



RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ANGAMIS AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AS DISPLAYED IN FOLKSONGS

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Abstract: The transmission of the oral folktales, folksongs and material culture which has been passed down through ages has kept the culture of the Nagas alive. The Nagas are known to have a very rich heritage of music and there is barely any occasion where songs are not in use. The Nagas, and the Angamis in particular are fond of singing. The songs are thematic in nature and there are different songs for different occasions with themes dealing in war, love, reminiscences of the departed heroes etc. Music has played a significant role at ushering life and expression in most of the festivals and events. Folksongs are also used to disseminate the heroic history of the past, the culture and tradition. It also exposes the importance of nature in the life of the Angamis and their relationship with the natural environment.

Keywords: Folksongs, religion, rituals, belief, nature, themes

I. Introduction

Nagaland, the state in the North east region of India, is also known as the land of festivals. The state of Nagaland is surrounded by green vegetations forming irregular plateau with high ridges and peaks. The state shares borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan of Asia at the international level and Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh inside India. It lies in the Eastern side of North-East India. The capital of Nagaland is Kohima with Dimapur being the centre of the commercial hub. There are fifteen districts in Nagaland namely Kohima, Phek, Mokokchung, Wokha, Zunheboto, Tuensang, Mon, Peren, Longleng, Kiphiri, Dimapur, Noklak, Tseminyu, Niuland and Chümoukedima. Nagaland is inhabited by sixteen major tribes consisting of Angami, Ao, Chakesang, Chang, Kachari, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Kuki, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Sumi, Yimchunger and zeme-Liangmai (Zeliang) and some other sub-tribes. The people residing in Nagaland are known as Nagas and they form one large ethnic community among many in Northeast in India.

Each tribe in Nagaland has a vernacular term for itself. The Angamis and some other allied tribes call themselves as the Tenyimia, the Ao call themselves Aos, the Lothas are known as Kyong, and the Semas are called as Sumi. The tribes have been distributed in different geographical areas. Kohima is the home of the Angamis, Rengmas and some other tribes. The Chakesang, Pochury and group of the Sangtam occupy Phek. Zunheboto is inhabited by the Semas and Wokha is home to the Lothas. Longleng is of the Phoms. The Zeliang, Liangmei and Kuki inhabit Peren with the Sangtam, Yimchunger, Khiamningam and the Chang residing in Tuensang.

Modern scholars view the word 'Naga' as a common name being used by the people of Mongoloid stock. The most reliable theory is that the word 'Naga' has been derived from a Burmese word 'Naka' which means people with pierced ear-lobes. It is a widespread practice among the Naga tribes. Each tribe of the Nagas has a language of their own and therefore speaks a multitude of dialects. (Zetsuvi, 6)

Nagaland attained statehood on the first of December, 1963 with Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the then President of India formally inaugurating it as the 16th state of the Indian Union. The Nagas are known to possess a rich cultural heritage which have been preserved and passed down in the various forms of oral tradition. They have no written script or written history and the myth goes that their history was actually recorded on an animal skin which was unfortunately eaten up by a dog and that is how they started preserving it in their memories and passed down from person to person in the forms of folktales, folksongs, culture, tradition and communal rites. Thus cultural memory plays a significant part in the process of transmission and sustenance of the oral tradition as it has helped in retaining the folk traditions of the Nagas.

The Angami-Naga is one of the major tribes in Nagaland. They have a common language called *Tenyidie* which is understood by every Angami. The arrival of the British government in the region in the 19th century created four divisions in the Angami region such as the Western Angami, Southern Angami, Northern Angami and Chakhroma. The Angamis are known to themselves as

Tenyimia and it is believed that the name has been derived from *Tonyümia* which simply means “swift walker”. *Tenyimia* is an umbrella term where the Angamis have been clubbed with the several other tribes. Also, legend has it that there is blood relation among the *Tenyimia* as they are considered to be children of *Tenyiu* whose father *Vadio* was one of the eldest ancestors of the Angamis. *Tenyimia* is a conglomerative term for the twelve Naga sub-tribes who themselves believe to be the descendants of *Tenyiu*. Based on the dialectical differences, the *Tenyimia* regions are divided into Angami, under which there is Northern Angami, Central Angami, Southern Angami and Western Angami. Chakesang forms another group, composed of Chokri, Khezha and Pochuri, Rengma comprising of Upper Rengma and Lower Rengma and Zeliangrong, under which there is Zemi and Lingmai.

II. Religion, rituals and superstitious belief

The Angami society in the pre-literate era practised animism like the rest of the other Naga tribes. This belief that every living thing possesses supernatural power enhanced their relationship with the natural environment by showing deep reverence towards it. The Angamis like the rest of the other Nagas believe themselves to be a part of nature. They perceive that all things in nature are controlled by supernatural forces. “Their way of life integrated well with the local geological and geophysical characteristics, fused with mystic powers and absorbed with ecological abundance and diversity. All these exposures led Nagas to develop a close attachment to nature” (Nienu, 35) Traditionally, the Angami Nagas believe in a supreme being known as ‘*ukepenuopfü*’ which means ‘she who bore us’. They also believe that the world is not absent from other deities who are called as *terhoma*, *temi* and *ruopfü*. Nature, according to them has constructive as well as destructive role to play because spirits can be malevolent and benevolent. Therefore rituals are performed by the village priest in order to avoid the wrath of the spirits. When performing rituals, nature is relied upon to predict omens. One of the simplest methods of observing omens is by tossing two leaves on the ground. The positions of the leaves are observed to predict good and bad luck. If one leaf is right side up and the other is upside down then it is taken as a sign of good luck. They also consult omens by strangling a fowl and determining the position of the fowl’s legs. If the right leg crosses over the left leg, it is considered to be a good omen. This ritual is practised during the festival of *sekrenyi*. An interesting thing about the *sekrenyi* festival is about a game named *sozie* which is played by men divided into two groups. The whole idea of this game was invented after watching the movement of the bird named *Sozie*. This bird resembles an eagle and flies very high in the air in groups. The forefathers of the Angamis came up with this game which is popular during the olden days and is only played during big and important festivals like *Sekrenyi*. The chirping of a tiny bird called *tseüno* is consulted for omens. If the chirping is heard from the leftward direction when stepping out of your house, it heralds good news. A shield is usually carried on the left hand side and so according to that the leftward direction is taken as a good omen. Apart from the Angami, most Naga tribes also follow the practice of performing a simple ritual by women before wandering inside a jungle or getting into a river for a bath. She is expected to pluck a grass and keep it beside the river and pray to the spirit that it spares her life and accept her humble sacrifice.

Their love and respect for nature are expressed in their folksongs, folktales, arts, crafts, religious ceremonies, dress and ornaments. The songs of the Angamis in particular praise nature and are filled with respect, amazement, energy and joy. “Earth is treated as mother, sky as father. This concept of the duality of nature, which is at the centre of the Naga worldview, is fundamental to how the Nagas treat nature. The Naga’s philosophy and perception are built on this concept, including the manner in which he organizes not only the relationship between man and his natural environment, but also that between man and woman and between his kin and his neighbour.” (Nienu, 37) This understanding of nature has endowed in them a sense of morality, a responsibility to his natural environment and his dealing and acceptance of his fellow men.

The Nagas are known for their oral tradition which served as a storehouse of cultural values and knowledge passed down from one generation to another by word of mouth with the help of cultural memory. In any oral tradition, the voice of a human is vital for transmitting knowledge from one generation to another. Many of the Naga oral traditions are expressed in the form of poems, songs and stories. The Nagas accept that all of the whole idea and possibility of existence are derived from the physical world. Different kinds of plants, shrubs or vines are used for subsistence activities or for performing rituals. The Nagas refer to the fig tree as the chief priest of the trees because it is considered to be a source of food and in remote villages, figs are also known to be a substitute of rice for poor people who has to work in the fields without having proper food. Superstitious beliefs are also associated with nature and in most cases the leaves of trees and even animals are used for predicting good and bad omens. There is a belief among the Angamis that if a bee keeps hovering around a person and refuses to leave, a sad or a bad news is coming on the way. This belief is evident from the novel of Easterine Kire’s *Mari* when the protagonist was followed by a bee constantly and news soon arrives that her lover was killed in the war.

III Significance of nature in folksongs

The traditional folk music or folksongs has been defined in many ways as music which has been transmitted orally or music with no known composers but which has been sung and performed for a long period of time. Folksongs, folk dances, folktales all comes under the term folklore which has been coined by the English Antiquarian William Thoms in 1846. He described it as the traditions, customs and superstitions of the uncultured classes. Folksong narrates about tales of life that has been forgotten or that is slowly disappearing. Folksongs act as a genuine bridge among people and also between the past and the present. The folksongs of the Angamis display a symbiotic relationship between men and nature. Every festival is accompanied by a folksong. There are different kinds of folksongs sung during different occasions. It is also a way for them to celebrate important events. The Angamis are known to possess a rich heritage of music. In the olden days, songs were learned and memorized by both men and women in their dormitory which is then passed on from one person to another with the help of memory. The folksongs are not confined to the gathering places but they are sung when working in the fields as well as when venturing into the jungle for collecting wild herbs and gathering firewood. The theme of folksongs varies from one another depending on the message that it aims to impart. Folktales and poems are also adapted into folksongs. Most of the folksongs follow the pattern of containing nine syllables per line in its metrical system. There are some songs which are forbidden to sing in the village as in *chieli*. This kind of song is sung only in jungles and is considered a taboo to sing in the village or in public. Likewise, a war cry can only be done in the jungle and during the time of war and funerals. The most commonly sung folksong is *kewhu* which contains no lyrics but if it is sung

perfectly, it produces a fine melody. This kind of songs is slow at the beginning but slowly speeds up and when it is rendered impossible to go faster, it ends with some loud yelling known as *mepfü*.

The only common musical instrument that the Angamis use is *Tati* which is made from dried gourd shell. The shell is cut into half and covered with the dried cow's bladder. This gourd is then attached with a bamboo handle and strings are fixed on it. These strings are made of tightly spun cotton thread greased with wax to make it smooth and firm. This dependence on nature by the Angamis to produce anything is seen evident in their folksongs as well. A folksong from Khonoma village goes

A neiü se dzü kekru lie u ti
Kwülie sho di puo bi cha a tsü
Kethie kiwe shülie mvü di n
Theri shü le dzü meluo kethu
Terhomia dzü rülhe zo a tsü
A tsüie tie a-i terhono
Cha pesotsoe thepe chü tsur

Mechü phouwe khalie sho voü
Tsünyü pienie kha kela zhü si
Weü tsatie tekwi kezolie luolie
Avo cü-u kezolie molie

The above song is usually sung by young people when they meet at gathering places like a morung or *thhuba*. It sings of a woman setting out towards the paddy field (wet paddy field) with her lover. On the way, she struggles to climb a cliff and her lover stretches his hands out to pull her. In that moment, she failed to respond to his love so she pretended to fall down once again so he could catch her one more time. As she touches the froth produced by the force of the running water, it disappears. She laments and tells the spirit not to offer the froth to her because she is also the child of the spirit. Then far away, the sight of famine approaches and the woman says that though saving multitude of people by making sacrifices is not possible, the leaves of bitter wormwood and the tree called *tsünyü* have been laid out for sacrifices. The song then shift towards the monkeys on the other side picking up fruits and eating it. Despite the famine, the monkeys are joyful since their bellies are filled with food. Therefore they need to set out towards that direction. The woman craves to be as happy as the monkeys.

In this song, the woman touching the froth and remarking on her being the daughter of the spirit defines how the Angamis viewed everything in nature to be spiritual. Nature is treated with deep reverence and rituals are performed in order to avoid the wrath of the malevolent spirit and appease it. The song also mentions two plants known as '*Tsünyü*' and '*pienie*'. This '*tsünyü*' is a tree and its leaves are used during the olden days by the Angamis for washing their hairs and cleaning themselves. '*Pienie*' also generally known as bitter wormwood and scientifically named as *Artemisia absinthium* is used in the olden days to ward off evil. Most people wear the leaves behind their ear lobes believing that it wards off evil. The economic status of a person in the village is also displayed by the kinds of paddy field that he owns. It is said that only the wealthy people could own wet paddy fields. Another song that compares human to nature is

Khunuo co puo tei therü ze nu
Whizo u cahu va rei
Khunuo hu rei, khunuo shü co pfwe
Rünyü a rei sho ke sa lo

This song is usually sung after spring and it sings about an insect that come singing after spring. The song delivers the message that there is something magical in the song of the insect because when one listens to it, one feels as though one is reborn. This portrays how nature can soothe a person's mind and enable him/her to forget all struggles in life forging a new life again.

Meriezo-o woru ho rüvü
Kerie keprü chanyie hu loru
Shanyie hurei rho ketsü rüda
Tsiedo no soma nie ra dylie de
Dukelie-u theza simo ru
Dusanyü-o nie ra dylie shie
Dusanyü-o porie talie cie
Vihukhrrie-o kuhienyi keri
Nie keti bi ler kilora
Diepu rükhru zu ta thenyüsa

Krüta

Ma we nhicu sha kenü ma we
Ma phipfüma petsu hu di nu
Kica merhie meyha these rü
Thema rhishü mero rhikeka
Kebakoi tsithu hu yie ho
Thehie metha thenyü krütsürü
Ci-i khapfü lozi zako ze
Wo viyie ho tsa ku zako we
Sümo johu selonu za-o

The above song is known as '*Tsati*'. It is a group song which can be sung by anyone in the village irrespective of age. This song is sung when one is working in the fields. There are two groups singing the song and the second group follows up after the first group. The first part of the song is supposed to be a remark made by old people to the young people and the second part of the

song is a reply of the young people to the old. Based on this, the first part of the song is sung slowly while the second part of the song speeds up. In this song, the young people are compared to fragile bamboo rope that breaks off easily because they are incapable of working. Bamboo is used in this song as a metaphor for both men and women. In the fourth line, a question is asked as to who has felled the bamboo tree. The name of the person remains unknown and this symbolizes a woman eloping away with her lover completely unknown to others in the village. In the eighth line, a man named 'Vihukhrie-o' is mentioned and he is described to be wearing a flower in his ear. In the olden days, 'kuhenyi' an orchid, was used by men for decorating their ears. This song uses images of nature as metaphor to human life.

Many folksongs of the Angamis are composed with themes based on love which might reflect the romantic nature of the people belonging to the Angami community. One can also find patriotic songs narrating about victory over an enemy. Several folksongs have been adapted from poems which are known as 'Geizo.' A number of songs also reflect the uncertainty and brevity of life and death which is inevitable. The above three songs give a peek into the relationship between the Angami tribe with their natural environment. Nature has always played a prominent role in the life of the Angamis and the Nagas as a whole. In a society that was dominated by the superstitious belief in spirits, nature was their sole comfort and also something to be feared. Their mythical belief, practices, tales and songs have always revolved around nature. Both animate and inanimate objects were looked upon as friends and they contribute to their fulfilling life. The fear of spirits of the forests enabled them to protect and preserve them to a large extent. There is a constant intimate link with the nature and forces around them and it is meaningfully manifested in all the cultural and customary practices, worship and folksongs.

IV Conclusion

As the world keeps on progressing, the threat of extinction on culture and tradition is on the rise too. The advent of Christianity and education into the life of the Angamis and the Nagas as a whole brought massive changes. Many indigenous practices of the Nagas have been brought to an end with the contact of the outside world. The old customs and traditions have been forsaken and it has rapidly declined over the ages. With the fall of the institution of Morung or *Thehuba* (gathering places), a lot of traditional superstitious beliefs were brought to an end. The folksongs are now replaced by western music and communal life with its indigenous belief system and many practices and festivals began to rot. In regard to the matter of dresses and ornaments, one can only see the symbols of culture during the Hornbill festival. Yet, even the Hornbill Festival is contaminated by the seeds of westernization. When a survey was conducted by the 'Morung Express' on Hornbill festival 2009, a remark was passed by an individual as, "A major rock music festival as part of the festival is somewhat of an oxymoron to me, as well as to many discerning Nagas. Cultural values of the Nagas are in complete antithesis to western pop/rock culture's values. Are we not sending a wrong message to our youth by including a western musical practice that is founded on rebellion, sexual pervasion and wanton lifestyle?" (Puthankudy, 139-140) The native dialect has also been replaced with English and the broken version of Assamese (Nagamese). This can form a reason behind the young people's inability to understand the archaic words and lyrics in folksongs. This assimilation of the western culture owing to modernism and westernization has led to the decline of culture and tradition of the old age and then pristine beauty.

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