



***Liandote Unau and Khupting-Ngambawm: Communicating Culture through Oral Narratives among the Vaiphei community of North-East India***

Nunchawii Hatlei\*

**Abstract**

Oral culture, as defined by Walter J Ong, is “a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing and even of the possibility of writing.” Due to the absence of writing, an individual’s verbal memory is a “valued asset” in those cultures. In the present day, the narratives, songs, speeches, riddles, tenets, etc., that had been passed on in the verbal form, became the carriers of a community’s cultural development and progress. Stories have come to be shaped by their social conditions, and it is in this way that an intertwined relationship exists between oral art forms and the society that produced them. Looking into the oral tradition and lore is an important part of understanding the culture of any community around the world. A study of the varied practices, festivals, rituals and attire of the people is necessary in order to decode the signs embedded in the oral narratives of the people. Not much was known about the tribes of North-East India. They reside in the geographical region known as “Zomia,” as termed by Willem van Schendel. The paper is a study on the cultural narratives of the Zo ethnic group of North-East India who were historically isolated from the rest of the country. With special reference to the Vaipheis, many ancient ways of life, tradition, beliefs changed with the acceptance of Christianity in the twentieth Century. Much of the customs have been modified in keeping with the change in the belief system of the people. However, the customs and beliefs of the pre-Christian era continue to live on in the narratives passed down orally. These tales preserve the distinct cultural heritage of the community along with the interpretations of the world the Vaiphei people inhabit. This paper will discuss the communication

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\* Assistant Professor of English, School of Language and Cultural Communication, Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU), Dongkietieh, Nongrah, Shillong

of culture and traditional beliefs as seen in the tales of the Vaiphei community. Selected tales will be analyzed in relation to the issue of communication and interpretation of the cultural signs and symbols embedded in the oral narratives of the people.

**Keywords:** Cultural Memory, Cultural Narratives, Memory Studies, *Mizo, Vaiphei*

The term ‘oral narrative’ refers to the tales, legends, and myths that are passed down orally from generation-to-generation. It is part of a larger body of works or literature known as oral literature, traditional literature or folk literature that is delivered by word of mouth. Folk literature is an essential part of a people’s folklore and understanding the culture of a community. The study of folklore, thus, encompasses several disciplines such as linguistics, cultural studies, anthropology, ethnography, psychology, comparative religion, mythology, and literature. It is, therefore, impossible to give a single definition of the term ‘folklore’. Vladimir Propp defines Folklore as “... the art of oppressed classes, both peasants and workers, but also of the intermediate strata that gravitate toward the lower social classes. One can speak with some reservations of lower middle-class folklore, but never of the folklore of the aristocracy” (Propp 5). Another folklorist Dan Ben-Amos defines folklore as “an organic phenomenon . . . so accordingly, folklore is one of these three: a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, or a kind of art . . . Folklore is not thought of as existing without or apart from a structured group . . . its existence depends on its social context . . . As an artistic process, folklore may be found in any communicative medium; musical, visual, kinetic, or dramatic. . . . In sum, folklore is artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 14). From these, we can understand that folklore is a vehicle to communicate the culture and history of a community. Far from being mere entertainment, oral narratives encode values, beliefs, and historical consciousness, making them vital cultural signs worthy of close analysis.

In the context of communication of culture and indigenous knowledge, the idea of tradition and a certain involvement with the past is ever present. Stith Thompson stressed on the importance of tradition in the study of folklore: “The common idea present in all

folklore is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record” (Thompson 134). Moreover, the association of folklore with the study of the past cannot be ignored as “folklore is an echo of the past, but at the same time it is also the vigorous voice of the present” (Sokolov 15). Regarding the connection of history with folklore and oral literature, the historian Collingwood remarks, “The past which the historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which is, in some sense, still living in the present” (Carr 20). Folklore is, thus, more than survival of the past but also the presence of the past in the present, albeit in new shapes and structures.

While folklore and history have certain similarities, it is different in several ways. Folklore uses symbols in elaborated narratives and in rituals to encapsulate, or intensify experience and provide a release from reality. Folkloric evidence is different from historical documentation because it often constitutes fantasy, but that does not detract it from its truthfulness or significance. Alan Dundes claims, “It is not easy to find a rationale for the irrational, to make sense of ‘nonsense,’ but that is what folklorists seriously interested in interpretation must try to do” (Dundes 27). Dundes’ emphasis on interpretation is significant as it points out multiplicity of interpretation of a singular event in a literary work can occur. While focused on interpretations, folklorists are equally concerned with aesthetic and expressive aspects of culture and the people and societies that make and respond to creative acts. This collection of traditional material is preserved and passed on from one generation to the other. As it is being handed down the ages, it has with it versions and variations shaped by memory, an immediate need or purpose, and the degree of individual talent. Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin in their essay ‘Interpretation and Identity: Can the Work Survive the World?’ pointed out that “multiplicity of meaning, subtle and complex ambiguity, is frequently a positive and vital feature of literary discourse” (John and Lopes 93). Thus, multiple interpretations and openness of interpretations are not signs of confusion, but rather strengths that allow for creativity and literary discourse.

The importance of memory in oral narratives cannot be stressed enough. It can be used to formulate a history of marginalised people. While memory is regarded as not being credible in a traditional historiographical study, it is effective in formulating an alternative history or in unmasking marginalized accounts of events or time periods. Jan Vansina notes that remembering is an activity – a re-creation of what once was (147). The oral tradition of a people in recreating history and culture is important; however, it may also be marred by time. The concept of memory, that is, recollecting and remembering past events, is essential in making auto-ethnobiography accounts of the people. Jawaharlal Handoo observes that, “an oral tale originates in the mind and is preserved by memory, carried by memory by skilled narrators in traditional language” (137); thereby, acknowledging through this remark the importance of memory in the study of folklore. According to Maurice Halbwachs, the society impacts the mind to the extent where the latter reformulates the memories, and this informs an individual’s own recollection of events through the prism of the community. Paul Connerton asserts that “images and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances” and that memory is not individual but a cultural one (Connerton 4). Jan Assmann calls the process of recollection of memory as “cultural” and considers “memory” as being able to be realised in and through the processes of social communication, just as it is with respect to consciousness that individual memory functions. Due to the absence of written accounts, these oral traditions have to be understood as a means of a community imparting knowledge to the next generation and as a means of remembering what once was. For the purpose of this paper, all oral narratives have been translated into English by the author.

In the case of the *Vaiphei* indigenous community of the North-East of India, several of their folklore can be seen as capsules from the past that continue to shape contemporary society. The community in question belongs to the *Mizo/Zohnahthlak* ethnic group, also known as *Chin-Kuki-Mizo*, who are among many of the ethnic groups of North-East India that geographically share the borders of neighbouring countries - China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. They reside in the Indian states of Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, Meghalaya, parts of Tripura, and Nagaland. The mythical belief of the

*Zohnahthlak* is that, originally, they came out from *Chhinlung*, *Sinlung*, *Khul*, or *Khur* which means ‘covering rock,’ which may be interpreted as present-day Silung in China, bordering the Shan State in the East. Several attempts have been made to rationalise the myth or *Khul*. One song that verifies this myth goes as:

*Ka thang e! Khul ah ka pian in Aw/ Ka chun le Zua’n  
thangnan chembang ei chawi e;/ Namtin Guallai lawi  
ang ka thang e!*

(I am famous! Since I was born from *Khul*; / My  
parents praise me in the village of many people; /  
Among many people I am famous). (Soilalsiam 61)

Although historians are not in exact agreement concerning the origins of these tribes, they do not deviate from the fact that these *Zo* tribes share a common root and were a migratory race. One common finding of historians and scholars who study the history and origin of these tribes is that they had been together at one point of time and gradually migrated south-west from China through Burma (Myanmar) to their present settlement in the North-Eastern states of India like Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and their peripheral regions. Political unrest, forced labour, and natural calamities compelled the people to move on to the Chindwin Valley, then onto the present Chin State in Myanmar. They then moved eastwards, across the Tiau River, and settled in present day Mizoram. However, the strong Pawi warrior tribe forced them to move northwards for survival. Ultimately, a section of the population decided to part ways with the others at one point, and this is remembered in the phrase “*An vai in an phe*” in the Duhlian dialect meaning “All of them departed” and the name given to the families that departed then, *Vaiphei*, stuck ever since then. The path north led them from the hills to the valley of Manipur and this move is recollected in a folksong titled, *Phaigam zawtna La (Song of Migration to the Plains)* which runs as follows:

*Saka Pawi pân kêl bang ei naw a,/Al bang i da man  
in/ Teimei Vangkhoa lam bang zawng ing e/*

(Like goats, the Northern Pawi man chased us, / With heavy hearts and heavy steps/ We trudge towards the Teimei (Meitei) plains). (Khuphau 6)

When the Central Government started ‘schedulisation’ of the tribal population after India got her independence in 1947, a majority of the ethnic communities residing in the state of *Mizoram* preferred to identify themselves as *Mizo*. This was formalized when the Lushai Hills District Act, 1954, was passed by the Indian Parliament. On the contrary, the *Zo* community that settled in Manipur further diversified into different sub-tribes with nomenclatures of their own. Among the numerous tribes, the *Vaiphei* were one to have been recognized in the Constitution of India in accordance with the Scheduled Tribes Order of 1950 (Vaiphei 6).

Prior to the arrival of the Christian missionaries, the *Vaiphei* language had no writing system. Impressed by the success of J H Lorrain and F W Savidge in creating a *Mizo* alphabet from the Roman script, a similar *Vaiphei* alphabet was made by the efforts of Watkin R Roberts, a Christian missionary, with the help of the first converts of the community, *Pu Thangkai* and *Pu Lungpau*, in the year 1911 (Chawnmang 5). Literature came into print from this time heralding a new chapter in the progress of the community. However, tales of the people continued to be passed down orally recalling the days before the Gospel came to them. The customs and beliefs of the pre-Christian era continue to live on in the narratives passed down orally. These tales preserve the distinct cultural heritage of the community along with the interpretations of the world the *Vaiphei* people inhabit. This paper will discuss the communication of culture and traditional beliefs as seen in the tales of the *Vaiphei* community.

To understand the tales that will be discussed, an understanding of *Vaiphei* cultural values and beliefs is required. *Vaiphei* society is a patriarchal one with a heavy emphasis on respect for elders. Anyone older to the individual is greeted with the prefix ‘U’ before their names. A married man/woman is no longer called by their given names, rather they are acknowledged by the name of their first-born child. For instance, Mr Lalpu and Mrs Khualnu are now known as “Tingcha’s Father” and “Tingcha’s Mother” - Tingcha being the

name of their first-born child. It is also considered inappropriate to call one's parents by their names as *Vaiphei* community accord a high importance to parents and elders. With regards to their belief system, the *Vaiphei* believed in a supreme being known as *Pathian*. Every object in nature is believed to be the abode of spirits, referred to as *Huai*. The people would offer sacrifices to the *Huai* that lived in their surroundings to appease them as well as to seek good fortune, be it in times of harvest or war. The blood and flesh of pigs, dogs, fowls and *mithun* (*Bos Frontalis*), were used in those sacrifices. Rites were performed at the location selected for *jhum* cultivation to cleanse the land of spirits before work began.

The *Vaiphei* were a people that were attuned to the natural world and beliefs arose due to their encounters with supernatural forces. One such superstitious belief is that one must never treat death in a flippant manner or perform the rituals and ceremonies as a source of merry making. In the case of death in the family, the corpse would be propped against the middle post of the house in a sitting position while the family prepared for the funeral. This is known as '*Sanglai*' and the dead body would be dressed up and his/her coffin would be packed with provisions for their journey to the afterlife. This custom was seen as a proper farewell for a family member and it was also a mandatory ritual for family members (Paukhawkai 5).cWith regards to the afterlife, the *Vaiphei* believed the soul heads either to the *Mithi Khua* (Village of the Dead) or *Pialgal/Pialral* (Home of the Warriors). Entry to *Pialgal* was only for the brave warriors, *Thansua-pa* or *Thangchhuah-pa* who had successfully hunted different animals and had collected the heads of enemies. *Mithi Khua*, on the other hand, was the place everyone could enter into regardless of their status. In the *Mithi Khua* (land of the dead), the souls of the dead continue their earthly occupations. They even have to construct houses for their dwelling. The souls of the dead feel pain and hurt, eat and sleep and work in the *Mithi Khua*. But life there is supposed to be only an imitation of earthly life.

The following section will focus on how oral narratives evolve and differ based on the speaker, context, and time. Oral narratives of people evolve through time and space, taking into account the creativity of the narrator and the context in which he/she tells the tale.

Folktales are dynamic and evolve based on time, audience, gender of the narrator, and immediate context in which they are narrated. The tale of *Liandote Unau/Liandovate Unau* is well-known among the *Mizo* community. Different versions of the tale exist depending on the region and the variant of the language used by the narrator. While the *Vaiphei* called it *Liandote Unau*, the *Lusei/Duhlian*-speaking community knew it as *Liandovate Unau*. The name of the younger brother also differs according to each narrator, where it changes from either 'Thanghau' or 'Tuaisiala' depending on the narrator. We will look at both the versions of the tales in the *Vaiphei* and *Lusei/Duhlian* languages in order to understand how tales can evolve depending on context, speaker and time.

The story of the two brothers, Liando/Liandova and Thanghau/Tuaisiala who were orphaned due to the death of their father and the remarriage of their mother, is a tale that preaches familial love and loyalty. The brothers had a hard childhood filled with neglect, abuse, and near-starvation. At one point, they are believed to have had to split a millet grain into two to share and fill their hungry bellies. As they had no immediate family to look after them, the brothers were shunned by the village. They would only get the leftover food from a feast, and their requests for food grains would be answered by tossed baskets of rice husk. Their fortune, however, changed when the villagers gave the discarded bladder of a python as their share of its killing. The brothers discovered that the bladder contained precious bells, gongs, necklaces, and gold coins which made them wealthier than even their village chief. Among the *Vaiphei*, these treasures are said to have been the property of a *Pawi* (name of a community) merchant who was swallowed by the python. While in the *Lusei* version, the identity of the merchant is believed to have been from the *Paite* community. This change in the merchant's tribe can be interpreted in the manner in which, the mentioned tribe in the respective versions of the tale, probably lived in close proximity to the narrator's tribe. Hence, changing the name of the community made it easier for the listener to identify better with the man who was the benefactor of the brothers' wealth.

Since times immemorial, the motif of entities that bless humans with unimaginable wealth has been present in many cultures.

However, the blessed ones would either become greedy, or overreach their limit, or they would forget their roots and become arrogant, both leading to their downfall. This type of moralistic story is popular with parents or grandparents, narrating it to youngsters to drive home the lesson that pride goes before a fall. This value of humility and respect for tradition is taught to *Vaiphei* children with another episode from the tale of *Liandote Unau*. The story goes that Liando marries the daughter of the village chief and gives them a bride-price befitting her status. Once again, a difference is noted in the name of the lady, said to be Sialchawng among the *Vaiphei*; while known by the name of Tuaichawng among the *Lusei*. Back to the story, the news of the wealth of Liando and Thanghau spread to the neighbouring villages when their mother came to confirm the rumours. She is said to have travelled due to her greedy disposition, and not out of love for her sons. She dies tragically after throwing herself from a tree, in regret over losing out on the wealth her sons gained. On her passing, Liando is reluctant to conduct the last rites - 'Sanglai' for his mother, and instead hangs her corpse in his granary where he kept a dog to lick the dripping blood to keep the floor clean.

As already mentioned, the *Vaiphei* would perform last rites for the dead for at least three days with the body placed in the centre of the home. The lack of respect for traditions and rituals by the brothers can be interpreted as either wilful ignorance or arrogance in their material success. The tale of the two brothers can be interpreted as a moralistic story of familial love and bonding. Alternatively, it is a cautionary tale of the perils of greed, revenge and disrespect to elders. *Vaiphei* society is one in which values such as altruism, self-sacrifice, community-sharing, and respect for elders, are prized over individualistic outlooks. Also, superstitions and fear of the unknown marked their lives as well. As a result, reluctance to perform traditional roles and sacrifices is seen as an act of perversion and detrimental to community living. Several symbols embedded in the story will make sense only for an audience well-versed in the myths of the people. Traditionally, a snake or python is considered a source of wealth and prosperity in tribal lore. In the famed *Chhinlung/Khul* origin myth of the people, the ancestors of the people were said to emerge from the cave after a brave warrior slayed the serpent that was guarding the exit. He earned the moniker 'Zahawnga' meaning

“opened the way for hundreds of people” and was widely respected. After their migration, the people who became the *Mizo*, began to populate the world and prosper in time. The tale of the two brothers wherein they gain wealth from the bladder of the dead python, reiterates the motif of dead serpents being a repercussion to material success and social mobility. Food and drinks are important aspects of one’s culture and often many stories are tied to the concept of dietary concerns. In any ritual or ceremony, *Zu*, traditional fermented rice-beer is a mandatory part, especially when a maiden’s hand is to be asked for marriage. *Zu* was a staple of any festival or feast, and the number of *Zu-hai* (barrels of *Zu*) around the porch indicated the wealth of the person throwing the feast. The drink was also used by the village priest when he had to chant incantations. Anyone with an ailment would get sprinkled with *Zu* while the priest performed the necessary ceremony. Divination was also done with the help of *Zu*. The villagers of yore would place a bowl of rice wine and drop a leaf on it to divine whether their expedition would be successful or not. In another instance, *Zu* was used to cleanse the house after death had occurred in the family. The priest would sprinkle the wine around the corners of the house to please the spirit and he would request the soul to depart peacefully to the Afterlife. With the acceptance of Christianity by the community, some of these practices have stopped while some have been modified.

Tea has now replaced the importance of *Zu* in all cultural events and ceremonies. The phrase “*Zu dawm*” (“brought *Zu*”) has been altered to “*Thingpi dawm*” (‘brought tea’) with regards to the hand of a maiden in marriage. Previously, a death ritual would not be complete without the men sipping on *Zu* and performing the last rites of the dead person. Nowadays, tea is served for all coming to pay respect to the dead person. Burial ceremonies are conducted according to the Christian faith. The following tale of *Khupting and Ngambawm* will be an examination of how the concept of *Zu*, socio-economic status and magic are represented in oral narratives. Although ancient *Vaiphei* society was egalitarian, one’s socio-economic status played an important role in courtship and marriage. In the tale of *Khupting leh Ngambawm*, the star-crossed lovers could not be together because of differences in status and wealth, even though their mothers had promised to marry their children when they

grew up. One version of the tale had the explanation of Ngambawm being a shapeshifter, as the reason for Khupting's mother going back on her word. Another narrator based the refusal on Ngambawm being an orphan and, thus, not rich enough for her daughter. Different narrators, therefore, give differing versions of the tale based on the audience and time.

With regards to the cultural significance of *Zu*, Ngambawm could not even afford to bring *Zu* while asking for Khupting's hand in marriage. Her family mocked him for the disrespect they felt he gave to them. While the usual bride-price was *mithun*, beads, necklaces and gongs, the first step towards marriage started with a pot of *Zu* being brought and decisions made over sips of rice-beer. Ngambawm had to skip this mandatory step due to his poverty, yet the interpretation made was that of disrespect for tradition and wilfulness. In the context of how oral narratives evolve through time, this episode from *Khupting leh Ngambawm* serves as an important marker of the change from ancient to modern society. To an audience of children below ten years of age, the story was changed from "not bringing *Zu*" to "not bringing tea". The change was made as the young audience were only familiar with *Zu* being an intoxicating drink. Secondly, the cultural practice of marriage proposal with a pot of *Zu* had evolved from drinking *Zu* to drinking tea in modern times. Therefore, in this oral narrative, we can find aspects of culture communicated through motifs and symbols.

In conclusion, an analysis of *Vaiphei* oral narratives demonstrates the importance and significance of several cultural artefacts and symbols which may be lost to a casual observer or to a person who is not aware of *Vaiphei* culture. Communicating culture through the oral and visual medium has been a mainstay of education and entertainment in olden times. A single narrative may be interpreted in multiple ways which will all be accurate. The space folklore occupies in saddling several fields of study is enormous, and we get glimpses of our history, our culture and our heritage from the folksongs, dances, legends, myths and tales of yore. And more so in the North-east of India, where the customs and beliefs of the pre-Christian era continue to live on in the narratives passed down in the verbal form. These tales preserve the distinct cultural heritage of the

community along with the worldview of the *Vaiphei* people. The discussion on how oral narratives evolve and differ based on the speaker, context, and time was focused on only two tales, namely *Liandote Unau* and *Khupting leh Ngambawm*. It has been noted that there is much work to be done with regards to the folk literature of communities from the region. Northeast India has much to offer in terms of folk material with its diverse population and cultures to work with, and the hope of meaningful discourses not only between history and literature, but also involving several disciplines of study which will catapult the region into further prominence as well.

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