



Research Paper

Appropriation of Gendered Stories and Folklore in Shaping the Contemporary Naga Society

T. Longkoi, Khamniungan¹

Abstract

In general, folklore and stories have shaped and continue to shape contemporary Naga society. The character is also gendered. The assigned gender roles and responsibilities are succinct. The traditional customs and practices reflect the social institutions and structures. For instance, tattoo art which was associated with rites of passage, initiation, and head hunting, dance, heroism, songs, are manifestations that has helped create stories, myths, superstition, and so on. As a result, a gendered perspective, social hierarchy/social strata, or a specific image or socialization/ village administration is formed. The paper attempts to understand whether we need popular stories/ folklore that are of limited interest or include a variety of narratives as society relies on those narratives and progresses accordingly.

Keywords: Folklore, oral tradition of Naga society, forefather.

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I. Introduction

Every tribe has its own myth on all fronts. Given the diversity of Naga society, each tribe has its own set of narratives, tales, stories, proverbs, and sayings etc. The different *stories and folklore*² about the origin of tribes and the infiltration from time to time, have made the Naga tribes more diverse and heterogeneous. But it is deeply embedded perceptions of the past in a more general sense that every village has knowledge about their forefather's days. The tribes have their own imagination (in every aspect) of their origin where women are excluded in that imagination. Who are the forefathers? Are forefathers and legends only male? Where are the foremothers? Is history traced through the male line only? *It seems imagination of the past is very androcentric among Nagas.* For instance, the Angami, Sema, and the Lotha tribes imagined their forefather comes from Kheza- Kenoma. There was a magic stone that was believed to increase wealth, especially in agricultural crops. There was a fight between three sons of a couple regarding the same and have gone different directions, become the forefather of these tribes.⁶

Gendered Stories and Folklore

The customs and practices “produces the cultural history of Nagas based on popular beliefs, norms, customs, traditions and morality. The implication of customary law in practice reproduces the patriarchy” (Longkoi, p. 11). On this, a 90 year old male respondent belonging to Yimkhiung tribe shared³, No, women are not involved in village affairs in any way. We won't eat anything prepared for ceremonial purposes, even if a woman manages to capture and cook a wild animal. Men are not allowed to eat any animal slaughtered by women. Not even chicken during the course of the rituals. That was the way things used to be, but not in the present day. But apart from ritual activities, during other normal days they can do so.

The myth construction (Longkoi 2023, p. 1) often excludes the women if not attributes with adverse connotations. A 45 year old female respondent belonging to Khamniungan tribe shared,

¹ Teaches Sociology at the Department of Sociology, Central University of Haryana, Jant-Pali, Mahendergarh, Haryana. E-mail: tlongkoi@cuh.ac.in

² Here stories and folklore broadly refers to the conventional myth and beliefs made. Refer Roland Barthes work, *Mythologies*.

³ The fieldwork for this paper was conducted in 2021.

*Corresponding Author: T. Longkoi Khamniungan

There is a folktale that dates back to a time when headhunting was still common, despite the assertions of men folk that women are weak and incapable of winning battles. One Khiamnungan village resident's house was broken into by an adversary while the woman from the Lushing clan was weaving. She therefore used her weaving item (*long*) to kill the opponent as a self-defense manoeuvre. Only a bold man could cover his crotch with a piece of linen embroidered with shells. As a show of bravery, ladies wore mekhelas, or wrapped around cloth, underneath their clothes as a sign of bravery. In order to honour the bravery of women today, women created this "Sheh Nujam," or shell-embroidered mekhela. However, the men folk are against it stating that if such mekhelas are made, then that person would attract imprisonment.

Organisation of the Kinship-Chieftainship

In a chieftainship society, the chief plays a pivotal role in the affairs of the community and naturally there are differences in customary practices from non-chieftainship society where no individual or group is recognised as a privileged class. The extreme diversity between different tribes is so apparent. In Konyak tribe, the chieftain (Angh) is honored, popular and well known, authoritative whereas the queen is rarely acknowledged, and there is no popular story about her. It is hereditary and clan and kinship is maintained to its utmost respect. The Sema chief (Kukami) though exercise autocratic, powers are not sacred as those of the Konyak chiefs. The Sema tribe also has hereditary tradition despite age, one becomes the chief. On Pochury chieftainship, a 50 year old male respondent shared,

We have chieftain system. The wheel functions according to the say of the chief. We practice jhum cultivation and for that only the chief decides who would perform ritual on the particular field. It is still in practice. There are two clans in my village in Meluri. The first and the second chief. The second assist the first and there were certain work distribution amongst the two chiefs. The chieftain clan can marry outside their own clan. We have six clans in our village. In every village they have their own clans. So it varies according to the village.

This forefather's model becomes both a part of popular consciences/consciousness (*even women's organisations too*) as well as codifying customary laws by tribal leaders/elderly men and customary court in the present time (Khiamnungan-1997, Pochury-2016, Chakhesang, 2020. This reproduces hierarchal social order and power relations. The final culmination is producing male supremacy over women where women live in an androcentric social, political and intellectual environment. In the context of Nagaland, Das maintains, "in the absence of powerful chief, the headmen and elders maintain social order and provide necessary politico-jural cohesion" (Das, p. 3).

II. Conclusion

Tribal society often is defined by the oral tradition. The narrative construction seems succinct and ultimate. However, such interpretation only supports some section from the social order. Therefore, narratives across gender, kinship etc. need to be acknowledged and

Declaration of conflicting interests

The paper is free from any conflict of interests.

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