

Transformation, Ecology and Society in Bodo and Karbi Folktales with Special Reference to Hadidogla and Vo Terang Pinso

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Abstract: Folktales form a significant part of the oral traditions that preserve cultural values, ecological knowledge, social experience, and memory. The Bodos and the Karbis are two of the major indigenous communities of Assam; they have a widespread collection of oral narratives that summarize their worldview, lifestyle, and a harmonious relationship with nature. One of the more frequent themes in their folk tales is transformation or shape-shifting. The present study examines the theme of transformation in two selected folktales: *Hadidogla* (The Adjutant Stork), a Bodo folktale, and *Vo-Terang Pinso* (The Hornbill Boy), a Karbi folktale. The study aims to analyze the causes, meanings, and cultural significance of transformation depicted in these narratives and to explore the relationship between transformed characters, society, and ecology. Through descriptive and analytical methods, the research illustrates that transformation in the two stories is linked to emotional trauma, social isolation, and a longing for liberation. In addition, the two birds-the Adjutant Stork and the Hornbill-that have gone through a metamorphosis are not just any random animals but species that communities in both cases were intimately entwined with ecologically as well as culturally. This study also explains how these folktales helped preserve indigenous ecological knowledge and indirectly supported the conservation of endangered bird species through folk belief. Based on an analysis of Bodo and Karbi myth, the paper aims to uncover both heritage tradition-comparatively as well as specific forms of transformation motifs while determining one constant: revisit folkloristics in relation to folklore-bonded with nature and society.

Index Terms – Bodo and Karbi Folktales, Ecology, Indigenous Knowledge, Society, Transformation.

INTRODUCTION

The Karbis and the Bodos have their own storehouse of oral literature. In many oral narratives of the Bodos and Karbis, it has been perceived that sometimes the character of the stories transforms into another shape with the help of chanting, magic, and curse which causes the transformation. Bodos and Karbis, both have close relation to nature. They completely rely on nature for their livelihood so, there is a direct influence of nature on their culture, tradition, and society. Therefore, animals, insects, birds, and trees are taking an integral role in their folk tales. This study mainly tries to highlight the transformations taking place in two folk tales of the Bodos and the Karbis and also tries to establish their relation to society. In this regard, 'Hadidogla' (Adjutant Stork) from the Bodo folk tales and 'Vo-Terang Pinso' (The Hornbill Boy) from the Karbi folk tales are chosen for discussions.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the theme of transformation as depicted in the Bodo folktale Hadidogla and the Karbi folktale Vo Terang Pinso.
2. To study the social and cultural meanings of transformation reflected in the selected folktales.
3. To explore the ecological significance of the Adjutant Stork and the Hornbill and their relationship with the traditional beliefs and practices of the Bodo and Karbi communities.
4. To identify the similarities and differences in the representation of transformation, ecology, and society in the selected folktales of the Bodo and Karbi communities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study consists of qualitative and comparative methods. It mainly analyses the theme of transformation in ecology and society by probing two folktales, Hadidogla of the Bodos and Vo Terang Pinso of the Karbis. Primary data consists oral information, published articles and books, journal articles relevant literatures. The data collected has been analysed by descriptive and analytical methods. The paper further lends a folkloristic lens to interpret the various cultural and ecological meanings encased within the selected narratives.

DISCUSSION

This study investigates the relationship of human emotions, social experiences, and cultural beliefs with the transformation in Bodo and Karbi folktales. This then aims into how the transformations in the protagonists of Hadidogla and Vo-Terang Pinso into birds depict suffering and torture. It also explores the difference between the transformed birds and the environmental settings of the communities. Additionally, it aims to analyze the factors of these folktales which keep alive indigenous ecological knowledge and once folk belief that promotes environmental awareness and conservation. The analysis aims to illustrate transformation as a rhetorical device that sheds light on the interdependence of humanity, society and the environment.

Transformation in Bodo and Karbi Folktales and Its Relationship with Society

Transformation, commonly known as shape-shifting or metamorphosis, is one of the oldest and most widespread motifs in world folklore. It refers to the process through which a living being changes from one form into another. "Metamorphosis is the transformation of any being or thing, form or a species into a new, different form and type, as well as an usual change in something. Metamorphoses rely on the most ancient mythopoetic ideas and reflect their unique characteristics."¹

There are many different ways to change one's transformation, and these transformations can serve a variety of purposes. Sandal, Veenu, describes about purpose of Transformation in "The mysterious world of shape-shifters" as "There are many types of shape shifting used for different purposes such as strategic deception, seduction, trickery, crime, revenge, escape, immortalisation, revelation liberation, punishment."² Such transformations may involve a change from human to animal, animal to human, human to plant, or even from one supernatural form to another. Across cultures, transformation often symbolizes emotional suffering, divine intervention, punishment, reward, liberation, social change, or spiritual evolution.

Among indigenous communities, transformation narratives are not merely imaginative stories. They reflect the cultural beliefs, ecological surroundings, and philosophical understanding of life. The Bodos and the Karbis, who have traditionally maintained close relationships with nature, have preserved numerous tales involving transformation. These narratives reveal how humans, animals, birds, forests, and supernatural forces are interconnected within indigenous worldviews.

In both Bodo and Karbi traditions, transformation is not simply a magical event but a symbolic process through which social realities and cultural values are expressed. The selected folktales, Hadidogla and Vo-Terang Pinso, provide valuable insights into how transformation functions as a narrative device to express human emotions, social relationships, and ecological consciousness.

Transformation in the Bodo Folktale "Hadidogla"

The folktale, Hadidogla tells the story of Serja Bwrai a man known for his specialty in playing the Bodo traditional instrument, serja. Even though the villagers appreciated his efforts made in producing melodious tunes, he could not fulfill his responsibilities for the family. He did not engage in fields like farming, fishing or hunting, but instead spent the majority of his time playing music. The villagers appreciated his talent and often shared fish and meat with him, but his wife gradually became dissatisfied with his idle lifestyle. One day when Serja Bwrai came back to his house and asked his wife to open the door, she answered with silence because of her anger and frustration. Serja Bwrai's was crushed from rejection, feeling shamed and sorrowful, he flew, becoming an Adjutant Stork. While many folk and fairy tales talk about transformation through magic, curses or divine intervention this one is transformed through mental pain. The incident then acts as a metaphor for social neglect, personal failure and emotional disconnectedness.

This story also holds a mirror to some of the social values of traditional Bodo society. In family structure, a husband is responsible for the earnings of economic and social wellbeing of the home That's where Serja Bwrai can no longer do these duties and his wife ends up angry with him, solving with her own hand everything that is given to her. Thus, the folktale is a cultural teaching about responsibility, seriousness and accountability. Through this story, we also see how heartfelt pain can define a person. The folktale emphasizes this challenge of the relationship between the expectations of others and one's own behaviour, through telling the tale of Serja Bwrai's transformation.

The choice of the Adjutant Stork as the transformed form is equally noteworthy. The bird is very much related to the ecology of the area occupied by Bodo race for centuries. The Adjutant Stork is a common sight around wetlands, rivers, croplands and human settlements. Additionally, the bird holds a unique position in Bodo folk knowledge and traditional beliefs. "Some parts of its body especially, the crop and feathers are considered to have medicinal properties. The Bodos apply its crop on snake bite by mixing rice grain. There is a folk believe in Bodo society that consuming its meat brings illness and misfortune."³ It has even prohibited hunters from killing and eating the bird since the time of immemorial believe it was once a human being, which also indirectly advocates its conservation. The folktale further connects the bird with music, as people believe that the sound produced during its flight resembles the melody of the Serja played by Serja Bwrai. Thus, the transformation of the protagonist into an Adjutant Stork not only reflects personal tragedy but also reveals the close connection between folklore, ecology, traditional knowledge, and cultural imagination in Bodo society.

Transformation in the Karbi Folktale "Vo-Terang Pinso"

In the tale Vo Terang Pinso, a boy who is mistreated and tortured by his stepmother after the death of his own mother. He does not get care and affection but neglect, dishonor, and other physical harassments. Even at a playfulness age, he is forced to work tirelessly on the household and agricultural field, with insufficient food. His life is overloaded with the harsh behaviour of the step-mother and he misses out on all happiness experienced by other kids. But the boy is comforted by the kindness of his friends who sympathies with his condition and share their food with him. One day his friends gift him many colourful clothes, and wish to become hornbill. All of a sudden, his desire is granted and he becomes a hornbill. On the contrary in this story this transformation shows that you want to escape from cruelty & suffering. It symbolizes the boy's desire to get far away from a life full of sadness and injustice a new life without his step mother cruelty.

One of the more important aspects to this transformation is that only the physical form of the boy changes but here you still have a human consciousness. He also goes back to visit his friends and have kept the promise which he had made on before was leaving even after becoming a hornbill. He gives them his feathers to adorn their bodies in appreciation. On the other hand, he punishes his stepmother for being a cruel towards him by defecating into her eyes and putting out her eyesight. Such is this case; shameful deed punished, and we see the moral lesson from the folk tale-style story, good deeds rewarded by fate. This

¹ Shoir Rustamonva Usmanova . "The Application of the Methods of Metamorphosis in the Folklore of the People of the East." Psychology and Education, 2021, p. 1033. Psychology and Education, www.psychologyandeducation.net.

² Sandal, V. (2008). The mysterious world of shape-shifters. p-2

³ Basumatary, Jiten. Personal interview. 15 Mar. 2020.

transformation then serves not only as an outlet, but is through which justice occurs. The story conveys vital social messages through the character of Hornbill Boy about kindness, friendship, gratitude, and responsibility.

The selection of the hornbill as the transformed appearance is a significant from both a cultural and ecological perspective in Karbi society. The hornbill is perhaps the most-known bird present in those forests and hills historically inhabited by the Karbis, and occupies a significant extent of importance within their folklore, mythology and belief systems. Hornbills play a key ecological role in the forest; they are vital to dispersing seeds over large distances, which is why many people regard them as an indicator of forest health and regeneration. "Hornbill referred as 'Farmers of the Forest' since they help in dispersal of the seeds of tropical trees and maintain the beauty of the forest to keep it alive"⁴

Additionally, the hornbill is an strongly representative form within Karbi culture and ecology. The hornbill, which inhabits the forests and hills where the Karbis have lived for centuries, retains a important position in their folktales, myths and beliefs. With an intimate closeness to these birds, the Karbis have developed a relationship.

Moreover, the rare bird holds a unique place in Karbi traditions. While eating hornbill meat has been believed by many Karbis to bring misfortune, bad luck or disease-with certain parts of the bird taken for traditional healing only as medicine purposes. A hornbill is also important because of a prominent Karbi myth which tells the story, how a hungry member (who belonged to Terang clan) who had lost his way and was at top of a high tree, was once fed by the hornbill. The idea is that the name of the Terang clan, one of strongest Karbi clans, is derived from hornbill. "As per the beliefs, one of the brothers of Terang clan was saved by the bird when the other brother tries to kill his own brother."⁵ Myths and beliefs like these show the deep cultural reverence associated with the bird, as well as its significant role in Karbi collective memory. "the clan Terang is said to be adopted from the wild bird called, Vo Terang (Hornbill). So it has been forbidden to Terang clan not to take the flesh of hornbill. It is true that totem belief has a great influence over the society till today"⁶ Thus, the boy's metamorphosis into a hornbill is not an arbitrary fictional event but also relates to symbolic, ecological and cultural significance of the bird in Karbi society.

Comparative Analysis of Transformation in "Hadidogla" and "Vo-Terang Pinso"

Each folktale illustrates human-bird transformation, and showcases the bond between folklore and nature. Change does not involve sorcerers, witches, or magical objects in each narrative. Rather human emotions become the strong force for transformation. However, important differences also exist. The change that occurs in Hadidogla is born out of a sense of shame, solitude, and emotional abandonment. Vo-Terang Pinso, is about how change comes from wanting to break free from suffering. Consequently, the different emotional circumstances surrounding the transformations.

The second difference is in design of the transformation. Serja Bwrai starts to physically and mentally transform into a bird. The Hornbill Boy, in contrast, undergoes physical transformation but keeps his human consciousness and memories. Ecologically, each of the two stories mirrors the surroundings inhabited by the communities involved. The Adjutant Stork is linked to the wetlands and plains where a large population of Bodos resides, while the Hornbill has strong ties to the densely forested hills traditionally occupied by Karbis. As a result, the adapted birds are representative of their communities ecolines.

More than anything, each of these stories shows folklore as an important aspect of environmental ethics. A similar observation has been made by Mago and Anand. According to them- "Folktales can be used as great tools to undo the degradation of ecology, through the children who are the future of the nation. Apart from being a source of entertainment for children, folktales also widen the horizon of the wisdom of people of all ages. These folktales develop a patriotic social attitude among people, so that they may keep their self-interests aside and accepts practices that lead to Sustainable Development".⁷

The stories promote respect for wildlife and indirectly contribute towards conserving biodiversity through the traditional beliefs linked to these birds. These stories, then, serve as cultural instruments and vessels of indigenous ecological knowledge

FINDINGS

1. In both Hadidogla and Vo Terang Pinso, transformation is a projecting motif to express the human emotions, social realities and cultural values.
2. In both stories' transformation do not happen due to magical objects, sorcerers or supernatural agents; they transform as a consequence of emotional suffering, social exclusion and a craving for freedom.
3. Transformed birds, the Adjutant Stork and Hornbill are intimately linked with Bodo's and Karbi cultural life as well as their ecological environment because of a notable relationship between man and nature.
4. While Hadidogla portrays both physical and psychological transformation, Vo Terang Pinso depicts only physical transformation, as the protagonist holds his human consciousness and memories after becoming a hornbill.
5. The folktales hold significant social and moral values that exemplifies responsibility, compassion, friendship, gratitude, justice and one individual actions within society.
6. The established ideas of the Adjutant Stork and Hornbill as sacred birds have helped local communities incorporate indigenous ecological knowledge into day to-day lives, thereby indirectly aiding in the conservation of these two-bird species.

⁴ Nigam, Ruchira, Asif Ahmad Siddiqui, and Amita Kanaujia. "Hornbills – Farmers of the Forest." Wuthering Wild: ENVIS-RP Newsletter on Biodiversity & Traditional Knowledge, vol. 2, no. 3, Oct.-Dec. 2020, p. 3.

⁵ Timung, Longkiri, and Kh. Narendra Singh. "Totemic Beliefs and Biodiversity Conservation Among the Karbis of Assam, India." Research on Humanities and Social Sciences, vol. 6, no. 11, 2016, p. 28.

⁶ Bey, Mondol Sing, The Socio-Economic Life of The Karbis At A Glance, Karbi Lammet Amei, Diphu, 2004.

⁷ Mago, Payal, and Rituraj Anand. "Ecological Worldview in Folklores and Folk Tales Leads to Environmental Conservation." SSRN, 10 July 2022.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can be summarized that the transformation of the characters is seen in two selected folktales- “Hadidogla” and “Vo-Terang Pinso.” There are several folktales among the Bodos and Karbis where the transformation of characters can be seen. In that case, sometimes the protagonist loses their original shape temporarily or permanently. The same has happened in two folktales. Usually, a sorcerer or a witch is considered to be the agency causing transformation and the character also transforms into another object through magic, curse, and sometimes without any reason. But in the both Bodo and Karbi tales, the humans are seen transforming into birds without any magical power. After studying both folktales, it can be observed that the women characters have been presented in different perspectives. Here, the negative response from the women is the main reason for the transformation. From that point of view, the similarities of both tales have been seen. The Bodos and the Karbis have been living in the same state for centuries. The only difference is that Karbi people live in the hills area and Bodo people live in the plains area. Adjutant Stork lives in a plain area and Hornbill chooses to live in a hills area. It can be the reason the birds mentioned in the folktales are different. Simultaneously, some aspects of society have come to light through the tales. From the above analysis, it can be said that both communities have a close relationship with nature. Some aspects of society are deeply rooted in nature. Consequently, animals and birds are found in folktales of both communities. From the study, it is found that the birds mentioned in the stories are used in the traditional healing practice of both communities. Through these folktales, it can be said that both communities have conserved these two endangered birds- Adjutant Stork and Hornbill through their folk belief. It should be mentioned that there is a similar folktale in the Zeme Nagas. This mutually shared or closely resembling tale between the Karbis and the Zeme Nagas may be the result of their long stretch of sharing, cultural interaction and their neighbouring setting. The nearness of the two communities over generations has allowed for a significant transmission of folklore, oral tradition, beliefs, and customs. Consequently, the similarity in folktales shows the cultural distribution and common cultural background in the area among them.

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