

# A Study into the River Spirits: Ecology, Philosophy of Change and Human Responsibility

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The river is within us, the sea is all about us; The sea is the land's edge also, the granite into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses its hints of earlier and other creation:

The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone; The sea has many voices, Many gods and many voices.

The Dry Salvages by T. S. Eliot

To feel the mystery and awe with nature is the most inevitable part of human life. It is often described as majestic when people fail to understand the miracle in nature. Those miracles are viewed and studied from different angles in respect of different disciplines. If it is observed from the folkloristic perspective, intuition is generated how the surrounding is twined with the life on earth. Water being an object of awe due to the ignorance about the underwater world has been inviting man throughout the ages to invent benevolent beliefs regarding the presence of some supernatural elements in the surroundings of the water bodies.

The energy in the flowing and falling has mesmerised the imagination of people from time immemorial. It gives rise to the formation of the association between rivers and various mythical creatures. Such events are common to most of the cultures of the world. The liquid history of a river that the human civilisation on its bank always witness creates long and rich cultural bondage between the water course and man on its bank resulting in different interesting linguistic connotations. As observed by Nick Middleton (2012) the sanctity of the water spirits "has generated numerous taboos surrounding access and use".

What deserves special attention is the link of the belief on water spirit with the maintenance of ecology and the regeneration of the environment. It is no denying the fact that as human started

empowering nature for self benefit, destruction and deformation paralysed mother earth to the highest extent. Whose responsibility is it then to preserve Mother Earth? The newer and newer discoveries and inventions gifted us with freedom. Does that freedom destroy our sense of responsibility? God is present before us through the elements of nature. An attempt to conserve the lost beliefs and taboos may be an honest attempt for the conservation of natural elements for a healthy ecology. Water bodies being the core source for living must be protected by any means.

The present article tries to observe the original intentions of the formation of the narratives on the water spirits. It also aims to see how they turn out to be the valuable discourse on the preservation of ecology around the world reminding man to their duties and responsibilities for the Mother earth. In this connection mention may be made of Douglas Kennedy's comment on human behaviour:

In fact within us are two kinds of awareness, two distinct surfaces or layers one of which we use calculatingly and the other an instinctive awareness which almost uses us, glowing and brightening spontaneously with occasional highlights and darker reflections from our past animal inheritance. (81:1965)

Such awareness gives rise to the concept of the traditional ecological knowledge. The traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is repository of large amount of information about the natural world. The very concept 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge' is an academic term to refer to the indigenous and aboriginal forms of traditional knowledge regarding local environmental sources. Such knowledge is explicit in a cumulative body of narratives about practices and beliefs evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission. It concerns the relationship of living

beings (including human) with one another and with their environment. Ideas, perceptions and empirical data held by human communities regarding local species are important sources which enable new scientific discoveries to be made, as well as offering the potential to solve a number of conservation problems. Ella E Clark in the book *Legends of the Pacific Northwest* quotes a comment by Martin Sampson, an Indian Grandfather of Puget Sound Region that to every person in his native state, everything had life or spirit; the earth, the rocks, ferns as well as birds and animals even the hail which fell from the sky, had a spirit and a language and song of its own.

Given the importance of the river spirit many rivers, pools and water sources are viewed with a mixture of awe, fear and respect throughout the world. Running water is believed to have magical powers that can be used to protect against evils. Water being considered one of the sources of life is a key component in most of the belief narratives prevalent in the society. Water is a cleansing force and is used in most religions for rituals, healing and protection. Almost all the societies of the world possess belief regarding the presence of supernatural beings. An attempt to trace the origin of such beliefs generates awareness to the ecological concern in numerous oral forms throughout culture. The different linguistic groups are rich with variety of belief narratives regarding river spirits. Water spirits fall into two tribes, viz. Good water spirits and bad water spirits. These water spirits are believed to have evil intentions. The psychological state of the victim of water spirits generates newer and newer beliefs in the concerned surrounding and thereby forming positive connotation of such beliefs.

In almost all the beliefs throughout the world it is seen that water spirits appear in human forms impersonating both sexes. It is generally believed that people going for fishing are mostly assailed by the spirits, Animals, especially horses and some serpent like forms too appear in the form of water spirit. There is specific space believed to be occupied by the spirits in the water bodies. Water spirits are rarely seen above ground or water. An interesting observation is made by Richard L. Dieterle in his paper 'Water Spirit' that When Earthmaker created the world he looked down and shed his tears into the void. These tears became the waters, which are the essence of the Waterspirit's being. Then he put down land and the creatures that were to live on earth. However, the whole was unstable and whirled about, so he placed four Waterspirits at its corners to stabilize it. Just as the waters mirror the sky above, so the creative process

of Waterspirits is a reversed mirror image of that of Earthmaker. The waters are at first still, then they begin to rotate until a whirlpool forms. Then various noxious creatures are ejected from the whirlpool. Finally, out of the depths comes fire (the opposite of water), and only then does the Water spirit emerge. A Water spirit who arose from the depths to give a human a blessing, only appeared after a burning log emerged from the whirlpool. Earthmaker assigned to a green Waterspirit a particularly important creative role. This Water spirit dug out a great channel with his teeth, melting the snow and ice as he went. From a whirlpool he threw off all kinds of game animals, and firing quills from his hide, he covered the landscape in trees.

Names of different deities are found throughout the world each of which are believed to perform specific purpose for humanity. While discussing on river spirit considering it to be discourse of ecology focus is given to those spirits which are connected with fisherman, sailors and a few other related avenues. Opochtli in Aztech mythology, Mazu in Chinese, Daucina in Fizion, Ahti in Finnish, Glaucus, Naiades, Pan in Greek, Ukupanipo in Hawaiian, Nixie in Germanic and Nordic, Lorelei in Germanic, bäckahästen or 'brook horse' in Scandinavian, Kappa in Japan, Kelpie in Scottish, the Scandinavian näck, näkki, nøkk, nøkken, strömkarl, Varun in Hindu mythology. The most notable aspect is the presence of various such water spirits among different folk communities without written documentation. That they are present in the human conscience can be traced especially from folk stories and narratives about the experience of encounter with the spirits that run family wise or community wise.

In Assam particularly, the common names for river spirit are 'baak', ghorabaak and digholthengiya which is supposed to lure people to river banks and instigate for fishing. They take the form of some familiar person of the victim. The victim has no option to follow. Usually more fishes are caught in such situations but it is found that not a single fish remains with the fisherman. It is essential to note that when the victim comes out of the whole situation he feels it to be the part of a dream. But due to the fear of being a victim of the river spirit people take precautions. They generally carry knives and little bags of mustard seeds with them. It is believed that these spirits fear these two things. There is another trick to keep oneself away from such spirits. Even if they take any human form they do not have shadows. The experienced people know how to recognise such forms by observing the shadows. Another interesting point to

be noted here is that the spirits are believed to carry a bag which is very much vulnerable. If the victim can catch the bag and can put it into his little bag full of mustard seeds the spirit becomes functionless.

Imphal Turen, Irang Turen and khuga turen are some of river spirits in Manipuri folklore.

A study of the narratives connected with water spirit reveals that variations exist in their probable effects on people. As far as the question of ecology is concerned prominent among them is to promote the awareness towards the preservation of all forms of life on earth especially the water bodies which happens to be the prime source of existence. Water spirits traditionally call certain chosen individuals which usually involves physical submersion of the victim. In some cases the victim hears a call in sub conscious mind to go for fishing.

While discussing the effects of the water spirits it is found that some of them are harmful and some are not. The question arises regarding the motive of this harm. What happens to the victim is not generally seen by anybody rather it is narrated and the narration goes on frightening the listeners. It is the fear that is articulated the form an encounter with the spirits. Researchers believe such need stems from the fear of the loss of water habitat. J. G. Osemeobo in his article *The Role of Folklore in Environmental Conservation: evidence from Edo State, Nigeria* mentions that the problem of adequate protection for these resources stems from habitat loss and adequate information on how biotic resources were sustained through ecological knowledge in the past. Here is an attempt to cite an example from Japan. A spirit associated with rivers all over Japan is the Kappa, a mischievous creature often described as something between a child and a monkey. Kappa applies tricks to lure people, horses or cattle into a river to drown. There are regional variations of kappa and its behaviour. With the progress of scientific world people started losing their faith on kappa. What happened as result is the pollution of the river bodies. To save the rivers from such pollution the character of the centuries old kappa has been transformed from a malicious and unpleasant water deity into a harmless and endearing mascot. As a nationally recognised symbol, the kappa has been used for various campaigns that draw on a nostalgia for Japan's rural past. Kappa is welcomed again to regenerate the environment around urban rivers calling for rivers to be cleaned up so that kappa will come back.

The Scandinavian näck, näkki, nøkk, nøkken, strömkarl Grim or Fosse-Grim were male water spirits who played enchanted songs on the

violin, luring women and children to drown in lakes or streams. However, not all of these spirits were necessarily malevolent; in fact, many stories exist that indicate at the very least that nøkken were entirely harmless to their audience and attracted not only women and children, but men as well with their sweet songs. Stories also exist where the Fossegrim agreed to live with a human who had fallen in love with him, but many of these stories ended with the nøkken returning to his home, usually a nearby waterfall or brook. Nøkken are said to grow despondent if they do not have free, regular contact with a water source. It is difficult to describe the actual appearance of the nix, as one of his central attributes was thought to be shape shifting. Perhaps he did not have any true shape. He could show himself as a man playing the violin in brooks and waterfalls (though often imagined as fair and naked today, in actual folklore he was more frequently wearing more or less elegant clothing) but also could appear to be treasure or various floating objects or as an animal-most commonly in the form of a "brook horse" (see below). The modern Scandinavian names are derived from an Old Norse nykr, meaning "river horse." Thus, likely the brook horse preceded the personification of the nix as the "man in the rapids". In the later Romantic folklore and folklore-inspired stories of the 19th century, the nøkken sings about his loneliness and his longing for salvation, which he purportedly never shall receive, as he is not "a child of God"

The Scandinavian Bäckhästen or bækhesten (translated as the brook horse) is a mythological horse in Scandinavian folklore. It has a close parallel in the Scottish kelpie. It was often described as a majestic white horse that would appear near rivers, particularly during foggy weather. Anyone who climbed onto its back would not be able to get off again. The horse would then jump into the river, drowning the rider.

The German Nix and Nixe (and Nixie) are types of river merman and mermaid who may lure men to drown, like the Scandinavian type, akin to the Celtic Melusine and similar to the Greek Siren. The German epic *Nibelungenlied* mentions the Nix in connection with the Danube, as early as 1180 to 1210.

Nixes in folklore became water sprites who try to lure people into the water. The males can assume many different shapes, including that of a human, fish, and snake. The females are beautiful women with the tail of a fish. When they are in human forms, they can be recognised by the wet hem of their clothes. The Nixes are portrayed

as malicious in some stories but harmless and friendly in others.

### CONCLUSION:

Fear for the mystery imbedded in the natural objects is necessitated for the preservation of the ecology as well as the life on earth. Thomas M Lekan in his book Landscape Preservation and German Identity 1885-1945 observes:

The rhetoric of Nature preservation and the promise to protect the imagined contours of a landscape also articulated bourgeois cultural anxieties about the pace, scope and effects of modernisation, filtering ecological concerns through an aesthetic and nationalist lens. (21:2004)

The same can be felt in Rousseau's idea of hypothetical state of nature as a normative guide. The modern world has seen the technology and education available to strike a balance between manipulating the environment to suit human consumption and preserving our environment. Humans need to harvest viable nature resources while simultaneously replacing the harvest with new resources. The psychological orientation towards the ecological issues can be developed only if that is learned uninstitutionally as well as informally in the social discourse. Social discourse on environment are pragmatic saga for the understanding of our place in the universe and hence our responsibilities.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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