



Mnemonic Tradition of Naga Folklore: A Living Fossil

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Abstract: The Nagas has a long tradition of imparting their history from generation to generation through mnemonic means and modes. Folklores provide an enormous source to understand and reconstruct the Naga past society. They are richly found in all the Naga tribes though varied among the tribes. Fascinatingly, they have forged for all the age-set system from children to old ages where gerontocracy was upheld. It is the survival within a people's later stages of culture of the beliefs, origin, moral ethics and etiquette, stories, games, song, dance, magical practices, utensils, tools, proverbs, poetry of the folks, rhymes, riddles, customs, festivals, arts, crafts, rites, houses, and other techniques or adjustment to the world and the supernatural, which were used in previous stages. The development of all this folklore has a deep meaning into it. They portray all the social values, economic activities, political conditions, and environmental awareness of their surroundings. Trade relations with their neighbouring tribes and different communities far and wide were preserved in the form of personal and community experiences which substantially framed into a story that later served as a verbal mode of fossils. With the advent of Western anthropologists in the late 19th to early 20th century invested their research in the regions which laid the first stage in written forms. However, the majority of the present generation is not aware of its significance and is losing interest in it due to the absence of inclusion in the academic syllabus and less prospects for job orientation. Thus, the objective of the paper attempts to analyse the oral living fossils of Nagas from the historical perspective and the challenges encountered using this information to reconstruct the past identity in the contemporary.

Keywords: Culture, Folklore, History, Identity, Naga, Tradition, and Tribes

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The people living in the Hills of Naga were commonly referred to as Nagas. Nagas were politically divided and found both in the North-eastern part of India and North-western part of Myanmar. In India, they were constitutionally separated and particularly found in four states viz. Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. Before the advent of the colonial power, they were politically

isolated from the civilization of India and Myanmar due to unfavourable terrains and the absence of political ambitions to establish a powerful kingdom in the region. Such a devoid of political ambition, compelled them to confine within a village community, but migration often occurred due to subjection in battle of head-hunting, internal conflicts among clan members, natural calamities, expulsion from the village due to an infringement of the customary taboos, and the inadequacy to produce a surplus of agriculture. Since then, dispersal became a nature and some of them settled in the foothills while majority preferred to stay on the tops of mountains due to security reason. The new settlement is usually formed by various groups of clans and villages acted as the biggest organisation in the region. Their surroundings were covered with thick tropical rain forest and gets an average rainfall every year. Also, a spring well is surrounded in all the corners of the settlement. In favour of this pleasant geographical terrain, shifting cultivations were extensively found practiced but later developed the method of terrace cultivation by levelling the foothills of the mountains. Although the practice of terrace cultivation was limited to few villagers specifically in the western part of Naga hills. Later, in the North-eastern part of Naga Hill, they successfully developed a system of *Angh* (kingship system) but couldn't disseminate their influence and confine to their specific region. However, most Naga's villages practiced a republican form of social structure, elected the best warriors and morally upright persons as the local leaders. Unfortunately, they have not invented a method of written system. This contributed to the continuance use of oral mode of communication that dominated the community and served as the only ultimate source of information in the region. Nevertheless, they have forged a considerable amount of their history in the way of folklore which directly deals with their activity in diverse forms. Those compositions were orally passed down in the form of her beliefs, philosophy, art, science, social, politics, economics, and environment. Most of these have been generated both based on the tangible as well as intangible things but with the encounter of the colonial power in the 19th century onwards they entitled and labelled the Nagas society as illiterate. Nevertheless, Naga's were not illiterate but non-literate.

The primary area of the research paper has been limited to understand the indigenous folklores, from the internal perspective. The paper has extensively made use of both primary and secondary sources. Varied methods of data collection have been adhered to. Direct field observation, tangible and archaeological data, and interview methods were implied at time of collecting the data. Subsequently, the sources used for the study come from various fields and in short, this study is interdisciplinary.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To understand the nature of ethnic folklore.
- To examine the influence from geographical factors.
- To find out how economic surplus enabled them to create and possessed more folklores.
- To investigate the mode of preservation.
- To study the similarities, differences, subjectivity and challenges.

Naga's have 68 tribes (Nuh, 2006,26), speak the family of Sino Tibeto-Burman, and have more than 100 different indigenous dialects. The concept of a tribe has been an invention of the colonial era and it doesn't very appropriate, therefore, the nomenclature of the word village was used in the article. Though they have been scattered in an area of approximately 47,000 square miles in a different region, still there were many similarities though numerous numbers of differences among them could be identified through their available folklores and systems. They have forged and possessed voluminous

numbers of traditional lores, origins, and tales for various social implications. Such invention is a product of a collective efforts of the people and passed down in different forms, means, and modes. Those have been developed through a stage of experiences of the community folks and framed into a proper structure that could be beneficial and acceptable to her society. The development of all the above, being it a social belief, customs like social and political institutions, rites of individual life to fulfil certain achievements, occupations, festivals, arts and crafts, games, sports, stories, songs, and several others must live through a several historical stages to come up into these proper fabric forms. There is no possibility that the Naga progenitors created all these available in one instance, it should undergo numerous historical stages and times to structure all these together for later generations.

According to scholars like W. E. Peuckert's, folktales "originated in the eastern Mediterranean during the Neolithic period, and they still preserve the structure of a socio-cultural complex that includes the matriarchy, initiation, and marriage rites typical of agriculturalists" (Eliade, 1963, 197). On the other hand, Sophia Burne understood the literal word of Folklore as "the learning of the people". She further stated that folklore "is the expression of the psychology of early, whether in the fields of philosophy, religion, science, and medicine, in social organisation and ceremonial, or in the most strictly intellectual regions of history, poetry, and other literatures" (Sophia Burne, 1914, 1-2). In a similar way, Propp argued "that the study of folklore cannot be limited to the investigation of origins and that not everything in folklore goes back to a primitive state or is explained by it. New formations occur in the entire course of peoples' historical development. In the transitional period of change, the old and new can exist not only in a state of unresolved contradictions, but they may also enter into hybrid formation (e.g. religion always merged in the process). The old is changed by the new life, new ideas, and forms of consciousness. Each stage must have its own social system, ideology and art. Folklore, like other phenomena of spiritual culture, does not register changes immediately and preserves for a long-time old form under new conditions. Since people pass through several stages in its development, and all of them find their reflection in folklore and leave traces in it, folklore always combines several stages" (Propp, 1997, 11-15).

Nagas being situated at the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot, which led them to possess an enormous number of folklores. It has been attracting and attaining more and more attention of the scholars since late 19th century. The anthropologist from different parts of the world flooded in the Naga Hills for their research works. Their research works were very limited to some specific tribes as they could not penetrate all the indigenous settlements due to the unfriendly and practice of primitive culture, famously known as head-hunting. Despite the limitation, they have marvellously recorded and documented the age-old information of the Nagas in written forms. There was, however, hardly any effort to scientifically and systematically examine all these sources. Although, some scholars study and compare the erection of Nagas megalithic monuments of individual, clans, and villages, traditional design of the common and *Morung* (dormitory) house, origin of people, symbol and derivation of ornaments, kilns, head-hunting, the flora and fauna, etc. were documented. In their researched, they examined behind the structural presence using folklore and folktales to find out the hidden meaning, though inconsiderably limited to few. Although there is no initiative to understand the historical stages and transition of this oral information in the new environment and the changes, and development undergone.

Historically, to understand these kinds of a common and a diverse nature, it is pretty much necessary to comprehend the evolutionary system of a village and its transitional atmosphere of the times. Since, Nagas were very mobile community in nature and could not exactly traced its origin.

Though, there were several folklores that indicated their origin but could not prove it empirically till date due to continuous division and migration among the folks. This factor led to somehow shared folklores which significantly hinder the present generation to objectively authenticate which village or community holds the credit of its original creation. For instance, almost all the *Tenyime* people (almost 50 percent of Nagas population) once settled at *Makhromai* or *Makhel* village shared almost a common historical bonding, apart from that somehow shared similar folklore as well. Undoubtedly, the practice of head-hunting also contributed to it. As there was a norm that children and women were either spare or brought them back in the village and gave them citizenship. Ultimately, those adopted shared their folklores to the new parent villagers and this might add another level of confusion and emerged a new spectrum, popularly regarded as a hybrid form. The major confusion was infused by the colonial writers. As they visited a handful of villages and carelessly credited their findings in to those specific villages while depriving others. Without considering the consequences, the present generation argued among themselves that the recorded information was mainly belonged to them while those deprived could not accept such claims leading not only to intellectual debate but even physical fights. In this circumstances, extensive comprehension of the indigenous folklore is an absolute necessity.

Subsequently, the well settled villages that practiced both shifting and terrace cultivation have enormously richer in folklores. For they could cultivate surplus of agriculture which gradually help them to structure their community. As the surplus could support more people which gives the people more times to innovate to think and shared it among the community members. These villages tend to encounter more people and guests resulted to be very dynamics than the outskirts hamlets. Gradually, surplus paved the way to regularly gather in a common platform where they began to share their experiences and community values among themselves. In this way, it becomes a culture and inherited by the younger generation.

The creation and composition of such lores, songs, and tales have certainly been associated with social beings since their existence. Some of them have been composed in ancient times and the Naga indigenous themselves find difficulties in explaining the exact meaning. Such examples could be seen especially in the words used in folk songs as the words vary from the normal or daily use words. Though, they could not understand the meaning but still found singing and using the traditional tones by fusing and inserting different meanings over the periods. Somehow, the interactions of the community people help them to compose it and the community members spread and entertain themselves of his or her period. For instance, the community chanting of *A-HO A-HO* while working, playing traditional games, and cheering makes the workers/participants more efficient by coordinating their efforts which has been practiced since time immemorial. Learning and memorizing the new compositions paved the way to transmit it to the upcoming generation and that kind of composition never dies. Naturally, the composers normally die but the songs circulate from one generation to the next generation and infuse the ideas of the past and similarly add their thoughts. Normally, those disappear and forget but the framework of their thoughts and experiences has been well structured to which can easily perceive and in appealing manners. This condition made it possible to hand over from one generation to the next generation. Carr's analysis of society and the individual shows that "every human being at every stage of history or pre-history is born into a society and from his earliest years is moulded by that society. The language that he speaks is not an individual inheritance, but a social acquisition from the group in which he grows up. As has been well said, the individual apart from society would be both speechless and mindless" (H. Carr, 1990, 37).

They have the habit of settling in remote geographical landscapes and have an abundance story related towards the relationship between the environment, animals and people. In this atmosphere, superior thoughts (advance civilizational ideas) do not penetrate the region and mix with it. For which they enjoyed complete autonomy as they were not under the bondage of any ruler. However, the internal community interaction could be evident from the similarities of some folklore and folktales. Not only these but the social values, behaviours, and etiquette of the neighbouring villages were very much evident. Though many of them have been created for amusement purposes but also framed through their experiences of nature and later became their belief. To the Naga population, the forest is not only a source of food, fuel, fodder, medicine and timber, but is considered as the abode of their *Ropfu* (male deity) and *Rozu* (female deity), and spirits. Naga's folktales, myths, legends and folk songs usually portray their way of life as they were pretty much connected with the forest. Gradually, these traditional beliefs are slipping off, nevertheless, the meaning of their significance is going to perish it, still found exist simply because it has existed. Lohe in a unique way discussed the origin of *Medanism* i.e. *Khuzhami* Naga religion and found only a few were practicing today but it serves as the relics of the people (Lohe, 2022, 17-32). Similarly, Tylor commented, that “on the strength of these survivals, it becomes possible to declare that the civilization of the people they are observed among must have been derived from an earlier state, in which the proper home and meaning of these things are to be found; and thus, collections of such facts are to be worked as mines of historical knowledge” (B. Tylor, 1920, 71).

In the development of belief, the permanent settlement of the people could be recognized and the division of the roles between man and woman could also be seen. There were traditional myths that due to the low demography in the region, they battle not only with their neighbouring settlers but with the animal creatures as well. Various incidents of Tigers attacking the villagers at night were still shared by the village elders that they have learned from elders. In these matters, males always came forward to protect family and fellow village members. Similarly, there is a folklore that every morning and evening married men brought their self-homemade rice beers and spicy curry/chutney to have together with their folks in *Morung*. In the process, their wives began to compete among themselves by staying back in kitchen in order to make the curry better for her husband than their competent. Gradually, women began to work more in the kitchen and become a norm of the society. Through this traditional information, many argued that Naga women were slowly attached and confined within the four walls, accepted the lower rank in the social strata. Interestingly, various social institutions sprang up, to control the attitudes and morals of the people (see detailed stories of "widow and the villagers", "three brothers", "the deaf and blind", "the ingenious orphan", etc.) and later *Morung* (dormitory) houses became the solely known institution in the homeland of Nagas to pass down the legacy of the past and trained the youngsters to adapt accordingly with the change of environment. In all their stages, they have forged their version of folklore, although there is also considerable diversity, there is also considerable uniformity. This institution served as the platform of the village political assembly, the elders of the community shared the stories, knowledge, values, skills and all the things that a person needs to survive with the community. This institution acted as the library, created new lores and developed certain skills while on the hand preserving them for the next generation. Foucault on continuity and catastrophe argued “that nature should be continuous and does not take exactly the same form in the systems as it does in the methods” (Foucault, 1970, 159).

Naga folks were very expressive of their minds and hearts in different means. Naturally, their folklore were dynamics or adaptive and not rigid or static. As a result, the folks do not give much importance to the origin and forms of folklore, in this condition the one who has that information of origin perished means that information also ceased to exist with him. In the process of transmission, the above forms were lost as the new generation created and instilled their composition by using and fusing the living fossils. Despite of that, the functionality was found prevalent as the solo to group involvement was invented and they performed it to the full extent. The best and most common incidents were; (i) the development of the *Nagamese* language through the trade contacts of Assamese, (ii) the *Khuzhami* learned *Tenyidee* through trade, and the Eastern Nagas trade relations with the Naga Burmese have developed some similarities of their languages between them, all these could not trace the origin and forms but transmitted it and continue to use it till date were embedded in the lores. The legacy that the folks possess is not a recent innovation but the information that already existed since time immemorial. The Naga folklore is a folklore that never dies but is continuously transmitted from one generation to another with slight modification, still the original values are respected. It provides enormous information of about the past and enables present scholars to dive into these facts while reconstructing the history. None of the humanities, be it history, ethnography, sociology, literature, etc., could ignore these facts. Perhaps, everything in these forms is not reliable and contemporary scholars face several problems as there were no scholars who have designed an empirical method to critically investigate the lores objectively. Thus, all the fields that are trying to extract information from the folklore are facing numerous problems. As in the 21st century, people significantly emphasised the importance of sciences which folklores are very much lacking in it. Nevertheless, it is unavoidable as there is a lot of hidden information of the past.

The multiple existence of villages developed their own and cherished the old one. In this circumstance, biases of the scholars toward her villages for they being more familiar and due to little compilation of all the folklore in one book resulted in this subjectivity. Modern and majoritarian history has been dominating the academic syllabus in the state resulting in ignorance of this available information as this information in no way of helping them to get jobs or separate branches that could teach the students in educational institutions is still absent. As the government has not accepted to introduce in the formal academic institution and has no grants of fellowship to investigate this living fossil. The richness of this knowledge is in the shape of disappearing as their origin, form, transmission and function have not been recorded properly. In this circumstance, the perception towards these facts have to shift, as many argues that it lacks a definite methodology or objectives to differentiate between the real and myths. However, all aspects of human experience must be documented be it for amusement or facts. In India, the state of West Bengal is the pioneer in introducing the study of folklore as a separate department in educational institutions and has a grant for research. As folklore is not merely an ideological discipline but there are many hidden truths or facts of the past-social life. Those uniqueness of her folklore varies from continent to continent, country to country, state to state, tribe to tribe, village to village due to different environments and experiences. It begets and moulded people different from culture to culture and have a separate peculiar identity. Dundee in a similar way argued that "folklore is tradition and tradition is variation, so therefore variation is folklore" (Dundee, 2007, 20). Thus, the state government of Nagaland and educational institutions should recognize and introduce a separate branch or department to study the available folklore, introduce as a regular subject to preserve her history and identity.

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