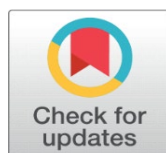
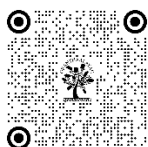


MYSTIC, SUPERSTITIONS AND SOCIETY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE BELIEF NARRATIVES OF KAKCHING

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ABSTRACT

In the modern age, where science and rational thinking have taken the reign over everyday life, it may seem like the world of superstitions is a chronicle of the past. However, it is still embedded into the present society as it is a habitual behavior which has been ingrained by the older generation of society. So, where does these superstitious beliefs come from and in what form do they exist in this day and age where science has become the solution for every question? The answer lies in folklore and its narratives, which have stemmed from the society. The paper will focus on the belief narratives which have been used to create an avenue for the superstitions within the belief system as well as validate such beliefs. The creation of the belief system is as old as the society itself. Traditionally, they are transmitted orally through generations, amalgamating into the pedagogical space of the society. In the old days, circumstances or situations caused either by nature or supernatural forces were explained through these narratives, which made it easier for the members of society to accept them. Belief narratives take the form of independent narratives or are integrated into other folk narratives, especially myths and legends. Generally, since myths and legends are believed to be factual and historical, they are rarely questioned by the people, thereby assimilating into the identity and belief system of the society. As such, the paper will bring forth the belief narratives of Kakching and question their position within contemporary society. Furthermore, by analyzing the socio-cultural elements embedded within these narratives, it will help the readers understand how these narratives have helped in shaping the social, cultural and behavioral patterns of the people of Kakching.

Keywords: Belief, Belief Narratives, Culture, Folklore, Kakching, Society, Superstitions

1. INTRODUCTION

Belief narratives are placed within the category of oral narratives, along with other forms of folk narratives. Folk cultures around the world are primarily spiritual and animistic in nature; they share a strong connection with the spiritual and supernatural world. As the forces beyond the natural world cannot be explained through human comprehension, belief narratives are used to understand the abnormal phenomenon experienced by people. Since the paper attempts to understand the belief narratives existing in Kakching, their significance and their position in contemporary society, one must first grasp the concept of what belief narratives are and their implications within the community they stem from.

In layman's terms, belief narratives can be defined as stories about supernatural events and experiences. Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, And Art (2011) posits that belief narrative "concentrates on inexplicable experiences in human life and helps to explain the mysterious and unknown. Whether the stories are ancient ones passed down as legends or new ones based on personal experience in the recent past, they are concerned with the supernatural and become part of the ongoing debate about the existence of a spiritual realm beyond the empirically observable world" (p. 218). One of the most important aspects of belief narratives is the effect they have on the community. Such narratives cannot be studied in isolation but rather alongside the culture and tradition of the community. They have been continuously permeated into the societal consciousness, thereby playing a role as an architect for the construction of the social identity of the community.

Belief narratives are accepted by society as factual and not fiction. Although questions of their feasibility can arise from time to time, they are rarely at the forefront. As Reet Hiimäe opines, "belief narratives should focus not that much on the question of believing, but rather on the ways how individuals and communities verbalise and communicate their experiences as well as various interpretations and beliefs connected with such experiences" (p. 8). As a foundation for the belief system of the community, the narratives strive to give reasons behind the social structure, providing validations for the social customs and rituals. Consequently, people belonging to the same community share their experiences through the narratives, enabling a sense of familiar bonding under a communal identity.

On the other hand, belief narrative also remains true to its nature as a part of folk narratives, acting as a medium to didact the younger generations of dangers as well as moral values. It further assists in teaching them about the superstitions, customs, rituals, etc., embedded within the narratives to ensure the pursuit of the societal values and behavioural patterns of the age-old traditions of the community. While the values or warnings contained within these narratives are usually accepted by society without question, rational reasoning or scientific evidence to support the core values has been discovered over the years. For instance, when an elder warns of venturing out into an isolated place, it can also be a warning to the young child about the risk of dangers lurking in dark corners, be it wild animals or evil people.

With the advancement of science and technology, it is inevitable for the world to witness a shift in lifestyle and social consciousness, which, in turn, would bring about changes within the customs of the community. Likewise, while looking into the belief narratives of Kakching and its people, one can find a transition from the traditional to the modern, from the transmission to the amalgamation. Thus, it has become a necessity to look into the belief narratives of Kakching in order to understand the customs and traditions of the community while delving into the consciousness and identity of the society through the narratives. The objective of this paper is to bring forth the belief narratives of Kakching and question their position within contemporary culture. It is also a search for the narratives within the social fabric of the present generation and culture, an attempt to find out whether the narratives have passed the quest of time or has succumbed to it.

2. BELIEF NARRATIVES AND ITS POSITIONALITY IN KAKCHING

The state of Manipur, with its diverse ethnic communities, abounds in multiple cultures and customs. As such, it is a treasure trove of folk narratives. While it is easy

to overlook the folk traditions and customs present in everyday life, these narratives have to be documented and further analyzed to have clarity about the cultural identity of the self and of others. It is through the assimilation of these narratives into the consciousness that behavioral patterns and thought processes are unknowingly formed.

When it comes to the Meitei customs and beliefs, the presence of Helois or female spirits cannot be overlooked. It is believed that there are seven helois and that they reside in the forests and the wilderness. The children are often warned about encounters with these spirits by the elders as they recount instances where the helois have seduced or enchanted men and children into the woods and dark places. As Sadananda Mayanglambam (2013) observes, “the confrontation with the helois makes life miserable, making one sick, lose mental balance on the verge of temporary madness, and if not treated properly by a maiba or a maibi (priest or priestess) the symptom may continue long, sometimes impairing the mental behaviour” (p. 122). In continuation to the belief system of the Meiteis, one can further observe the pivotal position held by the maibas/maibis (shamans or priests) when it comes to folk rituals and folk medicine. They are the ones people turn to when it comes to traditional healing, be it natural or supernatural. Smiti Rajkumari (2021) opined that “the maibis have access to the supernatural world where they enter into a trance like state especially during religious rituals and divination ceremonies. The maibi culture is an integral part of the folk culture as it is directly associated with the folk belief system of the Meities” (p. 57). Furthermore, the maibas/maibis conduct rituals while conveying messages of the deities and prophesizing the future, thereby solidifying their place within the cultural space of the community. In short, it can be observed that the Meitei community has a belief system which strongly relies on the animistic and spiritual world. Even with modernization and digitalization, this belief system still remains as a foundation for the communal identity of the Meiteis.

Kakching is one of the sixteen districts of the state of Manipur. In December 2016, the Government of Manipur acknowledged it as a separate district along with seven others. Kakching and its people boast of its rich cultures and customs, brimming with folk narratives. The community, which had started as Lois, also has its own variety of belief narratives associated with places and rituals. The myth of Khamlangba remains as the core narrative in the community as Kakching celebrates one of the major festivals of Manipur, Kakching Lai Haraoba (the festival of the gods), by dedicating it to Lord Khamlangba and his second wife, Shija Kalika, as their primary gods. The belief narratives and social customs discussed in this paper have been obtained by conducting personal interviews with recounters of the community. It has been loosely translated and transcribed for the purpose of writing this paper, which is to understand the social customs of the people of Kakching.

The elders have long told the stories of multiple encounters with Nupi Soi, an entity in the form of a woman who was seen in and around Kereching, a hillock in Kakching. She used to appear during the times when no one was around. Thus, they would warn the young people not to venture around the area alone and not to answer in a specific way if a female voice was heard calling out their names. In Meitei culture, it was believed that one must respond by enquiring what the caller wants to say instead of a simple “hao?” or “yes?” in case of evil spirits or supernatural encounters. The area surrounding Kereching was used for cultivation and farming.

One encounter narrated by an elder recounts how once, when a farmer was fishing on his farm near Kereching on a rainy day, a female voice called out his name. Yet, when he answered “yes?” and looked around, no one was there. It seemed like

the daughter in law of the farmer was pregnant during that time, so the anxious farmer warned her not to stay around the area for too long. However, the warnings were ignored, and the daughter-in-law continued to stay there. It was said that, soon, she contacted an unknown ailment and passed away. Other accounts of encountering a woman on the street were also told. During these encounters, she would vanish as they come closer and those people would end up suffering with mysterious ailments such as headaches and stomachaches as soon as they reach home. Even to the present day, elders would tell these stories to the younger generation to be cautious while going around the area, specifically a road which led to Pallel.

Tracing back to the origin of the narrative of Nupi Soi, it was believed that it started during the reign of King Samuroiba. It was said that the king gave a refuge for the unfortunate women such as widows and those who were unemployed. However, whether it was due to an indecent act committed towards them or not, a mother-daughter duo ran away from the palace and died. While it wasn't sure whether this story was true, some believed that they had returned for revenge and that it was the source of the belief narrative.

There were also stories of the haunting of Naodam Thingel (canal) in Kakching. The canal was feared by many people as they believed that a washerwoman would appear at night and that a bad omen would occur to anyone who encountered her. She was described as having long hair covering her face and continuously washing clothes. In contemporary society, some would jokingly confess their fear of the canal in their childhood and how they would close their eyes and dash across without looking at it.

Other locations, such as Tamnaobi Maril and Kongoi Pareng, are still feared by the local elders as places where spirits abound, even though not much about them is known so far. It was narrated by an elder how, during her childhood years, there would be huge Heipong trees (fig), whose width goes beyond their arms' length along Kongoi Pareng. According to her, it would be fine if numerous people were present around them. But, if someone entered alone to cut the bark of the trees, they would groan loudly as soon as the knife touched them. Thus, people would always fail to cut in fear of the cries.

It is interesting to see how such narratives have continued to mesh into the superstitious culture and influence the consciousness of the people of the community even today. Even if questions of the viability of such narratives can be raised, the belief stemming from these narratives is still capable of retaining their position within the social consciousness of the community. When dissecting these belief narratives, "the core of which is an awareness of the dangerous disturbance of the boundary between the two worlds" (Nikolić, 2019, p. 436). While the spiritual connection is used in the foreground, the logical reasoning behind the dangers of dark and isolated places for a young child can also be seen in the background of these narratives.

A ceremony unique to Kakching is the Namungba or Lai Una Thetpa ceremony, where a piece of tan (flat bread) is stuck to the entrances, like the doorways and windows of a house. The Namungba ceremony is performed during summer to worship Ithak Ningthou before the Kakching Lai Haraoba. During this ceremony, a variety of tans, such as chasubi, chahao tan, tanjam, karong tan, khubi tan, khutnao tan, etc., are prepared on a leaf by a maiba (shaman). The preparation for the ceremony usually starts from the day before. It can also be observed that such a ceremony has been drastically shortened in contemporary society as compared to the past. While the variety of breads prepared as offerings have been reduced, it is

still believed that there should be more than one variety. The breads are offered to the gods to pray for the well-being and prosperity of the people residing in the locality as well as to cast away any evil spirits. It was also recounted how, as a tactic to scare away the evil spirits, the locality would come together the day before the ceremony and beat the yangkok (a large winnowing tray made of bamboo used for separating rice husks) with a stick, making loud noises and chanting. As a custom, after completing making rounds around the locality, they would leave the yangkok and stick outside the house, which they would then collect the following day.

While every aspect of the customs could not be fully understood or explained clearly by the recounters themselves, such as the reason behind leaving the yangkok and stick outside, it is also essential to know its cultural significance. The viability of the ceremony cannot be endorsed by the people of the community. However, it is true that it provides a sense of security and optimism among the community. It strives for collective harmony within the society and creates a feeling of belonging, becoming a part of the social collectiveness.

In Meitei culture, generally, there are many narratives within the belief system. Elders have continuously warned children not to venture out in the late evening after the sun sets. There is also the belief that unfortunate events would occur if someone clips their nails inside the house or at night. Some also believe that the nails should be buried properly so that they would not fall into the hands of people with evil intentions. Similarly, there are various other superstitions believed by the collective Meitei community. However, with respect to this paper, it must be noted that the selected belief narratives are all unique to Kakching and its community. They are customs and beliefs that emerged in association with the Kakching community, its locality and its people.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, superstitions and belief systems are still embedded in the present society with the help of belief narratives passed down by the older generation of society. Even to this day, these narratives have created a platform for the supernatural elements within the consciousness and served as a link with the spiritual world. It is also an assurance for the older generation for the continuation of the cultures and customs of the community, as the presence of the belief system bears witness to the perpetuation of the social identity and age-old traditions of the community. Although this paper is a humble attempt to look into the belief narratives of Kakching to understand the social and cultural aspects of the community, it can be seen that there are still a lot of narratives left unexplored. Furthermore, it can also be observed that while these belief narratives have permeated into the social consciousness, passed the test of time and continue to exist within contemporary society, there are some which are lost in the passage of time and some which are in the process of dying. Thus, it is evident to document these narratives in order to preserve the existing belief system of the community and a step toward reviving the lost ones.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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