

The Educational Value of Proverbs and Folktales in the Mizo Society

V.Lalengkimi

Assistant Professor, Education Department, Lawngtlai Govt. College, Lawngtlai, Mizoram (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 10 November 2018

Keywords

Education, oral tradition, proverbs, folktales, Mizo

*Corresponding Author

Email: vengkimi5[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Foreign missionaries brought the gift of literacy and education to the Mizo people in the 17th century. But even in the pre-literate stage, the Mizo people had their own indigenous mode of educating the younger generation through the oral tradition. The oral tradition which include folktales and proverbs serves the function of books and texts that the younger generation study in the literate age. Folk wisdom and knowledge hidden in seemingly simple and humble stories of man, animals and nature serves a didactic function. These tales and proverbs serve as a form of exercising control over individuals in the community and encouraging them to be part of the communal life. The proverbs and folktales also bring the community together and perform the function of entertainment in the traditional society. The traditional Mizo society was a community based society and it is still so in many respect. Oral tradition thrives in such communal life where story telling was a much coveted skill and a good orator serves as a teacher to the community. This paper looks into selected Mizo proverbs and folktales and analyse how they serve as a tool for educating the younger generation about good behavior and their society's norms and culture. It also makes a case for making proverbs and folktales relevant to the present generation so that they are not only taught important life skills but also stay connected to their culture and community.

1. Introduction

The Mizo society has a rich oral tradition. Since literacy came only with the advent of the British missionaries, the traditional Mizo village depended on orality as a medium of transferring knowledge and culture from one generation to the other. Hence, folktales and proverbs which were handed down orally from one generation to the next became an invaluable source of education and transmitting knowledge. According to Alan Dundes, folklore is "a people's own description of themselves and "an autobiographical ethnography of people" (1980:55). Thus, the existence of Mizo folklore is very revealing of the Mizo society's culture and structure. The art of storytelling is a respected art because a story teller also becomes the community educator. The stories and tales maybe used to warn against behavior which are socially disapproved or encouraged behavior considered socially acceptable. The elder generation used proverbs to educate and instruct their children. Archer Taylor defined folklore as, "materials that are handed on traditionally from generation to generation without reliable ascription to inventor or author" (1984:398). Hence, folklore which include tales and proverbs emerged out of a need in a community and is more of a communal creation rather than individual.

This paper attempts to look at how folktales and proverb are used within the Mizo traditional society to educate the younger generation about the society's structure, ideals and values.

A society or a community can be studied by studying the proverbs and folktales created and transmitted within the community. proverb can be literally translated as *thufing tawi*. Hidden within these tales and proverbs are tools of social control which are used to educate the younger generation about the moral values and ethical ideals of the community

Mizo youngsters are educated about the seriousness of exercising wisdom while choosing life partner, through proverbs like

a). Mizo: *Thing pawh a kung a that leh a rah a tha, a kung a that loh leh, a rah a tha lo vang*
English: *If the tree is good its fruit is good, if the tree is bad its fruit is bad.*

b). Mizo: *Kawi pawh, a kawm a that leh a rah a tha, a kawm a that loh leh a rah a tha lo.*
English: *If the pod of a kawi bean is good, if the pod is bad the bean is bad*

Hence, young men and women are instructed to look for life partners from so called good families. The traditional Mizo society was a hardworking society where people depended on the work of their hands to make a good living for themselves and their families. Hence, the young men and women were discouraged from finding excuses to skip work or delay work which can be seen in the following proverb-

Mizo: *Themthiam lovin an hriam an mawhchhiat*
English: *Bad workmen blame their tools.*

Laziness was frowned upon and anybody who neglected work was warned through proverbs like

a). Mizo: *Vawiin tih tur naktuka tih ah khek suh*
English: *Don't pull off till tomorrow what should be done today.*

b). Mizo: *A tha lam kawng a chho a, a chhe lam kawng a phe*
English: *The good road is steep and the bad road is level*

The Mizo society is a community-based society where an individual cannot exist in isolation and every one has a role to play in the society. This is emphasized in the proverb

Mizo: *Lung pui pawh lung te in a kamki loh chuan a awm thei lo*

English: *Even a big rock cannot remain without rolling unless supported by small stones*

The communal life of the Mizo society is emphasized here along with the importance every individual, the humble and the great, have in contributing towards the development of the community.

Most Mizo folktales are didactic in nature. They not only entertain but educate and inform. Folktales are told as a part of community storytelling under the moonlit night by an elder to the village community or by grandparents to their grandchildren around the kitchen fire place. There is wisdom engrained within the seemingly simple tales and hence the function of these tales is much more than entertainment. Let's look at two examples of Mizo folktales and analyse it's didactic nature.

The first story is called Chemtatrawta and this version is taken from Dr. Margaret L. Pachau's *Handpicked Tales from Mizoram* (2008).

"One day a young man by the name of Chemtatrawta set off on a hunt. He began to sharpen his dao along the length of the river. Suddenly, a prawn bit him on his testicles. He was greatly enraged and, in his anger, he cut off the large bamboo from where the khaum creeper hung. The khaum was furious and in turn, he landed atop the spine of the jungle fowl below. The jungle fowl was very annoyed and in turn, it scattered the nest of the large ants. The large ants in turn, bit the testicles of the wild pig. The wild pig turned livid and it scattered the wild plantains where the bats nestled. The bat was furious and it flew up the elephants' trunk. The elephant in turn, was infuriated and it destroyed the house of an old woman nearby. The old woman was incensed and she defecated by the mouth of the village well. This angered the entire village and the villagers began to rally in great rage.

After a while the villagers gathered together and asked the old woman the reason as to why she defecated at the mouth of the village well.

'Old woman, why did you defecate at the mouth of the well?'

She replied, " Why did the elephant destroy my home?"

The villagers went across to the elephant, "O elephant, why did you destroy the old woman's home ?"

The elephant replied, "Why did the bat fly up my trunk"

They asked the bat, " Why did you fly up the elephant's trunk ?"

And the bat replied, " Why did the pig destroy my hamlet"

They asked the wild pig, "Why did you destroy the bat's hamlet"

The wild pig replied, " Why did the large ants bite my testicles?"

They asked the large ants, "Why did you bite the testicles of the wild pig?"

The large ants replied, "Why did the wild fowl destroy our home?"

They asked the wild fowl, "Why did the you destroy the home of the large ants?"

The wild fowl said, "Why did the khaum hit my spine?"

They asked the khaum, "Why did you hit the wild fowl on his spine?"

The khaum demanded, " Why did Chemtatrawta slash away the large creeper from where I hung?"

They asked Chemtatrawta, "Why did you slash away the creeper from where the khaum hung?"

And Chemtatrawta said, " Why did the prawn bite me on my testicles?"

They turned to the prawn and realized that he had no excuses whatsoever. He was at loss for words and so he merely said, "Ih,ih, ih if you roast me in the fire I will turn a fiery red, much to the delight of the children, and if you drop me in the water I will turn white and pale."

So they did likewise and roasted him in the fire and he turned a fiery red, then they took him out of the fire and placed him in water and he turned white and pale. But he soon regained consciousness in the water and declared, "Ah...nothing compares to the home of one's parents!!"

And saying this, he glided away to freedom. He swam inside a cave and they continued to chase. They poked him about with the leaves of the hnahthial plant. They prodded about the edges of his mouth and eventually it became scruffy and grungy. And that is why till today the prawn's mouth still retains such a shape!"

The unthinking act of the prawn led to a chain of event that eventually affected the whole village. It is more relevant in a community-based society like the Mizo's because the action of an individual has implications for the whole community. This story would serve as a warning to the younger generation as well as to the old that their actions however small could destroy the whole community. The use of various characters from the animal kingdom as well as the plant kingdom point to the fragile balance that exist in nature and how one must respect all levels of the ecosystem. An imbalance in one level could eventually affect human life.

The second story is that of Maruangi, a legendary heroine considered to epitomize the ideal Mizo woman. She could be considered to be the Mizo counterpart of Cinderella. A callous father and a cruel wicked step mother didn't deter her from working hard and being kind and courteous. She was skilled in weaving, hardworking in the field and kind to strangers. The end of the folktale shows her getting married to a wealthy man and escaping from her life of oppression. This story highlights how good character is clearly rewarded.

Alan Dundes commenting on the function of folklore says, "Whatever is contained in a folkloristic text is meaningful-even if we do not always have full insight into what the meanings may be. It seems clear that if an item remains in tradition, it must have meaning for the carriers of the tradition" (1510).

Mizo proverbs and folktales perform a salient function in educating the younger generation . The educational functions and values of this rich tradition of Mizo folklore should be tap into and made relevant in the 21st century.

References

1. Dundes, Alan. 1965. *The Study of Folklore*. New Jersey: University of California
2. Dundes, Alan . 1980. *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
3. Leach, Maria ed. 1984. *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legends*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc.
4. Lorrain, J. Herbert and Fred W. Savidge, *A Grammar and Dictionary of the Lushai language (Dulien dialect)*. Delhi: Cultural Publishing House, 198.
5. L.Pachau, Margaret.2008 *Handpicked Tales From Mizoram*.Kolkatta :Writers Workshop