



Folklore: Narrative tools for reconstructing the history of traditional Tangkhul Naga tribe of Manipur.

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Abstract:

Folklore refers to an unrecorded cultural expression of a people. The collections of traditional customs, beliefs, proverbs, legends, music, dances, myth and stories passed through generation by word of mouth. The Tangkhul Naga tribe people are devoid of a written script, their history and practices can be revealed through oral tradition. In such societies, information about the past can be learned and reconstruct from the memories of the community elders and folklore. Some scholars do argue that the oral history is full of myth and legends, and their accounts and explanation may not be complete fact in the scientific sense. The Tangkhul society has undergone tremendous change as a result of the impact of Christianity and modern education in the 20th century.

Key Words: Oral history, traditional customs, beliefs, myth, legends.

Introduction: Folklore constitutes the oral history of a particular oral culture like traditional customs, tales, saying, dances or arts forms preserved among a people. The Tangkhul Naga tribe were highly cultured people however; non-availability of written materials is a major setback in the writing of the history of Tangkhul Naga tribe. Tangkhul tribe has rich folklore, the study which mainly based on the oral tradition. Oral tradition being the only form of literature that existed among them, their origin and history can only be reconstructed with the help of oral tradition. History writing of Tangkhul Naga tribe was mostly based on the oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. In society where written materials are inadequate or absent the choice of oral tradition become inevitable. Folklore served as a connecting bridge between missing the link in history writing. Irfan Habib sees the need of filling up the blank that are left by written materials (document). He says that the blank may be far more important than the area covered by the written information. "The statement implies that oral information is as much useful in society with written sources as it is in society without adequate written material"¹. J.B Bhattacharjee experienced the usefulness of oral information in his endeavour in writing social history of Cachar valley of Assam. "He writes folklore provides more extensive data than the conventional historical sources"².

¹ Irfan Habib, Interpreting Indian History, NEHU Publication, Shillong Undated, p.2

² J.B Bhattacharjee, History and Folklore in the context of Cachar Valley, Folklore in North-East India, Soumen Sen (ed), New Delhi, 1985, p.157.

Folklore in the first sense has always been part of human culture since the very beginning of the human society and the cultural heritage of Naga is based on folklore, either in oral narrative or material culture. Folk aid to a culture and make one aware of the value and importance of culture. The Tangkhul Naga tribe live in isolation from other communities and their association with them in wider socio-economic and political perspective is

comparatively limited. The Tangkhul tribe were first settler in Tangkhul inhabited areas as referred from the mentioned of the Tangkhul in Manipuri literature "Numit Kappa"³. From folklore, it is clear that they have once made their settlement in Myanmar, while moving from one place to another. A Tangkhul elder says that they came from the east of Chindwin River. This Samsok (Thaungdut) theory of the Tangkhul is supported by Tangkhul traditional folksong. Through oral sources some Tangkhul elders claims that their ancestors emerged from a whole and have been living here from time immemorial.⁴

Genres of Tangkhul folklore:

Material Culture - folk art and architecture, textile.

Belief - Folk religion, rituals and mythology.

Music - Traditional folksong.

Story - folktales, legends, personal experienced narrative from community elders.

Foodways – relationship between food and culture.

Material culture: The Tangkhuls were highly cultured people. Historically they were self-sufficient people and lived themselves independently. The Tangkhul people are village loving people. The Tangkhul traditional houses revolve around traditional beliefs and custom being passed down. The Tangkhul artistic creativity is manifested in their handicraft and traditional wood carvings. Through art and crafts, the social economic aspects of people are reflected. The Tangkhul traditional house is broadly categorised into two types: Ngashi Shim (thatched house) and Lengcheng Shim (wooden house).

The Awunga (village chief) and Pipa (clan heads) should have a samsok (Hao wooden bed), wonrah (a resting platform constructed at some places) and Human skulls and animal skulls mainly of buffalo, monkey and wild boar are decorated around the house which signify the old 'head hunting' Tradition. The styles of houses built by the Tangkhuls were similar to the Kabo valley style. The construction of traditional Tangkhul houses involves lots of rituals and customs. The traditional Tangkhul houses have carving of human. Human skulls and animal skulls mainly of buffalo, monkey, wild boar is decorated around the house which signify the old 'head hunting' Tradition.

³Devi Promodini, Numit Kappa and Panthoibi Khongkun: A Study of Socio-Economic and Politico- Religious aspects of early Manipur, Times Printer Publishing Home, Kakching, 1988,p.15.

⁴Singh O Kumar, Stone Age Archaeology of Manipur, Amusana Institute of Atiquarian Studies, Manipur, 1977,p.131.

In ancient days, the Nagas made their own threads from the fibres of some trees. They also used some kind of bark and roots of tree collected from the jungle for dyeing their threads for weaving cloths. 'The juice of the wild indigo is used to give a black or dark blue'. Both married and unmarried Tangkhul women were engaged in art of weaving. They made the requirement of their family for everyday use and for ceremonial purposes. Soon they began to use cotton in making their cloths. According to folklore in earlier times, barter system of goods was practiced between the tribes' people and Meities. The traditional textiles of Tangkhul can be broadly classified as unisex textiles, both for male and female (upper and lower) garments. For example: among the traditional clothes and wears, the Haora Shawl is especially for Men whereas, the Chonkhom shawl is exclusively for women. The chief garments were shawls (Kachon) and Kashan female sarong.

The Tangkhuls were very fond of ornaments. Most of the ornaments of the Tangkhul - Naga such as khongsang, Huishon etc. were made of sea shells, conch shells a prominent feature of the people who live on the shore. They wore cane or brass rings coiled below the knee and had their ears pierced at the early age for wearing ornaments. The culture of Tangkhul is interrelated to their traditional beliefs, practice and custom which include the ancient tools and materials like swords, knife, spears, shields, bow, axes, and arrows. The art of Tangkhuls are attractive and creative. Some of the traditional produced tools and ornaments which distinctly

meant for men and women includes Varao Kazei (spears), Malah (arrow), Khai (knife), Ngalasop (basket), Mayo pasi (head gear), Zeithing, Huishon, Changvei (shield), Haar kazao (Bangal), Khongsang cha (necklace), Changkui, Tin(Spades), Ngaha(axe) etc.

Music:

The Tangkhuls are music loving people and most of their songs were soft and melodious. Songs and music were an important part of the Tangkhul socio-cultural life. On occasions like marriage, festival and other occasion singing songs in group was a popular entertainment of the Tangkhuls. The Tangkhul religious and romantic nature was expressed in their folksongs and music. Tangkhul songs are of various kinds such as war songs, festival songs, lullaby etc. Folksongs can be sung and taught by anybody. It was also played along with traditional musical instruments such as Tingteila (violent), Tala (trumpet), Phung (drum), Sipa (flute), Paren (bamboopipe) etc.

Narrative Legends:

Myths and legends play an essential role in creating the history of Tangkhul Naga. A legend is a traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but not authenticated. Myths and legends are part of all societies across the world. The origin story of Tangkhul and other Naga tribes trace their origins to Makhel. Many strange story and tales of living ghost are heard from community and village elders. Narration about Kazeiram, Mi Khangayei, Kokto, Shimreishang and Maitonphi are some of the stories which the Tangkhul Naga grew up listening to. Stories about head hunters are not foreign to Tangkhul people.

Belief and Religion:

The old religion of Tangkhul Naga tribe was a mixture of sacrifice, superstitious, morality, social custom and taboos.

The traditional religion of the Tangkhul was animism belief in one supreme god who is known by many names such as Ameowa, Reisangchonme, Zinghungleng and others. M. Horam is of the opinion that the Naga ancestor have no notion of supreme deity and that there existed no difference whatever between the conceptions of ghosts and the conception of Gods; no definite belief in any heaven and hell.⁵ According to traditional Tangkhul folklore the Kameos (evil spirit) was belief to have resided with the human on earth while Ameowa (creator) is said to have resided in heaven. They had vague concept in life after death. Sacrifices were the main mode of worships to propitiate the evil spirits. Omen, dream, sign and superstitious determine their social life. The Tangkhul festivals marked the different agricultural stages and were associated with religious activities like prayers to their Gods.

Food habits:

Agriculture was the mainstay of the Tangkhul Naga both terrace and shifting/ Jhuming system of rice cultivation was practiced. According to Mc. Culloch, The system of cultivation amongst the Tangkhul Tribe is superior to that of the other tribes, being on terraces that are watered by streams issuing from the side of the hill above them.⁶The early Tangkhul village state was economically self-sufficient except for salt. Most of the needs of the traditional Tangkhuls were produced by themselves. There was no division of labour as in other Indian regions. Some of the main items produced by the Tangkhuls are rice, maize, chillies, pumpkin, cucumber, tobacco, ginger, potato etc. The water system plays an important role in the agriculture as it determines the agriculture pattern of the Tangkhul society. The Tangkhuls are meat lovers. The ancient tangkhul practice hunting, fishing and domestication of animals.

Conclusion:

The discerning pattern or structure in folklore may or may not be consciously perceived but it reveal more than the common ways of life and cultural perspectives. Folklores associates itself in the study of human culture through the different genres of verbal arts, folk traditions and customs, beliefs. Folklore is concerned with revealing the inter-relationships of different culture expressions. Folklore is a part of human culture and the way of the folk aid to a culture and makes one aware of the value and importance of culture. The Tangkhul cultural heritage is based on folklore. The rich repertoire of tales, songs, riddles, sayings and others among the Naga brings in a better understanding of their similarities and their oneness. Today, it is not surprising that

many of us are not able to narrate a folktale or sing folk songs as we the younger generation take a culture backseat and take no interest in preserving our traditional customs.

⁵M.Horam, old ways and New Trends, Cosmos Publication, New Delhi 1998, p.14-15.

⁶Mc. Culloch, Account of the Valley of Manipur, Gian Publication, Delhi Reprinted 1980,p.68.

Our culture is an expression of who we are and what we are. It is an expression of our very own human identity. Hence, one has to take up measures to conserve our rich cultural heritage. It is important for us to conserve our folklore to showcase our identity to the world through rich culture.

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