

Human Attitudes towards the Animals' World in the Traditional A'chik Folk Songs of Meghalaya: A Sacred Relationship between Human and Animal

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Abstract

Folk song is one of the traditional cultural practices of the indigenous tribe that connects humanities with the animal species in their lives. Anil Boro in the book *"Folk culture of the indigenous tribe of Northeast India"* noted that folk culture denotes both tangible and intangible heritage and expressive traditions of a folk group or community of people (qtd in Girin P, 2017, p. 57). Hence, folk song is one of the cultures of the tribe that addresses the mankind's relationality with non-human contents. In the same manner, the A'chik belongs to the indigenous hill community having rich traditional cultural belief and practices which offer significance sacred relationship between human being and animals. The study aims at highlighting some of the folk songs that will point to the general principles governing the A'chiks community attitudes, behavior towards animal species in the indigenous folk song. The study also intends to find out into how various traditional folk songs may be taken as a means of ecological wisdom for the sacred relationship between human being and the animal world.

Keywords: The A'chik, folk song, animal world

1. Introduction

The A'chik life world is intimately associated with the oral literature which is informed by folk songs tenaciously handed down from one generation to another due to lack of script. There are various songs sung on different occasions as well as sacrificial ceremonies. Various songs and prayers is said to have constituted the traditional A'chik poetry like the prayers during the sacrificial ceremonies that offer human beings association with animal species. Lucy M (2015) noted that folk songs are intrinsic and inseparable part of the A'chik culture (p. 110). Traditionally, songs are the sacred words of argument, only which the deities can understand. Misuse of these songs, which is a sacrificial song, brings down appropriate

punishment in the forms of fatal illness and blindness (Rongmuthu, 1996, pp. 12). Iris Watre in *Music and Musical Instruments of the Garo Tribe of North-East* (2007) mentions how the songs were also used for renewing the fertility of soil and crops, for invoking the spirits-gods for exhibiting magical feats and even for curing the diseases (p. 26). Hence, songs, prayers, and poetry are the medium through which man communicated with other fellow humans as well as with nature of the A'chik community in the ancient time.

2. Human and animal species in the Folk Song

The A'chik indigenous tribe lives in close proximity and still lives life with

animal species and it is with animal species often a part of in the traditional folk songs. A historical traditional folk song consists of informing on how human express his actions, thoughts, feelings and attitudes about the surroundings and also to his fellow human beings.

Harendra M W (2010) in the book “*A’chik Aganbewalrang*” pointed out that *Doroa* is a song sung during the *Wangala* festival. It is a song sung in praise or to please or appease the *Minima Rokkime*, the goddesses of rice usually addressed to *Misi Saljong*, the god of blessing. According to the legendary narrative that the supreme deity, the creator invited all the living things to himself in the underground to appraise each of its function, to reveal himself to them and teach them to celebrate the gift of life by dancing and singing to the rhythm of musical instruments. In the celebration all the gods and goddesses were invited; *Misi Saljong* (god of blessings), *Susime* (god of Wealth), *Minima Rokkime* (goddess of fertility), and each of them have been appropriated a duty. It was believed that *Asi* and *Malja* were sent to represent the mankind in the celebration but failed to turn up at the function. Hence, *Asi* was killed by the tiger and *Malja* was taken by mermaid. So, the folk song into the mankind could not be reached.

According to the historical narratives, *Noro Mande*, the first man on earth did not know how to sing *Doroa*. But the gods and goddesses happens to quarrel over the death of *Dore* (a white headed babbler), and over the broken leg of a *Bengbul* (frog) because they were the only two who knew how to sing *Doroa*. As there was none left to sing, descendents of gods and goddesses tried to sing it by moving their

lips but it seems they could not utter the words, so, it was left again to the *Tatara Rabuga*, the creator to revive and refashion *Dore* and *Bengbul*. From the living being of the land and of the water, the ‘*prawn*’ went to the land of gods and goddesses to learn *Doroa* for seven years and seven seasons in the underworld. After coming back from there, he demonstrated and taught how to sing *Doroa*. Since then, the *squirrel* that live on trees and a field *cricket* that makes hole on the ground imitated *Doroa*. Thus, the first man *Noro Mande* started imitating it and began to sing *Doroa* (Marak. H.W, 2010, 88-89). Interestingly, *Doroa* is a prayer offered in the form of song and address to *Minima Rokkime*, the goddess of rice to come back and seek blessings for a good harvest in the next season.

Dirge or *Grappmangtata* or *Kabe* is the traditional A’chik beliefs and practices regarding life after death, spirits, and reincarnation. *Kabe* literally means lament, it is a funeral dirge, a song of lamentation at the death of loved one. *Mihir S N* in the book “*Pagitchamni Ku’bisring*” (1996, 47) speaks about the origin of *Kabe*. According to the historical narrative, the ancient man, *Eman Me’a Banggi Me’chik* lived in the deep pool called *Dengreng Wari* in the Rompa Stream. It was the day when *Eman Me’a* heard *Kabe* for the first time from a distance forest. Mistaking the voice that was crying with painful hearts to be human voice, he kept silence in fear. But, it was the bird named *Gangsime Gangchime* (the female hornbill) which fully moved and made him forget his way back home and also where he is heading to (*Mihir S N*, 1996. P. 45). After hearing the voice of the bird and he further looked around and found the bird from a short

distance of the stream. It was the female hornbill lamenting for the death of her husband with painful hearts. At the same time, *Banggi Me'chik* the wife of *Eman Me'a* was so fear for not being reached home till late at night informed the villagers. Upon hearing the news, though it was dangerous to search him in the deep forest, they went out with *bilcham* (traditional torches) to look for him. But luckily he managed to reach home safely. Then he narrated in details about the story of the bird to his wife saying:

In this way she cried (that her instructed her to do so), you too, at the side of my death bed do the same for me. This is what I'm telling you, what I want to say to you (qtd in Lucy M, 2015, 95).

The moment, he completed the narration and died in his sleep. Whatever the story says, after his death, she did the same to her husband too. After this, the story says that *Kabe* began to be used as dirge among the A'chiks during the funeral ceremony (Mihir N S, 1996). Hence, dirge is sung by female members of the bereaved family, close relatives with a broken hearts lamenting for the lost of their loved one in the form of a song. *Kabe* is basically a recital of merits of the departed, mostly of love, affection and an appreciation for the good deeds lead by the deceased as well as a prayer for him to reach his goal without mishap.

Traditionally, the A'chiks believes in the existence of spirit in man which after death; wend its way to a designated place, there to dwell for a period of time before being re-incarnated. Julius L.R.M (2000) noted in his book "*Balpakram*" that the spirits of the dead go to a place known to them as *Mangru-Mangram-Chitmang-Bri-*

Bolmang-Chiga (the land of spirits) along with the things that are given to the deceased at the time of death. Thus, the designated place for the spirit of the deceased is believed to be *Chitmang hill* where the soul of the dead lives. But the life in the land of spirit is not at all happy one and hence, they look forward for reincarnation. It is believed that reincarnation of soul in the next life depend upon what sort of life he/she live while on earth. As Mihir N.S (1995) in the book "*Hill Societies*" noted that a certain conception punishment and reward does not want in their beliefs, for sin in one life affects the form of reincarnation in the next. If one lives a virtuous life on earth, it is expected to be born again into the same motherhood as before which is believed to be the highest reward. For the good life reincarnation takes place in human form but the bad deeds of life reincarnation come in the shape of insects and plants or may be in the form of animals and birds. They also wish the spirit a good life at *Balpakram*. It is believed that through *Kabe*, the A'chiks pray for a good after life of the deceased in the land of spirits. Traditionally, the A'chik believed that the relatives or the family members can lead the spirit of the deceased to a better life in the life after death through a soulful rendering of *Kabe*.

In yet another folk-song that brings out the attitudes of human being and their sacred association with animal species is known as *Serejing*. According to the historical narrative, it was informed that one day, by the name *Serejing* were lamenting for the death of her mother and father; the deer came forward making the relation with *Serejing* with the sense of giving courage in her hard time in the form

of melodious chorus. As soon as she heard a melodious song of the deer from a short distance, it was the deer voice which fully moved her and made her to blank out the suffering and sorrow that they had been going through. According to Marak J.L.R, the main theme of serejing ring'a was a funeral wail or lamentation. So, on the death of her mother and father an A'chik lady named *Serejing* sadly lamented in the following way:

*Alas! I am alone without a mother r a father
Now I have to wander wretched and sad,
I will look after the house and its surroundings
And keep their memories alive
Alas! Where else will I see my mother's face? (qtd. in Marak J.L. 1999, 23)*

The above mentioned connection reveals that the human has a sacred connection with the animal for the harmonious relationship with animal species as well as nature and environment. In this aspect, the A'chik has always been connected to animal species which is the bond of intimate relationship between humans with the animal world. For instance, when there was none to be with the human known as *Serejing*, we find that the deer came forward making the companion to sympathize with and speak to the human in the form of chorus to forget sorrow and sufferings by which their sacred attachment with animal species may be indicated and proved easily.

3. Evaluation

What emerges in this aspect is that one can find the attitudes of human being in the form of love and respect embedded

in the sacred association. The mankind *Asi* and *Malja* invites the wrath of gods and goddesses in the form of misfortunes and have become the symbol of disobedience for their violation to authority and to cosmic order. Hence, *Asi* was killed by the tiger and *Malja* was taken by mermaid. It can also be mentioned here that it was *squirrel* that live on trees and a field *cricket* that makes hole on the ground imitated *Doroo* and hence teach the human being about the song *Doroo*. Since then, the *Doroo* folk song has been imitated to be sung by the A'chik community. Hence, one can have assumed that there was a sacred relationship between mankind and the animal species in their lives.

The A'chik traditional folk song of dirge or *Kabe* was literally a lament for the lost of loved one. It can be mentioned here that it was the A'chik man who happened to hear the song *Kabe* from the female hornbill lamenting for the death of her husband and hence, he told his wife to lament like this at the time of his death. Since then, dirge or *kabe* is sung by female members of the bereaved family, close relatives with a broken hearts lamenting for the lost of their loved one in the form of a song in the traditional A'chiks community even this day. In this line, the sacred attachment with the animal species can be indicated and located easily in the A'chik traditional folk song.

On the other hand, the meaningful recollect of all the good deeds of the deceased in *kabe* or dirge helps in winning some appreciation for the deceased in the land of spirits. What matter in this, it is the belief and practices that has been surviving down by words of mouth from one generation to the next. It is evident that the A'chik folk song involves and

associated with human beings action, behavior, and attitudes towards natural environment as whole. Marak L, in *Myths and Arhetypes in Garo Folk Narratives* (2015), remarks that all the theme of the folk songs essential are of- origin of the earth, origin of the *Wangala* dance, courting through songs, love and romance, pure merriment, death of the love one, emotions, expression of grief and sorrow. The A'chiks expresses their joy and sorrows, feelings and emotions, reflections of their way of life, zest for life, humour in life, fears, beliefs in gods and goddesses, in things supernatural. These beliefs and customs have also had great influence on their thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards animal species, and have resulted into the sacred relationship between human being and animal species.

4. Concluding note

If we look deeper into the A'chik cultural beliefs and practices, we learn and discover that folk-songs of the A'chik indigenous community reveal attitudes in their cultural traditional beliefs and practices which carry a sacred ecological relationship with the animal species. The folk songs like "*Doroa*", "*Serejing*" etc, according to which the entire songs are basically reveals the attitudes, actions, thoughts and behavior of human beings into the sacred relationship with the animal species. Though these songs are connected with ceremony in nature, it reflects culture and tradition of the A'chiks which connotes the attitudes into the sacred attachment between human beings with the animal world. In other

words, most of the dances and songs find their outlets in different activities connected with rites and rituals of the agricultural practices often partake with nature and hence adopt as part of human community. Many of the A'chiks tradition and culture based beliefs and practices cannot be proved empirically because they are not base on acquired knowledge from sense-experience. Yet they have a strong grip on their lives. The A'chik beliefs have a firm grip on their minds, emotions and even on their lives which ultimately makes the ways, thoughts and behavior into the sacred harmonious existence with the non human contents.

As a conclusion, it can be argued that today, the days of traditional belief and practices are gone by and the tradition and culture of the A'chik is drastically changed and is replaced by modern culture under the force of development strategies that need to look back and examine how the traditional culture relate to biodiversity. It is worth mentioning that traditional cultural practices and beliefs has a sacred contact with the animal world are now being modified in the name of modernity. Ironically, such attitude not only takes away the value of traditional culture, but also diminish the ecological wisdom that offer the recognition of values in animal species. Hence, perhaps, the only way we must agree and take into consideration is that traditional cultural practice and beliefs have a sacred ecological content into the relation of mankind with its animal species into the ecological chain of harmonious existence.

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