

ORAL NARRATIVES OF THE CHAKHESANG NAGAS AND ITS PORTRAYAL OF THE COMMUNITY LIFE THEREIN

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Abstract

Oral narratives like folksongs and folktales play a vital role in the oral community life of the Chakhesang Nagas. Due to the absence of a written script, the people find their way to relate the past through a different kind of oral transmission of folksongs and folktales. Since the oral narration solely depends on one's memory, with time, it slowly changes as the folksongs are been sung by different singers or the folktales narrated by different narrators. The flexible nature of the oral narration, it keeps on with the changing need of time and no one can stop the flow of change. No matter what consequences the changes is taking place, everything is recorded through folksongs and folktales which help the young generation to know about the social life of the past to some extent. Had it not folksongs and folktales existed or the creativity of the people fails to implore the importance of folksongs and folktales, then the community would have lost its contact with their past. But, with the creativity of the people in composing folksongs and narrating folktales, it bridges the gap of the past and the present generation. The present paper aims to study how oral narratives play an important role in helping the community to preserve their history, and how people use as a means to transmit their history from one generation to the next generation. It will also focus on how oral narration is accepted by the community in the present generation. The paper is based on the data collected during the personal fieldwork undertaken as part of the research.

Keyword: Oral Narratives, folksongs, folktales, community life

1.INTRODUCTION

The Chakhesang Nagas is one of the sixteen communities inhabiting in Nagaland. The absence of a written script in the community makes them rely on the spoken story of people through oral narration to past down the knowledge of the community from one generation to the next generation. Oral narrations in the form of folktales and folksongs of the communities in India have their own beauty suiting to the environment and the people around. The people living in the hills and the plains have variation in traditions, food habits, culture etc. For instance, the people living by the seashore depends their food on fish, while on the hillside, according to nature providence, they are prompt to depend on meat. Even in oral traditions, the folktales of the plains romanticised the sea, the moon, fisherman or the daily life happening by the seaside, while the people living on the side of the hill tend to romanticise the beauty of nature, flower, trees, the greenery of the hills, and the daily activities of the people.

The traditional dresses differentiate the people from the hills and the plains. The plain people have the availability of gold, iron, silver or brass, thus according they decorate themselves with it, while one finds the beak of birds or its feather, the tusk of the animals, dresses or ornaments representing flowers or nature among the hill people. The miseries, happiness and the past glory of the people are reflected through folksongs and folktales. One finds that they are the sole source to contact the past with the present. Both young and old learn them through listening or practising in the gathering sitting around the fire, especially during the festival period. People celebrate festivals after festivals following the agricultural cycle. When people were busy penning down their emotions and feelings in other parts of the world, the oral narrative is the only means to the community of the Chakhesangs due to absent of script and late arrival of education within the community. The

people composed their emotions and feeling through folksongs and even tell their own stories in disguise by using their creative skill of narration. The plight of the people, their miseries, and love is always a theme behind the folksong and folktales. When one looks deeper into the folksong and folktales, it transports one back to past days.

2. THE PORTRAYAL OF COMMUNITY LIFE THROUGH FOLKSONGS AND FOLKTALES

Folksong and folktale as part of oral narratives are transmitted by word of mouth. It is composed or sometimes it is sung randomly according to the situation of the singer or the composer is caught into. People find solace in folksong by pouring out all their unspoken feelings. This is why many folksongs of the community yearn with untold pain or express their unspoken feelings and emotions. It indirectly longs people to hear them. Most of the folksongs are an escape from reality. The community co-existed with nature for many years, therefore they learn to whistles like a bird, which later on becomes a war cry or an alert for danger approaching. This slowly makes its way to folksong. The people listen to the melody of the birds chirping then tune it to folksong by composing their feelings and emotions through lyric. The *oh ho, oh ho, oh oh*, is an utterance made by the people that comes out when the work. This also slowly turns into the melody of the folksong. People dependent on agricultural work reflect in almost all the folksongs. The lyric of the folksong comes out spontaneously, which in a way gives a person to pour out all his thoughts and feelings at that very moment or the situation, his life has caught in.

In-group folksong tends to convey more of a general message, while the folksong sang in duet and solo deals with more of personal theme. The group folksongs are usually sung during the festivals and social gathering,

while individuals folksongs are usually sung people a person is working along and tries to convey message his/her love to the beloved. In olden days, where there is no modern technology of communication, people communicate and give sign through folksong. For instance, when the lover has completed his fieldwork and going home, he cannot call out his beloved who is still working on the other side of the field with her parents. Thus, he climbs up to the mountainside, where his voice can be heard, then he yodels and composes folksong to stop working and rest. The lover on hearing her beloved replied him back through another folksong. Sometimes on their way back home, people rest and sits down in a place that has a good view and sing it out to people to rest and that its time to go home. This natural and spontaneous process of communication slowly paves the social life of the people to oral tradition.

The community being solely depending upon agriculture throughout their life until they were bedridden, they toil and labour to survive, and some to gain social status by holding the feast of merit. On and off lamentation folksongs were heard, complaining of their tireless work under the scorching sun and thundering rain, lamenting of the death or lamenting of the miseries and suffering of stepchildren, especially stepdaughter. Due to the lack of technological implements, people completely depend on the workforce. They help each other to complete the fieldwork, by taking a turn and working from one field to another field the next day. The poor people who have less field to cultivate and the paddy he harvested is not sufficient for him to survive in a year than he works in the rich man's field to get a basket of rice as his wage. When people work in the field, they sing out their heart to let people hear and listen to them. Lamenting of the harsh reality of life is the order of the day. A folksong of an orphan who was labouring in a rich man's field shows that a helpless person uses folksong as a replacement to ease out his suffering;

*I küswülü mülerüso künemi yilü
A khratele a züvotaze
Nachi kütho thori ditele
E mürüni-o apo vo taze
A chithi a bori müzho
A ta dori a bedo motele*

Helpless am I, but to labour in rich man's field
Tired was I and beg to take me home
Even the sun has lost its rays
Orphan am I, let me go home
My waist pains, and tired is my hand
My mouth is willing to toil but my hand refused to do so.

Throughout the folksong, the orphan cries out his heart of his plight of working rich man's field. As he is earning to get his wage, he cannot go home as his wish, but please the owner and work according to them. The rich are rather seem stingy and selfish, as their main motive of work is to climb the social ladder by holding a feast to the whole village. However, this requires extra labour and man forced to work in the field. Thus, they employ people to work for them but people who work for them suffer because they were given less rest and more work. People compete in their work to give a feast to the village. This is the only way to climb the social ladder and gain respect from the society, besides earning a warrior title.

In the absence of writing script, folktales become a key factor in passing down the tradition through oral narration. Unlike folksongs, folktales are likely to change or some been exaggerated according to a person mood and his technique of narration. It is been narrated to young boys and girls by the older people sitting around the fire. Thus, most folktales are passed down through the Morung institution. Folktale cannot be memorised like a folksong, it requires the presence of mind and creativity of the mind to narrate folktales. The narrator at times forgets or lose track of the story so he twisted or form his own story to cover up the rest of the stories. It involves all his expression and gesture to make the story interesting and even capture the listeners to participate during his narration. Through folktales, one is brought to the limelight about the social life of the past. Sometimes it even exposed the domestic life that is happening within the four walls in the past society. It takes the listeners to travel back to the past, re-experience the different world, where animals, human being and spirit existed and communicated. There is no more disagreeing the fact, rather than to agree with Harold Scheud views on tales;

"The tale is the moment in which past and present are blended in a performance.....the tales are simultaneously depictions of the immediate present, of real difficulties and genuine human emotions, at the same time that they point to the infinite; the human emotions and the problems of the hearth become

generalized into cosmological infinitude. This is the power of the performance (the narrator); it is the potency of the tale.....tale is reality, tale is performance; the image is real, the image is fantastic; the tale is the present, the tale is the past"¹

The belief on unseen god and spirit is on and off appear in most of the stories. Sometimes the intervention of *Kümünipvü* or even the belief in fairies existed within the society. One finds in the stories how the people try to relate themselves to the spirits or the intervention unseen god to all their unanswerable questions. The life of the society builds up the story, set the setting and even the character realistically portrays the life situation of the past, though sometimes it is been exaggerated to suit the mood of the people's pleasure. All the life of sufferings, hardship, happiness, prosperity, their belief etc. is directly or indirectly portray when the tales are been narrated. Sometimes the narrator fictionalises his own name and skilfully narrated his story to the people without letting them know it is his story. Like any other stories in the world, where there is always a story of the trickster, even in among the Chakhesang community, the trickster, also called *Machi* is famous among the folktales. This kind of trickster's character is usually been found in almost all the tales of the world. A similar character is found in African folktales, a female character call *Hlakanyana*² who goes around the village avenging the people who ill-treated her, and tricking the people to survive and sustain her life. In Chakhesang community, *Machi*, a male character is known for his tricks in all the stories his character falls into. Like *Hlakanyana*, he goes around the villages tricking people to survive and avenging the villages who ill-treated him. Both of them are been tried by the villagers, but with their tricks, they reverse the fate by tricking the villagers to fall in to their own trap and meet their lost or dead end. No matter what one finds similarity or a likeness of plot or character in folktales of the world. These show that just as folktales help the younger generation to build the present with their past in the Chakhesang community, a similar process takes place in other parts of the world as well.

¹ Harold Scheub. *Trickster and Hero: Two Characters in the Oral and Written Traditions of the World*. (United State of America: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012)p. 30

² Harold Scheub.....(ibid)pp. 35-38

3. CONCLUSION

Unlike folksong that gives the listener to guess the situation or the motive behind the song, one gets the clear picture of the society in minute detail in folktale. It exposes the miseries, suffering, joy and happiness. In most of the stories, one finds the plight of the orphan child, as this issue was the sickening disease paralysing the society in the past. Besides dead, the system of temporal and permanent marriage for every girl to compulsorily go through is one of the factors for the existence of widow or widower in society. One gets to know the dark side of the past through the folktales of the orphan child, the ill-treatment meted to him/her and the embarrassment he/she face in the society. On the other side, the folktale that narrates about the feast of merit, the festivals after festivals celebrated according to agricultural cycle portrays the prosperity and peaceful co-existence within the villagers. Folktales of warriors and legends are never been forgotten. In fact, they are been narrated and passed down from one generation to another generation as their pride and glory. It gives the listener a vivid picture of the headhunting period. One gets the glimpse of how warriors were once honoured and respected, and the system of war. One simply does not go cutting of head. Instead, a day is always been fixed for the fight after both the party accepted the challenge. A man who killed his enemy from behind is considered to be no better than a timid man who distances himself from going to war and the bravery is never counted. Folktales give a realistic picture and a clearer description of the past to the present.

The community belief is no less been neglected in the folktale. In every folktale, one finds the people invoking the unseen supreme god, or one find the intervention of the spirit within the community. The religious belief of the people was very strong. Anything that cannot be explained by facts is considered as the work of the supreme god or spirits, fairies or sometimes by the evil forces. The concept of life after death and the belief of heaven and the world of darkness are very much believed by the people, no matter how vague it may seem to the outsiders. All these traits of the ancestor's belief are been exposed in the folktale. One can see the complex nature of the concept of god and life after death. However, the complexities and the vagueness of their belief was never a hinder to life but is always a solution to the replacement of fear, anxieties and emotions.

Even today, folksong is considered as a continuous process of oral tradition, it bridges the gap between the past and present. Since the folksong is completely dependent on memory, they tend to forget, as people grow old. Some folksongs are been forgotten, while others are been passed down to the younger generation, helping the society to trace back the social life and condition of their ancestors. In the past, folksong might have been composed to entertain themselves and other people, or considered as a personal diary and love letter to pass a message to the concern people and sometimes it can also be a cry for help yearning people to hear it out. Today all these have become the reflection of the past life of the people. The setting, the characters and the theme in folksong all lingers to the time and situation of the particular time that the composer has composed. One cannot trace back the exact date and time of the past in oral society, but one can still roughly guess the situation and understand the century to some certain extend. For instance, when one hears the folksong of war during the headhunting period, and then one can make out that it was dated before the arrival of the Christian missionaries. In of the arrival of the written script with the coming of Christian missionaries, the folksong still holds as an importance factor to uphold their tradition and their traditional history.

Folktales might be of personal experiences or stories makeup from whims and fancies. Either way, it helps the society to transmit the moral values and inspiration to the younger generation. Some folktales end with a moral lesson to teach moral values to the people while some are humorous and satirical to indirectly pinpoint the fault of the people. Through folktale people, learn how to behave, respect and obey the moral values expected in society. The characters in the folktale are the characters that are familiar to the people and the theme deals with the issues happening in the society of that particular time. It is share and narrated any of the leisure time or in a busy time to teach or relate it to the situation. Like folksong, that portrays the past to the present, folktale has also its own role to play and help the people to know about the past social life.

With the changing need of time and situation, folktales and folksongs have drastically changed. The

introduction of Christianity amongst the community has diverted the centre of oral tradition to the Biblical centre. The people get mixed up with the creation myth of their community with the Bible. The original lyrics of the folksongs are been replaced with Biblical context. However, despite the outside influence, the oral narration of the community still resiliently strives to prevail within the community by adjusting and adapting according to the changing need of time and situation.

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