

# A Study of Selected Tangkhul Proverbs from a Contextual Point of View

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## ABSTRACT

Tangkhul belongs to the Naga tribe residing in Manipur, India, and in Myanmar, in the Sagaing Division. In Manipur state, they reside in Ukhrul, Kamjong, Kangpokpi, Imphal East, Tengnoupal and Thoubal Districts. Tangkhul language falls under the sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman family linguistically. There are approximately 284 Tangkhul villages. The language spoken by each village is mutually incomprehensible. However, after the coming of Christianity, a standard Tangkhul is formed and is now spoken by each one and is also taught in Schools and functions as a lingua franca in the community. Proverbs reflect the culture and tradition of the community embedded in succinct language. Its communication and transmission require interactions between the speaker and the listeners. Though Proverbs are self-explanatory in most cases, they require cultural specifics and background knowledge to understand and take appropriate actions, whether to learn, respond or act in a specific manner. The collections of proverbs will show that their intended outcome cannot be achieved without knowing the context of the proverbs. This paper explores and analyses the contexts of the proverbs which reflect culturally specific attitudes, help in social behaviour, personal attitudes and outlook which characterise the Tangkhul identity and worldview mediated by proverbs. This paper analyses some Tangkhul proverbs from a contextual point of view within the socio-cultural-traditional practices and beliefs of the community.

**Key words:** Proverbs, Context, Oral, Folktale, Tangkhul

## INTRODUCTION

Tangkhul has a rich oral literature. The oral literature is orally handed down from the older generation. Oral literature is also called 'folk literature'. R. Bascom has popularised the study of Oral literature. Richard M Dorson mentioned Bascom in his book 'Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction', 'verbal arts', his [Bascom] term for folklore, "as the creative composition of a functioning society, dynamic not static, integrated not isolated, central not peripheral component of the culture." It is also called 'orature' by Pio Zirimu, the late Ugandan linguist.

The Tangkhul community constitutes a folk community because it speaks the same language and has a common religion. The customs and traditions are, to a large extent, similar. Studying the Folklore of the Tangkhul will enrich its literature and help understand its worldview. According to Alan Dundes, "The term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own." (Dundes 6-7) Folklore is an agent of identification for a community. The discourse of identity formation, consciousness of being one and the process of "othering" have their foundation in folklore. Devoid of the tenet of folklore, a community's historicity is incomplete. Identification with certain legends, relics and myths is common in human society, and the understanding of human civilisation is constructed from the remnants of folklore. The spirit of the nation and community is encased in the oral literature. Handed down over generations, folklores are time-tested and offer valuable lessons in understanding the essence of humanity and the pursuit of happiness. As social beings, we need stories to navigate the social world with caution and be accepted as part of the community. Following the social ethos to develop the right personal attitude and subscribe to the identity of the community.

NEP 2020 states, 'India is a treasure trove of culture, developed over thousands of years and manifested in the form of arts, works of literature, customs, traditions, linguistic expressions, artefacts, heritage sites, and more. The promotion of Indian arts and culture is important not only for the nation but also for the individual.' (NEP 54) It further adds, 'It is through

the development of a strong sense and knowledge of their own cultural history, arts, languages, and traditions that children can build a positive cultural identity and self-esteem. Thus, cultural awareness and expression are important contributors both to individual as well as societal well-being.'(NEP 54) Different languages 'see' the world differently, and the structure of a language, therefore, determines a native speaker's perception of experience. In particular, languages influence the way people of a given culture speak with others, including with family members, authority figures, peers, and strangers, and influence the tone of conversation. The tone, perception of experience, and familiarity/'apnapan' inherent in conversations among speakers of a common language are a reflection and record of a culture. Culture is, thus, encased in our languages. Art, in the form of literature, plays, music, film, and so on, cannot be fully appreciated without language. In tribal society, an orally practised form of art is encapsulated in the form of folktales and proverbs. The essence of what it means to be human and their relationship with their fellow beings and surroundings is encapsulated in proverbs and folktales. It is a worthy endeavour to learn and preserve for its continuity and relevance. The present study of selected Tangkhul proverbs is analysed from a contextual point of view, subsequently illustrating the importance and necessity for the collection of contexts in the proverbs being studied.

## FOLKLORE

Folklore studies have gained momentum in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Study and recovery of traditional knowledge is imperative since traditional knowledge is considered a treasure house of ancient wisdom. Such is the wisdom that shapes the ideas of the nation, national consciousness and identity. 'The increasing awareness of folklore was closely associated with nineteenth-century intellectual currents of romanticism and nationalism.' Bascom said that folklore is the mirror of life. (Bascom) According to Alan Dundes, 'Folklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas. (Dundes 3) In order to differentiate, William R Bascom introduced the term 'Verbal Art' to designate the literary genre of folklore, which includes folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, etc. William Thoms suggested the use of Folklore to

replace ‘Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature’ of the Anglo-Saxons to capture the intellectual inheritance of the old cultures of the community, which are orally handed down as collective repertoire. The glorification of the common man included a nostalgic interest in his speech and manners, which were believed to be dying out,” said William Thoms. (Thoms 4-5) Archer Taylor went on to say, ‘Folklore is the material that is handed on by tradition, either by word of mouth or by custom and practice. It may be folksongs, folktales, riddles, proverbs, or other materials preserved in words.’ What is handed down from antiquity has the distinction of being tested and proven to be helpful. One can recall what Samuel Jonson said on Shakespeare’s worth in literature: that he has the quality of antiquity and is accepted by many, and is accordingly worth studying. Huirem Behari Singh also said, ‘Folklore may be taken as a living organism. It is living because of its orality, and also it lives as long as it changes. Folklore being a shared phenomenon, it has to be accepted by the majority of the group and in it there must be a continuity of traditions.’ (Behari Singh 5)

### PROVERBS:

The word proverb comes through the Old French word ‘proverbs’ which also came from the Latin word ‘proverbium’, pro, ‘for’ and ‘verbum, ‘word’ which implies use of figurative expression for the plain word which has two qualities – popularity and figurativeness. Proverbs, however, differ from ordinary speech in that they usually contain a touch of fancy in the phrasing, a touch that gives them their pungency. (Bryant 3) The Tangkhul word for proverb is ‘Chanjam’, which is a compound word of ‘Chan’, which means ‘story’, and ‘Jam’, which has its origin in ‘kacham’, which means ‘old’. This definition holds immense significance as the Tangkhul highly regard wisdom and expression worth emulating from the older generation. The elders have acquired the use of proverbs through their years of experience in life. Margaret M Brant said, “In order to live proverbs must be used, and in order to be used they must fit themselves in the memory of their users.”(Bryant 15)

Of the various definitions given by various scholars of folklores, the one given by Alan Dundes in regards to its study proves trite in study of proverbs, ‘with respect to any given item of folklore, one may analyse its texture, its text, and its context... the textual features of proverbs, for

example, include rhyme and alliterations. Other common features include: stress, pitch, gesture, tone and onomatopoeia. The texture is the language, the specific phonemes and morphemes employed". Thus, in the verbal forms of folklore, textual features are linguistic features.' 'The text of an item of folklore is essentially a version or a single telling of a tale, a recitation of a proverb, a singing of a folksong.' (Dundes 22-23) 'The context', he explains, 'of an item of folklore is the specific social situation in which that particular item is actually employed.' He went on to say, 'The collection of context is essential for all genres of folklore, but it is absolutely indispensable for proverbs and gestures.' (Dundes 23) Folklorists recorded only text, ignoring the context. Recording of context is essential in order to explain a particular text, which is tied to a particular social situation. And in proverbs, the collection of context is absolutely essential; otherwise, a proverb without context is meaningless. It is important that the proverb be recorded along with the social situation, i.e. context (Sharma 15).

Alan Dundes in his book, '*Interpreting Folklore*' asserts, 'the vast majority of published writings about folklore consist solely of descriptive data... the emphasis has traditionally been placed on the recording and accurate presentation of authentic field-collected data.(Dundes vii)" This has been the case with the collection of Tangkhul proverbs. There has been no analysis carried out. The interpretation of proverbs is required so as to understand proverbs better and enrich literature. The context is necessary as, without context, the meaning is lost. A proverb functions within a particular social context and makes sense within that worldview. While there is a strong interconnection between folktales and proverbs this paper intends to focus on selected Tangkhul proverbs.

Proverb is used by the elder to teach the young. It is not used by the younger generation in conversation with the elders. It is deemed unethical and lacking in etiquette to quote proverbs to the older person. However, in conversation, to prove a point, a proverb is used, irrespective of age, to win an argument or emphasise a point. In most cases, the elders use proverbs to educate and correct the actions and characters of the younger generations.

In the use of proverbs as is prevalent in the Tangkhul community, one finds that there is an act of detachment from the speakers and particularising the intended message to correct or educate the listener. In this way, the whole community's social values are teaching the listeners, not only the

elder who is in front of them, to educate or give correction. Not heeding or paying attention to the proper action is not seen when a proverb is spoken. Knowing the proverb is also a mark of wisdom. It also proves that the speaker has attained knowledge and wisdom to understand the situation and give corrective measures through the medium of proverbs. It indicates a mark of education and knowledge in its usage. Margaret M Bryant said 'they [Proverbs] are an index to what the people regard as true.' The Tangkhul worldview considers elders to know best. In the introduction to Jamaica Proverbs, Martha Warren Beckwith says that proverbial saying give a true picture of the mental life of the Negro in Jamaica than even song or story reveals, for in them he expresses 'his justification of the vicissitudes of life.' (Bryant) As a proverb is time-tested, it is believed to reflect wisdom in its knowledge and usage. Edvard A Westermarck said proverbs grows out of the life and thoughts of the people and are significant documents for revealing their characters, temperament, opinions, feelings, manners, and customs. (Bryant 13)

People come from a particular place and practice their own culture. No person exists in isolation, and no man is universal. Each one carries their distinctive ideas and identity from the community from which they come. It is what makes us unique and contributes to each other, coming from different cultures. Animals do not have different distinctive characteristics based on their place of existence if they are of the same species. People are characterised by the place they come from and the habits of their community. Nisbett commented in this regard, the different approaches people apply to life, 'These approaches include profoundly different social relations, views about the nature of the world, and characteristic thought processes. Each of these orientations—the Western and the Eastern—is a self-reinforcing, homeostatic system. The social practices promote the worldviews; the worldviews dictate the appropriate thought processes; and the thought processes both justify the worldviews and support the social practices. Understanding these homeostatic systems has implications for grasping the fundamental nature of the mind, for beliefs about how we ought ideally to reason, and for appropriate educational strategies for different peoples" and went to say 'the intellectual aspects of each society make sense in light of their social characteristics.' (Nisbett 38) As such the context of the proverb must be in place in order for the proverb to be

effective. It reflects the lived experience of the person within a community. Alan Dundes said, 'One needs texts in their contexts. One needs to ask not only for proverbs, and for what counts as a proverb, but also for information as to the other components of the situation in which proverbs are used.' (Dundes 23) Proverb is used in communication in order to evoke a particular emotion by emphasising a certain point detached personally but focus individually in a context specially for the listener.

Alan Dundes propounded a theory to analyse folklore on three level, 'with respect to any given folklore, one may analyse its texture, its text, and its context.' (Dundes 22) He further elaborated that the 'texture is the language, the specific phonemes and morphemes' as such it is the 'linguistic features' therefore in proverbs its features are 'rhyme, alliteration, stress, pitch, juncture, tone, and onomatopoeia.' He went to explain 'the text of an item of folklore is essentially a version or a single telling of a tale, a recitation of a proverb, as singing of a folksong.' The last 'the context of an item of folklore is the specific social situation in which that particular item is actually employed.' Alan Dundes said that context is very important in studying folklore as 'collecting context...[can] provide ... serious attempt to made to explain why a particular text is used in a particular situation.' (Dundes 24) Dan Ben-Amos said, 'Culturally, a folktale, a song, and a proverb can have as complex a system of meanings, connotations and significances, as any written work contemplated by a learned author...By the virtues of verbal creativity oral narratives have the same capabilities of multiplicity of meanings and intricacies of relations as any other form of verbal creation.'(Bascom 43)

In the study of proverbs, Archer Taylor said, 'The study of proverbs deals with: ...the history of individual proverbs with the interpretation and evaluation of their changing forms'(Taylor 1) He has emphasized on the interpretation and evaluation of proverbs which require contextual study as propounded by Alan Dundes.

Review of literature on a collection of Tangkhul proverbs pointed to a lack of interpretation and, as such, a missing contextual explanation. It is a faithful recording from the memory passed down from generation to generation through careful transmission. It is taken for granted that one should understand proverb naturally. The collectors of proverbs does not mind to give contextual interpretation. Owing to migration from rural to

urban areas for better lives, most of the younger generation find the proverb obscure to understand. As Alan Dundes explain, 'proverb is the last sentence in a tale.' (Dundes 31) In the scenario there is a need to explain why such a tale exist in the first place. This will reveal the social norms, custom and belief. In this way, as Alan Dundes explain 'it represents a people's image of themselves' which 'provides unique raw material for those eager to better understand themselves and others' eventually 'represent a small-scale attempt to isolate significant principles of worldview.' It will lead to better ability "to comprehend ourselves as well as others." (Dundes xi) Meider commented, "The wisdom of proverbs has guided people in their social interactions for thousands of years worldwide. Proverbs contain everyday experiences and common observations in succinct and formulaic language, making them easy to remember and ready to be used instantly as effective rhetoric in oral or written communication." (Meider xi)

### TANGKHUL PROVERBS

Proverbs are popular in Tangkhul community. It is relatively easy to memorise and effectively use in a situation to drive home the point succinctly. The presently available literature on Tangkhul Folklores is limited to documentation in its basic form of recording and compilation which is preservatory in nature. There is a lack of analysis in them. The study of proverbs is essential as proverbs form part of the overall folktale, which is normally contained at the end of the tale to drive home the point of view. It is the subscript of the folktale. As such, knowing the context of the tale is paramount to fully understand the proverb. In this regard, knowing the context of the proverb is necessary to understand the intended outcome. It is so because the backend story will act as an instrument for the proverbs to have their desired effect of the lesson being taught.

One the earliest collections of Tangkhul proverbs is by YK Shimray in his book, 'Proverbs Tangkhul Vrs English' (Shimray). In this book, he collected and documented around 100 proverbs and translated them into English. Stephen Angkang, in his book 'Ancient Sayings of Hao & Modern Proverbs' has more than 200 entries of Tangkhul proverbs, which contain explanations of proverbs but lack the contextualisation (Angkang). Nevertheless, it gives a grounding in understanding Tangkhul's proverbs. The latest collector of the Tangkhul proverb is by Rev. Somi Kasomwoshi.

His collection of Tangkhul proverbs has entries of around 400 called “Hao Tangkhul Chanjam.’(Kasomwoshi) The author gave a free English translation of each proverb, accompanied by an explanation and usage. However, it lacks a contextual explanation. As such, only the competent reader will have the ability to understand. The Tangkhul proverbs so far collected and recorded are based on text, and no contextual point of view study has been done. So it is a contextless folklore collection. It is observed that no serious attempt has been made to contextualise the available collections, and in many cases, the contextual point of view is either ignored or forgotten. As such, there is a need to collect not only the text but also the context of the proverb. A selection of Tangkhul proverbs, which shows the indispensability of collecting the context of the proverb, is shown below.

#### SOME TANGKHUL PROVERBS ANALYSED BASED ON CONTEXT:

1. “*Khamatha sakila Fava On kahai*”

“Trying to become handsome turns into a dog.” [Free translation]

Though the text and texture of the proverb are documented, the meaning of the proverb is not clear. Moreover, the context of the proverb is not provided as the meaning is unclear i.e. the time and event of the situation is not mentioned. As a proverb may be termed ‘Objective Correlative,’ the expression of a specific situation or a chain of events. Alan Dundes rightly says, ‘what is unsaid is much more important than what is said,’ as ‘many proverbs appear to be the last sentence of a tale.’

To fully understand this proverb, one needs to understand the story. There is a need to understand the community, the tribal nature of the outlook on life. There should be satisfaction in one’s life. There should be a limit to one’s ambition. The Tangkhul worldview looks at moderation.

There was a family of two brothers. The elder brother was a handsome man. He was loved and famous in the village. He was married and had a loving family. The younger brother was ugly. The villagers ignore him since he is not gifted with good looks. One day, he went to the field to work. As he cut the surrounding bushes of his wet paddy field and went home, all the bushes stood up again. The next day, when he came, he found that all the bushes he had cleared remained the same. So he decided to find out. He pretended to go home, hide in the nearby bushes, and observe what would happen. He saw a bird perching on a lowly branch and sang

‘ngakar rik, ngakar rik’, which means ‘all stand, all stand’. At that, all the bushes stood once again. He went as quickly as possible and caught hold of the bird. He pretended to kill the bird and cook for dinner. He started to divide the bird’s body parts, saying aloud, the head is for my mother, legs for me and so on. At this, the bird began to speak and appeal to him in human language. The bird said not to kill him and would grant whatever he wished. At this point, the man felt pity and decided not to kill. He wished for a handsome man. His wish was granted. The bird told the man to sleep outside the hut on the banana plantain. He rearranged his body features and made him into a handsome man.

When his brother saw the new handsome face of his younger brother, he began to get jealous. He nagged his brother to reveal his secret as he got more attention from his villagers. His younger brother told him what had happened to him. He went to his brother’s field, and fortunately, he also encountered the same situation. The bird agreed to make him a more handsome man. As he was being operated and rearranged his body features, an eagle took away one of the inner parts of the body. The bird could not make the man again; instead, he turned him into a dog.

The brother came home as a dog. His wife chased him out violently of the house as the dog did not belong to him or their neighbour. The dog went to his younger brother’s house. Similarly, he was chased out again. The dog began to come again and again. Seeing the dog’s behavior and recalling what had happened to his elder brother, he concluded that the dog must be his brother. He fed the dog. After eating whole, the dog ran away to the jungle and, according to legend, became a wolf.

## 2. “*Kumkha thang, kumkha ngaya*” (S Arokianathan 255)

“One Year Day, One Year Night” (Free English translation)

Reading the proverbs makes it unclear what is being communicated. It requires context to understand the proverb fully.

As the story was handed down, after god created the earth, the length of the day and night was undecided. So god called all the planet’s creatures to a great assembly to discuss and decide on the duration of day and night. After a long silence, the mole suggested that the day and night should be one year each. It was impractical and not accepted by all the creatures assembled there. After a spell of long silence again, ‘Chaklen’ (a small bird)

gave an opinion that there is a need for short intervals between work and rest. God took its advice and appointed Cock to determine the length of the day and night in accordance with that when he gets tired, he should crow, and that would become the night, and when he is rested enough, it should become day. So in Tangkhul's worldview, both the 'Chaklen' and 'Cock' are revered as they can foretell the future. In the olden days, listening to the chirping of 'Chaklen' was necessary for any work or travel. The same is the case with Cock. The older generation would examine the entrails of the cock to determine the future, whether it be agriculture undertaking or to wage war. (Luikham 18)

There is a tradition in the Tangkhul community that the younger ones cannot speak in front of the elders. The tacit implication is that the one who knows should say and the one who does not know should listen and learn. There should not be a race to speak first and raise their opinion. If spoken, wrong opinions ruin a reputation and affect the decorum of the gathering. Usually, people are hesitant to talk in public lest their opinion lead to damage to their reputation if the opinion is of no value.

### 3. "Fapai hokpai makan khari"

*"The one who steps over dog and pig droppings first"* (Free English Translation)

This means that the old have harsh experience of life. They know the heart of the matter and it will be wise to listen to the older generation. They have seen and experience the tragedy of life and it will be in the best interest of the younger generation to pay heed. They know the good and the bad things of life. They have tasted the life nature as they have come first in this world.

The worldview of the Tangkhul society is that they one who comes first knows best.

Even in the social structure, the first settler in a village is the king of that village. The social hierarchy is also based on primogeniture which is based on birth.

### 4. "Achon li achon salo, ameili amei holo"

*'Call Achon as Achon and Amei as Amei'* (Free English Translation)

In the Tangkhul social hierarchy, there are three classes, the eldest is called 'Amei', the second 'Achui' and the third 'Achei'. These prefixes are social

hierarchy markers in society. When a person addresses another, they should be addressed by the social marker Prefix before their names. The violation of this shows not only a lack of social etiquette but also transgresses the social hierarchy. In some cases, this violation will result in litigation.

5. “Awungashiwui khararchan mahangphaphalu Awungashiwui favana malei yeih”

*“Speak not the king’s tale too plainly, lest his dog bite you.”* (Free English Translation)

As it has already been highlighted, the first to settle in the village becomes the King of that village. The proverb that recognises the suzerainty of Kingship and his social hierarchy is codified in this proverb. Citizens of the villages should avoid making fun of the King’s family and history. That amounts to challenging the suzerainty of the King’s family. Their story should not unnecessarily come under scrutiny or vilify their family by way of casual comments from the citizens. It is prohibited. In order to dissuade people from doing so, people say, even the dog will bite you, let alone the wrath of the entire community.

6. “Rushilali Yorsaklana hangkhamachin”

*Rushila admonishes by Yorsakla.* (Free English Translation)

In this proverb, also, though it is recorded in text and texture, the latent meaning of the proverb is hidden. The situation of the proverb is also not explained here; therefore, the proverb will not be understandable to a person from another culture. Even within the same culture or community, without explaining the context, it will be obscure. The proverb is part of a tale. Knowing the tale will help in understanding the proverb. The proverb is meaningless to a reader who does not know the context. Once we know the context, the meaning will be clear.

The proverb is used when two bad people try to teach or accuse each other of a bad act. The proverb comes from a folktale where Yorsakla and Rushila, both of equal unprincipled, conceived pre-maritally and illegally.

## CONCLUSION

Just a few Tangkhul proverbs have been analysed from a contextual point of view. The Tangkhul proverbs require to be studied from the contextual point of view to have a better understanding and enrich literature. With modern

development, change is imminent and people have gradually drifted from traditional livelihood and worldview. As such, traditional practices, contexts and world view are at the point of extinction. Undertaking proverbial and folklore studies in traditional and historical cultural paradigm will certainly preserve and protect legacy of traditional wisdom and practices.

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