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Sacred Groves: A Study of the Religious Beliefs of the Darlong Community in Tripura

Benamina Darlong
Tripura University

Abstract

Prior to the tribe's mass conversion to Christianity somewhere in the 20th century, the Darlong had their concept of worship grounded in Nature and its components. In other words, the ethnic tribe who was a nomad previous to their final settlement in the present state of Tripura, worshipped ample of deities in their yester-years. 'Rationality' was never the features of their philosophy but 'Superficiality' and 'Superstitions' characterised the entire narratives behind their religion. The article attempts to bring to light the dormant materials of the Darlongs' oral traditions that created the belief-systems of the people. In fact, the remnants of these motifs are yet to be seen till date in the present Darlongs men and women in their act, be it conscious or unconscious despite of the change in faith. Nevertheless, it must also be remembered that the period I am referring in the topic dates back to the pre-Christian period of the people.

Keywords: Darlong, Worship, Groves, Sacred or Sacredism and Narratives.

I. Introduction to the study:

The paper discusses the religious practices of the Darlong communities relating to certain groves in their pre-Christian days. The people, in the past, were enchanted or rather captivated by every little unfamiliar phenomenon encountered by them in their daily routines as such narratives were employed to discuss the presence of illness, mediate their fears of it, come to terms with it, and otherwise incorporate its presence into their life. For instance, sacred nature for April tree was born in a story where two friends journeyed out for a purpose and fell asleep under an April tree at dusk. At midnight the two friends were cursed by the shadow of the tree. However, the one of the two friends was yet awake when the shadow pronounced the curse and saved his friend who later saved him as well by making a blood sacrifice. Similarly, in course of my visit to Talan village, located at Unokuti district of present Tripura, a person narrated me his encounter with the god of water known as 'Tui Tarpa'. The tale, when narrated by me, will one day act as a narrative in support of the said god establishing the cause of ritual performance.

II. The Belief Motifs of Darlong:

Conventionally, the Darlong believed in existence of an over-soul called 'Pathian' which inhabits in rivers, streams, mountains, forests, certain flora and fauna and at many instances. It is said to exalt himself in a varied forms known as 'Khawhri' or Demons including the guise of human. In addition to these, the people also pitched their firm belief in 'Rihli'¹ for whom rituals and sacrifices are made with great deal of devotion because of their fear. For instance, if an illness was claimed to be caused by the 'Ramhuai'², the parent of the victim had to go out in the forest at midnight to challenge the spirit by making a conversational rite thereby bringing a healing bond for his patient. However, if the parent failed to overcome his fear instinct during the performance, he or she is entitled to die. Several rites and sacrifices are made by the tribe at different times which are generally followed by a feast. Some of the major rites are 'Khal'³, 'Daibawl'⁴, 'Khawpuilam Sat'⁵, 'Khuangchawi'⁶, 'Khawbawl'⁷, 'Thangsua'⁸ and many other sacrifices depending upon circumstances. The Darlong believes in the life after death. Accordingly, there existed three worlds in the Darlong psychology. They are 'Khawvel' i.e. the 'Mortal World', 'Thikhua' i.e. the 'Shrine of Dead' and 'Pialral' i.e. 'Paradise'. It was their deed and status that decide a person's life after dead. Cruel and merciless murderer are avenged if not in the mortal world than in the abode of dead by their action's victim as in the legendary story of 'Chawngkuala'⁹ where 'Chawngkuala', the protagonist awaited the Lushai king, who shot him, in order to avenge his death while the good men and women were more likely to return back to physical world with a mark. Hence, babies with a pierce mark on their ears were considered not to be a new born but the return of some good person from 'Thikhua'. However, 'Pialral' was inherited only by few distinguished individual. According to some elders, the Tribe had this habit of taking a cock along with them in their journey. Whenever they stopped at a place, they would release the cock on its own which is a process of checking the places. If the cock survived and crew without fear in the morning, the people would take it for a good sign. However, if in any case, the cock would not survive or dare not to crow in the morning, they would abandon the place immediately. In the midst of all these, in the year 1919 the Darlongs converted themselves into Christian neglecting their previous practices and customs taking it to be their

¹ Shadow or ghost.

² Furies or Dark Spirits of Forest.

³ A sacrifice made for the shadows of house called 'In Rihli' who at many instances could bring ill-fate upon a family.

⁴ This was a sacrifice made for the furies in the forest. It was also performed before cultivation and while choosing the site for it.

⁵ It was more like work-together rites in which every household participate in clear the way of a village. By doing so the people believed that luck would favor the village for a year.

⁶ This rite was a costly one involving lot of cash. Hence, only the rich perform the rite after which it was claimed that a performer could directly ascend to 'Pialral' or paradise, an immortal world only for the elite.

⁷ It was performed for the welfare of a particular village and for the residence of the village against ill-fated circumstances and was also known as God of Community.

⁸ The rite was performed when a person achieved his goal in a lifetime and was gifted with a cloak called 'Thangsua'.

⁹ One among the many great warriors of the Darlong past.

'Unchristian Images'¹⁰ thereby leaving a big question mark behind the great exodus. Presently, the tribe practises their religious architecture and philosophy in accordance with the Western Christian religious system. In fact, all associations, assemblies or other organisations affiliated to by the Darlong Christians are connected or rather related to the West in one way or the other. As such, the Western ideas have not only governed their religious aspect but also the socio-economic and the cultural ideas.



Picture showing once known to be the abode of 'Lungtan Pathian' located in the present Dhalai District of Tripura.

III. Reading and Substantiation of the Groves Narratives:

Nature occupies significant part in the religious architecture and philosophy of the Darlong in which trees like Banyan, April, Tamarind and others may be considered with number of tales on them. In fact, all the rites, rituals and religious architectures are digested unanimously by the people based on the oral scriptures narrations. Thus, in the tale of 'Zi Rihli', a man went out to hunt in the forest leaving his infant child and wife at the village. As night fell, he sheltered himself under a tree that happened to be a 'Zi'. At midnight while the man was yet awake waiting for his prey, he overheard a voice calling for a friend requesting him to accompany them in the task of naming a baby boy. The man then paid a silent attention to the voice and discovered that the call was being made for the tree's 'Rihli' by other 'Rihli' of the forest. However, the 'Zi Rihli' rejected his friends' call saying he had a visitor to take care of and they should do the job without him but to let him know on their return. After a while, the furies returned and the 'Zi Rihli' asked what name they put on the baby boy. His friends replied, "We named him in this

¹⁰ In course of my conversation with an elderly person namely Mr. Biahnela Darlong, a residence of Saibual village presently located in the Unokuti district of Tripura, India, the later used the term to describe the people's past belief system and customs when asked about the transition in the marriage ceremonies from the past to the present.

manner. The child will grow up to be a good looking young man and shall have two wives. The two wives will one day fight on the issue of using ‘Sum’¹¹ that would compel their husband to go into a forest in order to make another one. On his way, a tiger will devour the young man”. The ‘Zi Rihli’ was quite happy with the naming and bid farewell to his friends.



Picture showing ‘Khursia’- a damaged pit or well, which was believed to be the residence of dark shadows or the ‘Huai’.

The next morning, the man woke up early only to leave for his home straight away. The nightmare kept on knocking his mind as he knew very well that the baby boy which the furies named was none other than his own boy. Years passed, his son grew up to be a good looking young man. The young man got married to two beautiful girls and time went on peacefully for few years. One day, the two wives had a quarrel over the usage of ‘Sum’. The husband then decided to go into a forest to make another ‘Sum’ as to calm down his wives. All these while the father, a man who was the witness of the naming incident, was silently following his son. No sooner, the young man entered the forest a huge tiger attacked him but was saved by his father, who never revealing the story to anyone was secretly following his son to the forest. From then on, it is claimed that ritualistic applause was made to the ‘Zi Rihli’ in order to avoid such circumstances.

At other instance, we find the theatricality of the shadows of groves that label them to being the so-called ‘God’ by the tribe. In the story ‘Khuangthli Rihli’, there lived a man, ‘Khuangduma’ and his wife who had two daughters. The couple practice *jhum* cultivation but too old to sustain the heat of scorching sun everyday and hence, send their daughters to keep a watch over the crops and to drive away the birds collecting the ripening crops. The two sisters do not have any proper ‘Tu’¹² in their *jhum* except for a

¹¹ A block of wood where a hole is dug in which grains could be smashed to powder.

¹² A cottage-like-structure house built in a cultivation site that act as a shelter and a storage for the cultivators.

ruined one that was once built by their father. Beside the ruined 'Tu', there was a huge tree called 'Khuangthli' in the vernacular. The one and only prayer often made by the two sisters was that, if there would be someone to construct them a 'Tu' so that they can rest peacefully in their *jhum*. One day, the prayers extend to a state where the elder sister made a promise of marrying the maker of the 'Tu' whoever he may be. The 'Rihli' of the 'Khuangthli', who took the shape of snake, over heard their prayer and did the job. The next day, when the two sisters arrived in the *jhum*, the 'Rihli' appeared to them and demanded the elder sister to fulfill her promise of marrying the maker. As a result, the elder sister was compelled to marry the serpent or 'Rihli' whom the younger sister was terribly frightened of.



Picture showing the abandoned village of the early Darlongs where many have encountered the dark spirits or the 'Huai', located in the present village of Talan, Unokuti district of Tripura.

As usual, the two sisters come to the *jhum* with their respective 'Bufun'¹³ everyday where the elder sister ends up sacrificing her share for her serpent husband. The routine did not break out until the deteriorating health of the elder sister came to catch the eye of their parents. Thus, one day, the father asked his younger daughter as to what the reasons of her sister growing lean and thin with the passage of time can possibly be. But she begged to be excused on the ground that she dare not say. However, the father insistency caused the younger daughter to reveal the secret no matter how distasteful the story may be. At this point, she told her father that her sister fell in love with a serpent that used to eat up all the share of her elder sister. Hearing this, the father grew very distressful and furious compelling him to decide to go to the *jhum* at once in order to kill the serpent. On reaching the *jhum*, the father asked the younger daughter to call upon her brother-in-law. She sang:

'Khuangthli Rihli, Rihli aw,
Ki U-in honjg ro nanga ti.

¹³ Sort of a lunch pack. Every labour take 'Bufun' with them while working but the curry was always cooked in the cultivation field.

The serpent replied: 'Ki lu ki khui lai tak, Hrang sam ki zel lai tak'.

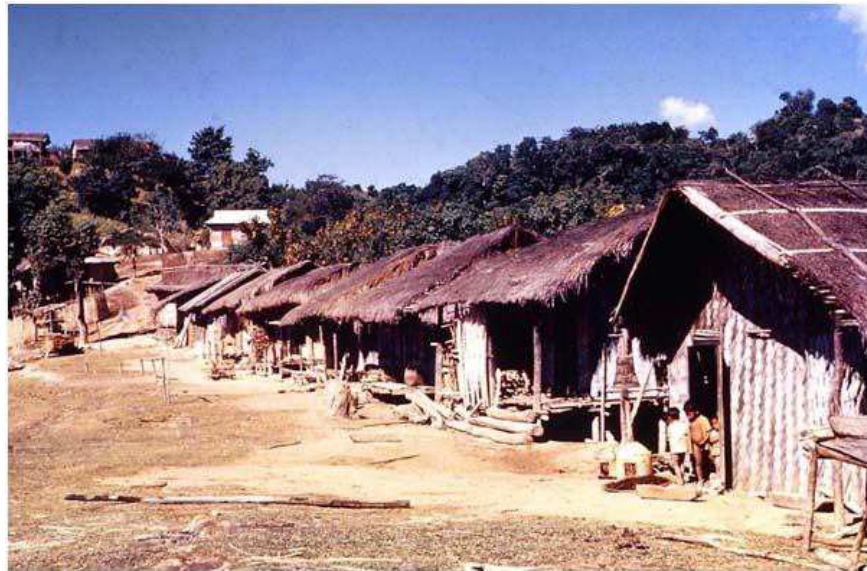
(*Translation: Oh...spirit of Khuangthli, come forth for sister asked for thee/I am in the midst of tying my hair exquisitely*)

No sooner did the serpent entered the 'Tu', the father of the beloved cut him with an axe into two pieces after which the father buried the head of the serpent in the ash, the body in the quarry and hanged the intestine on the brinjal plant. When the elder sister returned from her tiresome work, the younger sister said to her, 'our father wants you to throw the ashes, bring edible stones from the quarry and pluck some brinjals'. As the elder sister accomplishes the assigned tasks, she began to suspect the murder of her lover. But the confirmation did not come until she went to clear the ashes where she found out the buried head of her lover. She then cried:

'Sim ral mo ni tawng, hmar ral mo ni tawng?'

The serpent head replied, 'Hmar ral hom chang mak sim ral hom chang mak, ni nih ni pa ral ki tawng'.

(*Translation: Have you come across an enemy of the south or the north?/I neither came across the enemies of the South nor enemies of the North. I came across your parents).*



Picture showing the appearance of early Darlong villages.

Knowing the truth, the elder sister was deeply hurt and stricken with grief that snatched away her voice. Nevertheless, she returned home with the stones, brinjals and some fuel woods as asked by her father. On reaching their house, she found her father's hunting dog lying in the 'Thinghawn'.¹⁴ Despite her repeated shout at the dog, there was no reaction from the dog as her voices could no longer be heard by the animal forcing her to place the heavy log over the dog who succumbed to it. The incident made the father angry at his elder daughter and cut her belly, from which large quantity of baby snakes

¹⁴ Fuel woods store.

came out. The father, however, succeeded in killing the baby snakes except one that later grew up to become a huge snake figuring in another tale namely ‘Thaichimi Khua’¹⁵.



Fig.6. Picture showing a ‘Thiampu’ performing a rite involving a ‘Thumvawr’.

The faculty of belief, for the Darlong, act as something that suppressed human fear from being the superstitious victim providing an unconscious invocation for the ultimate construction of ritualistic performances toward strange forces. The shadows are supposed to take different shapes and guises at different times, which are among the few universal characteristics of deities thereby moulding the superstitions of the Darlongs to concrete philosophy as delineated in the second story.

In support of the narratives, mention may be made of the few case studies I have undertaken. In the word of B. Hnela Darlong, Mr. Khawma Darlong and Miss. Lianseli Darlong, both of whom are deceased today and the residence of Saibual¹⁶ village, were two of his recallable victims of a banyan’s shadow. It was claimed that the spirits of the tree possessed the persons’ soul and torture them making many demands such as food, dagger, sacrifices and others. Thus, the thiampu¹⁷ had to undergo many ‘Thumvawr’¹⁸ in order to cure the illness. Another citable patient was Mr. Thlaikunga Darlong of Lamkhuang Khuahlui¹⁹. The spirit, in the same way, tortured the soul of the victim so much so that it eventually resulted in death. Mr. Thlaikunga’s only wrong doing was building his house at the juncture of two valleys which according to the tribe was said to be a bad omen. The latest incident²⁰ I have heard about such spirits’ possession was in the year 2008-09 that took place in the present village of ‘Deora’, located at Kailashahar in the

¹⁵ A story featuring a huge snake that was said to be worshipped by some of the Darlong sub-clans in the past.

¹⁶ Presently located in the Kumarghat Subdivision of Unokuti District, Tripura.

¹⁷ Priest.

¹⁸ An interrogation period between a spirit and a priest.

¹⁹ Located in the present district of Dhalai, Tripura.

²⁰ Narrated to me by Mr. Roben Zaithangvela Darlong, neighbour of the young boy.

present Unakoti District of Tripura. A young boy claimed that “he often see three ghosts who tease him every time he walk across the April tree” which is located by the side of the road with an old tubewell adjacent to it. Old tubewell and deep fissure are generally considered to be the home ground of dark spirits by the tribe till date known as ‘Khursia’. Eventually, the young boy succumbed after struggling for quite a long period.



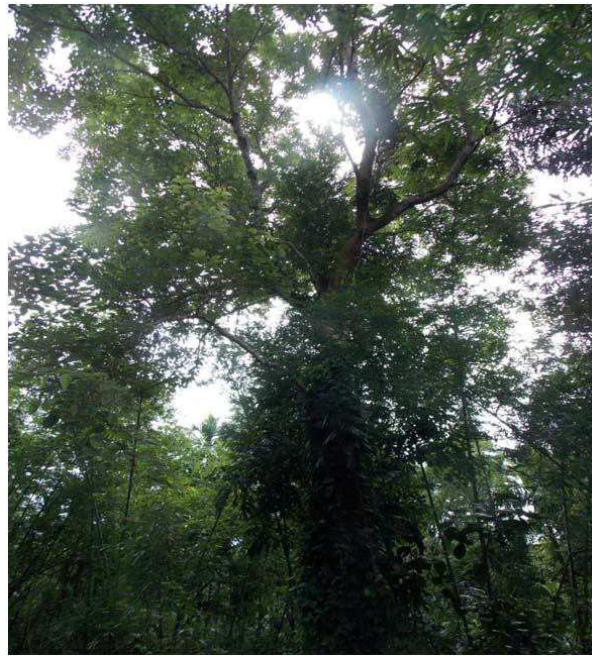
Fig.7. Picture showing the lower part of ‘Thangfen’ river at Talan village in present Unokuti District which was once the abode of ‘Tui Tarpa’- the god of water.

Stepping further, somewhere in the year 1980s, there was this incident in my village that I came across in course of my investigation. Mrs. Piangi Darlong became very ill and his family did everything they could to cure her illness but in vain. So, the family members decided to consult the matter with a thiampu who in turn asked them to dig the ground in which the bed of the patient was exactly placed. When they dug the ground, they found a tamarind root entering the house. The thiampu asked the family members to cut off the root and throw it away thereby and the illness was cured. The finding of tamarind root in the house had nothing to do with the sickness of Mrs. Piangi Darlong or perhaps the patient’s recovery was just a co-incidence with the finding of tamarind root. However, the Darlong rather than negating the cause and effect issue consider the ‘possibility’ and the ‘probability’ thereby defining their belief philosophy.

‘Thingsairuakher’ is another imperative abode of shadows claimed by the tribesmen and women. ‘Thingsairuakher’ is nothing but two trees meeting each other at the top and are far apart at the bottom that rarely happens. Mr. Rochua Darlong of Saibual village once happened to cut the root of the ‘Thingsairuakher’ while deforesting a cultivation field. The next day, he fell to severe sickness in which he claimed that the spirits kept on appearing to him in dreams and hallucinations attempting to kill by hanging him on the trees. The illness was cured only after the removal of the trees by third person. Mr. Rochua Darlong today is blessed with two sons and three daughters and has many grandchildren.



Picture showing the traditional structure of 'Sum'.



Picture showing the 'Zi' tree, which was considered to be a guardian tree of 'Rihli' or dark shadows, in the clutches of bamboos.

IV. Conclusion

The Darlongs, despite having been Christianized in the year 1919, have the habit of un-Christian interpretations and investigations to certain happenings or phenomena and thus consider them to be subject of omen or portent which is the consequences of their early worship and practices. In the pre-1919, the people had numerous gods and goddesses in which groves' worshipping was one significant discipline. 'Khawbiak'- god of community, 'Lungtan Pathian'- god of rock, 'Tuitarpa'- god of water, 'Ramhuai'- furies or dark spirits of forest, 'Si'- abode of demons, 'Khuachultenu'- goddess of natural happenings, 'Fapite'- goddess of plentifulness and 'Zingngawrtenu'- goddess of dawn, are

some the mentionable god and goddess of the early Darlongs. Thus, every little thing they see, saw or dreamed of became a sign to them such as sneezing during sickness, ants in a rainy days, itching of palm, swinging of spider in front of a spinster, encounter of tortoise by hunters, dog climbing the roof of a house, stumbling at doors, crying of an eagle hovering around a village, shivering of eyebrows, running away of pets and others have their respective interpretations by the people.

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Benjamina Darlong is a Research Scholar in the Department of English, Tripura University.
