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Narratives in a Narrative of the Chakhesang Chokri Naga

Abstract

The Nagasⁱ originally do not have a written script or record of their own. Therefore, they are bound to oral tradition. Oral traditions have been maintained through folksongs, lyrical poems, folk performances, narrating of stories, folktales, riddles, etc. All these have been narrated or performed from one generation to another. This continuous process helped the community to acquire, adapt and preserve the folk tradition of the society. The very history of the people, the religion and entire social life have been shaped by their oral tradition. The Nagas have the rich oral tradition and culture that identify them from other people. They have diversities of culture and traditions, which beautifully knitted them into a unique wholeness. Every community has their own story to tell and their own culture to follow. Ceasing the importance of narration, in the form of folksong, folk performances, stories and so on within the rich oral tradition of the Nagas, a particular community, the Chakhesang Nagas has been singled out to focus and employ the narratives in a narrative of the community folksong through interview and interaction with some of the village elders. This article is also intended to study on how folksong plays a crucial role in transmitting the tradition of the past to the younger generation in the absence of a written script.

Keywords: Narration, Folksong, Oral tradition, Community identity.

Introduction

The Chakhesang Naga is one of the major communities under Phek district in the state of Nagaland, situated in the Eastern part of India. They were formerly known as the Eastern Angami, but are now recognized as a separate community under Phek district. The word Chakhesang was formed based on the majority speaking of people within the Phek district. *Cha* means *Chokri*, *Khe* means *Kheza* and *Sang* means *Sangtam*. Later on, the Sangtam community was separated with the formation of a new district under Kiphire. Presently, the Chakhesang community consists of three majorspeaking groups of people, consisting of Chokri, Kheza and Poula. Chokri is considered as the majority speaking language and has been used as a means of communication among the community. In spite of their language differences, the Chakhesang people have a common culture and tradition, which makes them more unique and defines them from other communities in Nagaland.

They all celebrate different kinds of festivals according to agricultural cycle, which they believe will eventually lead to peace, prosperity and progress. The community is bound to oral tradition. As Tamsula Ao puts it, "Oral tradition, the source of all folklore is now being hailed as the chronicle of human history by providing evidence to the original people and their subsequent migrations to final destinations."¹

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ⁱThe Nagas are indigenous people inhabiting in the state of Nagaland, and some part of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh of India as well as Somra Tract of Upper Myanmar (Burma). Their origin is still a mystery. They are different division of people according to communities and linguistic with immense diversity and yet dwell in unity. The article here talks about the Nagas inhabiting in Nagaland state.

The Role of Narration of the Chakhesang Community

The Chakhesang community was essentially an oral society. They depend on oral tradition in tracing down their past. The past history is traced down through folksongs, stories, lyrical poems, etc., revealing about how they wage wars with other villages, glorifying the brave warriors, love songs, mourning of the death, people's sufferings, etc. Every story, or poems/folksong has its own history to tell and a secret to reveal. They preserve their culture and tradition through the oral form like narrating story and singing folksong, which are transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to another. Lanusashi Longkumer opinionated, "Any oral traditional history, origin and migration of the people (tribe, clan, individual, etc.), formation of the village, events of war, peace, festivals and so on are transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to another through songs, poetry, ballads, prayers, sayings, stories and tales or public oration when the situation demands."⁸ To this, folksong and story narration becomes a key factor to preserve culture from one generation to the next.

The narration of a story from one person to another varies, and thus it changes with the changing need of time. The uniqueness of narration is that nobody can retell the same story from one person to another person and there is no folksong or story that originally belongs to a particular person. The composer remains unknown. The traditional stories that are written down today cannot be called the original story as it has been written by the writer's perspective and interpretation. Folksong or lyrical poem helps the culture of the past to be preserved without changing, as people memorize the lyrics and sing accordingly. People remember lyrics according to the melody of the folksong and it is passed down to the younger generations, thereby continuing the rich oral tradition despite the changes in their lifestyle and their religion. The belief of innate bonding with their culture and tradition is essential to give meaning to their sense of identification with a rich heritage from the past.

Narrative in a Narrative: Interrelating Folksongs of the Chakhesang Chokri Naga

The stories and the past histories are narrated through folksongs. It plays a dimensional role in preserving the tradition and culture of the society. It is said that people learn to sing the melodious tone

through the chirping of the birds and the sound of the animals. This shows their close relation to Nature they dwelt in. When they are tired and wearied from their work under the scorching sun or in the rattling rain and buzzing wind, they hum to forget their tiredness and sadness. It was an escape to an ecstasy; their humming of sound becomes a melodious tone. With these, they started to form suitable words that suit their feelings and emotions, and then sing them with their humming melodious tone. Thus the folksong varies in tone and rhythm. If a person is happy, the tone of the humming replete the same, but if a person is sad then the tune changes alone with the lyrics. Jawaharlal Handoo asserted, "In oral narrative it is the narrator's act of identification or sympathizing with a given situation that results in exaggeration or overstatement."⁴

People expressed their miseries and sufferings or joys and happiness through folksong. When their joy is overflowing, or their sorrow and suffering is over burdening, and it cannot be shared to anybody, then people express them through folksongs. Folksong in a way gives them satisfaction, and an ear to hear their miseries and happiness. The folksong they sing comes naturally from within them. Unlike the other song that needs its root from tonic solfa or staff notation or as Indian Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, the folksong of the Chakhesang Naga does not apply the entire said music base, which in fact makes them unique in nature from the other song. Everything comes naturally. For instance, the sound made during their work 'oh ho,' or 'he hi' is taken and sung as a folksong. Though actually that 'oh ho' or 'he hi' utterance is an expression of their tiredness. The yelling and yodelling when they are happy, or the war cry to alert the approaching of the enemy, becomes a melody to the folksong. The folksong tone varies according to the situation they sing. Every folksong is sung with purpose like when people are working in the paddy field, or when people are grinding and pounding rice, and so on. The same lyrics can be used in different songs with different melody.

People's close relationship to nature and their sole dependence on prediction of seasons, years, days and time through the response of nature is on and off reflected in their folksongs. They occasionally romanticize nature and compare it with the life of human beings, especially with the blooming youthful life of a woman. Often people compose about women's beauty along with the short span of nature. In the folk poem *What Insect do Knows the Autumn?*,ⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱTranslated poem from a Chakhesang folksong by Setolu Tunyi, 2015.

translated from the Chakhesang Chokri folksong, *Di Khonu No Tūrhi Seyoze?*ⁱⁱⁱ, reflects the life of a woman, where she laments to give away her youthful life and

embrace the old age with her marriage. On the other hand, it also gives us a glimpse of the society's past.

Translation of folksong/ poem

<i>Di khonu no Tūrhi seyoze?</i>	<i>What insect do knows the Autumn? (Translation)</i>
<i>Di khonu no Tūrhi seyoze?</i>	What insect do knows the Autumn?
<i>Sŭtho khono tūrhi seyoze</i>	<i>Sŭtho</i> ^{iv} insect knows the autumn.
<i>Tūrhi yize rū mŭji khorī</i>	It come singing with the autumn
<i>Rŭ mŭji kho co mŭno chi</i>	Towards the village gate
<i>Co mŭno chi lŭ kŭsŭ cothe</i>	With a strain note of melancholic song.
<i>No mhi lilŭ va mŭsu hiche</i>	Oh! Please do not sadden the betrothed lady.
<i>Tsŭli tŭso sŭkŭ doli</i>	I woke up this morning,
<i>Nachi yikri tŭbo phe rūdu</i>	And chance to see the sun beneath the sky,
<i>Nitŭ yirŭ nieboyō vakhrīe</i>	The lady cutting her earring thread and placing it on her thigh
<i>Zoyi chemo mhŭdzŭ po tsŭri</i>	Unspoken feeling flows through her tears,
<i>Hiyo vakhrŭ nitŭ razelŭ</i>	Stricken with sorrow to leave her colourful earring and put on the older one
<i>N she pu-o lŭri chikhri ra</i>	Lady, your fiancée stands by your door step.
<i>Thŭno lipŭ dikhri kra vase</i>	My dear, "what ails your tears to fall?" he implores.
<i>Nitŭ krikra kŭrho a mhŭlŭ</i>	The dart in my eyes triggers my tears to flow.
<i>Hiyo khava tsa kŭze nyiphri</i>	Oh, to embrace the old age earring,
<i>Tolu zemo lŭaro yole.</i>	I envy of my bounded fate that haste too soon

This folksong talks about the season, particularly of autumn season. People solely depend on nature to predict the season, weather, time, and days. There is no such calendar that will help in predicting things. It is through their close interaction and connection with the nature that their prediction never betrays them. They are romantic in nature. They romanticize the nature, and compare it with the life of people. Often people compose about women's beauty along with the short span of nature. In this lyrical poem, the life of a woman is being portrayed, where she laments to give away her youthful life and embrace the old age with her marriage. People predict and belief that the singing of *Sŭtho* insect signify that the plantation in the paddy is already late. So all plantation work must be done before autumn season approaches, for people believe that anything that is planted in autumn, can never produce good grain which ultimately leads to a bad harvest. The singing of *Sŭtho* insects is considered as a melancholic sad song because it disappoints the people who cannot complete their field work, and reminds of the women who are betrothed and bound to marry. When the plantation work is done, people get time to celebrate and merrymaking. It is either after plantation or the harvest, the marriage celebration and festivals takes

place. The poem opens with the question to the people, who know the autumn, and give credit to *Sŭtho* insect that is known for alerting the coming of the autumn to the people. The composer in the poem pleads *Sŭtho* insect not to burden the lady with sorrow with its melancholic song, which reminds her approaching marriage day. Then the situation suddenly shifts to the composer of the lyrical poem, who witnesses the heavy and unspoken feeling of a lady, who is seen cutting off the thread of her colorful earring lamenting and not wanting to put on the earring of a married woman. In the society, the ornaments put on by young lady and married woman differ. They can be distinguished even from their earring or necklace. The young woman wears colorful earring and necklace. But the married women wear the less colored ornaments.

The scene changes and the attention finally draws to the lady and her betrothed husband, who stood by the doorway of the lady, wanting to know the reason of why she was crying. The lady, wanting not to reveal the reason, makes a clever excuse blaming the dart that had gone in her eyes and triggers her tears to fall. She sighs saying how she envies to give up her youthful life. But she succumbs to accept her fate.

ⁱⁱⁱ*Di Khonu No Tūrhi Seyoze*, a Chakhesang Chokri Folksong, Interview based, taken by Setolu Tunyi to a Village elder, Thiyiswŭyo Kezo. 2015.

^{iv}*Sŭtho* is an insect that comes crickets during the end of summer and the arrival of autumn season.

Folksong relates the life of the people. In spite of the hardship and laborious work that people have to face, their folksong helps them forget their tiredness and accept the situation. Be it in the field, or household chores, or climbing up the hill with their heavy basket, folksong whiles away their tiredness and suffering. People expressing their love or sorrow through folksong is very much popular in the past history. When their suffering and sorrows are too much for

them to carry, they turn it into a folksong and sing in a melancholic tone which indirectly yearns for an ear to listen the miseries and sufferings that a person is going through. The lamentation of a child over the ill-treatment of the step-mother is common in the society. In the folksong/poem *Oh Chithimi Rūzalŭ Sŭri*^v which means “I and my *Chithimi* had gone to *Rūzalŭ* to cut firewood”^{vi} shows how the step-mother’s treatment is at its worst in the society.

Translation of Folk Poem

<i>Oh Chithimi Rūzalŭ sŭri</i>	The Necklace (Translation of the poem)
Oh Chithimi Rūzalŭ sŭri	I and my <i>Chithimi</i> ^{vii} had gone to <i>Rūzalŭ</i> ^{viii} to cut firewood.
Ri kŭkho nha ati lulŭ tŭ	Fateful was the day when my necklace fell off;
Apo azu ati tŭte le	And I but to convey the loss to my father and mother,
Thŭnomi no doneyo lutho	Only to be ridiculed by my mother who blames my cleverness
Done mole chisŭh po rūswŭ	Not by my cleverness, god forbade, I swear.
Tsŭlu tsŭkho lo rūza poyo	This morning I stood by the pond side pleading;
Thŭrŭmi za rhokŭthoyo ze	Spirit, if you are really powerful,
Apho yita ati lari ze	Take me and return my necklace.
Posŭ phumo rūtso abelŭ	The necklace sprung to my hand when I but complete my pleas.
Hi-o pŭtsŭ azu ne belŭ	And there I took it and place in my mother’s hand;
Apo azu rothiyi vale	Father and mother, your wish is fulfilled,
Apru pu-o iŭtŭ mo zŭtho.	But my loss might grieve my brother.

Story within the Folksong

The folksong/ poem narrates about the plight of a young damsel who has been ill treated by her mother, and her father would not side with her. It deals with the theme of the plight of women, their unspoken feelings and miseries in the society, which in a way also gives a glimpse of the condition of the society.

Once upon a time, there lived a young damsel, adorned by the beautiful necklace dazzling around her neck, in a village with her father, her step-mother and her bother. Her beauty knows no bound and is acclaimed by the village folks. This makes her vicious step-mother more jealous and she hated her so much that she ill-treats her that no human can ever tolerate. One day, when she and her *Chithimi* had gone to *Rūzalŭ* to cut firewood, her beautiful necklace fell off to the depth of the pond. She could not trace back her necklace in spite of millions of trials to search. All her search was in vain, as the depth of the pond prevails her. With heavy heart, she had gone

home carrying firewood alone with her friends. She told her father and mother about the lost necklace that fell off to the pond. Her father would not react, nor say a word. But her mother replied, suspecting her that she might have traded it somewhere or given to somebody.

Her mother ridicules her that she had lost the necklace purportedly. She got no option, but to swear in front of her parents. But her father would not say a word, and her mother would still not believe it. The next morning, the young lady had gone to the same place where her necklace fell off. She stood nearby the pond crying, begging the pond spirit, “Spirit if you really exist, and powerful, please give me my necklace.” There was no response. She cried and requested the same for the second time. But there was no response even for the second time. With grief and sorrow, she begged the spirit for the last time bartering her life with her necklace, “Spirit, if you really exist and powerful, please give me my necklace and take my life.”

^v A folksong taken based on interview with a village elder, *Rūsangoyo Tunyi* of *Kikrŭma* village, 2015.

^{vi} Translated poem from Chakhesang folksong *Oh Chithimi Rūzalŭ Sŭri*, by Setolu Tunyi.

^{vii} *Chithimi* is a Chakhesang Chokri language, *chi* means house *thimi* refers to group of young people who sleep together in *chithichi*. *Chithichi* is a Morung in Chakhesang Chokri language. It is a dormitory or informal institution which is built separately for both young boys and girls of marriageable age, who stay together with their own sex and were taught norms and values, inculcate taboos, along with the narration of stories or practising folksong.

^{viii} *Rūzalŭ* refers to the name of a place; a forest.

The moment she completed her sentence, the necklace sprung to her hand. Her joy knows no bound but it was just a blink of an eye. She fulfilled the mothers wish by getting back the necklace but lost her life. The moment she entered her kitchen door, saying, "Mother the necklace that you so desperately wanted is found, but do not let my brothers mourn for what is going to be lost." Saying that she fell off and there breathed her last breath.

The promise and commitment that she made with the spirit can never be changed. Her fate was sealed and she became the wife of the spirit in the pond.

Reflection of the Past Society within the Story

The society was bound by laws and taboos. A single-handed parent, be either a husband or a wife, who raises the children and runs the family, after divorce or after the demise of their spouse, is ridiculed and looked down upon in the society. The fear of losing their status in the society compels both men or women to re-marry and not be a single-handed person, which in fact let the children suffer either from step-mother or step-father.

There is always jealousy and constant hatred within the family of a re-married father or mother. Comparing the step-mother and step-father's ill-treatment, women were prone and succumbed to jealousy and hatred. Man most of the time stays out door, as the situation demands them so.

They were expected to be in the battle field, go hunting, guards the village from the enemy. If the enemy comes and beheaded a woman or a child, then they are considered as the bravest warriors and are given the highest respect in the village. Because people believe that beheading woman or children means, the warrior had penetrated inside the enemy village and defeated all the men and got the best from what they are protecting. Nobody would protect a thing and keep safe to the extent of losing their life if that is not worth protecting.

Women on the other hand are confined within the household activities, and she runs the house. Thus step-children in the family become the target of their step-mother. In the olden days, there was not a story that tells the love between the step-mother and her step-children. There always runs a string of jealousy and hatred. Children were treated worst then a pet. They were imposed with heavy work, but were given meagre rotten food. The child that has a step-mother is avoided by his or her friends, looked down upon by

people, and becomes the daily sympathy and eye sore of the society.

The Sacred and People's Reverence of the 'Swear'

Within the narration of the poem, readers come across the word 'swear.' The society revered the oath taking or swearing. It is something that they make the final statement to prove their rights. If a person swears by his/ her lies, then they are bound to be cursed with dreaded incurable disease, or something bad happens in the family. Swearing cannot be taken as a joke. Once, a person swears over something, and then it means, 'be it so' and that is final. It is not possible to take back the swearing word, once it is spoken out. Swearing to god or making amendment with any spirit can never be retracted. As the kings are bound to their promise and their words, so are the Chakhesang people bound to their swearing, pledges or promises.

Significance of the Necklace

The necklace in the society holds an important place. People can judge each other's status through the necklace they put on. It also differentiates the married women from the young damsels. The married women put on the red necklace known as *Tiza*, while the young unmarried women put on the bigger colorful necklace with many lines called *Tila*. The girl from a rich family wears more lines of sixteen or fourteen or twelve. While some wear the necklace that has eight lines. The poor people do not put on the necklace as they cannot afford it.

Chithichi: An Institution to Preserve and Pass on Culture and Tradition

Chithi means a group of people sleeping together in a particular house, and *chi* means house. Thus *Chithichi* refers to a dormitory or an informal institution where unmarried boys and girls have their own dormitory house and were taught separately. They were taught the tradition and cultures of the society. Stories, folk tales, folksong and so on are learned. This Morung helps in preserving the culture and tradition of the society. Society fully depends on oral tradition. Men learn stories of their village warfare, men of valor were talked about, moral and values were also being discussed. In the same way women learn the art of various occupations and things that relate to women's society. Chithichi also serves as a watch tower to guard village against their enemy and give alert to the villagers for the approaching enemy.



Figure 1. Young girls wearing Tila



Figure 2. Elderly woman wearing Tiza

Society's Belief in Spirit

People believe in the existence of spirits, in any force that is beyond their understanding or beyond their power. They fear or revere the spirit as it helps them maintain law and order in the society. It also in a way helps them to trust each other and be truthful to each other. For example, there was never a key that will lock the door. It is accessible to anybody. But the fear of the spirit, makes them dread to enter the others' house and steal. People making amendment or appeasement with the spirit in return of favors is on and on narrated in the oral tradition. This shows their strong belief in supernatural spirit or force is very much practised and thus different rituals were performed accordingly.

Analysis: A Transition of the Past to the Modern Society

With the advent of Christian Missionaries and the contact with the Britishers, the transition within the fold of the culture slowly started to take place. J.H. Hutton pointing out to two of the Naga community, the Aos and the Lothas, rightly asserted, "Old beliefs and customs are dying, the old traditions are being forgotten, the number of Christians or quasi-Christians, is steadily increasing and the spirit of change is invading and pervading every aspect of village life."⁵ This change is happening in all the parts of the Naga communities, which affected even the Chakhesang Naga. People thought the new culture is superior to them, and embraced the foreign religion as their God. The change of religion plays a crucial role, as it is in this phase that shuffled the culture and tradition of that people. They were told that singing of traditional folksong in the church is displeasing to their foreign God. So the 'white people' taught them how to sing 'foreign' song. The church replaces the institution of Chithichi. They inculcate into the people's mind that Chithichi is a paganistic place which pleases evil spirit. The people were even encouraged in demolishing Chithichi and building

churches over it. Thus many churches were built over Chithichis. Today Chithichi that still exist in remote villages has become a rare heritage or monument of the Chakhesang tradition. No matter how hard the West tries to uproot their rich culture and tradition, the spirit of linking with their rich oral tradition can never be rooted out. They accept the new ideas differently. The Nagas composed the new lyric and fused it with the same old traditional folk tune they sing and glorify God in the church. They even adopted the good melody of the Western music and fused with their melodious folksong, and sing accordingly. As Soumen Sen puts it, "No system can survive without its root in reality,"¹¹ in spite of the Western influence even in folksong, the traditional identity is never lost. Their rich folk narrative is always so dear to their heart. The society maintains its culture and oral tradition till today. It is passed down from generation after generation, though it is no denying the fact that few were altered according to the demand of the situation and the changing need of time. The present cannot stick to the past primitive tradition and culture and cope with the modernistic technological world. It has to be dynamic, or else man would not develop and progress this far. In spite of rapid changes, every individual person carries his or her own identity, through culture. Cultural identity becomes the personal identity.

The Chakhesang Nagas still proudly carry their own oral tradition and culture, which distinguishes them from other communities. The rich oral tradition still finds its place in the society through stories, folksongs or poems, folk performances and so on in spite of the advancement of Christianity. Folksong is still sung in important functions, festivals, church programs, etc.

The youngsters' love for Western music makes them to go away from their folksong. Thus in order to revive back the rich folksong of the community, the Chakhesang people started organising different programs like Chokri Area Youth Fellowship, Chokri Area Children Fellowship, Chakhesang Youth Talent

Contest, etc., where young people from different villages gather together and compete in folksong, alone with other Western music. Besides this platform, young people are also encouraged in learning folksong during festivals like Sukrunyi (a weeklong festival that is celebrated after the harvest by the Chakhesang Chokri people), where elders in the village gather the youth around fire and teach them folksongs, narrate stories, etc. This orality is still imbibed in the society and has not yet been forgotten.

Conclusion

The oral tradition has so much to offer the quest of unique cultural identity of the Chakhesang Nagas. Folksong helps the people to some extent to look back their past and reconstruct their present, as KB Veio Pou asserted, "For human beings looking into their past is important in asserting or (re)constructing their identity."⁹ The idea of identity which is derived from oral tradition reflects the origin of the people and their culture.

The narration of the oral tradition through folksong or lyrical poem, no doubt helps the society to still find the root to the past history. The folksong that was composed and sung in the past might perhaps meant only for their own situation, for pleasure, or a means to escape from realities. But today, the past folksong exists not just for entertainment or to please the hearer. It helps the people to retrospect the society of the past, their plight, their miseries and suffering, how they plough or till the land, who is the brave warrior, how people have a close contact with nature, etc.

Folksongs become an identity of the community. It is only through folksongs and narration of stories; people are able to preserve their past history till today. Though it cannot give the exact record of the origination of the community, or specific detail of the past history, it still finds its way in guiding the people to know of the past society. The narration of a story from one person to another varies, and thus it changes with the changing need of time. The uniqueness of narration is that nobody can retell the same story from one person to another person. The traditional story that written down today cannot be

called the original story as it has been written by the writer's perspective and interpretation.

Folksong or lyrical poem helps the culture of the past to be preserved without changing, as people memorize the lyrics and sing accordingly. People remember lyrics according to the melody of the folksong which are passed down from one generation to another, thereby continuing the rich oral tradition despite the changes in their lifestyle and their religion. The belief of innate bonding with their culture and tradition is essential to give meaning to their sense of identification with a rich heritage from the past.

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