

## The Mundhum Myth: A Semiological Perspective

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### Abstract

This article aims to observe the Limbu Mundhum myth *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* 'The Creation of Man' from the semiological perspective setting it in the second order tridimensional pattern developed by French semiotician, Roland Barthes. The objective of the study is to find out the process of interpreting myth through Barthes' model of semiotic system. Basically, the analysis is based on linguistic theory of literary criticism. The theory proposed by Barthes is modeled upon Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic 'sign' under the semiological system. In the process of analysis, the study has revealed that though Barthes' semiotic pattern follows Saussure's model of sign system, there are certain distinct features in the interpretation of myth than that of Saussure's linguistic sign, signifier and signified pattern. Especially, the component 'signifier' is differently perceived in Barthes' triple dimensional pattern. Likewise, the connection between 'signifier' and 'signified' is not the same in simple linguistic and mythical semiotic system. The article can be useful to create a way for interested individuals to deepen their understanding of language, literature and society.

*Keywords:* acoustic image, sign, signifier, signified, tridimensional pattern

### Background

The general concept is that the followers of certain religious faith do not seem to study their religious scriptures for the purpose of expanding and exploring knowledge as they are supposed to do with other general literary texts. The religious followers hold the opinion that the religious texts are not meant for discovering the possible contextual meaning, analyzing the meaning system and commenting on the structural make up. Moreover, they happen to let these texts remain unquestioned, undiscovered or even unanalyzed in the name of honor and holiness. The motive behind the reluctant state could be that the sacred books should not be the subject of public discussion and debate. When they become the matter of public discussion, they soon fall into the controversy and thus they lose the reverence and piety. But even in such state of one-sided devoutness and piety towards the religious discourse, average individuals must have realized that these texts are of vast store of knowledge about the mundane as well as spiritual world. In this article, the study is focused on interpreting the Mundhum myth from the semiological point of view.

The Mundhum is the religious scripture of the Limbu ethnic community. It is essentially a collective corpus of various narratives or especially of the myths. "These religious explanations were handed down from generation to generation in the form of myths. A myth is a story about the gods which sets out to explain why life as it is," (Gaarder, 2016, p. 1). Here, Gaarder means to say that we have myths in our every community which are the philosophical answers to many questions regarding the life, the world, the universe, or the abstract

phenomena around us. For Hawkes (2003), "myths, properly interpreted, can thus be seen to be 'civil histories of the first peoples who were everywhere naturally poets'" (p. 2). Generally, one may regard these narratives merely as the light stories which are supposed to be meant for entertainment. But these myths, which appear in the religious texts such as the *Mundhum*, can have very grave motives or meanings when they are considered seriously. Hawkes (2003) claims, "all myths, that is, have their grounding in the actual generalized experience of ancient peoples and present their attempts to impose a satisfactory graspable humanizing shape on it" (p. 3). Like Hawkes, emphasizing on the importance of myth, Morales (2007) states, "myths are stories that are of psychologically importance to a community" (p. 3). The myths are limited to the verbal form and when they aspire to the action form, they become or especially transformed into the rituals. Regarding myth, Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, and Willingham (1999) hold the opinion, "just as the dreams reflect the unconscious desires and anxieties of the individual, so as the myths are symbolic projections of a people's hopes, values, fears and aspirations"(p. 159). Furthermore, myths are not only the symbolic projection but also they are ideological projections because a community's life mode is guided by certain ideology based on the myths.

Every myth may embed certain knowledge within it. In its specific sense, one can get special knowledge from the myth. In this regard, Sansonese (1994) holds the view as, "we can discern that special knowledge in myth just as within the moon we see the brilliance of the sun disguised"(p. xiii). In this statement he may be trying to reveal that the myth on its surface may appear as a very simple story but within that story, it may have very special matter. The similar view is found in K. K. Ruthven's work. "A myth conceals a 'real' meaning beneath its apparent meaning," (Ruthven, 1976, p. 2). Here, Ruthven means that the story serves as a mask and beyond and below the mask there lies the real face. In another context he further argues, "Every myth is encased in a verbal covering which is probably quite different from the core meaning underneath" (p. 27). The matter is obvious that the myth involves two levels of meaning i.e. surface and deeper which run in a parallel way. This article attempts to answer of how the *Mundhum* myth 'The Creation of Man' '*Yapmi Pongma Mundhum*' can be analyzed from the semiological perspective.

The term semiology or semiotics is related to the science which studies "verbal language in its different MEDIA of speech and writing and also NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION system, such as gestures and body movement (KINESICS), and other CODES of proximity/distance (**proxemics**), dress and MASS MEDIA, etc." (Wales, 2001, pp. 354-55). In other words, semiotics uses the analysis of sign to interpret its meaning and in that sense, it is "the theory of SIGNS" (Richards, Pratt & Pratt, 1999, p. 329). By considering the above definitions regarding the term semiotics, simply the question may rise of what relation exists between the myth and semiotics. It is safe to say that there can be a significant association between the myth and the sign system. When the myth is conceived as 'sign' for it signals specific meaning, it can readily be analyzed under the semiotic theory. Furthermore, a myth is also one form of communications. In this regard, Barthes (1957) holds the view as, "myth is a type of speech ... speech of this kind is a message" (pp. 107-8). From Barthes' notion it can be inferred that one myth is considered as a single whole 'sign' just as single speech utterance. It

means that one myth can consist of thousands of words however; the whole discourse is thought to be only one sign.

### Problems, Objectives, and Methodology

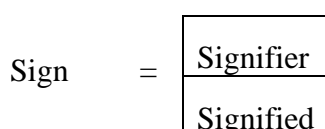
The Limbu Mundhum is composed up of diverse mythical narratives. These varied myths are not merely for the light entertainment to be told to pass the leisure period hung over someone. Myths are said to have two distinct meanings i.e. the outer or surface as well as the inner or underlying meaning. The surface meaning is essentially a denotative meaning whereas the inner meaning is concerned with its associative or metaphorical meaning. The audience can perceive the kind of meaning according to his/her level of understanding. The surface meaning is not the intended one because it serves only as a SIGN and the means to lead into the intended or real meaning. Now the questions rise of how the myth is set to the semiological perspective, and how it is interpreted on the line of Barthes' semiological frame.

The objectives of this study are:

- To set the Mundhum myth *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* (The Creation of Man) in Barthes' semiological frame,
- To interpret the said Mundhum myth on the basis of the given frame

The set objectives have been met through the qualitative research design in which non-numerical data have been gathered from the library consultation. The primary data have been drawn from the Limbu religious scripture Mundhum myth called *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* translating to 'The Creation of Man'. When the desired data have been obtained they have been analyzed, interpreted and appraised. The theory of analysis is particularly based on semiotics or semiology - one of the branches of linguistics - that conceives language as the sign system. The semiological theory was propounded by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980).

Saussure is regarded as the founder of twentieth century linguistics and semiotics or semiology. His ideas have been successful to lay down the foundation of many considerable developments in the field of linguistics and semiotics. "His theory of language and how it should be studied played a seminal part in the development of 'structuralism' as a method in the human sciences and thus significantly affected the course of literary studies in this century" (Lodge, 1987, p. 1). Under the semiological system, Saussure has postulated language three different aspects in the meaning system as 'sign', 'signification' and 'signal' or sign, signifier and signified. According to him the 'sign' is just like a coin having two sides of 'signifier' and 'signified'. Saussure (1987) puts forward his view as, "the *sign* designates the whole; *signifier* refers to the sound pattern, and *signified* concerns with the concept," (p. 11). Saussure model can be shown by the following diagram:



Regarding Saussure's semiological system and his analysis of word as a verbal sign, Selden (1989) points out as, "words are not symbols which correspond to referents, but rather are 'signs' which are made up of two parts (like two sides of a sheet of paper): a mark either written or spoken, called a signifier, and the concept (what is 'thought' when a mark is made), called a 'signified'" (p. 52). According to Selden, Saussure was explicitly differentiating between sign and symbol since the 'symbol' essentially refers to the 'thing'. Thus, things have no place in his model. The elements of language acquire meaning not because of the result of linkage between words and things but because of the parts of a system of relation. There is no as such natural bond in the relationship between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' but there is arbitrary relationship.

The above Saussure's diagram has been modified by Barthes (1957) as the following table:

Language →	1. Signifier	2. Signified
	3. Sign	

Barthes was much interested in interpreting the myth on the line of Saussurean semiotic frame. Barthes has devised the second order of frame basing on Saussurean semiological model presented above. His second order diagram is the one as shown below:

Language	1. Signifier	2. Signified
	3. Sign	
MYTH	I. SIGNIFIER	II. SIGNIFIED
	III. SIGN	

According to Barthes, the 'sign' of both 'language' and 'MYTH' is the associative total of a concept and an image. Likewise, the 'signifier' is the acoustic image which is mental. The 'signified' is the concept formed while after perceiving the acoustic image through the mind. In the above diagrams, the semiological process involves tridimensional pattern whether it is a simple linguistic sign or mythical signaling system of communication. The structure of myth repeats the same tripartite pattern in that myth is the second order signifying system with sign of the first order signifying system as its signifier. The following discussion attempts to show how a myth communicates in the Barthes' semiological model.

### Result and Discussions

On the outset of the discussion, it is customary to jot down the corpus the intended text that is being analyzed in this writing. The text of Limbu Mundhum- *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* translating to 'The Creation of Man' goes like as follows:

The myth 'The Creation of Man' *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* in Limbu Mundhum refers to that even after creating many things like fish, bird, animal, plant, etc., the creator *Porokmiba* realized that there was still something lacking to be created which would make the earth look beautiful. The early created things were not enough to make the world look a charming place. The suitable thing that would make the earth look beautiful was, in fact, the mankind. The Mundhum myth further refers to that creating the man was not as easy as the creation of other creatures. Thus the Supreme God *Tagera Ningwaphumang* ordered *Porokmiba* (the Creator God) to create strong, smart and immortal man. According to the Supreme God's admonition, the Creator mixed up precious metals (i.e. iron, silver, gold, diamond) to create special kind of man. But unfortunately, the attempt was not successful. Then, he hurled it at different places tearing it into several pieces. After that he thought to create the man out of very trivial things (e.g. ashes, shits of different fowls and the water accumulated in the tree hole). In the second time, the effort was successful, but the creator unconsciously happened to spit on the face. The newly created man dropped dead because of the divine curse.

The creator received a setback in his creation for the newly created man died instantly after casting the spiteful curse upon the new live man. He (God) again made the human being with the same trivial materials, but this time, it was female whose name was *Muzingna Kheyongnama*. Limbu Mundhum believes that she was the first mother of the Limbu world. (Tumbahang, 2020, pp. 142-43)

The given mythical text has included numerous signifiers. When we analyze these all signifiers from the linguistic perspective or the first-order tridimensional pattern, it becomes quite a long and painstaking job. For in such analysis, every word is to be considered as a sign as well as signifier. But with the mythical text, as in Barthes' opinion, every myth is thought to be single signifier. He states that the myth works with raw materials reduced to pure signifying functions so that myth becomes a sum of signs. In other words, the signifier of a myth is formed by a sum of signs. This implies that the myth is set in the second order tridimensional pattern in which the sign - the associative total of a concept and an image - of a language becomes merely a signifier of the mythical semiotics.

Barthes holds the opinion that the signifier of myth exists itself an equivocal way. The myth's 'signifier' is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other. Unlike the linguistic 'signifier', the myth's 'signifier' provides the physical existence which is readily visible and readable through eyes or it has a sensory reality. In contrast, a linguistic 'signifier' is purely mental or a person perceives a mental image while listening or visualizing the linguistic sign. Moreover, a linguistic signifier is "a psychological impression of sound as given to him by the evidence of his senses" (Selden, 1989, p. 10). The constant presence and absence of the meaning and form of the myth's signifier is very natural process. In this regard, Barthes (1957) views, "it is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and form which defines myth" (p. 114). The first order linguistic sign is turned out to be the myth's (i.e. second order tridimensional pattern) 'signifier'. So, for this reason the 'signifier' (the 'sign' of a language which certainly has its physical reality) possesses its meaning as it narrates certain incidents and events e.g. the above given Mundhum myth is in the position of 'signifier' and it tells a story of how the creator god created the first man. When one considers the meaning and

form aspects, the corpus of writing along with its literal meaning is always and already there. But when one thinks of the first order tridimensional pattern, the 'signifier' is absent because it is purely mental image. In this sense, Barthes (1957) states "the signifier presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other" (p. 116). In this, he gives an analogical explanation in which a man in a car can see the glass of the window at one time, and he also sees the beautiful scenery outside at the other. Both things are there but the viewer cannot see the both things at the same time. Seeing things depends on which the viewer focuses his attention.

Now, let us have a look towards the third term 'signified' of the triplex pattern. The term 'signified' is referred to as the 'concept' in the semiotic system which is formed by the association of the mental image 'signifier'. According to the first order tripartite pattern, the linguistic item, for example, 'dog' is taken as the 'sign'; and from this 'sign' the viewer (for written word) or listener (for vocal sound) forms an acoustic image 'signifier' in the mind, and this acoustic image 'signifier' triggers the concept 'meaning' or the 'signified'. "The two elements (signifier and signified) are intimately linked and each triggers the other" (Saussure, 1987, p. 11). For Saussure, the link between 'signifier' and 'signified' is essentially arbitrary or the linguistic 'sign' is arbitrary. Bringing these two dimensions to the religious context, Bradford (2005) opines, "the atheists and the Christians will share a largely identical relation between 'God' (signifier) and 'God' (signified) but without a referent" (p. 6). Here Bradford does not find the referent or the 'sign'.

Barthes holds the opinion that the myth in the semiotic system functions quite distinctly from that of the Saussurean tridimensional pattern. Saussure opines that the link between 'signifier' and 'signified' is arbitrary whereas Barthes argues that this connection, which is an act of signification, is the result of collective contract, and over a period of time, the connection becomes naturalized. In Barthes' view the 'signified' of the myth is not arbitrary but it is rather intentional. He claims as, "it is the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered" (p. 117). Regarding the connection between 'signifier' and 'signified' he further states that the relation which unites the concept of the myth to its meaning is essentially the relation of deformation. In myth, as he argues that the meaning is distorted by the concept. In fact, the distortion is possible only because the form of myth is already constituted by a linguistic meaning.

Presenting the argument, Barthes points out that in simple language system (e.g. in Saussurean semiotic system) the 'signifier' cannot distort anything at all. It is because the 'signifier' of simple language system, being empty as well as arbitrary, offers no resistance to it. But in the case of myth's 'signifier', the context is different in the sense that the 'signifier' has two aspects: one full which is the meaning, one empty which is the form. The concept 'signified', literally, deforms however, it does not abandon the meaning. This means that a word can fully restore this contradiction, but it can only set apart. The 'signifier', in an actual sense, undergoes certain change and reveals as the concept 'signified' it is because the 'signifier' assures the characteristic features of the 'signified'. Regarding this duplicity, Barthes (1957) claims, "myth is a type of speech defined by its intention, much more by its literal sense" (p. 122). But, however, the intention is somehow frozen, purified, internalized and made absent by this literal sense.

From the point of view of Saussure, the 'sign' in a language is essentially arbitrary. This infers that there is nothing to compel the acoustic image 'tree' naturally to mean the concept 'tree'. The 'sign' here is quite unmotivated. While turning to Barthes, the matter is quite distinctly different that the mythical signification (semiotic system) is never arbitrary rather it is always in part motivated and unavoidably contains some analogy. When we come to realize that unlike Saussure's proposition that is, the relation between 'signifier' and 'signified' is arbitrary, in Barthes' semiotic system, the 'signified' is partly motivated by the 'signifier'. It is because the 'signifier' is not empty as in Saussure's linguistic sign. One thing what we should not forget is that Barthes is advocating the 'mythical sign' but not the 'linguistic sign'. In Barthes system, the myth with its literal meaning or the surface level story (myth) is always and already there in the 'signifier's' realm/dimension. He also argues that there is an unavoidable analogy between the 'signifier' and 'signified'. He points out that the concept is inferred basing on the literal (level) meaning of the myth. Otherwise, where does the intended (deeper) meaning come from? The plain meaning of the term 'signifier' is to show or indicate or even to denote. Hence, the myth (signifier) denotes something and the intended meaning is thus, inferred. Likewise the unavoidable analogy is that the 'signifier' is "as the creator god fails to create the man out of strong and valuable metals then he creates out of trivial things. He was not satisfied and casts spiteful curse causing the newly created man drop to dead." Now, basing on this 'signifier' (literal level) the concept (signified) is derived. In this way, there is an analogy between 'creator's spiteful curse' and 'mortality of human being'.

Now let us turn to the Limbu Mundhum myth *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* 'The Creation of Man' and consider how it fits into Barthes' triple-patterned of semiotic system. First, let us see the diagram of threefold pattern as below:

<b>SIGNIFIER</b>	<b>SIGNIFIED</b>
Myth: the creator's curses to newly created man out of trivial things	Human predicaments: frailty, defenselessness, transience, mortality of life
<b>SIGN</b>	
Myth: the creator's curses to newly created man out of trivial things	

### **The Sign**

The mythical 'sign' refers to the whole story (e.g. the mythical story narrating of how the first human was created according to the Limbu Mundhum) as a unit which consists of number of linguistic signs. The 'sign' should be understood as the associative total of an image (signifier) and a concept/meaning (signified). The 'sign' of the above diagram refers to the myth of *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* 'The Creation of Man' (i.e. Myth: the creator curses to newly created man out of trivial things). Moreover, the 'sign' also consists of meaning/concept e.g. human predicaments as frailty, defenselessness, transience, mortality.

### **The Signifier**

Unlike the Saussurean first order model in which the 'signifier' is an acoustic image; Barthes' second order model denotes the same mythical story of the 'sign' copied or repeated in the 'signifier'. In the above diagram, the same myth (i.e. the creator curses to newly created man out of trivial things) is placed. In this regard, Barthes (1957) states, "the signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form full on one side, and empty on the other " (p. 116). The meaning and form is full in the sense that the same myth (i.e. the creator curses to newly created man out of trivial things) is placed there. So, the form of story physically exists there and its literal meaning exists too. Similarly, the sense of emptiness is aroused from the fact that the acoustic image is absent there.

### **The Signified**

The signified is defined as the concept/meaning which is thought when the acoustic image/mark is made in the mind. Contrary to the Saussurean first order model, the relationship between the signifier and signified is motivated, intentional, metaphorical in which there lie some kinds of analogical elements and features. For instance, the signifier portion of the Limbu Mundhum myth *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* 'The Creation of Man' narrates as:

The creator god *Porokmi Yomphami* blended precious metals to create strong, beautiful and immortal man, but he could not put life into it. Then he kneaded trivial things like ashes, fowls' shits (e.g. lophophorus, partridge, water cock, hen, crane, rooster,) and water and created human figure. He put the life into the human figure and called it. To his great surprise, the human figure responded to his call. Ironically, he happened to think that it was really a cruel joke upon his craftsmanship. Unconsciously, he spat on the human's face and cursed severely wishing the death. No sooner had the creator cursed the newly created man than the man instantly dropped dead.

The above 'signifier' has been distorted so as to make intentional signified (concept). The intended meaning is devised from some analogical features. From the first created man's accursed life and death, it may be hinting at man's futility and defenselessness. Perhaps it is the subtle explanation of the query as to why man is so fragile and has transitory life. Likewise, the further explanation is that man's body is supposed to be composed of trivial matters, as a result, how he can be smart, strong and immortal. The nature of man's body composition is momentary. In other words, the divine curse to the first man caused him a mortal being or human body is composed of trivial matters hence mortal.

The Mundhum myth 'The Creation of Man' *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* may also be trying to indicate towards some constraints and limitations. Human limitations have been implied through the trivial materials used during his (man's) creation and the divine curse he received while responding to the creator's call. According to the myth, human body is supposed to be composed of soil, ashes, water, and shits of different fowls. That means the human body is very fragile and transitory which after all, returns to the same matters of which it was supposed to be composed. The life giver who has given life to man, after certain period, takes it back. The succinct saying of the myth's concept (or signified) is: human predicaments: frailty, defenselessness, transience, mortality of life.



## Conclusions

The special matter about the myth is that it consists of two levels of meaning. One of the most recurring myths in the Limbu ethnic community is natively termed as *Yapmi Pongma Mundhum* translating to 'The Creation of Man' also contains the two levels of meaning. One meaning is literal or surface and the next is underlying meaning or the main message. In the tridimensional pattern of semiotic system, the surface level or the form of the story is placed in both the realms of 'sign' as well as the 'signifier'. And the connection between 'signifier' and 'signified' is not arbitrary but the mythical signification is established through motivation and unavoidable analogy. In other words, the 'signified' is nothing but the underlying meaning of a myth. 'The newly created man out of trivial matters and severely cursed by the creator god' is the surface level which functions as the 'signifier'. Then the motivated and analogical concept (signified) of this myth is that human life is transient, fragile, defenseless and mortal with many constraints and limitations.

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