

# Tribal Culture and Environment: Exploring the Application of Metamorphosis that marks the Kinship of Culture and Environment in the Kuki Orature with Special Reference to the Darlong and Hrangkhawl Tribes Considering Select Tales

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## Abstract:

'Culture' and 'Environment' have always had close affinity in Indian philosophy. This relationship is also exalted by theories like ecofeminism, anthropocene, and more reviving ancient rituals, texts, traditions, and customs on nature worships or rather objects of nature. According to Merchant, cultural ecofeminism "celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centered on goddess worship, the moon, the animals and the female reproductive system" (Radical Ecology, 193-221). The Northeast region of India, known for its richness in orature, has ample of texts (inclusive of written and oral) that challenge the difference, and commemorate the bond. The Darlong and Hrangkhawl tribes, residents of the present state of Tripura, are no exception to it. However, the tribes (Darlong & Hrangkhawl), having accepted Christianity, have lost and trample over such philosophy as it contradict their newly accepted faith. Folktales such as 'Rwngnû', 'Rwngnû', 'Hrîlî Dîl', 'Sâipui Nâirengpâ', 'Khuangthli Rihli' and more inculcate the affinity between the tribes' culture and environment. This affinity is championed through the application of metamorphosis in tales. Hence, the paper intend to study the application of metamorphosis as modern of escape to challenge social, religious and scientific constructs in the Darlong and Hrangkhawl narrative considering select folktales.

## Keywords:

Culture, Environment, Folktales, Metamorphosis, Kinship.

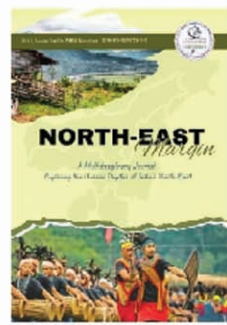
## 1. Introduction to the Study:

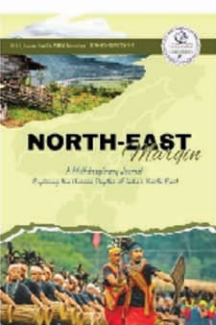
"In recent years, interdisciplinary research, including folklore, ethnography, linguoculturology and other disciplines, has been expanding. The complex study of

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materials related to various sciences ensures the complementarity of the fields of science, contributes to a deeper and more systematic understanding of the phenomena of language and culture. In particular, the comparative study of the specific motives and methods in the discourse of mythological traditions and fairy tales in folklore texts serves to determine the way of thinking, mentality and imagination of different peoples" (Usmanova 2021). On the basis of this, the paper intends to study the oral narratives of the Darlong and Hrangkhawl tribes from a new gaze. "Oral narratives are cultural materials and documents transmitted verbally from one generation to another in speeches or songs that later take up the form of folktales, folksongs, ballads, sayings or even chants. No doubt, the origin of this tradition may date back to some stone age when men knew not the art of writing yet watermarked their every deed for their forth coming generations. It might also have originated in circumstances where a grandmother or a grandfather attempts to quench the thirst of their grandchildren about the outer world which according to them is a world full of adventures and strange happenings" (Darlong 2014). stepping further, the "oral traditions of the peoples of the East are characterized by the prevalence of metamorphoses in the structure of "man → animal", "man → bird", "man → insect", "man → supernatural being" and "man → body, element". There are cases when the opposite of these structures. In the folklore of the peoples of the East, metamorphoses in the form of "man → animal" and "animal → man" are distinguished by their productive use. Consequently, in the collection "Guan and tzi" ("Unusual Records"), compiled by Day Fu during the Tang Dynasty in China alone, one can see metamorphoses in the form of 33 magical fox-girls, 16 magical tiger-boys and 11 magical snake-girls. The unique fauna and flora of each Eastern country was also one of the important factors in the emergence of metamorphoses in the oral art of the peoples of the East. Therefore, in the folklore of the Chinese and Korean peoples, the motifs of foxes, snakes, white birds, parrots, butterflies and dragons, and in the folklore of the Uzbek and Turkish peoples, the motifs of dogs, wolves, horses, monkeys, snakes, frogs, pigeons, white birds and monsters are common. At the same time, it should be noted that the motif of stone solidification is characteristic of the oral art of all the peoples of the East" (Usmanovan 2021). It is through such oral narratives and traditions that we often find form/shape shifting phenomena which the paper term as 'metamorphosis.' The tales of Darlong and Hrangkhawl too intend inhabit similar characteristics negating the notion that nature/environment is an independent entity in human world.

Metamorphosis is nothing but, a process of modification of form/appearance or character undergone by a thing or person to shift into an entirely altered version. For instance, the change from nymph or larva to adult is called metamorphosis. In the world of emerging theorists, the definition has also been applied in the study of social sciences. As such, cultural studies apply the definition to perform a penetrative measurement of the equation - Culture and Environment, Nature and Culture, et al. Subsequently, in the words of Maria Tatar "Metamorphosis is central to the fairy tale, which shows us figures endlessly shifting their shapes, crossing borders, and undergoing change" (2000). Again, "The Encyclopedia of Mythology defines the concept of





"metamorphosis" as follows: Metamorphosis (Greek. Metamorphosis): 1) the transformation of one being or thing into another; 2) the transformation of any form or species into a new, different form and type; 3) an unusual change in something" (Usmanova 2021). Thus, metamorphosis may be understood as the transformation of any life form into a new species or the like having unlike form and type from the former. Nonetheless, the metamorphosis transforms not the deep underlying character and personality but the superficial appearance while the innermost metamorphosis apply when a character conclude his/her own providence. To exemplify,

"Once upon a time, there lived a girl named Hrili. The girl had a cruel stepmother and led a life of domestic tortures and sufferings. One day, the father took Hrili's younger sister deep into a forest and cold bloodedly murdered her. Hrili cried for many days looking for her younger sister. Eventually, she came across the corpse of her younger sister in a plantation field. She then wept inconsolably alone in the field. The little girl, drained, exhausted and unable to produce any sound, fainted besides her sister's corpse. Magically, a goddess known as Zingngawrtênû<sup>1</sup> appeared and found Hrili in a miserable condition. She woke Hrili up and asked the cause of her sufferings. Having heard Hrili's story, the goddess revealed the healing power of a particular tree. The goddess then asked the little girl to pluck the leaves of the tree and bring her younger sister back to the mortal world. In the spur of the moment, Hrili awakened her younger sister who had been lying as a corpse for days. As a result, the younger sister had become very thirsty. In order to quench the thirst of her younger sister, Hrili had nothing else to do but asked the goddess's favour for one last time. She pleaded to the goddess, 'Oh you most beautiful spirit of good-will, the goddess of dawn, grant me the power to transform myself into a lake so that my little sister could drink from it.' In no time, Hrili could transform herself into a lake with the help of a magical spell from the goddess, Zingngawrtênû. However, the magical spell could not retrieve Hrili back to her human form once she transformed herself into a lake. Later, Hrili was compelled to change herself into a white mithun and wandered around in search of shelter where she could safely rest. While she was wandering around looking for shelter from place to place looking for a safe haven, her urine formed many small lakes wherever she visited. She eventually decided to stay at Sanzawl village not far away from the river, Rûn<sup>2</sup>. However, the spirit of the river threatened to suck her dry if she happened to settle there. Thus, having crossed the Champhai Valley<sup>3</sup>, she finally settled at the present location in the form that she cherished the most i.e. a lake<sup>4</sup>". (Translation of a Darlong folktale 'Hrili Dîl').

1. Goddess of dawn in Darlong mythology

2. Presently located in present Myanmar.

3. Located at present Mizoram, India.

4. In accordance to the Darlong mythology, the lake is believed to be the gateway to 'Thukhna' (the abode of dead).

Further, a Hrangkhawl folktale namely 'Saipui Nwi Rengpa' narrates that 'a little girl who was abused her entire childhood ended her life and took a form of a gooseberry tree. On the other end, there was a couple (a queen and an elephant) who couldn't give birth. They prayed for a child and the God asked them to consume gooseberry. The god also precisely instructed them where and which gooseberry tree to consume from. And later when they found it, the couple ate the fruits. Subsequently, the couple gave birth'.

The above discussed folktales undoubtedly state the relationship that existed between their culture and environment. The tribes (Darlong & Hrangkhawl) shares the belief that an existence of spirit/ghost in every object in the universe. In fact, this belief is accompanied by many rites and rituals that are still (consciously or unconsciously) practiced or rather subconsciously believe by common tribesmen and women. As a matter of fact, they believe in the presence of 'Rihli/Rali'<sup>5</sup> in tree, houses, stone, stream, water, et al. Consequently, they practice a ritual known as 'Khawser' (in Hrangkhawl) and 'Khawbawl' (in Darlong) once in a year to cleanse/protect the village from the curse of 'Rali'. The ritual, at certain instances, ends with an abandonment of the village if the 'Ochai/Thiampû'<sup>6</sup> pronounces the village to be cursed. The tales (discussed above) also reflects on the use of metamorphosis agency as an escape to challenge social, religious and scientific constructs thereby establishing their close affinity with their environment. This belief, perfectly, fits in Indian philosophy too as "Ancient Indian felt Brahman (not caste) presence in everything around them. Since these divine forces sustained all living creatures and organic things on this earth, to please God, they felt they must live in harmony with His creation including earth, rivers, forests, sun, air, and mountains. This belief spawned many rituals that are still followed by traditional Indians" (Devi 2019). Hence, the paper intend to study the many instances of form/shape transformation, - metamorphosis, as modern of escape to challenge social, religious<sup>7</sup> and scientific constructs in the Darlong and Hrangkhawl narratives considering select folktales.

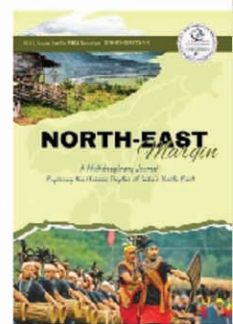
### 1.1 Introduction to the Darlong and Hrangkhawl tribes:

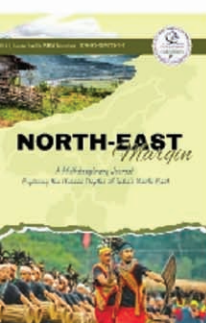
The Darlong and Hrangkhawl tribe resides in the present state of Tripura that witnessed influx of tribal migrants in the past from places like Mongolia, Tibet, China, Burma and others. They share a common language root i.e. Tibeto-Burman and could converse with one another with certain comprehension. The Darlong tribe resides in Dhalai, Unakoti and North Tripura while the Hrangkhawl tribe resides Dhalai, Sipahijala and Khowai Tripura. Presently, the state has nineteen Schedule Tribes listed as follows: Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Chakma, Lushai, Mog, Garo, Kuki, Chaimal, Uchoi, Halam, Khasia, Bhutia, Munda, Orang, Lepcha, Santal, Bhil and Noatia. However, only nine mentioned above are considered to be major tribes i.e. Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Halam, Chakma, Mog, Lushai and Kuki. Tripura: A Pictorial Mono-

5. A living ghost.

6. Priest.

7. Particularly the Christian domain.





graphs on Tribes of Tripura stated that under the Kuki community, there are several tribes, "There are also seventeen recognised sub-tribes of the Kukies. They are: Baite, Belaithut, Chhalya, Fun, Hajango, Jangtei, Khareng, Khepong, Kuntei, Laifang, Lentai, Mizel, Namte, Paitu or Paite, Rangchan, Rangkhole, and Thangluya. Linguistically, Tripura tribes may be distinguished into three distinct categories. Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Uchai, Rupini, Kaloi and Murasing belonged to Kokborok speaking tribe identified as users of the Bodo language of the Tibeto-Burman family. These tribes mainly migrated to this territory from a place called Shan state of Upper Burma and the downhills of Tibet, and linguistically are known as Bodo group of tribes. Halam, Kuki, Lushai, Rangkhel, Molsom, Darlong, Kaipeng are linguistically known as Kuki-Chin group of tribes, who migrated from China. The language spoken by Mog and Chakma is known as languages of Arakan origin. These two tribes mainly migrated from Arakan Hills of Burma and settled in south Tripura" (2010). In literature, the term 'Kuki' first appeared in the writings of Rawlins when he wrote about the tribes of the Chittagong Hill tracts. By the term 'Kuki,' Rawlins meant to refer to a wild tribe comprising of numerous clans sharing a common past, customs and traditions. On the other hand, the origin of the term 'Chin' was uncertain. However, the British administrators applied the compound term 'Kuki-Chin-Mizo' to classify groups of ethnic tribes sharing commonality in language and physical features. At present, the tribes (Darlong and Hrangkhawl) have been converted to Christian and have transformed themselves into a new group of people.

## 2. Scope

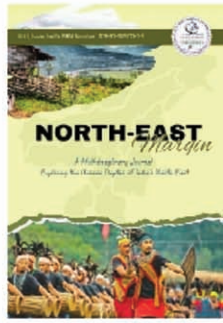
Oral tradition or literature has been in existence in the ancient and modern literary world and continues to provide classified information at present times. In fact, literary texts in the present adapt and modify the materials in an attempt to communicate with a larger populace in the world. There is still the need for parents to inculcate the knowledge to their children especially in their respective mother tongues while also encouraging research work without complacency, inclusive of both the insider and the outsider. It must also be stated that in our struggle for survival, we must make sure that our actions and decisions do not destroy the cultural heritage built by our ancestors which in most cases stands as a symbol of our peaceful co-existence and cultural individualism. Thus, the literature of Darlong and Hrangkhawl existing in oral realm till date, the study will have meaningful contributions to the world of Darlong and Hrankhawl folklore serving as an educator and initiator. It intends to highlight orature and tradition as an alternative source for documenting and establishing cultural heritage particularly for the said tribes. The paper will also act as a source to examine and understand society (of the said tribes) in the framework of preserving indigenous identities and protecting marginalized traditions to revive indigenous philosophy for sustainable development.

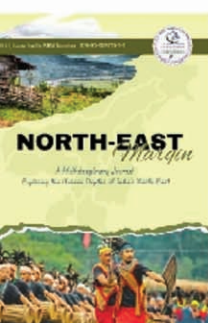
## 3. Analysis of the Select Darlong and Hrangkhawl Folktales

In Indian oral tradition, environment has been supposed as a living being which breathes, feels, protects, etc. Environment is a friendly entity and various compo-

nents of environment have been given unique position i.e. a kind consideration was kept in mind for environmental forces. At times, these special considerations were ritualized. The animals and forms are one of the basic components of tales the oral tradition in India had created. It is also reflected in the religious practices as different animals and plants were worshipped at different times so as to ensure their survival. In the oral tradition the ecological man looks upon nature as a reality of which he is an inseparable part at all levels. The oral myths do not give man a unique position in so far as his origin is concerned. He is also not in the possession of knowledge automatically. The knowledge came to him from birds and animals. Man is not the creator of knowledge. Cosmic intelligence is the self existent source of all knowledge. According to Dr. Surekha Devi, "The principal cosmic-vision is fully integrated in two different but related traditions- the oral and textual. While the reflections of the oral tradition are more focused on practice, the textual tradition offers a complete and systemic analysis of the universe. The Indian textual tradition assumes that, like the rest of the material world, man is made of elements which at death disintegrate and dissolve into nature. At the most general levels there are nine tatvas or elements; Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Sky, Time, directions, Mind and Soil. Indian mythology explains that elements originate in phases. Water, Earth and sky come first; aquatic animals and birds second; land third; air or wind fourth and finally fire. Indian thought explains Environment as a given entity which is transcendental in nature. It perceives that there is life in all kinds of things; it might be biotic or non-biotic material. There is greater emphasis on mutual dependence where living in isolation was not possible. Environment has been perceived as a friendly abode" (2019). In so doing, human often finds its own shelter in the abode to escape from his/her world to deny socio-religious and scientific constrict imposed upon him/her. The famous tale of 'Rwngnu', a folktale of Hrangkhawl tribe may be cited as an example:

"Once upon a time, when elopement was forbidden, there lived a young girl namely 'Rwngnu.' She was known for her porcelain like beauty, and her deep black hair run to her hips. She was considered to be one of the most beautiful maidens of her age. Rwngnu, just like her beauty, was also the kindest soul with love, and compassion for all living creatures. Despite the constant efforts by men to wife her, her heart was devoted to only one man. She fell in love with a humble man. The news of their relationship spread like wildfire across all villages. They were put on trial by the village elders to break off their relationship, but was in vain. One day, Rwngnu, and her man decide their fate to be together in death, and the afterlife. They had an agreement to end their lives together so as to be together in the afterlife. But, eventually, the man hesitates to jump as he watches her jump. So, he sat there mourning over her death singing, feeling guilty, and miserable. He walked towards the corpse of Rwngnu, and made her lay on his lap wishing, and praying to the gods to give her a life that would always be young and vibrant. Consequently, Rwngnu was reincarnated as a





stream that was blessed to never run dry. She flowed from the cliff that ended her mortal being, and transformed into an immortal stream that spread to all corners of the village. Today, the stream is known as the 'Burma Tui,' which is found in the oldest Hrangkhawl village 'Sonarai.' The localities believe that the Spirit of Rwnghnu yet resides at the 'Burma Tui'. The stream is also believed to have the power to grant wishes if one visit the cliff and ask for it with true heart. However, the grant of wish comes with a condition that one has to repay whatever asked" (Translation of Hrangkhawl folktale).

The metamorphosis we find in the tales of Darlong and Hrangkhawl occurred to competitively challenging the regular norms defying the socio-cultural definitions of the time. Again, the Darlong legend namely Tuisoi<sup>8</sup> narrates;

"Once upon a time, there lived a couple, who had a very beautiful daughter. The daughter was endowed with all kinds of virtues to impress her suitors (as the Darlong tribe has several number of marriage system). The couple would go to 'Loi' (jhum) everyday while the daughter would prepare them 'Bufun' (lunch packed) and reach them out during the work interval (specifically known as 'Bu pan hun' in Darlong) to deliver it. Days, months and years passed by, the monotonous routine of the family remained the same. The daughter has grown mature, and was ready for marriage.

One fine day, as usual, the daughter, with her 'Bufun' in her hand was passing towards her parents' workplace. On her way, she noticed a handsome young man was wedding a 'Loi'. She was impressed and fell in love with the young man at the very first sight. One fine afternoon, as the girl was passing by, the young man asked for a sip of water saying 'he had been working for several hours, and was running out of water at the moment'. The girl readily accepted, and spared to give him her water (which of course is the lion-share of her parents). The young man asked, 'Are you really interested in wasting your parents' share?' While the girl replied, 'I don't care so long as it quenched the thirst of someone I cared.' From thence, the girl, would often calculate the young man's work timing instead of her parents' work interval timing. This went on for quite some time until the parents realized 'what was going on?'

As time passed by, the parents think it time for their daughter to start a family of her own. On the other hand, the couple were kept in the dark about their daughter's admiring someone. Thus, each time, her parents propose a name, the daughter would deny saying 'I'm still young.' In so doing,

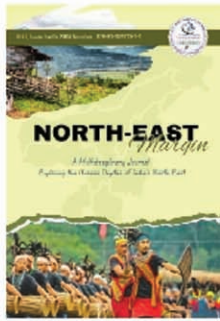
8. It is a waterfall, located at Sâ ikar Village, Longtarai Valley, Dhalai Tripura. The fall is located at a distance of 130 kilometres away from Agartala, the capital city of Tripura, 30 kilometres from Kannalpur and 15 kilometres away from Kumarghat. The nearest village to the fall is Sâ ikar, a residence of Darlong tribesmen and women.

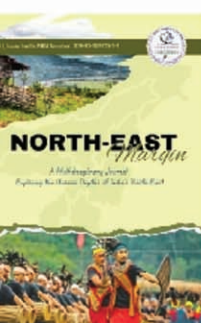
eventually, she had to reveal about her love for someone that her parents were not aware of. This annoyed the parents for they wanted their daughter to a man with title (The Darlong in pre-Christian era award individuals a 'village title' based on his achievements). As a result, the marriage was ruled out. At this, the young girl was shattered, and left heart-broken.

The next day, she visited a forest, and prayed to the 'Lung?an Pathian' (God of Rock & Mount in Darlong pre-Christian period) to do her favour. In reply to her prayer, the god transformed her into a fountain where the young lover can quench his thirst every day. From thence, the lover would spend his days by the side of the fountain. However, the lover was mocked and ridiculed for falling in love with a fountain. Subsequently, he took his own life out of utter shame. At this, the fountain (a transformed form of the young girl) began to devour lovers who ever visited the fountain. The more she devoured, the bigger she got. Eventually, she became the 'waterfall' she is at present, known as 'Tuisoi' (Translation of Darlong legend).

The tales acts as a means of expression to convey consciousness to the underlying injustices men and women facade in the past, and the stubbornness of misogynistic attitudes women experience in their lives. As a result, the characters 'Rwngnu,' 'the daughter' in Tuisoi, and the little girl (in 'Saipui Nwi Rengpa') metamorphosed themselves to evolve into a stronger character that can challenge the societal norms and construct while the protagonist takes the form of stream, waterfall, lake, tree, celestial bodies, et al. This is, because of the fact that, since the Darlong and Hrangkhawl believes in the existence of spirit/ghost in every natural object, the possibility of taking every fauna's form in the process metamorphosis can never be questioned thereby questioning the present lack of cosmological sustainability. In the like of the said statement, traditional knowledge plays a significant role in bring about general awareness, and sensitize the common men and women on the idea of sustainable growth in the society. "In 2000, Paul Crutzen affirmed that currently, we are in the age of the 'Anthropocene', an age of unprecedented human impact on earth's ecosystem. In the race to 'progress', humans have almost obliterated the connection and semblance with the non-human world" (Bhattacharyya, 2022). "This is so because our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office and finance - in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands" (Millet 25). This civilization is what T.S. Eliot called a civilization "of male manufacture" (ibid.).

Accordingly, the agenda of sustainable development traced back the correlation between culture and nature by overhauling the entire system of domination, and exploitation, and replaces it with an ethic of concern, which is an approach that upheld principles grounded in the characteristics of care and nurture. This methodology prioritizes human benevolence and behaviour in a way that propagates care for oth-





ers - gender counterpart, nature and the universe itself. Speaking about nature, human has always relied on nature's benevolence for survival taking from food, fuel, shelter to even cultural identity. In fact, even the birth of modern science may be credited to the cosmological narratives of the pre-literate societies i.e. folklore. This dependency can precisely be interpreted or rather described as connection of culture and nature. In other word, it may be termed as 'folklore'.

Mankind has customized the environment as a corollary of its growth, dispersal, activities, death and decay. Subsequently, the different social structures like industrial, agricultural, religious, and aesthetic developed during various stages of human civilisation based on natural resources in turn presents itself as environmental destruction rather than progress of civilization. As a result, the existence and quality of the eco-system now rest on the responses of these social structures and its developer - the human folk. Therefore, sustainable development sought for a global attention to the fact that culture and environment are disproportionately affected by prioritization policy engineered by techno world.

As to conclude, if "we deem the tales to be carriers of ancient wisdom, one might even detect in them prophetic forebodings about humans as invaders and trespassers. Through centuries, they have occupied territories of other species only to fulfil their own needs. There are other tales which have resonances of mistrust between humans and other species" (Gupta, 2022). Mankind, in the name of change, progress and development has sated the world of nature with no place for refuge but folklore. Folktales instil new environmental belief and instigate sustainability by maintaining ecological balance while the study of it can also be "encouraged as a therapeutic strategy to heal the sores and scars that humans have perpetrated on both themselves as well as the entire ecology by extension" (ibid.). Subsequently, the metamorphosis brings about a new change in perspective and perception where the common men and women transformed themselves or the protagonist into non-believer to believer, commoner to deity, and presentation of single entity to relative entity.

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