

Folk Music Of The Zeliangrongs Of Northeast India With Special Reference To Songs

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Abstract

The paper is a humble attempt to look into the folk songs of the Zelaingrongs of Northeast and its importance in their culture. The Zeliangrong people have their rich culture which handed down from one generation to the next through oral traditions. They lived in the villages and their cultural life operates around the village community through the institutions like *Khangchu, Luchu, Pei, Karaapei Kaibang, Gaanchang Kaibang* etc. They are proud of their rich cultural heritage, as their culture has significantly been enriched by their religious ceremonies, annual festivals, beautiful dances and diversely classified folk songs. Music may be vocal or instrumental through which one's feeling, sentiment, emotion and idea are expressed. It also binds and touches everyone because music is the universal language. They sing their folk songs in time of festival, great ritual sacrifice of the village or individual and other social functions. Their folk songs express their love, their hardship, hope, frustration, victory etc.

Key words: *Zeliangrong, folk songs, music, love, hope, sentiment, universal*

Introduction

The Zeliangrong,¹ one of the inhabitants of Northeast belong to Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid racial stock.² Like other inhabitants, they, too, claim their origin from a cave locally known as *Mahou Taobei*, which is believed to be located somewhere in Senapati District

of Manipur. Another theory suggests that they must have lived with other groups of the same family in south West China before 1000 B.C and migrated to eastern Tibet, Upper Burma, then moved into Irrawaddy valley, Malaysia and Indonesia, and they returned southward and entered north East India through Manipur river, and some tracts of Indo-Burma border to their present habitat (Northeast)³ at different periods. As migrating people to the new environment they took shelter at the cave (*Mahou Taobei*) for safety and protection from natural surroundings (rains, storms, wild animals and other groups). They moved to *Makhel* and to *Ramting Kabin*, and then to *Makuilongdi* where they had well established social system. After many years of their settlement at *Makuilongdi*, they moved to different directions due to factors like economic, limited space and differences among the leaders of the group; the Rongmei, to the south, Zeme, to the west and Liangmai, to the north of Manipur. Most of the Naga traditions point to *Makhel* as their original home. Now, they are found settled in three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

Methods and Materials

The necessary data on which the study rests has been collected from available primary and secondary sources and also from selected well informed informants of the Zeliangrong community. The study is based on ethno-historical approach.

Since culture a unique quality of man, separates him from the lower animals. So, one can describe man is a cultural being instead of a social animal. Edward B. Tylor defines culture as “complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.”⁴ Culture means refined.⁵ It has both material and non-material expressions. The non-material culture does cover thought pattern, institutions, the behavior and love of beauty expressed in dress, costume and ornaments, system of religious belief and moral law, the love of life as expressed through the festivals, and dance, song and music.

In wider term, culture does include in itself all walks of life, total mode of behavior, philosophies and ethics, manners, customs and traditions, religious, political, economic and the aesthetic expressions and visual arts. It includes all that man has acquired in his individual and social life.

Every society small or big has a culture of its own. The Zeliangrongs, too, have their own culture which is transmitted orally from father to son and a cumulative of continuous process of the social heritage of the tribe. The Zeliangrongs are traditionalist and culture conscious people. They are proud of their rich cultural heritage. They are deeply religious and have a great respect for their traditions handed through the ages. With their well-knit social organization, they developed and practiced a well institutionalized cultural pattern. The Zeliangrong culture has greatly been enriched by their religious ceremonies, great annual festivals, beautiful dances and

their diversely classified songs. Their conservatism comes out of their sense of pride in the superiority of their culture in relation to others. They love life, beauty, color and a fantasy to flee from the routine work of the realities of life.⁶

The Zeliangrong people lived in the villages and all their activities are confined to the village. The cultural life of the people operates around the village community through the institutions like village council (*Pei*), the dormitories (*Thien*) and the family households. In the distant past, village was impressive and extraordinary with big houses, the imposing males' dormitory (*Khangchu*) and the ritual ornamental houses of the *Taraangkai*.⁷ At present, these houses have vanished from the Zeliangrong villages.

Music

In all parts of the world, music is used as medium of thought through which feelings, sentiments, emotions and ideas are expressed. Music is “the art of combining vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) to produce beauty form, harmony, and expression of emotion.”⁸ It may be called the universal language because its meaning and appeal are largely the same for people everywhere. It has almost limitless variety. In other words, music does speak universal language and break across the barriers of race and color. It may be vocal or instrumental. It unites, binds and touches everyone. It is believed that music is as old as the world. Over a period of many centuries, people all over the world have developed musical systems peculiar to themselves.

The types of songs sung by the Zeliangrong people at different functions clearly indicate that they love music. They sing their folk songs in time of festival, ceremony and other socio-cultural functions with or without instruments. In the distant past, boys and girls slept in their respective dormitories namely *Khangchu*, bachelor's dormitory and *Luchu*, girl's dormitory where they learnt different types of folk songs from their senior members. It was their system to communicate with each other through songs on many important matters either in group or in individual. They also used to argue and interact through songs. Thus, the folk songs of Zeliangrong are very philosophic.⁹

Folk Songs

The folk song forms the essence of the Zeliangrong culture. It is believed that song is divine origin. Men adopted the songs sung by gods. There is a myth. One day, a farmer slaughtered a cow and left the flesh at the paddy field for evil gods. The evil gods came and ate the flesh of the animal. After that they tried to kill the man who slept in the hut; the farmer did hide inside a heap of straws. The evil gods surrounded the heap of straws and started to take away the straw to kill the man. Then, *Lao Rah* (paddy field deity) appeared and said: “Oh! If you want to kill the man, first you sing all the songs of *Thongramnang* and you should take away a

straw after singing a song.”Accordingly, the evil gods followed the advice of *Lao Rah*. Fortunately, the farmer was saved as the dawn broke and the evil gods left the place.¹⁰ In this way, men learnt all the songs sung by gods. Their songs express their love, their hardship, hope, frustration, victory etc. Some of the important folk songs are as follows:

Work songs

Laophun Lu is a seed sowing song. The songs are sung to make the work more progress and goddess of paddy happy. It is believed that the goddess of paddy feels happy and blesses a bountiful harvest if the cultivators work in a happy mood. *Lao Ruaih Lu*, a song of weeding is sung to please goddess of paddy and to forget the trouble and pain during cultivation. The songs may be sung responsive-manner or lead and follow by two groups. No instrument is used as accompaniment of the songs, however an imaginary rhythm is always followed uniformly.¹¹

Ritual songs

Maku Luh is a song sung on the occasion of great ritual sacrifices like *Banru*, *Taraang Kai* etc. They are not sung at the common functions and festivals. *Matui Lu* is a song of the *Thian*, dormitories. These songs are sung to stimulate a sense of positive competitions among themselves for the wellbeing of the village. *Kuan Lu* is a song sung on different religious occasions and ceremonies. No one should commit mistake in singing the song. Hymns are recited by an elder of *Pei* as prayer song to *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God for wellbeing and prosperity.¹²

Song of flour pounding

Jou Sou Lu is a song of rice pounding. A lot of rice-beer and breads are required in the celebration of special ritual ceremonies like *Banru*, *Matui*, *Taraang Kai*. And for the purpose, rice is pounded by the boys and girls of the village some days ahead of the ritual ceremonies. The song is accompanied by musical instruments like drum, gong, cymbal etc. Drum beating does synchronize the song with the thrashes of pestle and it continues till the flour is properly pounded.¹³

Agricultural Ritual song

Katu Lu is an agricultural ritual song sung by the members of *Khangchu* on the festive occasion of *Gudui* or *Maleg ngai* by marching from one end of the village to another for plentiful harvest.¹⁴

War song

In the distant past, *Rih Lu*, the war song was sung on the occasion of *Kavoumei* ritual when a warrior brought enemy's head or killed wild animals like tiger, bear or python. It is usually performed at the house of *Ritu Kaibang*.¹⁵

Harvest songs

Maja Lu is a song of the paddy. These songs are sung on the occasions related to the harvest. It is a song sung praising of goddess of paddy for abundant harvest. Generally, the song is sung by a person inside the house; when the song is just ended, everyone who is present will shout *Laogai, Laogai*. *Gong* is accompanied as musical instrument. *Maja Kaileng Pat Lu*, a song of pre-harvest is sung to please goddess of paddy for good harvest. *Kailaam Lu* is also a pre-harvest song sung to please rice goddess for bountiful harvest.¹⁶

Village guarding songs

Kairong Ron Lu is a song sung by the youth and warriors to give a sense of security to the villagers during night time. In short, it is a kind of guard song.¹⁷

Festival songs

Festival songs are also known as *Chapa Lu*. It is a common song sung at the time of dance of the annual *Gaan-Ngai* festival with the accompaniment of beating of drum, cymbal and gong.¹⁸ The drum is beaten simultaneously with the first words of every sentence of the song at the beginning. It is known as single beat. When the dance begins, they beat drum from single to double beats. At this, the drum shall be beaten with every two syllables of the song. Now the steps of dance, the song and emotion of the folk are synchronized by the drum beats. And it will continue till the dancers are out. Then, the song and the drum beat shall gain momentum and concluded with *hoi, hoi*. Sometimes, it is also sung at the seed-sowing and weeding in the jhum fields when there is shortage of songs in certain series. It is sung either responsive or lead and follow manner by two groups comprised of male and female mixed. It is sung very slowly at the beginning and then faster bit by bit till its conclusion, and the same song is sung repeatedly four or five times or so.¹⁹

Romantic songs

Ramruan Lu is a song of lamentation, love, anguish and melancholy. The songs are divided into *Magian Lu* and *Nrah Lu*. *Magian Lu* is a song to lament a death. *Nrah Lu* is the same, but the song to lament a death is sung with *Nrah*, harp. *Magian Lu* is sub-categories of *Tuna-Gaan Magian Lu*. It is sung to express profound sorrow over the separation of lovers, intimate friends etc. Children and young people are advised not to sing in the belief that it may invite bad omen, but learning is permissible for any one any time. The song is sung in solo either by male or female very slowly with full expression of the meaning at the same speed and same vocal till its conclusion.²⁰

Lullaby

Nah Kathu Lu is lullaby. It is sung to lull a baby to sleep, to caress or to stop from crying. Both man and woman can sing this song.²¹

Poetical songs

Luruang and Luphai are the songs sung in the festivals. The themes of these songs are more of romance, cultural, social and moral life, historical events, occupation, economic resource and activities, topographical descriptions, and intermarriage and contemporary love affairs of the time.²² The songs are sung without musical instruments.

Praising songs

Luchian Lu is a song of good gesture and best wishes. They are classified into *Meinou Kailong Pat Lu* (song sung on the eve of marriage), *Nouson Lu Chian Lu* (song sung on the day of marriage) and *Maku Luchian Lu* (song sung on the preceding days of ritual ceremonies). *Meithon Lu* is a song sung praising individual for his great deeds or actions.

Song accompanied with a harp

Nrah Lu is a song sung with a harp. It is said that *Gairemnang*, a semi folk hero, once sitting on the top of *Kimbut Hill* and sang *Nrah Lu* describing the beauty of girls of the *Kourang* village.

Song of old womenfolk

Karaapei Lu is the song of old womenfolk sung on the occasion of *Nanu-ngai*, a ritual festival in which the children born in the preceding year are given ear-piercing on both the lobes and are blessed. It is observed in the month of February every year. On this occasion the old women sing and dance for the fertility of men and soil of the village.

Conclusion

To conclude, folk song is the basic foundation of the Zeliangrong cultural heritage. Folk songs of different types are also sung by them on diverse events with or without musical instrument for. In the past the youth learnt the folk song including playing of musical instruments from their senior members while sleeping in their respective dormitories. Unfortunately, nowadays, the younger generation is neglecting such traditional songs including the use of musical instruments. It is high time to preserve and promote the folk songs of the people.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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