



Mythological Themes in the Tales of Chhurbura: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract: Chhurbura is a prominent character in Mizo folk narratives. There are several fascinating tales associated with Chhurbura's adventures and misadventures. He belongs to the class of 'Trickster Characters' and his stories are present in most folk narratives of the Zo people. This paper attempts to look at the themes pertaining to mythology in Chhurbura's tales through the lens of different definitions of myth described by scholars and thinkers all over the world. Basing the arguments around the idea of mythology and the possibility of mythologising Chhurbura and his tales, this paper aims at a qualitative analysis of different tales of Chhurbura, namely, 'Myth of Creation', 'Chhura Catches Crabs with his Mother-in-law', 'Chhura's Magic Horn', 'Wonderful Flight in Air', 'Travel to Mawngping Village', and 'Chhura Joins his Captors to Cut the Tree'. This paper attempts to give new perspectives to the comprehension of Chhurbura's tales and to breathe new life to this timeless character and his adventures.

Keywords: Chhurbura, Mizo folk narratives, myths, trickster tale.

INTRODUTCION

Chhurbura, or Chhura, is one of the most popular characters from Mizo folk narratives. Chhurbura's tales comprise several entertaining adventures, and as a significant Mizo folk character, he is often associated with mythical beings called "The Trickster Characters". Chhura's character is present in various folk narratives of the Zo people, where he is given different names according to the dialect of the people. A distinctive aspect of his character is his wisdom and lack of common sense at the same time. His stories are generally marked by humour that involves him exhibiting slyness, followed by a miserable failure most of the time.

As a trickster character, his tales often delineate his breaches of both natural and societal principles and order, portraying playful disruptions of normal life to subsequently re-establish it. Although the name Chhurbura is associated with stupidity in contemporary times, it is noteworthy that the Mizo ancestors harboured great respect for him, while simultaneously harbouring a certain amount of disdain for him.

CHHURBURA AND THE CONCEPT OF MYTH

It is posited by many scholars that Chhurbura was also involved in the creation of the earth in the Mizo myth. K. C. Vannghaka asserts that “Every nation has their owned folk-narratives. Folklorists also classify folk-narrative into Myth/Mythology, Folktale, and Legend based on the story”. (Folk Literature 35) In analysing the tales of Chhurbura, it is imperative to explain the meaning and characteristics of myth in general.

According to Stephen C. Behrendt, “...That is, myth functions actively in the ‘making’ of a universe in human terms...” (Introduction: History, Mythmaking, and the Romantic Artist. 19).

Lynn Byrd mentioned that,

According to Slochower, mythology has a limited historical frame, but by putting the values of the past into symbolic form, writers can form a literature that has universal relevance: ‘The living myth would not restore the dead past, but would redeem its living heritage. The myth also contains the tradition of re-creation... The culture hero in mythopoesis chooses his tradition, rejects the stultified in favor of the creative roots of the past... (Old Myths for the New Age: Byron’s Sardanapalus. 166)

According to Guy Poitevin, the word ‘myth’ is “generally recognised by the sciences of religion as ‘legendary traditions pertaining to the origin of everything, to the primeval times and the divine powers...’ (Myth and Identity II: Narrative Construction of One’s Social Entity by Pari\ Communities in Maharashtra. 50) Meanwhile, Wikipedia explains myth as,

...A folklore genre consisting of narratives or stories that play a fundamental role in a society, such as foundational tales or origin myths. The main characters in myths are usually gods, demigods or supernatural humans. Stories of everyday human beings, although often of leaders of some type, are usually contained in legends, as opposed to myths.

Myths are often endorsed by rulers and priests or priestesses, and are closely linked to religion or spirituality. In fact, many societies group their myths, legends and history together, considering myths and legends to be true accounts of their remote

past. In particular, creation myths take place in a primordial age when the world had not achieved its later form. Other myths explain how a society's customs, institutions and taboos were established and sanctified. There is a complex relationship between recital of myths and enactment of rituals. (Myth. web)

From these explanations, it can be surmised that myth actively revolves around the creation of the universe, inclusive of gods, supernatural beings, and even the presence of human beings as one of its main characters.

With the different definitions of myth as given above, this paper explores the possibility that the tales of Chhurbura can be included in the genre of myth in Mizo folk narrative. Chhurbura's tales, despite the broad appeal, prove challenging to be typed or chronologically organised, as the story's beginning, the middle, and the end are not known due to the multiple sub-stories. Most available sources and popular tales of Chhurbura appear to be set in his heyday. According to P. S. Dahrawka, "The story of Chhura is great in number, extraordinary; but, it seems like nobody can clarify the chronology of his story." (Mizo Thawnthu 223) The recounting of Chhurbura's tales always has a succession and cannot be concluded with a proper ending, as it is always consecutive. According to Dr. Lalruanga,

One of the popular folktales among the Mizos was Chhura. Chhura's full name was Chhurbura. He and his brother Nahaia's story was interesting and played an important role. Chhura's story was very interesting, funny, variety; without Chhura, Mizo folktale seems like dance without drum. The difference of Chhura's story is: it has rooted in Myth, it has sprout in Legend. And it blossoms in Folktales. It plays an important role in myth, legend and folktales. (Mizo Thawnthu 7)

Additionally, Dr. Lalruangliana Khiangte also said:

The most interesting and memorable personality in the world of Mizo folklore would undoubtedly be Chhurbura. A reading and study of Mizo tales would be incomplete and much less meaningful if Chhurbura (or Chhura in short) went unmentioned.

There is a great paradox in his character, which makes him all the more interesting for the young and old. He may be considered, without doubt, as the 'silliest of all simpletons' among the Mizo folk protagonists. Yet on the other hand, he could be considered as the cleverest of all.

All his actions and behavior, on account of which he was considered foolish, were in fact, all due to his abiding love and affection for his elder brother, Nahaia, who happened to be one of the laziest of men. A good number of

the stories about Chhura in fact, related to his elder brother, Nahaia wherein Chhura invariably came out the loser. In all the other adventures where Nahaia (or Naa in short) was not a counterpart, he came out as the victor. Each episode is rather short and crisp, but it has a good moral to impart to the reader. (Folktales of Mizoram 1-4)

Many scholars posit that Chhurbura was a real person who existed in the real world among us. According to P. S. Dahrawka, “It seems like Chhura existed due to two points:

1. Based on the conditions of the story.
2. There are his descendants among the Mizos in recent times.” (Mizo Thawnthu. 210-211)

Moreover, on the descendants of Chhurbura, H. Lalrinawma remarks, “The descendants of Chhura among the Hmar tribe are: Lawitlang, Zote, Vaiphei, Pautu, Khawbung, Zawngte, and Ngurte.” (Hmasang Zofate Chanchin 179) Dr. Laltluangliana Kiangte also said that “...According to another tale, Chhura was still alive in the 14th century A.D. It was reported that he lived in the eastern part of Mizoram, and monuments have been erected in his honour, and these can be observed to this day. (Folktales of Mizoram 4) Based on the findings of the aforementioned scholars, the possibility of Chhurbura’s existence as a real person is quite self-evident, which makes Chhurbura’s tales not merely stories but possibly real-life events.

However, it is imperative to note that the tales of Chhurbura showcase notable mythological elements like:

1. Myth of creation:

Chhurbura’s tales also encompass the creation myth of the earth. According to Dr. Laltluangliana Kiangte, “...It is also said that Chhura played an important role in the creation of the universe. He shaped the world by heating and hitting the solid earth with his big stone club, levelling parts of it and in the process, he created hills, mountains, plains and valleys... (Folktales of Mizoram. 4)

In addition to this, Dr. Lalruanga also mentioned that,

...when the time has passed, there is a man called Chhura entered on the earth, and he level the earth by using his big club. But his big club was broken and he only leveled the Champhai valley and N. Vanlaiphai and had no time

for other during that time. The remaining big club was still there in Vankal area and Sailulak area. (Mizo Thawnthu Zirzauna 9)

Moreover, in another observation, Dr. Lalruanga further mentioned in another version, "...But the earth was rough due to the flood. So, Chhura made a big club and he levelled the earth. He only levelled Champhai, Vanlaiphai, and Thenzawl, but, his big club was broken." (Mizo Thawnthu Zirzauna 17)

From these observations, it is thus brought to light that Chhura's stories depict him as playing an important role in the creation of the Earth. He contributed to the creation of Earth, levelling the Earth with a big club that he made by himself.

2. Presence of the goddess of the stream:

In another story, we find notable characteristics of myth where 'Chhura Catches Crab with His Mother-in-law', according to Dr. Lalruangliana Khiangte's version.

One day, Chhura set out to catch crabs with his mother-in-law. They reached a thick forest and then approached a stream. Chhura caught a lot of crabs, and his mother-in-law helped him keep the catch.

...After some time, he put his hand inside the hole in order to pull out a crab.

While trying to catch the biggest crab, Chhura was suddenly tempted to fulfil his carnal desire with his mother-in-law.

He said to her, 'The Crab has bitten me, it's quite painful.' He therefore asked her, 'Please go and inquire from the goddess of the stream behind that big rock on how to solve the problem.'

Then his mother-in-law went towards the big rock and said, 'O goddess of the stream, tell us how to cure the pain caused by a crab's sting?'

Meanwhile, Chhura ran to the other side of the big rock and responded to the question with a low and gentle voice, saying... (Folktales of Mizoram. 21-49)

This story suggests the incorporation of the image of a goddess. Chhura's mother-in-law agrees to Chhura's wish to ask the goddess of the stream to help them find a cure. This demonstrates the belief in the existence and power of the goddess of the stream. Moreover, it reflects the traditional beliefs and practices of the Mizo, which rely on the existence and worship of spirits, additionally suggesting an involvement of supernatural elements.

3. Involvement of the supernatural:

In several tales of Chhura, there are significant incorporations of supernatural elements. One notable mention is ‘Chhura’s Magic Horn’, which demonstrates the presence of non-human elements and Chhura’s direct encounter with them. As per the narrative of Dr. Laltluangliana Khiangte, the tale goes,

...As usual, the female spirit reacted quickly with her mysterious utterance once again and warned him to stop throwing stones because he was hurting her children.

...Now realising that the new owner could not be scared away, the spirit stealthily escaped from one corner and went down the brook...(Folktales of Mizoram 6)

4. Breaking the laws of nature:

A significant characteristic of myth is the presence of instances of unusual and unexplained phenomena in the tales. In the tales of Chhura, there are many breaches of natural laws, implying unexplained occurrences integrated into the tales. Such tales as ‘Chhura’s magic horn’, ‘Wonderful Flight in the Air’, ‘Chhura’s Travel to Mawngping Village’, and ‘Chhura Joins His Captors to Cut the tree’ are demonstrations of unusual phenomena.

In ‘Chhura’s magic horn’, Chhura procured a magic horn which can give him an endless supply of food from Phungpuinu. According to the laws of nature, it is logically impossible to have a supply of food from a horn. However, according to this tale, Chhura has procured this particular magic horn that provides an endless supply of food, making this story one of the most popular among his tales.

In another tale called ‘Wonderful Flight in the Air’, Chhura and Nahaia have a flying horse which they rode together. The flying horse constitutes a fundamental aspect of the story despite the logical impossibility of its existence in reality. However, the story narrates that Chhura has a flying horse, thereby exhibiting another instance of the breaking of the laws of nature.

In ‘Chhura’s Travel to Mawngping Village’, the tale narrates that the inhabitants of the Mawngping village never excrete because of an unusual and abnormal condition called imperforate anus. According to the laws of nature, it is impossible for the village and the people to exist in reality, thereby affirming the possibility of myth in Chhura’s tales.

In another tale called ‘Chhura Joins His Captors to Cut the Tree’, Chhura was trapped in a tree, while his enemies tried to cut the tree. According to Dr. Laltluangliana Khiangte,

...After some time, he came up with an idea, “I will fly towards the west,” he declared.

So, their leader detailed one section to the west.

“I will fly towards the east,” he declared. So, he detailed another section to the east.

“I will fly towards the north,” he declared again. So, he detailed another section to the north. (Folktales of Mizoram 39)

A significant aspect of this tale is Chhura’s ability to deceive his captors, making them believe that he could actually fly. The ability to fly is not a part of human capacity unless there are machines involved. This proves another possibility of myth in Chhura’s tales, which comprise several entertaining adventures.

FINDINGS

With a careful analysis of Chhura’s tales and different findings by scholars as aforementioned, it can be concluded that there is a strong possibility of Chhura’s existence in real life. At the same time, it is also evident that there are significant integrations of myth in the stories of Chhura, likely altered and adjusted through orality and storytelling to fit the audience or the times. Therefore, it can be concluded that Chhura’s tales can be included in Mizo mythology as a significant presence.



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