

Documenting and Translating Bodo Oral Tradition: An Analysis

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to look at the early documentation and translation of Bodo ‘oral traditions’ in the late 19th Century. I will look into the reasons for bringing Bodo oral traditions in print and also the problems of bringing them into print. This paper will also analyze if any of the translators misinterpreted and misrepresented the Bodo oral traditions. For my primary materials, the documentations and translations published in the late 19th century and early 20th century by the colonialists, the documentations and translations by the native scholars and others post-independence until the late 20th century are taken up for analysis. Some of the translations were also compared during the fieldwork.

Key Words: translation, documentation, oral traditions, folklore, Bodo, translators, sexuality, and identity

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I. INTRODUCTION: BODO ORAL TRADITIONS IN PRINT

The Bodo oral traditions have been documented and translated by a considerable number of authors and translators. Most of the works on the Bodo Oral Tradition can be understood by looking at the prefaces and introductions; they shed light on the way these works were carried out and also what it intended to serve. These works are more like an attempt to contextualize the documentations and translations in order to gain understanding for better appreciation of the documented and translated texts of Bodo oral traditions.

“*The Bodo dialects, though still spoken in Assam by more than half a million persons are in their turn giving way to Aryan languages (Assamese and Bengali) and their complete disappearance is only a matter of time*” (Gait, History of Assam 1905). Gait’s statements may have led the scholars to rush in order to salvage what is left of the language and its traditions. The missionaries, historians, anthropologists, folklorists and individual members of the community all contributed to the collection that exists now of its oral traditions and the number is growing. The central idea governing most was not to produce the work for the fulfillment of the pleasure factor of the reader but mainly to preserve and promote a scholarly aspect for further research into the subject and language.

Initially, the motto of creation of identity became a guiding factor in looking at the language and its oral tradition. The western idea of authentication in writing of views, facts and ideas too played a major role in codifying the oral traditions. As ‘saying’ or ‘verbal statements’ was no longer looked as authenticate and proof in writing became more and more visibly important. Literacy was looked at as the solution to the problem and codification of oral traditions were done without much emphasis on the problems associated with it. The scholars were either unaware or chose to ignore the ‘dangers’ of introducing literacy into a pre-literate culture.

II. COLONIAL PERIOD

Sidney Endle and J D Anderson are the names that stand out in terms of the colonial era translations of the Bodo ‘oral traditions’. They documented and translated their findings and to an extent even codified the traditions and narratives of the people for the future generations. Endle was an evangelist who devoted his life in bringing education and Christianity to the Bodo people in and around Darrang district. Anderson makes clear with his reasons for documenting and translating the folktales and rhymes; they were intended to supplement Endle’s *Kachari Grammar*, and for those who did ‘not care to learn Kachari’ and hoped that it may interest some in making a more fuller exploration in this unexplored field. Anderson casually collected the tales and rhymes over campfire with Samson, who was his tutor and the source of most of the folklores documented by him.

Endle presents the Bodos as ‘simple folk’ who are “in mental and intellectual power are far below their Hindu neighbours”; but they make up for it by hard work and tenacity in digesting and remembering. The Bodo people are simple because they did not had much contact with the outside world and he laments that its simplicity and the rustic way of life may soon disappear as their experiences with the outside world grows (Sidney Endle “*The Kacharis*” 1911). Endle in “*The Kacharis*” gives us an overview of the race, religion, customs, language and oral traditions of the Bodo. The focus of the author was not primarily on the oral traditions but to give an overall introduction of the race and its habits to the western readers and scholars. The

book is divided into several sections such as history of the race, religion, customs, oral traditions and language. Through this book he establishes the Bodo race as different from their 'hinduneighbours' (Assamese and the Bengalis), but also draws few similarities in certain aspects such as syntax and the festivals observed.

The romantic notion prevalent in most of the ethnographers, social historians and folklorists of early 19th century – that the tribal folk being simple and leading a rustic life can be seen in Endle's work. On the subject of alcohol he says "they are certainly not habitual drunkards, and in this matter Kacharis as a rule would compare not unfavourably with the working man in more civilized lands; e.g., in England... apart from this failing... among them are to be found many simple virtues of great price, i.e., honesty, straightforwardness and a general trustworthiness deserving all honour." His literacy and culture is reflected in his evaluation of the Bodos, the values that the west and other literate societies uphold and value is highlighted and put forward for his readers to appreciate. In his understanding of folk songs sung in festivals he writes, "the versus sung at these festivals for the most part to be little better than mere jingle-jangle rhymes, made up on the spur of the moment, though occasionally some of them give an insight into the peculiar humour of the Kachari character and temperament." The essence of the oral traditions is that they are not fixed and they vary at different times according to context. In most Bodo folk songs, the lyrics are not fixed, the artist is somewhat free to perform his/her own rendition and play it to the tune which is also not very rigid. The following song documented and translated by Endle is a Bisagw song and the lyrics may vary from place to place.

- a. Agio, Boisagi, faidanang.
Dana bather janai-khai rang zaganzang.
- b. Ada Pua Ram, lagalagathangdang;
Gamsahadang, falihadang, manabarabdang?

I. Sister Boisagi, come out and play; This is our Bihuholiday;
Don't move inside the house all day.

II. Dear brother mine, I'll come anon I am putting my best sarion;

Five minutes' grace; don't harshly press We ladies must have time to dress.

Endle misses in his translations the meaning of the words 'agoi' and 'ada' for they generally mean 'sister' and 'brother' respectively but it could also mean 'lover' and in this case it means the latter. He could have expressed the meaning of the song more if he had just translated 'dear' for 'agoi and 'ada'. Endle misinterprets the meaning of the song and he does not arrive anywhere near to its meaning. This is a playful song where Pua Ram calls on Boisagi to come out and join him in the festivities of singing and dancing. Boisagi calls on him to wait and questions his eagerness to leave when she has gifted him with 'gamsa' and 'fali' and tries to enquire why he is brooding ('manabarabdang'). This song is presented as an example of the songs sung in the Bisagw¹ festival but he does not mention the context. It could also be that he did not collect this song while it was being performed and it was recited to him by a person who failed to translate its context and meaning. Endle being an evangelist could also have tried to present a chaste picture of the Bodo tribe whereby sanitizing the meaning of a flirtatious song into playful banter between two members of a family. It may not be totally wrong to speculate that some conscious manipulation of the source may have taken place to censor the content for the reader, i.e. the target reader may have been offended by flirtatious content.

III. SANITIZED TRANSLATIONS OF BODO 'ORAL TRADITIONS'

K.C. Baral's "Translating the Oral: Translatability and Cultural Dynamics" states that after independence the translators have somewhat broken free from the chains of colonialism and have the power and the onus to translate without taking up the position of the colonialists. The Bodo translators of oral traditions may have preferred the colonial methods of the Europeans in their translations as they did not appropriate the identity of the source and in fact their translations became the source of identity for scholars and political leaders. Anderson in his introduction to Endle's "The Kacharis" stated that "the Kacharis who live in the scattered foothills of Himalayas in North Bengal and Assam, intermixed now with the Hindu people who have intruded into what was once their undisputed home." Emulation of the style of the European translators became the norm for most who tried to find and translate the identities of the Bodo oral traditions. There were attempts by translators to present the image of the community as chaste and pure just like the Europeans did, so as to be accepted in the mainstream.

Bisagw is a festival where everyone takes part in singing and dancing and to a certain extent the elders of the community turn a blind eye towards the flirtations happening between the younger generations who group to sing and dance and take part in the festivities together. Most of the sensual Bisagw songs have gone through some kind of censorship/manipulation to subvert their meaning or have not been included at all in the published documents or translations. There are many oral narratives dealing with the subject of sexuality which do not find

¹ Bodo New Year Festival held in mid-April.

their way in the printed text. We rarely come across texts that present aspect of sexuality present in the oral narratives to the readers. Some texts dealing exclusively with the matter of sexuality may be found, but in most printed texts of oral traditions of 'pre-literate culture' it is not presented or highlighted. To me, it would be the influence of literacy, where the taste of the readers has to be taken into consideration and since the author/translator does not have control over the reach of his work, he tries to exclude or sanitize sexual connotations to avoid uncomfortable situations that may arise for his readers. The oral narrator/performer has the knowledge of his audience and may even select his audience while presenting oral narratives/performance containing sexual content. Given below is a song sung between mother-in-law and son-in-law.

Bizamadoi: ayoinon'niphicazoa
Na bathonkhouodenoron'aAyoidenorona
Bikhumzo: ron'acozaico
Zoloimozan
Gaonolainoron'agaonoZanoron'a
Bizamadoi: ayoinon'niphicazoa,
Phanlubathonkhouodenoron'aAyoidenorona
Bikhumzo: ron'acozabaigonzaico
ZoloimozanGaonomanoron'aDainoron'a.

Translation by Anil Boroin "Folk literature of Bodos" 2010 Son-in-law Mother, mother
Your daughter does not know How to prepare jelly
Of roasted fish
Mother-in-law The blame has come to my daughter, has it?
You are a good son in law indeed. You yourself do not know
How to bring fish home Or to eat the same
Son-in-law Mother, mother
Your daughter does not know How to prepare jelly
Of pepper
Mother-in-law The blame then falls
On my daughter, is it?
You are a good son in law indeed. You yourself do not know
How to cultivate pepper
You are yourself ignorant of all works

Anil Boro in his book may have given the literal meaning of the song which most of the readers will have to be content with but I happened to come across this particular song during my fieldwork where I met Mr. Bolen, a Bisagw dance troupe performer who helped shed more light on the sexual connotations of this song. In the song, the son-in-law is complaining to his mother-in-law about his sexual life blaming her daughter and the mother puts the blame back at him. There is the literal meaning and a hidden (sexual) meaning, but the underlying meaning of the song is the latter as far as I am told. I requested Mr. Bolen to narrate more such oral tales and songs and to my astonishment there were numerous oral traditions narrated by him that were sexually explicit in nature. He further mentioned that people did not take much part in exchange of these adult tales anymore and that it would soon disappear if they were not told and retold.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is clear that most of the translations of the Bodo oral traditions were target reader oriented. The target readers are mainly members of the Bodo community or the research scholars. The rigorous assimilation process followed by the dominant neighbouring communities fuelled the fear of complete annihilation of its 'oral traditions' and language as expressed by Edward Gait in the "History of Assam". The translations also served the purpose of creating an awareness of the existence of the Bodo 'oral traditions' among the members of other communities which gave a push in the assertion of a separate identity by the Bodo leaders and community members. Preserving the oral traditions before being erased from living memory of the performers of oral traditions was another reason that gave momentum to documentations and translations. The latter reason may have guided the translations to be more reader oriented. The translators preempting a situation where the oral traditions are completely forgotten may have chosen a more target-reader friendly approach that is easily understood, acceptable for all age groups and non-sexual in nature, whereby, the readers may at least be able to comprehend the oral traditions better than if it were more 'source oriented'.

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