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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Biodiversity Conservation Ethos in Naga Folklore and Folksongs

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Abstract

Nagaland, with its indigenous tribal population is par excellence an area of continuous interaction between the people and the nature with all its endowments. Even today Nagas are known for their intimate link with natural environment which forms an inalienable part of their life. Besides they have strong sense of physical and spiritual attachment with the nature, so much so that their socio cultural and economic life revolves around biodiversity of which they are an integral part. They have developed their culture and tradition, folklores and folksongs, taboos and myths in association with everything that surrounds them and have developed an intimate relationship and understanding of the complexities of their ecological system. Their Knowledge, techniques and practices have come through prolonged series of observation and experiences transmitted from generation to generation.

Based on the field experiences with the communities, the proposed paper attempts to describe how Nagas perceive their nature and surroundings, beliefs, myths and taboos, folklore and folksongs governing their resource use. It elucidates their concept of biodiversity conservation embedded in their traditional customs and ethos.

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INTRODUCTION

The state of Nagaland is located in the far North – Eastern corner of India. Situated between 25° 6' and 27° 4' N latitude and 93° 20' and 95° 215' E longitude, it has an area 16,579 sq.km. With a very rich flora and fauna diversity, Nagaland falls within the 18 mega bio-diversity hot spots region of the world. With the exception of south and west stretches, the entire Naga region is hilly mountainous terrain where the Arakan Patkai extension of Myanmar meets the Eastern Himalayan range. Besides bewildering physical features, Nagaland is a land of great socio-cultural diversity. It is the home to 16 major tribe's viz. Angami, Ao, Chakesang, Chang, Sema, Lotha, Phom, Konyak, Kachari, Rengma, Sangtam, Pochury, Yimchunger, Khiamuungan, Zeliang and Kuki. Besides Kukis and Kacharis, which represent different ethnic group with entirely different culture, language, customs, legends and history, the remaining tribes belongs to the same group 'the Naga'. Although they have similar culture, history, habits and belief occupying their ancestral land that is geographically contiguous, they speak different dialect and often vary in social political systems within their respective tribal world.

Nagas are a distinct Indo-mongoloid group of indigenous peoples. For centuries their community-based tribal customary laws and ethos have looked upon the natural resources around them as renewable and consequently built a culture, based on their sustainable use¹. Their vast understanding and respect for the nature and everything that surrounds them is deeply embedded in their rich folklore and folksongs. It is linked to their inter-generational cultural development, survival, beliefs, spirituality and medicinal systems. They worshipped nature and have a strong belief that man, God, animals, aquatic creatures and plants symbiotically co-existed since time immemorial. Accordingly their mode of communication with God was through some natural agents like birds, plants, animals and signs and dreams. They listened to noises and chirping of certain birds, dreams or any unnatural signs in the

surroundings which were carefully carried out either by an individual or through elderly wisdoms or with the help of soothsayer. Interpretation of dreams and divination has an important role in Naga life². They sincerely believed that God speaks to them through various agents on their environment, as such their belief and predictions were mostly true. Before they ate or drink, they would always offer little food and drink to Gods so that they might not harm them³. Nagas had the concept that all men and women are equal before god and that there was no distinction between men, plants and animals etc.

Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Extensive interviews and discussions were done with the local community members and holders of traditional knowledge and wisdoms which form the bases of this research work. Besides, books, journals, magazines, etc. were consulted for supplementing the article.

Beliefs and myths

Nagas had a strong traditional belief in Supreme Being. This belief is associated with the spirit of nature and god the creator of all, including human being. It has provided them with a clear understanding of the living world in which they are an integral part. There are different types of spirits, both benevolent and malevolent and some even indifferent². They believed in different Gods for different social and spiritual needs such as God for home, for wealth, for forest, for rivers and lakes, for rocks and mountains etc. The indigenous religion of the Nagas had a clear concept of the creator of all mother earth, known by different names to different tribes. The Sema tribe calls the supreme God Alhou, the Lotha's called it Potso, the Angami's call it Ukepenuopfu, the Ao's Lijaba, Rengma's refer to it as Sunggigu or Anyiza and the Phom's call it Vangyoung Ongpa. Nagas believed that this benevolent God is the creator of the earth and deity in control of the nature including the jhum fields. The Rengma's believed that Sunpri is the Goddess of destruction called. She is the male malevolent Goddess, who brings misfortune and destruction to all creations. Therefore she need to be pleased all the time by timely offering prayers and sacrifices to keep her away from bringing misfortune and destruction to humanity.

Among the Nagas, Ao, Sangtam, Phom and Chakesang tribes practices Lycanthropy, in which it is commonly believed that a person is having a spirit in the form of a tiger. Any incident or accident or injury that happens or may occur to the tiger has a direct bearing on the person and even death. It is also believed that certain birds, other animals and fishes have a special link with human being and hence, are highly venerated even today. It is commonly found that the general construct of the Naga folksong and folklore is associated with the nature expressing their love and appreciation for nature. One such belief in the Ao Naga folk tale is the origin of Catfish. One day three women went to forest to collect bamboo shoots for pickle. On the way back one was swept away at a ford. The other two went to look for her and found the body caught in a fish trap, a little lower down. It had half turned into a catfish. That is why catfish carry tattoo-marks to this day and are not eaten by women⁴. Leaf butterflies, of which wonderful examples are found in the Naga Hills, are held to be the offspring of mixed marriages between leaves and butterflies⁴.

Their symbiotic relationship is evinced through their strong beliefs and deities, observance of taboos and worshipping of nature such as water bodies like lake, marshy areas, stones and some particular place or forest which they believe to be the abode of spirits and gods. Timely visit and offerings bring them closer to these gods which not only protect them from the wrath of the nature such as drought, destruction of crops in the field from wild animals and natural calamities but brings abundant harvest and blessings. The indignation of gods is so costly that it brings misfortune and loss of wealth and death in extreme case. Therefore it is imperative for Nagas that in all social events they first evoke the blessings of god and an unfeigned thanksgiving after the event. It is also a common practice that people propitiate the spirits of forest/nature and gods for good luck during hunting, fishing, collecting of insects, cutting of trees and forests etc. Springs, lakes, marshy lands were supposed to be the abode of spirit of sickness. Hence, Chicken, eggs, ginger charcoal and metals were offered to these spirits to cure the sicknesses of family members or fellowmen and also they were propitiated so that they may not bring disease and sicknesses to man⁵.

Nagas believed that forests are the abode of spirits and provide all essential needs to mankind and hence were respected and preserved. They believed that there were indwelling spirits in trees and as such if and when these trees were to be cut down for village gates or log drum etc., they offered drink offering at the foot of the tree with a short prayer. After the tree is cut down, the Ao tribe usually places a stone on the stump of the tree so that the spirit of the tree might not blame the men for the high handedness but simply put the blame on the stone⁶. Similarly the Khamniungan Naga before cutting the palm leaves in the forest has to loudly ask the spirits for their permission before he starts cutting. If strong wind blows just then, he has to return empty handed⁷.

It is common to find a large tree at the entrance of the village or near a village gate, and it is believed to be the guardian of the gate itself². An Angami, while crossing a forest would take a leaf and put it behind his ears or pluck some leaves and places them on the ground. He believes that this will protect him from any undesirable attention of the malevolent or powerful spirits². Their belief in this spirits of individual trees has a bearing on which tree is suitable for timber, for building houses, for firewood etc. and hence cannot be cut arbitrarily. Those trees that are used as timber cannot be used randomly for firewood and vice versa. Any kind of trees with blemishes like crossed branches or injured bark were not used for timber. Cutting trees without specific purpose, cruelty to animals, mismanagement of seeds, fruits etc. is unethical and unacceptable to Naga society. In the Phom Naga saying that states “Phongpenn Phaünyü Loihamnyih Paikok Vü Kao Tülangtük”, meaning “Don’t cut the stem of this plant; it will feed you during famine”⁸. Such strict adherence of belief and practices has led to deeper understanding of living Mother Nature, enabling people to protect and preserve the environment around them.

Taboos and genna

Observance of taboos and genna were a guiding principle in the lives of the Nagas as far as their relationship with the natural environment is concerned. The term taboo and genna are closely connected and in many instances inter-woven, so much so that observation of one leads to the other at the same. However, the basic difference is that the former implies prohibition on something that is regarded for religious or other reasons as not to be done, touched, used, speak etc. while the later applies to abstaining oneself from going to fields and work on certain occasions. The word genna is believed to have been derived from an Angami word “Kenna” meaning prohibition⁵. During genna, nothing is taken out or brought in the house or village, no one is allowed to work or to go to fields neither are guests entertained. Genna is observed if for instance when the paddy fields are being destroyed by the pests like rats or grasshoppers, during the birth of new baby in the family, the rise of new moon, sowing of seeds, harvesting of crops, unnatural death of a person who is either killed by wild animals, fire or drowned in water etc. Genna possesses serious social and religious attributions and is believed to produce evil effects. Therefore it is to be strictly observed to avoid consequences upon one’s life which may come through fellow being in the society or from supernatural forces.

The observance of taboo is called anempong by Ao’s, Sarüsatuk by the Lotha’s, Chinih by Sema’s, Cjhaipü Nüing by Phom’s and violation of the same entails heavy punishment. There are taboos against offending the gods, spirits or nature. Also certain taboo exists which prohibit the killing of animals at certain stages of life. For instance, hunting, killing and keeping traps are forbidden and taboo during the breeding season. Killing of pregnant animals and birds and during gestation was a taboo, for by doing so it would bring misfortune to the hunter and his family. Fishing and the use of certain poisonous roots and leaves that kill fishes in the rivers or springs during the spawning season are restricted⁹. Defecation in the rivers and streams are taboo because it is unnatural and unethical. By doing so it not only dirties the purity of the water but also abuses the essential elements of life’s survival¹⁰. It is a taboo for men to kill animals when their wives are pregnant for by doing so it was believed that the hunter’s child will be born unhealthy. When it comes to agriculture, strict observation of taboo is a must, for instance abstaining from making love before clearing jungle, sowing seeds, or other crucial work in the field. Taboo is observed to ensure healthy food crops and abundant harvests.

Taboos take place in different duration and intensity according to the respective tribe and occasion. Observations of taboo vary from a day to several days while some last even for weeks. Free from hard work and engagement it is also a time of reflection and to contemplate their approach to nature, agriculture, animals and the Supreme Being. Observation of taboo therefore brings critical support to human environmental relationships and their interdependence among the Nagas and its environment. In a way taboo has not only enriched the spiritual understanding of the Nagas towards his physical environment but has restrained them for overexploitation of the nature.

Folklore and folksongs

Nagas are known for their rich oral tradition and heritage. Every aspect of Naga life, history, politics, religious beliefs, legends, love and romance are embedded in their folk lore and folk songs. Naga culture had no written language till the recent past, their history and traditions were passed down from generation to generation through narration or songs. It will not be wrong to say that Nagas deepest thoughts could be best expressed through folklore and songs. Even today there is a rich repository of stories and legends available in the folklore and folksong of various Naga tribes. Almost all the folklore and songs are accompanied by different style of dances called war dance, bamboo dance, harvest dance, lovers dance and so on¹¹. All these folklore and folksongs have played a significant role in their everyday life that depicts a symbiotic relationship between men and nature.

According to Chang Naga legend, their ancestors lived at “Chansang” at the time of creation of the universe. Thence the entire living creatures live together, ate common fruits and drank from the same river⁵. The ancient Naga mythology says that in the beginning when the earth was young and wholesome there was no distinction between birds and animals nor between them and humans. The Ao Naga believed that once upon a time man, God, bear and tiger, lived together as brothers of a family⁶.

Naga folk songs are unique: romantic in character, patriotic in nature, factious in essence with fundamental nature and spiritual in principle¹². Every festival and occasion is marked by singing. According to an Ao Naga, it is believed that their ancestors learned singing from a spirit called “song tree”. According to their legend, a damsel had love affair with a young handsome man who vanishes during broad daylight but appears to her only at night. She once presented him with her beautiful hand woven shawl only to be found tightly wrapped around a tall big tree the next day near the well from where she draws water from. With a mystical feeling she began bathing simply singing tsüsenjoker.....tsüsenjoker meaning bathing.....bathing, the nearby tree in which the shawl was wrapped suddenly started singing asking her to sing along “Tsüsenjoker laza surem sune moker; O chungliyimti lar meyu temsenaka matsungzukla, kongro yimti yongyala” meaning “having a bath, wearing a colourful dress, oh! Distinguished girl of Chungliyimti move along nothing can outshine you, brighten our world”⁶. There and then she learnt the song from the tree and narrated the story along with the song to her parents. Since then people started learning different sounds of nature, birds and animals and used those songs to express their feeling and also use as mode for communications.

Ecological significance

Over the past many centuries the indigenous socio-cultural life of the Nagas has developed a close relationship with its natural environment. 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. Their intimate link with the forest and rivers for food, security and development has been the basis for their social, cultural and spiritual growth. This has been meaningfully manifested in all their cultural and customary practices, worship and through their songs and folklore. While on the other hand, their deep understanding, ethos and values of their natural environment and observation of taboos and genna have helped them protect their environment for centuries.

Conclusion

In the Naga worldview the earth is a “Living Earth” and all living and nonliving elements on earth has its purpose. They are all intricately linked to human being for its survival and development. The Naga ethos of integration of all lives on earth is so strong that everything is inclusive and is one entity. This is clearly demonstrated through various folksongs, folklore, legends, and dances in their everyday lives.

In spite of the rich cultural heritage, there is a rapid change taking place in the contemporary society as a result of the modern education, change in religion and most strikingly westernization of culture as pointed by one Naga scholar that the present Nagas are found to be Christian in religion, western in social setup, idealistic in politics and itinerants in culture¹². Significantly with the onset of consumerism in the Naga culture there is a fast disappearance of the oral tradition and culture among the Nagas which is adversely affecting the aged old tradition of understanding and respecting the nature.

Conservation of biodiversity in Nagaland through Naga folklore and folksong may not be the only means to retrieve the fast declining biodiversity in Nagaland, but it certainly plays a critical role in the continuity of oral tradition, traditional knowledge and rivivacation of the good ethos, values and most importantly shaping the perception of the people on the environment that has sustain them for centuries and in which their future depends.



Fig. 1. Location Map of Nagaland (Not to be scaled)



Fig. 2. A Ficus religiosa (Moracea) Believed to be more than 500 years old At Mongpio Village(Wokha District)

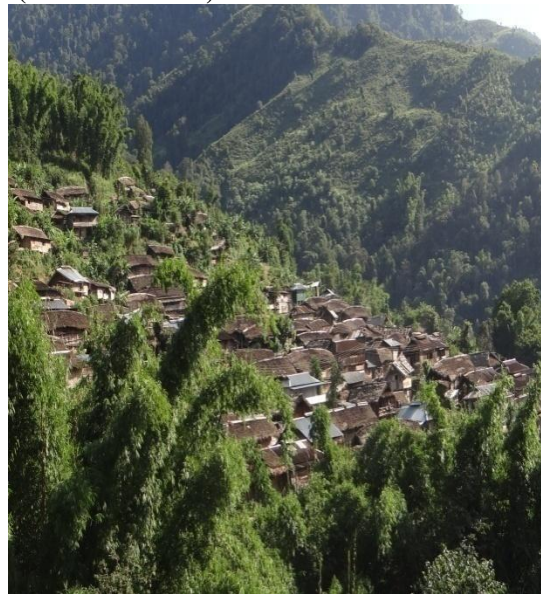


Fig. 3. A Naga Village Surrounded by its rich biodiversity New Pangsa Village (Tuensang District)



Fig. 4. Sumi Naga ladies singing folk song



Fig. 5. Sumi Nagas performing a folk dance

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