas of Northeast India, folklore is the key to reconstructing the past as well as understanding the culture. This was first noticed by colonial ethnographers who initiated the collecting of folktales in the second half of the nineteenth century. The folktales of the Mizos which have been passed on from generation to generation by word-of-mouth play an important role in presenting the oral history of the Mizos. The Mizos have a tradition of story-telling which continues till the present day. Folktales of the Mizos act as a source through which traditions and memories of the past can be understood as texts which depict their history. In his book *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye writes that Literature imitates the

total dream of man (1957). He uses the term ‘archetype’ which stands for a recurring pattern of experience which can be identified in works of literature and human sciences and can be identified in the form of recurring actions and reflections of primitive, universal thoughts. Frye writes that these primordial images reside deep in a person’s psyche and seek an outlet in works of art (Nagarajan, 2017, 142). This paper will deal with how primitive thoughts are embedded in the folktales of the Mizos. The first part of the paper will deal with the *Sakhua*, the indigenous belief system, of the pre-Christian Mizos explaining the myths and folklore of the Mizos. Many of the Mizo myths and tales explain how certain places of the present day came into being thus bringing to light the politics of location, territory and identity. The paper will give an in-depth study of human-animal relationships, and how human consciousness is shaped by its co-evolution with other life forms as stated by Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Posthumanism* (2014). The folktales picked out for study are taken from a collection of folktales *Folklore from Mizoram* translated by Margaret L. Pachuau, *Mizo Songs and Folktales* edited by Lalitluangliana Khiangte and *Mizo Myths* a collection of Mizo folktales translated by Cherrie L. Chhangte.

Mizo Sakhua

In the pre-Christian era, before 1894, the Mizos followed a particular mode of worship or Sakhua. Vanlalhlani defined the term Sakhua as ‘the belief and worship of one good unseen God, Pathian, dwelling in heaven, who is the creator of all and who blesses and protects all his creations’ (2009, 51). Saiaithanga, on the other hand, thinks that Sakhua is not the worship of Pathian, nor of the Ramhuai (forest/land dwelling multifarious spirits), but of Khuavang, considered by the ancestors as the one who protects and blesses (Saiaithanga, 1981, 51). Rev. Liangkhaia thinks that this Pre-Christian mode of worship was committed to spirit appeasement. Sadawt (priest, one who pierces the sacrificial animal) performed the task of offering sacrificial animals to the Ramhuai. Rev. Liangkhaia explained that Sa refers to one’s clan and Khua refers to the protector of one’s village (Liangkhaia, 1976, 21). Zairema shares this argument and says that Sakhua is the guardian spirit of one’s clan by whom one is identified (Zairema, 1988, 36). Vanlalhlani, a theologian, said that animism is only one

element of pre-Christian Mizo Sakhua. As children took the religion, Sakhua, of their father, it was taken for granted that women did not have a Sakhua as they had to follow whichever Sakhua their husbands followed. In earlier pre-Christian times, there were tales of Phûng who kidnapped people and can read the minds of its victims. Phûng is described as “a spirit, a bogey, a spook, an ogress, a genie, a goblin, a hobgoblin” (Lorrain, 1982, 364). The Mizos generally regard Phûng as a female entity and it was believed that they even had the power to inflict illnesses upon humans using sorcery and witchcraft. Serious illnesses like epilepsy were seen by pre-Christian Mizos as inflicted by the Phûng even naming the illness as Phûngzawl (under the power of the Phûng). Sacrifices would be offered to appease the Phûng spirit in attempts to cure the person with epileptic fits. As such, it was believed that earlier Mizo Sakhua began offering sacrifices to the spirits for good health and sometimes good harvests (Khangte, 2023, 180). There are tales of ogresses like Hmuichukchuriduninu, named one of the more popular Phûngpuinu (a huge ogress) in Mizo folktales. It is said that instead of a nose and a mouth, Hmuichukchuriduninu has a protruding beak like a bird’s with which she would peck the heads of little children and eat their brains and drink their blood. This Phûngpuinu is not a spirit but a creature of flesh and body who would pretend to be a human and kidnap children and devour them. Tales of Hmuichukchuriduninu always ended with a moralising note instructing children not to stray far away from home lest they may be abducted by the evil ogress.

In pre-Christian times, the Mizos worshipped spirits but were also known as people who would cast spells over their enemies and sometimes even kill them with spells. In the tale of Kungawrhi, a man from the Keimi community fell in love with her. A Keimi is a mythical tiger-man/woman, possessing the magic power of changing himself/herself at will into a tiger, and back again into a human being. These “changeling” tales of the Keimi community are retold in Margaret L. Pachuau’s retelling of the story of Kungawrhi, of how a Keimi cast a spell on her –

One day, a young man from the Keimi community lifted the footprints of Kungawrhi from the ground and preserved them by drying them over the fire. As soon as he did this, Kungawrhi fell ill and could not recover from the illness. (Pachuau, 2013, 91)

This tale speaks of a non-human creature casting a spell over a human. But Kungawrhi, the woman who is considered human, was also a supernatural creation born from a man's festering wound on his thumb, a story similar to the tale of Thumbelina. In Mizo tales, we find these magical creatures bordering on fantasy whereby there is "a network of linkages and crossings with all forms of life" (Nayar, 2014, 5).

How the world came into being – Origin myths of the Mizos

Mizo folklore gives a clear depiction of their appreciation of the natural world. The Mizos view nature as feminine; Khuazingnu, a powerful goddess, is considered to be the creator of the earth. In the origin myths of Mizos, nature plays an important role in creation. Margaret L. Pachuau, in her book *Folktales from Mizoram*, writes about the creation myth of the Mizos:

In the beginning of time, much before the formation of the world as we know it now, there existed a world that was bereft of human beings. However, there was a powerful deity known as Khuazingnu. Khuazingnu was regarded to be the benevolent deity who created the earth and all that was around it. It was believed that she also created the environment that surrounded all creation. Amongst this was the land that covered all the earth. Finally, Khuazingnu found a solution to the problem. She would throw open the windows that grew out of the sky. After this, she would also hurl water from these very windows out from the sky and onto the arid dryness of the earth, all to maintain the greenery that was slowly but steadily diminishing. To this day, very often when the rains fall, some Mizos still exclaim that 'the goddess of the heavens is dousing us with water'. (Pachuau, 2013, 25)

Mizo culture was an oral culture for a long time until the entry of the white man into their land in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Creation myths play an important role in bringing about meaning and explaining the universal question of existence. There are similarities in creation myths among various tribes and cultures of Northeast India. Vern A. Westfall writes of the importance of creation myths stating that "They provide a constructed identity through myth while etiological myth explains either human or natural phenomena. Creation myth is as extensive as the human experience in itself. It stretched across time from the earliest accounts of man to the present" (2003, 20). In Mizo society, stories were passed

on by word-of-mouth for generations and these stories have been put in print only recently. In the introduction to *Mizo Myths*, the author Cherrie L. Chhangte writes about the importance of story-telling in an oral culture. She writes about how –

...all narratives can be traced to folk stories. Tribal societies in general are very rich in oral narratives, and within these narratives, the wisdom, beliefs, preoccupations and folkways of a people can be discerned. At the core of seemingly simple tales are embedded folk attitudes regarding social structures, gender relations, spiritual beliefs and practices, relationships with nature, and survival strategies. Moreover, elements of song and dance, the poetic and the prosaic, the mythical and the ridiculous, all come together to form a unique fabric of narrative structures that are unlikely any other “modern” plot – and yet paradoxically use the same archetypes found in so much of today’s literature, in any genre. (v-vi)

In ‘The Story of the Beginning of the World’ Cherrie L. Chhangte re-tells the story of how the Mizos originated from Chhinlung rock. In this tale, Chhangte narrates how a representative couple from each human clan and each animal species were placed inside a cave by the goddess Khuazingnu. And when everyone was inside, she sealed the cave with a huge rock called Chhinlung. After generations were born inside the cave Khuazingnu lifted the Chhinlung rock thinking that enough people were born to repopulate the earth. All the different clans came buzzing out from the cave in multitudes. When the Ralte clan, known to be loud and noisy, came out from the cave, Khuazingnu decided to put back the Chhinlung rock over the mouth of the cave thinking that enough people had come out due to the great noise made by the Ralte clan. Till today, the Ralte clan are called “Ralte bengchheng” meaning noisy/rowdy Ralte.

In “Telling our Stories: Reflecting upon Oral Narratives in Mizo”, Margaret L. Pachuau writes, “The oral narratives that existed with the precolonial domains were inherently reflective of the beliefs that were pertinent to Mizo society... in many ways, the importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism and desire emerge” (Pachuau, 2023, 183-184). When one studies the oral narratives, the myths and tales of a people, it is important to remember that these tales need to be studied “without seeking realistic, logical, or rational

explanation” (Chhangte, vii) as some tales even border on the nonsensical.

The Non-Human

Non-human creatures like Bakvawmtepu, Keimi, Phûng, Khuavang Lasi and many others are seen in Mizo folklore. In Mizo folklore, these creatures exist and live among humans, sometimes in hiding and sometimes as one of the humans. Fairies and goddesses often mingled in the affairs of the humans in earlier times. The non-human entities would converse with the humans and interact with each other without many problems. Z.D. Lalmangaihi in her article “Narrating Mizo Literature for Children” writes about how the conversation between nonhuman characters in the folktales “offers a broad spectrum for the readers in terms of how orality is deeply entwined in the culture of the Mizos” (Pachau, 2023, 152). In Mizo myths and folklore, the non-human creatures are given human-like qualities and rational thought and a language similar to and understood by humans thereby showing that “a community cannot evolve without speech because speech enables a community to be formed” (152). In the tale of ‘Chhawnlaihawih’ a young girl named Chhawnlaihawih lived with her seven brothers in an iron house. She would also stay at home while her brothers went out hunting. When they returned they would sing –

My sister Chhawni, Chhawnlaihawih,
Open the eight-layered door for me (Khangte, 2002, 27).

Then Chhawnlaihawih would open the door and let them in. This tale reminds one of the story of Rapunzel who was kept “captive” in a tower by the evil witch. But in this tale, Chhawnlaihawih is not kept captive but she is kept under lock and key in a house with iron doors for safety reasons. Bakvawmtepu, a bear-like non-human creature, heard the song and memorized it and went to their door three days later and sang the same song. When Chhawnlaihawih opened the door for him, he abducted her. When her brothers found out that she was kidnapped they rushed home. After a long and tiresome journey, it was her youngest brother, her only brother left alive, who rescued her from the evil Bakvawmtepu. In Mizo tales, non-human creatures like Bakvawmtepu are depicted as villains that disrupt the lives of the humans. In the tale of

'Mauruangi' (Pachau, 2013, 69-80), Mauruangi's mother was pushed off a bridge by her husband on their way back from their jhoom. Soon after her death, he took their neighbour as his wife; this woman was cruel to Mauruangi and would never give her good food to eat. One day, when Mauruangi went to the stream, she met her mother who had transformed into a catfish. On seeing her beloved daughter thin and frail, she lovingly told her to always come to the stream whenever she was hungry. They would have endless conversations as though nothing had changed. Even after her transformation into a non-human, Mauruangi's mother was still the nurturing, ever-giving mother. Alas, Mauruangi's stepmother came to find out that her mother had turned into a catfish and was feeding Mauruangi with fish and other delicacies. In anger, her stepmother called the men of the village to catch Mauruangi's mother, the catfish. Mauruangi heard of this and so she ran to her mother and told her of the plans to capture her. She told her mother that she should swim towards the mouth of the stream when she told her to swim towards the bottom of the stream and swim towards the direction opposite to what she would tell her to escape being caught. When the villagers were unable to catch the catfish because of her they stuffed her mouth with a rag and took her away. After they caught the catfish they cut it up and distributed the meat among themselves. Mauruangi gathered the bones of her mother, the catfish, and placed them in an earthen pot. She also took her mother's heart and buried it in a white ant hill. It turned into a beautiful Phunchawng tree. The tree soon flowered and gave nectar and when Mauruangi sang to the tree –

Mother lean gently
 Mother phunchawng darhniangi
 Mother lean gently. (Pachau 2013, 73)

the tree would lean down, enabling Mauruangi to consume its sweet nectar. Once again, her stepmother found out that she was being fed by her mother who had turned into a tree. The men of the village were once again called to cut down the phunchawng tree. Mauruangi shouted with all her might –

Mother stand your ground
 Mother phunchawng darhniangi
 Mother stand your ground. (Pachau 2013, 73)

Mauruangi's mother was able to stand her ground while her daughter was shouting out to her, but after Mauruangi was taken away, her mother was unable to stand strong and was cut down by the men of the village. Even after her mother transformed not once, but twice into a non-human form Mauruangi still called her "mother" and by no other name likewise her mother still nurtured her like she did when she was a human. This clearly shows the intermingling of humans with non-humans, how one needs the other for survival. The story goes on and her step-mother continues to mistreat her. Mauruangi is rescued by a Saza, a Serow, when she is killed by her stepmother. This Serow is not given any other name like Bakvawmtepu so it can be considered to be in its true "animal" form when he rescued Mauruangi. Mauruangi then takes care of the Serow's child and sings to the baby narrating how she once used to be the wife of a king from the plains but is now taking care of her master, the Serow's child. A Serow, an animal, is given human characteristics of love and sympathy whereby the human returns the good deed by taking care of his child.

In the tale of Khualtungamtawna we find a man, a human, fall in love with a woman of the Keimi (half-tiger, half-human) community and in the story of Kungawrhi we find a man of the Keimi community fall in love with a human-like woman born under supernatural conditions. In both these tales revolving around the Keimi, women are depicted as objects to be married off to suit the sentiments of the male members of the family. In the story of Khualtungamtawna, the brothers of the Keimi woman were killed by Khualtungamtawna. Not knowing about all this, he fell in love with the Keimi woman as he was captivated by her beauty. Her father and her brothers who were still alive agreed to give her a hand in marriage so that they would be able to take their revenge and kill Khualtungamtawna. So, she becomes a mere tool as she cannot voice out that she is not willing to marry the hateful man who killed her brothers. In the tale of Kungawrhi, Kungawrhi was unable to recover from an illness. Her concerned father gave out the order, "Whoever can cure my daughter from illness shall be given her hand in marriage, bereft of the bride price" (Pachau, 2013, 91). In both tales, the women were never asked for their opinion in choosing their husbands. The Mizos have a saying "Hmeichhe thu thu ni suh,

Chakai sa sa ni suh” which means “A woman’s word is no word to be taken seriously in the same way that crab’s meat is not considered meat” which justifies how women are silent spectators even in situations which are directly related to them.

Conclusion

In the tales selected for study, we find the mingling of humans with non-humans, how in some stories the lives of humans are controlled by the non-humans and vice-versa in other stories. In these tales, there is a uniform show of power from both sides; at times when the humans are not strong enough they are helped by the gods and deities. Many Mizos still believe that having a bee hive in one’s home is a good sign for the future. They also believe that finding geckos in their homes brings good fortune. These beliefs are a clear sign that Mizos were a people who lived peacefully with animals and non-human life forms. In his book *Posthumanism*, Pramod K. Nayar writes about the interconnectedness between humans and non-humans, how “New cultural studies and theory... emphasizes the human-animal relationship as one based on empathy and connectedness” (97). He also explains that “critical posthumanism does not see the human as the centre of all things, it sees the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life” (5). Linkage of all forms of living things is seen in this study of Mizo myths and folklore where we find the co-evolving of humans with the non-humans. And so, in the words of Pramod K Nayar, critical posthumanism “entails an ethics and a *politics* of response and responsibility toward all forms of life, toward difference” (101). In Mizo tales, as seen in the tale of Mauruangi, the non-human, including plants and trees, is centrally situated in the fabric of human life forms. Fairies, ogres, animals and bear-like creatures, creatures that are not ‘complete’ humans bring to light “the boundedness of the human, the ‘status’ of life and living” (Nayar 101). This aspect of Mizo folktales also brings forth an alternative reading of Mizo culture and history. Stories, or the act of story-telling, become a significant instrument in imparting a deeper knowledge of society and culture, and how belief systems evolve with time.

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