



Journal Homepage: - www.journalijar.com
**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
 ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)**

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/3614
 DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/3614>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE MAO NAGA TRIBE OF MANIPUR, INDIA

A. Kapesa.

Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong-793022.

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 07 January 2017
 Final Accepted: 13 February 2017
 Published: March 2017

Key words:-

Mao Naga, history, origin, migration, pioneer settler, strategic location.

Abstract

The Mao Naga is a major Naga tribe in Manipur, India. They bear an important place in the history of migration and dispersion of the Nagas. Makhel being the first settlement area of the Nagas and the *Chitebu-Kajü*, the place of dispersal of the Nagas are located in the Mao territory, the Mao Naga can be considered as the pioneer settler among the Nagas. Till today, the Maos continue to play an important role in the politics of the Naga for their strategic location and as a permanent member of the Tenyimi Peoples' Organization (TPO).

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Who are the Mao Naga?

The Mao Naga is a major Naga tribe in Manipur, India. They are a recognized 'Scheduled Tribe' under the Constitution Scheduled Tribes order of 1950. They are known as *Ememei* in Mao language. They occupy the northernmost part of the state spread across Senapati district, bounded by similar Nagas like Angami and Chakhesang in the north, Maram and Zeme in the west and south, and Tangkhul and Poumai in the east. The main area of their habitation falls under Mao-Maram Sub-Division. According to 2011 census, the total population of Mao Naga under Mao-Maram Sub-Division is 1, 16,374. There are 58 Mao villages, out of which 38 villages are revenue village and the remaining 20 are federal unit.

The Maos are also found in large numbers in the town areas of Senapati and Dimapur and in capital cities of Imphal and Kohima. They have formed unions to unite and coordinate among themselves in the town areas where they have settled permanently as Mao Senapati Union, Mao Imphal Union, Mao Kohima Union, Mao Hoho Dimapur and Mao Union Jalukie in the respective town. However, for administrative purpose, the Maos are recognised only in Manipur state as a 'Scheduled Tribe'.

The Maos speak 'Mao' or '*Emela*' language which belongs to Angami-Pochuri group of Tibeto-Burman language family (Burling, 2003). Mao language is an officially recognised language which is taught as a subject up to class ten standards in the state. In 2016, the Mao language is recognised to be taught up to class 12 levels by the Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur. On August 12, 2016, Mao language is selected as a language subject for 'Language Certificate Programme in North Eastern Language' at Namaste, Centre for Studies on North Eastern States, Nitte University, Derlakatte, Mangalore.

The traditional habitation area of the Mao Naga is also known as 'Mao'. Mao area is a strategically important location connecting the two north eastern states of Manipur and Nagaland. National highway 2 pass through the heart of the Mao inhabited area. This highway is the only effective land connection of the landlocked Manipur state with the rest of the country.

Corresponding Author:- A. Kapesa.

Address:- Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong-793022.

Origin and Migration:-

The origin and migration of the Mao Naga in particular and the Nagas, in general, is shrouded in mystery since they practiced oral tradition. Thus, it is difficult to separate the myth and history as per the oral tradition of the Mao Naga. The origin of the Mao Naga is known through the popular myth 'Dzülamosiuro'. According to the myth, the godly and the mysterious woman *Dzülamosiuro*, was already there at Makhel (also known as 'Makhrail Rabu', considered as the ancestral home of the Nagas), while she was resting under the 'Sacred Banyan Tree' (also known as 'Charasü Marabo Kaji', still standing tall at the heart of Makhel village), a cluster of cloud enveloped her and she conceived and gave birth to *Ora* (spirit/gods), *Okhe* (tiger) and *Omei* (man), (Daniel, 2008; Mao, 2009; Nepuni, 2010; and Salew, 2014). The three brothers lived in harmony however when their mother became old and sick, dispute broke out between the three brothers each claiming to inherit her land. To settle the dispute, the mother devised a contest among the brothers. The contest was a race. For this purpose, she made a simulacrum with grass-like ball at a distance and said that the one who touched the simulacrum first would inherit the mothers' land. Man being the youngest and the most noble was favoured by his mother; told him to make a bow and arrow to shoot at the simulacrum as she knew that he could not compete with the powers of the spirit/gods and tiger in such a race. The man following his mother's instruction succeeded in touching the simulacrum target first by using bow and arrow and finally inherited his mother's land. The three brothers had erected a monolith each at the time of their departure at *Chazhelophi*, about 3 kilometres south of Makhel village. The monolith of spirit/gods and man is still standing erect however the tiger's monolith had fallen down.

Nepuni Salew, the present *Movou* (village Chief) of Makhel village writes that *Omei* (Man), the youngest sons of the mysterious woman *Dzülamosiuro* was known as *Alechameiwo* and he had three sons, namely, *Asüpfu Alapha/Asüpfu Alapha*, *Tuttowo/Chütuwo* and *Khephio* (2014). There are variations in terminology since they practice oral tradition and the myths were passed down from one generation to another through oral narrations and due to variation in dialects from one village to another. Whatever might be the differences, it was said that the three brothers lived together at Makhel for a very long time. It was said that there were seven hundred houses on the eastern side and seven hundred houses on the western side (Onia, 1995). There came a time when they had to move out as population flourished. At the time of their departure, they held feast and had erected a monolith. The monolith is still standing tall and located on the eastern side of the village written as '*Pinoumei Kosü Tamara Tu*', meaning '*dispersal stone of the three brothers*'.

Most Naga writers and scholars accepted that Nagas had migrated from a distant place and first made a settlement at Makhel. Heshu writes that majority of the Naga tribes considered *Kheso* as their original place from where they had migrated following a river name *Chuhrürü* as their main route and settled down at *Makhrail Rabu* (Makhel) where they can view clearly both the topography of east and west of the place (2008). While Lhousa claimed that Naga ancestors hailed from *Heziera* where there was no difference between day and night and a daughter given out in marriage grows unrecognisably changed in a year due to strong wind. He further writes that the Naga forefathers migrated from the eastern part of Asia/Indo-China through Burma and settled at Makhel while some Nagas came straight from Chindwin river direction and settled in northeastern part of Nagaland (2015). Sanyu is of the view that the Nagas were among those tribes who migrated from China and took the route of Patkai section and settled down on the way in the Naga Hills (1996).

While there is lack of clarity about the migratory routes taken to reach Makhel, it is accepted by most of the Naga tribes that the Nagas first settled at Makhel and then dispersed from it (Hodson, 1989 and Bane, 1995). Even recent writers like Lhousa (2015), Lotha (2010), Nepuni (2010); Mao (2009) and Heshu (2008) write that most of the Naga tribes first settled at Makhel and then dispersed from it. Nagas did not migrate at the same time but the migration was a continuous process in ripples of one tribe pushing the other while, in turn, being pushed by another (Lotha, 2010).

Chütebu-Kajü, the 'The Great Naga Wild Pear Tree' is a living proof that before the Nagas dispersed from Makhel; they had planted this tree to remember that they first settled at Makhel and then dispersed from it. This tree is still standing tall at Charanho village about one kilometre to the north of Makhel. It was said that in the past when a branch of this tree fell, those people who dispersed from Makhel observed a *genna* (also known as '*mani/mane*' in Mao language; it is a day of prayer and religious observance day according to the Mao traditional religion and people abstain from going to field) in their own respective village even if the information reached to them a month or so later. This tree marked a symbolic representation of the dispersals of the Naga brothers and more importantly symbolises the oneness of the Nagas (see also Heshu, 2008).

The Naga tribes who trace their dispersal from Makhel are known as 'Tenyimi' or 'Tenyimia'. Angami, Chakhesang, Mao, Maram, Poumai, and Zeliangrong are the tribes who originally traced their dispersal from Makhel. They are united under the Tenyimi Peoples' Organization (TPO), the apex body of the Tenyimi. Its unit is spread over three states namely – Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam. At present, the members' tribes of the TPO are Angami, Chakhesang, Impui, Mao, Maram, Pochury, Poumai, Rengma, Thangal, and Zeliangrong. It is formed to protect the welfare of the Tenyimi brothers and sisters and to foster unity and brotherhood among them as well as the other Naga tribes. They share a deeply rooted cultural heritage and inherent values. Ura Academy, an academic institution is set up to study Tenyidie to preserve and promote the Tenyimi language, literature, cultural values, traditional heritage and customary practices. It is located at Kohima. Tenyidie is the first Naga language to be introduced at the University level. It was introduced in the post-graduate level in 1997 under Nagaland University. In 2005, Tenyidie was further introduced for Ph.D. level. This institution had celebrated 75 years of its establishment in 2014 (1939-2014). On the 11th April 2014, some members of the TPO and Ura Academy came to Makhel and *Chütebu-Kajü* (Charanho village) seeking blessing from their ancestral place with the banner 'We are here to celebrate our common roots' before the celebration of its Platinum Jubilee.

Ancestors of Mao Naga:-

According to the myths, *Dzüliamosüro*, *Alechameiwo* and *Khephio* were the great ancestress and ancestors of the Mao Naga. However, according to the folktales and folksongs of the people, the forefather of the Maos was known as 'Shüpfumei'. Nepuni writes that Shüpfuwo was the eldest son of Khephio and his descendants were known by the name Shüpfumei in the past (2010). The word Shüpfumei means 'the people of Shüpfuwo'. The Mao people practice oral traditions and the only source of their history is folktales and folksongs. In their folktales and folksongs, the Mao people are referred by the name Shüpfumei. Even in the early writings about the community written by the British administrators has referred them as 'Sopvoma/Sopvoma' or 'Mau/Mao' by Dun (1886), Grierson (1903) and Hodson (1989) and 'Sopvoma' or 'Memi' or 'Mao' by Hutton (1921). 'Sopvoma/Sopvoma' is a corrupt form of Shüpfumei. Heshu writes that 'the difference in the spelling of the earlier writers could be because the writers are unable to capture the exact pronunciation' (2008: 2).

Shüpfuwo had three sons namely, Kapewo, Toliwo and Choro (Saleo cited in Nepuni, 2010). Choro was the youngest and so inherited his father's land and settled down at Makhel while his two brothers went out in search of a better place for settlement in the neighbouring areas. Kapewo first settled down at Saranamei village, (a Poumai village) and his descendants are known as Kapemata/Paomata. Toliwo first settled down at Koide (a Poumai village) and his descendants are known as Tolüpemata/Lepaona (Nepuni, 2010). The descendants of Kapewo and Toliwo are together known as Poumai Naga and the descendants of Choro are known as Mao Naga. In the past, the present Mao and Poumai Naga were together known as Shüpfumei.

Khrasi, Ahrowo, Kade and Memüwo/Memüo were the four sons of Choro. The descendants of Khrasi are known as *Ekhramei* and settled down on the western side; the descendants of Memüwo/Memüo are known as *Imepadeina* and settled down on the northern and eastern side and the descendants of Ahrowo and Kade on the southern side of the Mao territory. They settled down in different villages however in close proximity to one another. At present, the descendants of Choro have settled down in 58 villages under Senapati district of Manipur.

Village Settlement:-

As population increases, within a social structure adaptations must be made in order to prevent the community from fissioning (Caneiro, 1967) so for better life the Mao people looked out for new settlement site. In the past, while selecting a new site for settlement, the Maos were very particular about the location of the site. A new site for settlement was chosen on hilltops since it had a strategic position during the warfare time since they practiced head hunting tradition. Secondly, the Mao people looked out for signs and dreams seeking divine consent before they settle down at a new place. They believe that human being lives along with benevolent and malevolent gods and spirits and so if anybody wanted to settle at a new place, he or she should first claim the place and become the owner of the place before gods/spirit claim it. Even when a child is born, the parents have to first claim the child; otherwise, if gods first claim the child, the child might not survive. Claiming the child means taking the ownership by the parents (Nepuni, 2010). After a site is chosen, they kept simulacrum and go home and see their dreams. If dreams were not good and the simulacrum too falls then they took this signs as the place is not good for settlement and they would leave the place and move on searching for new place.

When a place was finally chosen to settle, on the first day, they carried a shield, a spear, a rooster and materials needed to make fire which is known as *milasü milareï* in Mao language. It may be mentioned here that in olden days the Maos did not use match stick but they practiced indigenous technique known as '*milasü*' to light fire. Even today during cultural festivals, it is frequently witnessed that the traditional art of making fire '*milasü*' is replicated in the form of game or competition. When they reach the particular place which is decided to make settlement; first they claimed the place by saying 'I want to make this as my place and my land' and then they sacrificed a rooster to supreme god and start lightning fire through *milasü* and let the fire and the smoke reached the sky. If the smoke goes straight to the sky, it is taken as a good omen that they will have a prosperous life in the village (Saleo, 2008).

In order to depict the traditional way of making new settlement, the story of how two brothers first settled down at the present Charanho village (also known as Shajouba is one of the biggest Mao villages at present) is explained here. One day two brothers came across the present area of the village and they wanted to settle there, and so the brothers, each kept a bundle of paddy straw on a branch of a tree for the night and went home. The next day they came back to that particular place to see the sign on the paddy straw; it was found that the elder brother's paddy straw was dying out and the younger one's look fresh and lively. From this sign, it was taken that this place can be a good place for settlement however, from the sign of the paddy straw it is taken that the younger brother would be a better leader among the two. Thus, they made their settlement and as per the omen, the younger brother became the *Movou*, village Chief of the village (Personal Interview with Daiho Kholi, the present *Movou* of Charanho village). In present times, national highway becomes a preferred choice for a new settlement. With the development of national highway 2, the Mao people began to move towards the national highway. National highway 2 passes through the heart of the Mao territory. Some of the Mao villages which are established along the national highway are Kayinu, Song Song, Kalinamei, Phikomei, Tadubi, Khridzüphi, Makhan Tabio, Makhan Centre, Makhan Lovadzüngho, Makhan Khuman, Khongnem Thana, Puni Pfosemei, Mao Karong, Taphou Pudunamei, Mayangkhang Khunou and Daili village.

Social Organization:-

The Mao Naga follows typical patriarchal and patrilineal social set up. They practice monogamy and type of family is nuclear family. Father is the head of a family. His decision is final and binding in all respect. The rule of descent is traced through the father's line or male line. The succession and inheritance of property is through sons or male offspring. The eldest son inherits his father ancestral paddy field known as *opfu lophre* and the youngest son inherit his parent's house. The Mao community gives more importance to the eldest and the youngest sons in a family since it is them who inherit their father's ancestral property. If there is no son in a family, the ancestral/parental house and the father's ancestral paddy field goes to the nearest male relative from the father side and the daughters can inherit only the remaining property of the family. The legacy of a family is carried down by male offspring in a family and so the ancestral properties are passed down only through the male line.

The next level of social organization is 'clan organization'. It is known as '*pfuta*' in Mao language. The clan is an endogamous group in a village. Inter marriage between the clan members is a taboo. Every clan have its own gate known as '*koro*', built nearby the main clan habitation area in the village. Most clan have community land. The members of every clan select their own clan representatives to administer them in the village since time immemorial. The clan representatives are known as *Enulei Kotsümei* or Village Council or Village Authority (at present). The Mao Naga is known to have numerous clans and sub-clans. As they make new settlement site and form a village, they tend to use a different name like their lineage ancestors' name or sub clan as their clan and in this way, they develop new clans with the establishment of a new village. At present, the Maos has more than 60's clans. Some commonly used clan name are Arücho, Arüna, Chachei, Chalai, Chakre, Ekhe, Kadena, Kapena, Kayina, Krichena, Lirina, Piku, Poji, Pfoze, Rajina, Maheo, Saprüna, etc.

Religion:-

The Maos have their own traditional religion known as *Opfufe Chiina* – religion of the forefather. They believe in the existence of a supreme god called *Oramei*. They also believe in the existence of benevolent gods/spirits and malevolent gods/spirits. The benevolent spirits are considered as good and helpful while the malevolent spirits are evil one which causes sickness and suffering to mankind. Thus, their religion can be called as nature-centric and animistic. They performed rituals, observed *gennas* and offered sacrifices to propitiate their gods and made appeasement. Taboos also constitute an important religious element in the Mao traditional religion. It is not only a mere prohibition with a superstitious belief but it guided and governed their socio-religious life. It has two connotations, '*moli chünoe*' – taboos of commission and '*li chünoe*' –taboos of omission (Loli, 2011). *Movou*, the

village Chief been the village priest announced the *gennas*, performed rituals and offered sacrifices for the well being of the people. Sometimes the head of the family or the woman of the family too offer sacrifices and performed rituals for the individual family.

With the coming of Christianity, the traditional religion of the Maos lost its importance and significance. At present, the Maos are 99 percent Christian. Baptist, Roman Catholic, Christian Revival, Seventh Day Adventist and Good Samaritan are the main denomination practiced by the Mao community.

Economy:-

Traditionally, the Mao Naga is an agrarian community. Agriculture is the main stay of the people. The Maos are hard working people. They work from dawn till dusk. They make terrace fields at the slopes or foots of the mountains and along the river bank. The hard work of the people can be judged from the exquisite craftsmanship of converting the hilly terrains into delicately beautiful and continuous terraces covering ranges for the purpose of rice cultivation. Every family of the Mao community has their own terrace fields and cultivate for their sustenance and sustainability (Heshu, 2008).

The Maos also practice shifting/jhum cultivation and permanent garden cultivation. They cultivate different kinds of crops. Rice, maize, potatoes, cabbages, chillies, tomatoes, tree tomatoes, cho-cho (squash), beans, pumpkins, cucumbers, brinjals, oriental onions, spring onions, onions, yam, etc are the main cultivated crop. The Regional Potato Farm, first sponsored scheme of North Eastern Council is in Mao area, located at *Pfukhro* (Song Song). This farm is wholly owned by the state government and targeted to supply potato for the whole north east regions. The Maos are the only community producing potato for commercial purpose in the state. They also supply to the neighbouring state of Nagaland. The Mao people also cultivate fruits like plum, peach, pear, guava, banana, passion fruit, kiwi, grapes, etc for consumption as well as for selling.

The Maos also rear varieties of animals like fowls, cat, dog, pig, cow, buffaloes, duck, rabbit, etc. Cows and buffaloes are used for ploughing the fields. Pisciculture is also practiced since time immemorial. The Mao people used to rear fish in the middle of the wet terrace field known as '*khochübvü*'. Fish is an important food item of the Maos. The penalty for person stealing fish from this *khochübvü* is very severe. In the past, before the introduction of monitory system, the penalty was ten *oji* (a traditional kind of basket to measure and carry paddy).

Floriculture is developing in a big way in Mao area. It was initiated by the womenfolk. They rear flowers for both beautification and for commercial purposes. The Maos has celebrated 'Flower Festival' in the year 2015 and 2016 which is first of its kind in the region. Floriculture is giving a big boost to the economy of the Maos.

In present days, the Maos begin to adopt new occupations. National highway 2 passes through the heart of the Mao inhabited area. The strategic location of the Maos on the national highway 2 has brought a lot of avenues to the Mao community especially in the field of economy. The Maos have taken up entrepreneurship, small time business men and women. And also the agricultural products could be easily transported to state capital Imphal and Kohima and other commercial hubs such as Senapati or Dimapur and sold off at good prices. At three places on the national highway 2, the Maos have developed into tourist place, open up food and tea stall and sells locally produced agricultural products, mostly of organic vegetables and flowers. The three tourist places are Mao Gate (Song Song), Vane (Tadubi) and Opringho (Makhan).

The Maos are pursuing in public sector undertaking like banking, insurance, BPO, call centres, etc apart from government jobs both state and central. Another very prominent occupation adopted by the educated Maos is in the field of teaching. We can see the Maos teaching in private educational institutions in the whole of north eastern states. The economy of the Maos is slowly growing with the passage of times.

Conclusion:-

The Mao Naga bears an important place in the history of migration and dispersion of the Nagas. Makhel being the first settlement area of the Nagas and the *Chütebu-Kajü*, the place of dispersal of the Nagas are located in the Mao territory, the Mao Naga can be considered as the pioneer settler among the Nagas. Till today, the Maos are playing an important role in the politics of the Nagas for their strategic location and as a permanent member of the Tenyimi Peoples' Organization (TPO). The TPO has being playing an active role in Naga's politics fostering peace and unity among them and also other neighbouring tribes in the region. The strategic location of the Mao Naga between

Manipur and Nagaland, the Maos have been playing an active role in the Naga's politics for instance - in the year 2010, when the Manipur government banned Mr Thuingaleng Muivah, General Secretary of NSCN-IM from visiting Somdel, his village in Ukhrul district, Manipur after more than four decades of being away and he got stranded at Viswema, the Maos organised a peace rally to show their solidarity. Mr Muivah came with the consent of the government of India however Manipur government denied the permission on the grounds that it might cause 'communal disharmony endangering the peaceful co-existence of the different ethnic communities' (Bhatia, 2010: 38) and so the government of Manipur deployed armed forces at Mao Gate, the interstate boundary on the national highway 2 to prevent Muivah's entry to the state. The deployed Manipur armed forces assaulted a civilian at Mao Gate on 5th May 2010. The already tensed situation was aggravated by this incident. The next day i.e. 6th May while the Mao people were going a silent peace rally against this assault and demanding that the Manipur armed forces vacate the place, the peace rally group were tear-gassed and then fired upon by the Manipur armed forces. This incident had killed two young college-going students and injured many, including men, women and children. Every year on 6th May, the Maos observe the death anniversary as 'Martyr's Day' and declare a special holiday and all economic activities are restricted on this day in the Mao area. The Mao Council, the apex body of the Mao Naga fought alongside with the United Naga Council (UNC), the apex civil body of the Manipur Nagas during the introduction of Naga People's Front (NPF), a regional political party which originated from Nagaland state in the year 2011.

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