

# AXONE: THE NAGA IDENTITY FROM ORAL NARRATIVE TO THE BIG SCREEN

Debolina Mukherjee<sup>1</sup>

Tainla Longchar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, St Joseph's College, (A), Jakhama; corresponding author- debbymukherjee15@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, St Joseph's College, (A), Jakhama.

*The Nagas have unique cultural identity and traditional practices which had been transmitted orally since time immemorial. After the advent of the British to the region in 1832 and the subsequent spread of education thereafter, oral narratives began to be gradually preserved in print. Of late, there has been a steady shift in the dynamics of Naga narrative from print to screen. The film Axone by Nicholas Kharkongor though not a film about the Nagas per se has highlighted the issues of identity faced by North Easterns in mainland India and how 'axone' (a Sumi Naga term for fermented soyabean) gives the North Easterns in Delhi a sense of shared identity. The present paper studies the shift of Naga identity from oral narrative to the big screen.*

**KEYWORDS:** Oral narratives, Naga identity, Axone, films.

Ruth Finnegan in *Oral Tradition and the Verbal Arts* mentions the word 'oral' as 'uttered in spoken words; transacted by word of mouth; spoken, verbal.' This is frequently the primary meaning in much apparently technical terminology: 'oral tradition', 'oral literature', 'oral narrative', 'oral testimony' and so on. It is often contrasted with written. (p 5). Until the advent of the British in 1832, the Nagas who reside in North Eastern region of India were a pre-literate society. Writing was unknown to them and hence did not have a collective script of their own.

However, according to Sangtam Naga folklore, they once had a written script on a scroll which was kept hidden above the hearth. But the scroll was devoured by a dog and that was how the script was lost. Almost all Naga tribes share similar tales regarding the lost of their script. The Nagas are undoubtedly an oral society since there is no documentation that has been preserved by them as such. They relied only on oral sources for the dissemination of knowledge to the younger generations.

Oral narration had been the medium of keeping records where men and their memories were considered as sole knowledge keepers. The Nagas rely heavily on their folklore to trace their history, culture, identity etc. The old and fading generation transmits everything that has been preserved through memory to the next generation by means of oral narration/ narratives. Memory serves as the only means to preserve the histories and hence the elders strove to make conscious efforts to convey it to the succeeding generation/ progenies.

In order to facilitate the tradition of learning and to keep up the cultural heritage and identity, *Morungs* were established which was prevalent in all the Naga tribes. These *Morungs* were guard house as well as dormitory for the young boys and girls. They acted as institutions whereby youngsters learnt various cultural practices like songs, dances, customs, tales and beliefs. They also acquired life skills and were taught to be responsible citizens.

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, St Joseph's College, (A), Jakhama; corresponding author- debbymukherjee15@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, St Joseph's College, (A), Jakhama.

The Naga society being a pre-literate society, very little has been documented so far but with the spread of education, there has been a shift in the dynamics of narrativity from oral to written. The limited documentations that exist were attempted by writers and scholars usually in a language foreign to them i.e., English and hence have often failed convey the exact contexts of the complex and unique culture of the Nagas. However, in recent years, writers like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Nini Lungalung etc. have documented the literary aspect of the Nagas in their writings. Though still in its nascent stage, the various written documentations on the Nagas and their way of life and the literary works by Naga writers have put the Naga identity, in however modest a way, in the world map.

With the world closing in and rapidly establishing itself into a global village, there is constant interaction between people from different regions. This has inevitably led to an unconscious exploration of each other's culture and way of life. With the rise of multiculturalism and cross cultural practices, amongst various other things, the indigenous cuisines of the various communities across the globe have bonded people and given them a sense of shared identity. Food thus becomes an important indicator of one's culture and identity.

The Hornbill Festival which is held every year in the first week of December in Nagaland, is an excellent example of how people from across the globe come and take delight in tasting Naga food. In the modest heritage village of Kisama, people from different parts of the country and the world come together and bond over food and drinks, among other things. However, food also has had to settle on the fringes of racism and communalism several times. The sense of identity that is attached to one's culinary habits and the ways of preparing it has also led to several misunderstandings, quarrels and racist remarks.

The film *Axone* by Nicholas Kharkongor explores such issues of racism and marginalisation that is faced by North East Indians in mainland India. *Axone* is not a movie about the Nagas *per se*. It is a movie about the North Easterners from India living in Delhi who has gone there for studies and work. It is one of the most frequented places in India by virtue of it being the capital and the plethora of opportunities it offers to people from every corner of the nation.

The movie takes the audience into the lives of a group of friends who hail from the various states of North East. They have developed a sense of oneness because of the common geographical landscape and the cultural similarities they share. The racial discrimination and the feeling of living in sufferance with the mainlanders have also cemented the ties of the migrants from North East India which has transpired into a sort of a familial feeling for one another.

One of the ways in which the characters in the movie bond is through their shared love for 'axone' which is made of fermented soya beans and is the staple food of the people hailing from the North East region. Dolly Kikon in her essay *Fermenting Modernity: Putting Akhuni on the Nation's Table in India* writes, "On the one hand, making and consuming *akhuni* are important parts of tribal identities between Himalayan communities-a kind of sensory imagined community. On the other hand, *akhuni* is part of a larger culture of food preparation and consumption that casts these same communities as less sophisticated in the culinary order of India, and South Asia more broadly." (p.322)

The characters in the movie have come together to celebrate and surprise their dear friend Minam by cooking her favourite dish, smoked pork in axone (a recipe for disaster), on her wedding. What may otherwise seem as an obligatory cooking for a friend on her wedding has become interspersed with variant meanings and a culinary adventure for these friends. The movie does not endeavour to promote Naga identity specifically but on being asked in a personal interview as to the director's choice of the title *Axone* he replied "there are many North Eastern restaurants in Delhi but the most popular ones are the Naga restaurants" and hence fermented soya beans which is a common dish for the North Easterners has come to be identified more easily by the Sumi-Naga term axone, even though almost every tribe from North East has its own term for it.

The title of the movie thus establishes the culinary identity that the Nagas have etched for themselves in a land where there is culture polarity. Axone as a dish is repugnant to many of the mainlanders especially because of its foul and strong stench while preparing the dish. It is however a delicacy for the Nagas, for whom the smell produced while cooking is not foul and smelly but an aroma that arouses one's appetite for food. This polarised attitude towards this dish has been highlighted in the movie in a light hearted comic way.

The movie *Axone* has been screened at major film festivals like British Film Festival 2019 and at MAMI Mumbai Film Festival 2019. Having been screened before an international audience, this Naga dish has definitely drawn the attention of the world audience but according to Nicholas Kharkongor, the response from the Indian counterparts were more interesting and relatable as *Axone* is also in every way a movie about the mainlanders and how they have to struggle with the stench of axone. This movie has in its own way, generated interest and curiosity amongst the audience at the screening and the Sumi Naga term is a further stamp to the Naga culinary identity.

*Axone* is the first mainstream Hindi movie that has used North East themes, tells North East stories and has majority of North East actors cast in the movie. This shows a steady shift in the mode of narration among the North Easterners in general and the Nagas in particular. Largely an oral society, the Nagas have moved from narrating stories from memory to documenting them in print and reels. The Naga millennial in particular have also resorted to social media like youtube, whatsapp, facebook, instagram, twitter, etc. to tell their stories in their own way without any inhibitions to make known their ethnic culture and also speak about any form of injustices they may have seen or encountered.

From oral narratives to the big screen, the Naga narrative has come a long way. The movie *Axone* may be considered a proto development of a kind of narrative and will perhaps herald aspiring filmmakers and actors from Nagaland to venture into producing films that will tell Naga themed stories thus presenting to the world the multi-cultured life of the Nagas and their rich history that have been for so long archived in memories and reiterated in writing.

## REFERENCES

1. Ao, Tamsula. (2012). *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House.
2. Chodongse, Tsalongse & Kedutso Kapfo. (2009). *Sangtam Folktales*. Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages.
3. Finnegan, Ruth. (2001). *Oral Tradition and the Verbal Arts*. New York: Routledge.
4. Genette, Gerard. (1982). *Figures of Literary Discourse*. (Sheridan, Alan. Trans.). England: Basil Blackwell Publisher.
5. Ghosh B.B. (1982). *History of Nagaland*. New Delhi: S. Chand & Company.
6. Kharkhongor, Nicholas. (2012, November 19). *Personal Interview*.
7. Kikon, Dolly. (2015, June 24). *Fermenting Modernity: Putting Axone on Nation's Table in India*. [http:// www.researchgate.net/publication/279312051](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/279312051).
8. Lacey, Nick. (2000). *Narrative and Genre: Key Concepts in Media Studies*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
9. Pou, K B Veio. (2015). *Literary Cultures of Northeast: Naga Writings in English*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House.
10. Stirn, Aglaja & Peter Van Ham. (2003). *The Hidden world of the Nagas*. New York: Prestel. [www.identityexploration.com/ISA\\_concepts\\_and\\_their\\_meanings.asp](http://www.identityexploration.com/ISA_concepts_and_their_meanings.asp) Accessed on November 27, 2019.