

REFLECTION OF CULTURAL ETHOS, BEHAVIOURAL CONDUCT AND ECOLOGY TENYIDIE ORAL LITERATURE

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Abstract : *This paper is an attempt to highlight the myriad elements contain in the study of folklore. A piece of folktale reflects multi-facet genre in terms of humanistic study. It also projects various socio-religious beliefs supported by cultural ethos in which behavioural conduct of every member of the community upholds as a code of conduct.*

*The objective of this paper is to develop an applicable methodology of analysis. For the purpose, the tale of three brothers – **Ghost, Tiger and Man** – is selected as this piece of folktale is one of the most popular and common tales of the Nagas. The tale begins with the concept of one family which is a mythical base story. The narrative reflects a trio-relationship of the three worlds – supernatural, animal and human. Its multi-dimensional values are still upheld in Tenyimia society as cultural wisdom in practice. It is a source of heritage and legacy of oral literature in Tenyimia society.*

Key words: *oral literature; orature; close-reading; Tenyimia & Tenyidie; ghost; tiger, man, tenya*

I. Introduction

The Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu called oral literature, “**orature**” and its definition given in The Encyclopaedia of African Literature, edited by Simon Gikandi (Routledge, 2003), “Orature means something passed on through the spoken word, and because it is based on the spoken language it comes to life only in a living community. Where community life fades away, orality loses its function and dies. It needs people in a living social setting: it needs life itself.” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oral_literature). Morphologically, Zirimu coined this composite word compounding two words, ‘oral+literature’. Whatever term used by different scholars, the popular understanding and most common used in the context is ‘**oral literature**’.

If we look into the genre of oral literature from the angle of Hellenic Studies (Harvard University – <https://chs.harvard.edu/.../6272>) oral literature existed before invention of writing system. For instance, epics, ballads, prose tales and lyric songs existed orally much before writing was invented. The mode of transmission in continuity consisted of narrator(s) and listener(s), for the purpose of, primarily, inducing entertainment. However, learning process is deeply embedded, in the sense that education might have rooted its origin from such discourses. The contents of any types of oral literature were made up of long time human experience or imaginative expressions in artistic verbal forms.

What I understand of today's role in dealing with 'oral literature' or for that matter, 'tribal literature' is to study it at micro-level so as to bring out its inherent values towards dissemination of knowledge. For the reason, the attempt to this paper is a specimen of close-reading of the text (given below) and to relate its impacts unto the community who still embrace such values as cultural ethos and practice in their situational moment as behavioural conduct.

Various elements contain in this tale are understood not only as a common narrative to the pre-literate society of Tenyimia community, but also realized as a rich value based narratives to the contemporary society. This orally transmitted tale contains multi-dimensional features. The piece bears academic interest in the field of folkloristic, linguistics and socio-cultural studies. The following points have been drawn from the selected text.

- 1. On mythical creation:** The narration begins with 'an old woman who had three children' did not reveal the father of the children. An interview was conducted with N.Saleo, a senior person of Makhel village, Senapati district of Manipur for clearance of this oral narrative. According to him, that woman was covered by a cloud beneath a standing tree causing her to impregnation. She gave birth to three children namely the **Ghost**, the **Tiger** and the **Man**. The narration on the creation of that family is indeed mythical.
- 2. The Mythical Family:** That mythical family is comprised of the mother and her three children. The Ghost was the eldest, the Tiger second and the Man, the youngest. Since then, the behaviour of each of them had been accessed. Since the time of their dispersal, the Man inherited their parent's house by virtue of being the youngest male child. From that time onwards a tradition was instituted with the youngest male child to inherit the parent's house. Tenyimia community, till today continue to follow that tradition in matter of law of inheritance. However, the Liangmai sub-group allows the eldest son to inherit the father's house is an exception. This exception of this typical customary law came into practice after the time of separation of three brothers, the fore-father of the Liangmai sub-group, forefather of the Zeme sub-group and forefather of the Rongmei sub-group at Makhalingdi.
- 3. Conceptualization of Cosmic Relation:** The narrative reflects an existence of relationship of *supernatural-animal-mankind* in a symbiotic framework. It has a similarity to the fundamental reference of today's academic world discourse on natural phenomena. In other words, human's dependency on nature and cosmic stability is a matter of our deep concerned today. Likewise, the development of religion/faith and beliefs must be a direct consequence and manifestation of balanced human attitude towards nature and supernatural world. For instance, we talk of environmental issues such as the need of protection of different species of flora and fauna, preservation and protection of forests to save the wrath of global warming, flood, draught etc. It is indicative that they were tied together in a family during the life time of the mother, but dispersed to their respective destiny. The Ghost rules the universe with mystic power; the Tiger rules the forest. Man's fear of tiger can be considered as an instinctive bearer of suspense in destruction of environment. Man live in established village under the shed of 'house' and in organized society, however, the belief of existence of Ghost and fear of tiger continued in his/her mind.
- 4. Tradition of reservation:** During race contest of the Tiger and the Man, a reserved symbol (nhoutshü) was made by the Ghost to mark the destination-point. From a considerable distance, the two contestants were set to run to touch that reserved symbol. Although the Tiger was quite ahead in the race, the Ghost had shot the standing symbol with his catapult. Seen at the shaking

motion of the symbol, the Man, while on his way, shouted, “I’m first, I’m first”. The claim was as per the confidential advice of the eldest brother, the Ghost. As he claimed first, he was adjudged the winner. The practice of marking with a reserved symbol made of twigs and leaves upon anything became the cultural tradition of Tenyimia community. Seen such a symbol, no one would attempt counter claim to the object put on with the mark.

5. **Concept of Family Attitude:** Mankind has a universal behavior to behave in a special way towards members of our family. We honour our father and mother, respect our elders and the elders have affectionate attitude towards their younger ones. At the same time, the youngest in the family is treated in certain way special. One can also understand within the philosophy of humanism, the possibility of forming/adopting a family irrespective of racial difference, the fact that the three brothers are of totally distinct species. Not only that human being has the practice of bringing wild animal for domestication or for safe of species. Elderly people used to say that ‘tiger does never attack man as its prey, except in rare case’. In a similar attitude, man does not kill tiger unless a tiger becomes man-eater or killer of domestic animals. In the cultural practice, if a warrior killed a tiger, he has to undergo five-day ritual observation similar to ritual processes of collecting head of a war prey. Also a tiger killer would earn warrior’s insignia called ‘*ramei*’ in Tenyidie, which is as good as a war warrior.
6. **Food habit of animal and human being:** The story did not mentioned about the food of the Ghost, however, the desire of the Tiger to eat any part of the mother’s body as and when she died. It reflects that animal lived on raw food including human flesh. On the other hand, the Man had buried their mother’s death body beneath the fireplace at home and started cooking above it. Deriving from such action, Tenyimia community has no religious restriction to make fire and cook over a tomb/grave even now-a-day – a typical type of cultural wisdom for liberal practice.
7. **Obedience to Ghost:** The blind obedience of the Man to his eldest brother, the Ghost at the time of the racing contest and the victory over the Tiger has resulted a constructive impact in generating community’s cultural wisdom, religious practice and cultural ethos as well. The Ghost’s soft corner unto the Man manifests a constructive heritage in favor of the Man. Such favor can be the cause of total submissiveness of Man to God in religious perceptions and practices. In Tenyimia religious performance, the main focus of passion/desire of man are reflected in religious poetry/chanting for prosperity in terms of growth of population, good health, wealth of granary and domestic animals, courage and strength, victory over enemies etc. At all occasions of worship, ritual performance, seeking blessing of all wishes and purposes, the language is composed in solemnity and reverence to God/goddess. Never in the religious poetry or chanting, words of rude manner or sarcastic expressions for god or goddess are found in Tenyidie oral literature.
8. **Socio-behavioral development and continuity of application:** The Man has tested the love and favor of the Ghost. Without questioning he had obeyed and acted the command of the Ghost and uttered the claim, “*I have touched first, I’m first*”. He won the race and gained their family’s house and the village. The wisdom is upheld by the people till today. For instance, any person of Tenyimia community, whoever has the knowledge of that heritage, will never take shelter under the shed of standing trees, deserted farm house, cave or cliff before throwing any material such as stone or piece of wood at such place. Anyone who is in the midst of critical situation like tempest, thunderbolt strike, landslide, falling of tree etc. would utter, “*I’m first, I’m first*” before entering into such place for emergency shelter. It is believed that such claim will save him/her/them from natural destructive incidents.

9. Emergence of agriculture tradition: The Tiger while on his way to the forest after dispersal of the brothers, he thought out certain good advice for his younger brother, Man. Therefore, he made up his mind to come back to Man to pass the advice, but on the way he met *Tenya* (wild-cat). Taking the opportunity he attempted to entrust the wild cat to deliver his advice to Man. The advice given were, “(i) let the Man prepare new nursery bed of rice every year for transplantation; (ii) let the elder die first and younger die later; (iii) let my brother not to drink *zudouzuvü* (improper process rice-beer). The wild-cat agreed and took the advice but at the time of delivering to Man, he had said, “Your elder brother, the Tiger sent you a message, ‘let the old and the young die in a mixed’” It is narrated that the cause of indiscriminate death of old and young men ever after was due to the deviated message of the Tenya. Even today, if any messenger passes a wrong message, such person is called ‘*Tenya lietho*’ (literarily means wild-cat service). Following the elderly advice the tradition of preparing new nursery bed for paddy plantation is still continuing in agricultural practice.

10. Concept of brotherhood and human attitude towards wild animal: Tenyimia community treated and called Tiger, ‘*U dzürieu*’ (our elder brother). On account of such addressing attitude, a person in the event of encountering a situation like frightening of tiger, he/she would uttered out, ‘*U dzürieu, kenyü ho, n siezeu hara tuo ho*’ which literarily means, ‘Hi, elder brother, God forbid, your younger brother is here’. Then, the tiger will stop frightening the man. On the other hand, man will not hunt to kill tiger unless a tiger misbehave as mentioned in para 5 above. It is also practice that man (not woman) can share any flesh of animal killed by a tiger, considering that it is a collection of the elder brother, the Tiger.

Conclusion : Interpretation of a text of folklore may differ from scholar to scholar depending on the degree of knowledge about that text narrated by the ethnic community. For the reason, I have considered few methodical criteria such as oral literature on myth, narrative of faith and belief, cultural behaviour, conduct and attitude of people towards supernatural and wild animals; the popular use of expressions and their meaning etc. In addition, few parameters also have being adopted based on the content of the text referred. In the course of case study, notable values also have been drawn out for general readers. In the context of tribal literature, oral narrative is the main medium of transmitting knowledge, yet due to change of time and generation, the value and beauty of orality are fast eroding. However, it is evident that an attempt to revive oral and tribal literature will certainly play a significant role in refashioning modern literary creation as a base form of learning.

[Enclosed text]

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: <https://chs.harvard.edu/.../6272>

Glossary of Tenyidie terms

<i>Liangmai</i>	A sub-group of Tenyimia community spread over Nagaland and Manipur states.
<i>Makhalungdi</i>	One of the earliest locations where Tenyiu generation 3 rd wave party settled. It is located in Senapati district of Manipur state.
<i>Ramei</i>	Feather of hornbill bird used as ‘warrior’s insignia’.
<i>Rongmei</i>	A sub-group of Tenyimia community, live in part of Semapati and Tamenglong districts in Manipur state. They are the generation of the youngest of three brothers disperse at Makhalungdi.
<i>Tenyidie</i>	The name of the language of the Tenyimia community. This common variety is mainly of Angami variety and medium of literature.
<i>Tenyimia</i>	The generations of Tenyiu, the eldest of four sons of Vadio who settled first at Mekhroma (Makhel). The Tenyimia group of Nagas are Angami, Chakhesang, Rengma, Zeliangrong, Mao, Poumai, Memei and Thangal.
<i>Zeme</i>	A sub-group of Tenyimia community.

The Text

THE THREE BROTHERS - GHOST, TIGER AND MAN

Retold by : Rüzühkhrie Sekhose

Translated by D.Kuolie

Once upon a time, there lived an old woman who had three children. The eldest child is the Ghost, the second is the Tiger and the youngest is the Man. Among the three brothers, the Ghost and the Man have more intimacy. The Tiger had a peculiar character since his childhood. Due to old age, their mother cannot go to the field anymore that she stays at home all the time. Even at home, she cannot do anything as her limbs become weak, feeble and dull. It was the time for her sons to look after their old mother turn by turn. It was usual that the day the Ghost or the Man stayed with her, she remained happy because they nursed, and cared her attentively by serving with hot and proper food. Contrary to the manner, the day the Tiger stayed with her she became very weak at night. The Tiger being a carnivorous animal played at her mischievously. With his typical nature, the Tiger used to pull and bite any part of the mother's body saying, "Mother, I want to eat here, here also when you die."

One day, while the Tiger went out for hunting their mother died all of a sudden. The Man was with her that day. He was in a confused thought where to bury their mother. He knows the nature of his brother Tiger that if he buries their mother's body at a common ground, the Tiger would certainly dig out again and ate up her. For sometimes, he was in a dilemma but before long the eldest brother, the Ghost came home. They found out a good idea that they would bury their mother's mortal body under the fireplace and above that they made fire and started cooking. So nowadays, the practice of cooking on a grave is not tabooed. The Tiger returned home in the evening and asked for their mother but the Man did not tell him the truth. The Tiger searched every corners of their house but could not find their mother. He sniffed at the fireplace and said, "Some typical smell of flesh is evident" but he could not try to dig out again because the Man had made fire and was cooking.

After their mother's death, the time has come for them to separate. Nevertheless, by that time there was no traditional law to determine the rightful one among brothers to inherit the parent's home a confused thought arise whether to transfer the legacy in favour of the Tiger or the Man. The Ghost got an idea. He had suggested his two younger brothers to bid for a race. A mark called *kenhou/nhoutshü* was placed at a distance, and whoever touched it first would stay at home and the looser would go into the jungle. Both of them had their obligation to obey their elder brother. The Tiger was delighted at the proposed racing competition, as he knew that his younger brother, the Man could not run as fast as he does. The Ghost also knows well that the Man has no matching qualification against the Tiger in that racing competition. However, he has a hidden idea in favour of the Man. Therefore, he gave a secret instruction to his youngest brother. The Ghost instructed the Man, "While you were racing towards the mark, you look at the reserved symbol. Before you reach, I will hit the symbol with the bow. The moment you see the mark shaking you must cry out, *'I have touched first, I am first'* so that I will decide the trial between you." The race was set to start. While the two racers were on their halfway, the Ghost shot at the destination mark behind

them. The Tiger was well ahead of his brother by then, yet the Man behind him cried out, ‘*I have touched first, I am first*’. The Tiger looked back at the Man and denied of his claim of being the victor, saying, “You are still far behind me, how can you claim to have reached the mark first?” However, the Man told him, “Look, brother, I have touched the mark that it is shaking.” The Tiger could not believe the claim but the Ghost’s decree went in favour of the Man that the youngest brother was destined to live at home. The Tiger moved towards the jungle sadly. Before the Tiger disappeared, the Man said to him, ‘My elder brother, if you caught any animal in the jungle please inform me. Saying this, they parted and the Man came back home to live permanently.

Therefore, the Tiger in turn, passed tool on hillock side whenever had his prey and man continues to call Tiger, elder brother of man even this day as the Tiger had left such mark, fulfilling Man’s request. The Tenyimia community still uphold, the belief that whenever one has to take shelter under a tree, rock, cave or deserted farm hut due to rain, tempest etc. one has to throw a stone or wood or clod of soil at it before taking shelter. Such practice is believed to refuse the hit of thunderbolt to such place.

As there is no way for human being to escape death, the Man pray to his eldest brother, the Ghost, “If human being has to die by any means let the elder died first and the younger later.” His request granted. In the meanwhile, the Tiger was also meditating over so many things, while on his way to forest. Being elder to Man, he realized that it was not wise on his part to be separated without passing even a piece of elderly advice to his younger brother, the Man. Amidst melancholic feeling over his misfortune he made up his mind to come back to Man and gave a piece of advice. Before long he met a wildcat (Tenya). The Tiger asked the wild cat, “Where are you going to?” The wild cat replied him that he was going towards the village. Taking the opportunity, the Tiger requested the wild cat to convey his advice to the Man. The wild cat agreed politely. The Tiger then said, “If you happen to meet my younger brother, Man, let him arrange a new nursery-bed of paddy plant every year. Also, let him not drink improperly processed rice-beer (*zudouzuvü*).” Then they passed to their own way. But the wild cat, being an over-smart small wild animal conveyed a distorted message, saying, “Your elder brother, the Tiger sent you a message, ‘let the old and the young die in a mixed.’” So saying, the wild cat slipped into the jungle. The Man had no chance to utter out a refusal and for that reason death falls unto both young and old indiscriminately ever after. Attributing to such mischievous story, if some children pass any wrong message in any context an idiom is drawn as ‘wild cat message’ even to this day.

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