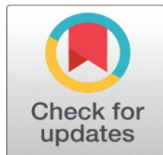
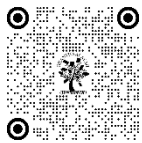


PARSING THROUGH BODO MYTHS: ITS REFLECTION AND SIGNIFICANCE IN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the inhabited world, in all ages and under every situation, the myths of man have flourished. It is a heritage shared by all humans and an inherent as well as a crucial part of culture since antiquity. For members of any society, primitive/folk or modern myths seem to hold timeless importance and veneration; they have been a living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the human activity and mind. In a similar view, the Bodos possess a distinct mythological tradition that shows excellent varieties. It goes without saying that myths, i.e., mwdai daodwi ni solo in the Bodo society are not just human imagination or creation, but represent their actual human life. Myths form a valued part of their sacred circle of life and it serves as a vehicle of emotional introspection and release. In this paper, an earnest attempt will be made to explore the reflection and significance of myths in their society.

Keywords: Myths, Bodo, Folklore

1. INTRODUCTION

The English word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word *mythos* and has been distinguished from the Greek word *logos*, both the terms having been translated into English as *word* or *story* (Leonard and McClure 2004:2). According to Dundes (1984:1), myths are 'sacred' narratives usually explaining how the world or humankind came to be in its present form. The critical adjective 'sacred' distinguishes myths from other forms of narratives such as legends and folktales, which are ordinarily secular and fictional. Bascom (1965) came up with a definition of myth based on the recorded observations of folklorists and anthropologists studying myth in non-literate and traditional societies. The definition finds the clearest delineation in the article *The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives*, where he maintains:

Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; They may purport to 'explain' details of ceremonial

paraphernalia or ritual, or why taboos must be observed, but such etiological elements are not confined to myths (Bascom 1965:4).

Naturally, then myths endeavour to explain the enduring and fundamental human questions: How did the world and the universe come to be? Who are we? How did we come to be here? What should our values be? What are our proper, essential, or specific roles as we relate to one another and the world at large? How should we behave? How should we not behave? What are the outcomes of behaving and not behaving in such ways and so on? (Leonard and McClure 2004:1). That is, myths are stories that serve to define the fundamental worldview of a culture by explaining the aspects of the natural world and delineating the psychological, social practices, and ideals of a society. In other words, by examining myths, we can discover how different cultures have their own answers to essential questions about the world and man's place in it. In this connection, it is worth recounting one of the myths of the Greeks, all of which try to answer some complex questions regarding the existence of evil and trouble. According to their belief, at one time the earthly evils and trouble were trapped in a box. These escaped when the box was opened by Pandora, the first woman (cited in Wolflang 2003:3). So, myths are self-acknowledged truths of the society that are culturally important. It may also be described as socialisation of private dreams or visionary stories, recognising that in many societies the inspiration of the individual dreamer or prophet, which Levi Strauss refers to as 'mythic status,' i.e., 'living myths are marked by social consensus about their importance and often their implications' (Doty 2000:38).

It is worth mentioning that the various aspects of Bodo culture and religion are reflected through the complex characters of Bodo myths, as myths, whatever their nature may be always a precedent and an example not only for man's actions (sacred and profane) but also the condition in which his nature places him. It may be added that the Bodo myths address the process of creation: the creation of the universe, the world, humankind, animalkind, and everything else in existence; in effect, their entire cosmogony. In other words, myths in Bodo society form an inevitable part of their culture, the product of man's learned traditions and customs, based evidently on social heritage. Given the above statement, the present study primarily aims to examine one of the extant aetiologicalⁱ myths related to thunder and lightning and explore its significance in Bodo society. The stories contain key teachings that profoundly reflect their inner world and ensure balance in their day-to-day individual and community lifeways. The circumstances may have changed as the stories were retold, but the moral or emotional issues have generally remained intact.

2. MYTH OF THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

In the ancient past, an old couple lived in a certain village. They had two grandchildren - a grandson, and a granddaughter. Their names were *Roana* and *Raoni*. With time, they subsequently attained the age of marriage. *Raoni*, besides everything else, was extremely beautiful and a pious girl. *Roana*, the brother fell in love and secretly planned to marry her.

One day, the paddy was spread out under the sun to get it fit for husking. Soon the birds began to feed on the paddy. The old lady who was attending the paddy drove away from the birds by saying - 'be off, be off, do not eat the paddy, you can eat them as much as you want on the marriage day of *Roana* and *Raoni*.' These words were overheard by *Raoni* but she could not comprehend them properly. So, she asked her grandmother. At first, the old lady was unwilling, but when pressed hard, again and again, the old lady ultimately disclosed the truth, i.e., her nuptial with her brother. Hearing this, she became wild with anger and vehemently protested against the marriage, but her objection yielded no results. Hence, she decided to foil her wedding by some other means.

One day *Raoni* planted a *khakling* tree (a kind of pulses tree) in the courtyard. She then invoked the almighty God by lighting an earthen lamp at the foot of that tree. Devoutly she prayed daily to the heavenly God to bless the *khakling* tree, to let it grow tall, so tall that it reached heaven and no one should be able to cut it down whatsoever. Almighty God heard her prayers and blessed the *khakling* tree. One day, the tree began to grow tall till the top of it ultimately touched the heavens (sky). One particular night, *Raoni* started her climb. As she climbed the *khakling* tree, the cocks also began to crow, and finally, she reached heaven. *Roana*, on the other hand, was not aware of *Raoni*'s plans. Subsequently, he came to know that *Raoni* had escaped to heaven by climbing up the *khakling* tree. So he became furious and started chasing *Raoni* by climbing the same tree. Soon *Roana* also reached heaven. In heaven, *Roani* hid herself among the clouds. But soon *Raona* discovered her and she had to flee from that place. While fleeing from one place to another, she had to lift her garments and, in the process, some parts of her back became visible which is what caused the flash of lightning in the sky. On the other hand, the loud shouts of *Roana* in a fit of rage caused the thunder. Out of anger, *Raona* still chases

Roani by roaring, and this causes thunder and *Raoni* also still flees which causes the lightning in the sky (Narzary 2018:82-85).

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MYTH

The significance of this myth lies in the fact that it unveils the concept of Bodo people connected with the phenomena of thunder and lightning, one of the most powerful forces of nature. As recounted, it was *Raona's* aggressive roar that caused the thunder and the lightning to emanate from *Raoni's* naked back. In meteorological terms, both thunder and lightning have the power to bring nourishing rain and wind to fertilise the soil. Being an agrarian community, these natural forces seemed celestial, and the Bodo people revered and relied on them to restore fertility to the earth. The Bodos believe that at the first fall of rain, mother earth menstruates to prepare herself for fertilising work (Sanyal 1973:10). In other words, it implies that it is through the concerted effort of Mother Earth that the fertility of the world is assured. Consequently, the women in Bodo culture are engaged in the first uprooting and plantation of the paddy saplings. So, *Raona* and *Raoni* are primarily the weather gods of the Bodo pantheon: *Raona* symbolises the Sky-god, the male spirit, while *Raoni* manifestly symbolises the Earth-goddess, the female spirit.ⁱⁱ Their appearance in the form of thunder and lightning meant that life would continue. The agrarian Bodo people believe that if these sibling deities are satisfactorily worshipped, they shower sufficient rain on the earth.

This phenomenon is further epitomised in the songs and ballads of *putuli haba* (doll marriage) in the Bodo tradition.ⁱⁱⁱ The village folks, to appease them make dolls of straw in the name of *Raona* and *Raoni* and worship them. The *putuli haba* basically is an enactment of the marriage ceremony of *Raona* and *Raoni*, who is believed to be the first man and woman to be wedded (Boro 2004:101). The marriage of *Raona* and *Raoni* is indicative of the belief system that sexual act assists in the promotion of abundant harvest and are indeed indispensable to securing it (cited in Datta 1994:155).

Thus, the object of this *putuli haba* is to ensure the fertility of the variety of seasonal paddies and other fruit trees, animals, and mankind. In this way, the sacred marriage of *Raona* and *Raoni* underscores that vital principle - it is through the cooperative efforts of the gods and goddesses that the fecundity of the world is guaranteed. Furthermore, the Bodo people believe that if these deities are appeased satisfactorily, even a childless couple may be blessed with children (Basumatary 1955:12).

Moreover, the didactic element found in this myth is inherently moral. The myth ostensibly teaches the children how to act, live, and behave in society. In contemporary times, this tale acts as a moral tale, inculcating moral or didactic lessons in the minds of the children (Boro 2001:224), because desiring to marry one's sister is outrightly forbidden, a taboo in the Bodo culture. So, this myth functions as a weapon of social pressure and social control. It also fulfills the function of maintaining conformity to the accepted modes of behaviour in society because a stable home and society depend on accepting the established social and kinship norms. Since the influence of myths continues throughout the life of a man, it can be used against those who deviate from social conventions or an established pattern of behaviour (*ibid.*:225). About this function says Gayton (*ibid.* 224), 'the mythologic system of a people is often their educational system and the children who sit listening to an evening tale are imbibing traditional knowledge and attitudes no less than the row of sixth graders in our modern classrooms.'

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can state that myths in Bodo society culture are uncanny in phenomena because they are at once static and yet dynamic; stable and yet protean; archaic and yet contemporary; profligate and yet hallowed; fantastic and yet highly structured; divine and yet human in that they are as much about gods and goddesses as about human beings (Dorairaj 1998:1). Though they belong to a pre-literate and pre-historical era, they keep recurring in all ages and are a part of our contemporary society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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ⁱ The term 'aetiological,' is derived from the Greek word for 'cause' (*aitia*). In such myths, we find the origins of certain recognisable rites, of places and objects sacred to the culture.

ⁱⁱ There is also an extant belief that if appeased with prayers and offerings, they send a celestial girl called the *Bardwi Sikla*, the manifestation of wind and rain, to fertilise the earth for cultivation.

ⁱⁱⁱ As a religious ceremony, it is mostly celebrated in the district of Kamrup, Barpeta, Nalbari etc., on the seventh day of *Bwisagu (Bihu)* festival.