



A Cultural Analysis of Authority and Tradition in Manipuri Folktales: A Case Study of 'The Feast – Lamkhunu na Chakkouba'

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Abstract

This research paper explores the themes of authority and tradition in the Manipuri folktale "*The Feast - Lamkhunu na Chakkouba*", using Max Weber's theory of authority as a theoretical framework. The folktale centers around a conflict among four birds namely crow, dove, sparrow, and owl. They were invited to a feast by a pigeon to honor his late father's wishes. The primary conflict arises when the birds debate over who is the eldest and, thus, should take the first seat at the feast. The tale explores two forms of authority: traditional authority, based on age, hierarchy, and customs, and charismatic authority, represented by the owl's spiritual wisdom and divine connection. This paper analyzes the birds' arguments and their eventual resolution, showing how authority in the tale is not merely determined by age but also by divine or spiritual status. By applying Weber's concepts of traditional and charismatic authority, the paper illuminates the dynamic relationship between tradition and spiritual wisdom in Manipuri society. The study highlights how cultural narratives reflect the complex ways in which authority is constructed and contested, offering valuable insights into Manipuri folklore's role in perpetuating social and cultural values across generations.

Keywords: Folktale, authority, traditional, charismatic, cultural narratives

1. Introduction

Folklore has long been an important tool for the transmission of cultural values, social norms, and collective wisdom. In the case of Manipuri folklore, oral traditions and tales offer rich insights into the social fabric of the community, particularly the ways in which authority and tradition intersect. One such folktale, "*The Feast - Lamkhunu na Chakkouba*," provides an intriguing depiction of authority, hierarchy, and respect for elders. This paper aims to analyze the themes of authority and tradition within the folktale, employing Max Weber's theory of



authority as the theoretical framework to understand the dynamics of leadership and the role of spiritual wisdom in shaping social structures.

The folktale used in this study is based on Bidyarani Thingujam's English translation of a folktale from *Phungawari Shingbul*, a collection of Manipuri folktales and fables compiled and edited by B. Jayantakumar Sharma. Thingujam's English translation was published on E-Pao.net on January 16, 2017, and is used as the primary textual source for the present analysis, enabling an exploration of Manipuri cultural values, authority structures, and traditional beliefs embedded within the narrative.

2. Max Weber's Theory of Authority

Max Weber's theory of authority provides a useful lens for understanding how authority functions within the context of folklore, particularly in traditional societies. In this paper, Weber's concept of traditional authority will be employed to analyze the folktale "*The Feast - Lamkhunu na Chakkouba*." According to Weber, traditional authority is rooted in the sanctity of established customs and practices, passed down from generation to generation. This type of authority is particularly relevant to Manipuri society, where the respect for elders and adherence to tradition play crucial roles in shaping leadership dynamics.

Additionally, charismatic authority will also be considered, especially in the case of the owl, whose divine connections and wisdom grant it a unique form of leadership. This paper aims to explore how both forms of authority namely traditional and charismatic, are interwoven in the resolution of the conflict in the folktale.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, utilizing textual analysis to explore the folktale "*The Feast - Lamkhunu na Chakkouba*." By focusing on the narrative structure, character development, and social dynamics presented in the folktale, this paper examines how the characters embody different forms of authority. The analysis also draws on existing literature on Manipuri folklore and Weber's theory of authority to contextualize the findings within broader cultural and sociological frameworks. The research is conducted through the following steps:

1. Textual Analysis: The folktale is analyzed for key themes related to authority, hierarchy, and tradition.



2. Application of Weber's Theory: Max Weber's concepts of traditional and charismatic authority are applied to interpret the actions and interactions of the characters.
3. Cultural Contextualization: The findings are contextualized within the broader cultural practices and social structures of Manipuri society.

4. Analysis of "The Feast - Lamkhunu na Chakkouba"

4.1 Authority and Tradition in the Folktale

At the heart of the folktale is a dispute over who is the eldest among the birds invited to the feast. The pigeon's request that the birds sit according to their age and seniority reflects the deep respect for tradition in Manipuri culture. The custom of honoring the eldest and seeking their blessing mirrors the hierarchical structures prevalent in Manipuri society, where elders are seen as the bearers of wisdom and authority.

The male pigeon, while hosting the feast, requests that the guests sit according to their seniority:

My father asked me to seek blessings from the eldest sitting at the head of the table, so I request the eldest among you to go in first and take the seat. Gentlemen, please sit according to your seniority. (Thingujam, 2017, para. 6)

This request shows a traditional practice where age and seniority are important markers of authority. In this society, a leader's authority comes from the collective belief that the eldest should be honored, not just for their age, but for their accumulated wisdom and experience. The pigeon's role as a host, adhering to his father's wishes, mirrors the cultural norm of preserving family traditions and passing down authority through generations.

4.2 The Contest for Authority

The argument among the birds about who is the eldest is symbolic of the contest for authority that occurs within societies where age and wisdom are central to leadership. The crow claims seniority based on its historical role in the creation of the river, while the dove asserts that it is older due to its connection with the first king of Manipur. Similarly, the sparrow claims to be the oldest, citing its creation by the god Sanamahi Pakhangba. Each bird, therefore, seeks to justify their authority through mythological or historical narratives that highlight their significance in the community's foundation.

The birds' responses emphasize their competing claims to traditional authority:

- a. The crow explains its significance in the creation of the river:



It was me, the crow, who went to Nong-goubi, the bird, to give the news about the first river and it was because of my news that prevented Nong-goubi from drinking its water.

(Thingujam, 2017, para. 13)

- b. The dove claims that its connection to the first king, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, makes it the oldest:

We have inhabited this land since the time of the first king Nongda Lairen Pakhangba—our godly figure. (Thingujam, 2017, para. 13)

- c. The sparrow also claims precedence based on its creation by Sanamahi Pakhangba:

We Sparrows were among his first creations among other species. (Thingujam, 2017, para. 16)

In Weberian terms, each bird is asserting a claim to traditional authority based on its perceived role in historical or mythological narratives. These claims are not based on any formal system of rules or laws but on deeply ingrained cultural beliefs that confer authority to those who are connected to foundational events in the community's history.

4.3 The Role of the Owl: Charismatic Authority

While the conflict between the birds is resolved through a process of traditional authority, the owl introduces an element of charismatic authority. The owl claims to be the eldest, not merely because of its age, but due to its divine connections and spiritual wisdom. The owl's divine relationship with the god Atiya Guru Sidaba and its status as a spiritual leader elevate it above the other birds. This claim to authority is rooted in the charisma that comes from its personal qualities and spiritual significance, rather than just its age.

The owl, upon being questioned, reveals its age and authority:

It's been so many years that I can't even count anymore. That sparrow you are saying is far way younger than me. He must be great-great-great-great grandchild of my grandchildren. (Thingujam, 2017, para. 21)

The owl then asserts:

Let me tell you how old I am, my dear children. Atiya Guru Sidaba, the greatest of all Gods and father of Sanamahi, is my son-in-law. He calls me 'Tku' 'Tku' with love. After hearing him call me 'Tku', all the gods and goddesses started calling me 'Guru Sidaba's 'Maku' (owl). (Thingujam, 2017, para. 22)



The owl's divine connections and spiritual leadership elevate its claim to authority beyond age alone, aligning with Weber's concept of charismatic authority that is based on personal magnetism, spiritual legitimacy, and divine favor.

5. Discussion

The folktale "*The Feast - Lamkhunu na Chakkouba*" provides a fascinating lens through which we can examine the intersection of authority, tradition, and hierarchy in Manipuri society. The tale not only portrays the cultural norms surrounding leadership and the respect for elders but also highlights the complex ways in which authority is contested and legitimized. Through the conflict over the "eldest" bird, the folktale offers insights into how Manipuri society navigates the tensions between tradition, divine sanction, and personal wisdom in determining rightful authority.

5.1 Traditional Authority and Social Hierarchies

In Weber's model, traditional authority is based on the sanctity of long-standing customs and traditions that dictate the way a society operates. This form of authority is passed down through generations and is often unquestioned because it is seen as divinely ordained or historically justified. In "*The Feast - Lamkhunu na Chakkouba*", the male pigeon's actions—inviting the birds to the feast and requesting that they sit according to their seniority—reflect a deep respect for tradition and hierarchy. The pigeon follows his father's wishes, which not only enforces the notion of filial piety but also emphasizes the idea that authority, respect, and wisdom are inherited and should be acknowledged by all members of the community.

The male pigeon's statement, "*My father asked me to seek blessings from the eldest sitting at the head of the table, so I request the eldest among you to go in first and take the seat*" is a direct appeal to tradition, showcasing how authority is not self-created but is passed down through ancestral customs. The pigeon does not consider personal desires or ambitions; rather, it is the collective wisdom of the elders that dictates the actions he must take. His authority to host the feast is only meaningful because he follows established norms of respect and hierarchy. This reflects Weber's assertion that traditional authority in societies such as that of the Meitei is grounded in deeply held beliefs about the rightful role of elders in maintaining social order.



5.2 The Contest for Authority: Myths, Age, and Identity

The conflict that arises among the birds regarding who is the oldest is emblematic of the way in which authority can be contested, even in societies that are traditionally hierarchical. Each bird—crow, dove, sparrow, and owl—makes its case by invoking personal or collective histories that align with the foundational myths of Manipuri society. The crow, for example, claims seniority based on its role in the creation of the river, an event tied to the earliest phases of the world's formation. The dove links itself to the first king of Manipur, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, a godly figure central to Meitei myth. Meanwhile, the sparrow claims precedence based on its divine creation by Sanamahi Pakhangba, another god who is foundational to Manipuri beliefs.

This contest over eldership reflects a power struggle within a context where social positions are not merely dictated by biological age but by mythical and spiritual narratives. In traditional societies like that of Manipur, authority is often seen as a socially constructed concept that is as much about spiritual significance as it is about biological seniority. This brings to light Weber's theory of charismatic authority, where leadership does not arise simply from age but from an individual's connection to the divine or their extraordinary qualities that transcend the ordinary norms of governance.

The crow's assertion of its ancient role in the creation of the river, for instance, is a demonstration of how traditional authority can be rooted in the mythological history of a culture. Each bird is invoking a myth to justify its claim to seniority, which emphasizes the fluid nature of authority in folklore. The birds are not merely looking at one another as rivals in terms of age; they are engaging in a contest of spiritual and historical narratives that help to define their place in the broader cosmic order.

5.3 Charismatic Authority: The Owl as a Spiritual Leader

The pivotal moment in the folktale occurs when the owl, after being questioned by the vulture, asserts that its age is immeasurable and that it has a direct connection to Ati Guru Sidaba, the father of Sanamahi. The owl claims that its age cannot be counted in years and is instead defined by its spiritual wisdom and divine favor. It refers to its special relationship with Ati Guru Sidaba, the supreme deity, stating:



It's been so many years that I can't even count anymore. That sparrow you are saying is far way younger than me. He must be great-great-great-great grandchild of my grandchildren. (Thingujam, 2017, para. 21)

The owl's appeal to its connection with the divine and the cosmic order marks the transition from traditional authority based on age to charismatic authority, as it is not merely the owl's age that grants it authority, but rather its spiritual prestige and the wisdom it holds. The owl's charisma is evident in the respect it commands not just because of its age, but because of its spiritual significance and the divine stories surrounding its being. Weber's theory of charismatic authority comes into play here, as the owl's authority is not rooted in conventional social norms but in extraordinary qualities that others believe give it rightful power over the others.

Furthermore, the charismatic authority of the owl is validated by the vulture's admission of its mistake in questioning the owl's seniority. The vulture's deference to the owl, inviting it for a feast at his home and offering to carry it on his back, symbolizes the recognition of the owl's supreme wisdom and the sacredness of its role. This resolution echoes Weber's notion that charismatic leaders are often recognized by the followers' willingness to submit to their extraordinary abilities or spiritual gifts. The vulture, as a representative of the collective, shifts from questioning the owl's authority to acknowledging and respecting it. In doing so, the owl is established as the ultimate authority, not because of any formalized system of rules but because its charisma and spiritual stature cannot be denied.

5.4 Conflict Resolution: Integrating Tradition and Charisma

The resolution of the conflict over authority in the folktale is significant because it ultimately harmonizes the two forms of authority: traditional and charismatic. While the other birds argue based on traditional claims of age and wisdom, the owl's spiritual connection and its charismatic leadership settle the dispute. The tale suggests that, while tradition and age may provide a foundation for authority, it is wisdom, spirituality, and divine approval that elevate one to true leadership. This reflects the broader societal belief that spiritual wisdom, which transcends earthly hierarchies of age, holds the highest form of authority.



The final acceptance of the owl as the eldest and most authoritative reflects a cultural acknowledgment that divine favor and spiritual wisdom are integral to leadership, transcending ordinary social disputes. This demonstrates that spiritual charisma holds significant power in traditional societies, which rely heavily on oral traditions and ancestral wisdom. The folktale thus conveys the message that true authority is not just about age, but about the wisdom one possesses, often conferred through divine or ancestral connections.

6. Conclusion

Through the detailed analysis of "*The Feast - Lamkhunu na Chakkouba*," it becomes clear that authority in Manipuri folklore is a complex, multifaceted concept. The conflict in the folktale illustrates the tension between traditional authority, grounded in customs, age, and hierarchy, and charismatic authority, rooted in divine connections, spiritual wisdom, and personal qualities. By applying Max Weber's framework, we see how these two forms of authority interact and ultimately converge to establish a clear hierarchy within the narrative. The story also reinforces the role of spiritual wisdom and ancestral connections in determining rightful authority. It underscores that in traditional societies such as that of the Meitei, authority is not a static or purely age-based concept; it is dynamic, deeply intertwined with mythological, spiritual, and social narratives. This dynamic interplay between authority and tradition offers valuable insights into the cultural practices of Manipuri society and the role of folklore in transmitting cultural values across generations.

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