

Folktales from the Hills: A Look into the Angami Naga Oral Tradition

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ABSTRACT:

The Angami Nagas are a tribe inhabiting the hills of Nagaland, a mountainous terrain in north eastern India. The Angami Nagas, like the rest of the other Naga Tribes have no written documents, that would have otherwise serve as a source of documenting history and culture. They are a tribe that follows the oral tradition to pass down knowledge and culture to the younger generation. Every story they tell, every word they hum in a folksong and every detail we see in their traditional attires have different stories to tell and stories that they have lived. These folktales represent the oral folk literature of a tribe, becoming a source of repository for its history, culture, beliefs and ideologies. These folktales, however, are fast disappearing with cultural assimilation, westernization and the effects of the global village. As the world move toward a global village, modernity and technological advancement, old practices are abandoned and this is the case with the oral tradition of narrating folktales, which occurred in morungs and in the family circle. With each passing generation, these folktales have faced lack of opportune delivery and sustainability, even diversion and dilution of the original, as is usually the case with oral tradition. The need to document and preserve the rich folktales is felt like never before.

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This article is qualitative in nature, where relevant literature will be studied, interviews will be conducted and analysis on the selected folktales will be made to highlight the significance of every folktale. This article will highlight three folktales and will make an attempt to study the oral tradition of the Angami Nagas, how and from where these folktales were told in the past and passed on to the younger generation in the absence of formal school system, and finally the present study will also show how their folktales direct their people and how these folktales shape their society.

Keywords: Angami Nagas, Oral Tradition, Folktales.

Introduction:

The Angami Tribe is one of the major Naga tribes inhabiting Kohima district of Nagaland, the 16th state of the Indian Union. Like the rest of the Naga Tribes, the flow of information and traditional knowledge was oral.

Oral tradition is not just a medium for preserving history and culture, but is also in many ways, a moral compass for many communities that follow oral traditions. In world societies where there exist no formal written codes of law or formal education systems, folk literature in the form of folktales, stories, proverbs, and songs often function as ethical texts which shapes and influence the individual as well as group behaviour and reinforce communal values. The narratives are not merely for entertainment but they teach lessons, morals and values and warn against deviations. "The ethical dimension of oral tradition lies in its ability to translate lived experiences and cultural ideals into shared moral frameworks" (Chowdhury and Umadevi 2023, 85–106). Oral tradition, therefore, is broadly a tradition that primarily preserves its knowledge system by passing down from one generation to generation through the different forms of stories, songs, dances and verbal instructions (Pou 2015, 72). The same can be said about the rich oral tradition of the Angami Nagas where the folktales become more than story telling but a way of learning on how to live rightly within the social order in the absence of written code.

Methodology

The method used for this research paper is Inductive thematic analysis of interviews and literature in relation with the selected folktales and the objectives of the research paper are:

1. To document the folktales of the Angami Nagas through Interviews and relevant Literature.
2. To highlight the significance of folktales in shaping an oral community like the Angami Nagas.

Discussion

Kichüki (Morung)

The first place to learn about the culture and tradition in an Angami village is home, usually at the hearthside of home where family gathers to eat food or warm themselves by the fireside. As a youth grows to a teen, he will be eligible to go to the *Kichüki* (Morung).

The Morung is a dormitory for young boys and girls. It is a place where they gather after the days' work is done and they gather here to be with their peer groups. The Morung also acts as a place of learning where the young listen and learn from the elders. However, with modernity, this system has disappeared, replaced by modern systems of education and the career and job oriented system, which the Morung system cannot provide. The negative impact however is the fact that, with the disappearance of the Morung system, the folktales, folk songs and folklores which otherwise were passed orally have lost their primary platform and with little or no means of transmission, these oral literatures have been slowly disappearing. "Nagas are rich in folktales, folksongs, folkdances and folklore. These must be compiled systematically for posterity. There are only a few publication available till date though. With the disappearance of the Morung-dormitory system" (Sekhose 2011, 162). The author here laments the disappearance of the Morung system as this was a place built and maintained by the older generation to pass down knowledge to the younger generation. Sharing this burden, a few scholars and writer have courageously and dutifully tried to document and preserve the oral literature in their works. The vibrancy of each tribe or village will slowly disappear with time if, not told and recorded. The dependency on the older generation is getting swept away with the passage of time.

The traditional Education system for the young boys and girls where every trait and skills are learned is the Morung. (Elizabeth and Tsuren 2017,13) states that,

The morungs served as educational centers equipping the young with the values and ways of their culture. These were mainly for the male

members but also served as common meeting places. Similarly, young girls of the same age group had a corresponding house. They had their own dormitory in the home of an elderly lady. The elder or a parent was responsible for their cultural initiation. The basic concept of this education system was that the elder members of the community taught and guided the younger ones by sharing their knowledge and wisdom gained through experience.

In the past, Morung played a very important role in building a community, mentoring and educating the younger generation. Morung is a place where young boys gather, sing, recite lyrics and also listen to the elders about their past exploits and stories of their ancestors were also learned from this place. Also, this is not only a place to sing and merrymaking but also a form of school for the boys who have come of age.

In these institutions young men learn stories of their villages or tribe's exploits and defeats, of men who brought pride to the people, of warfare and how to be great warriors, and to be responsible men of the people. In the same way women learned the art of various occupations and things that relate to the women of the society. The Morung is also where people learned the songs for various festivities and the stories of the old that speak of their history, traditions, customs and practices (Pou 2015, 74).

Morungs may have been replaced by schools in the today's context but it did not kill the spirit of learning orally for some Angamis. They still listen; they still learn but to a limited time or season since.

The Morung served as a traditional school where traditional values were handed down from one generation to the next. They were taught, trained and disciplined in this institution. It was here that raids and headhunting's were planned and discussed. (Zetsuvi 2014,25).

In a Morung, the duty of the elders is to inculcate moral values of life, obedience, respect and social obligations. In the absence of written code and also the absence of reading and writing, the

elders communicate orally, the young boys listen to the elders and remembers and pass their learnings down to the younger ones once they are in a position to be called an elder.

Interaction and communal participation are integral aspects of the Angami oral tradition.

This is in the sense that storytelling is a social experience rather than a solitary act. These storytelling sessions often take place during significant cultural events, festivals, or gatherings, where families and friends come together to share narratives that reflect their shared history, values, and beliefs. The *kichiki* (morung), a traditional gathering place for young men, served as an important context where oral tradition was transmitted to younger generation. In such places, elders recounted tales of the past, legends, myths or cultural ethos and values of the Angami people. The hearthside in Angami households is another important context for oral tradition to be passed down. Here, elders and parents pass down stories that include moral lessons, ancestral histories, and folk tales. Another significant traditional context for sharing and exchanging oral literature is in the fields where the agricultural works are done in a communal setting. In these informal settings, where community members work together, storytelling serves as a way to bond and pass time. The stories shared here can range from light-hearted anecdotes to more serious lessons, often reflecting daily life and the rhythms of the natural world. These narratives help maintain a connection to the land and agricultural practices, offering a way to intertwine cultural wisdom with labour and community life.

Most of the folksongs sung were learned from the elders singing, the younger ones listening and passing down the tune to the following generation.

Folktales of The Angami Nagas

MACHE

Once there lived a man named *Mache* in an Angami village. *Mache* was a witty and clever youth and he would exploit the innocent villagers

often. Crafty as he was, Mache was also very lazy. Since he does not go to the field to work and stay at home the whole day, the villagers who often goes to the field requested him to take care of their children. So, *Mache* would baby sit the children of the villagers while the parents worked in the fields during the day. This would be a good thing if only Mache would honestly be carrying out his given job but he did not take care of the children properly when he was left all alone with the children.

By evening when the parents get their children home from Mache's care, the children would cry out of hunger, all because, *Mache* would eat all their prepared lunch without feeding them.

It was told that *Mache* would eat the children's lunch and later excrete giant stools. Amazed by the size of his stool, the villagers asked *Mache* the reason and *Mache* would say, it is all because of eating green leaves. It was told that, In the latter part of his life, he was chased away from the village.

In a more extreme narration, seeing Mache's stool, huge and substantial, Mache was requested by the villagers to help the children pass stool just like he was able to. All the rich food he stole from the children contributed to his healthy bowel movements and the children deprived of their food, naturally had poor bowel movements. Mache would then go on to tell the gullible villagers to bring him a rod with a sharpened tip (in some narrations, it was an umbrella handle with a sharpened tip). The tragedy is that, Mache heated the tip on fire and pierced the anuses of all the children, who would all succumbed later to the inhuman act. Only the death of the children would cause the villagers to see past their foolishness, a realization that came too late. Though the Villagers chased Mache to avenge their children, Mache's wit would again prove to be a power to reckon and they would fail in their pursuit.

The story of *Mache* and his exploits is a popular story narrated amongst children. The story is found in all the Angami Villages. The story of *Mache* is found as simple narration and in some, with dramatic dialogues. The character of *Mache*

is a narration of wit and adaptability. There is also the element of warning in exploiting others and its sanctions.

The ethical dimension of Angami oral tradition is vividly illustrated in the popular tale of *Mache*, a witty but lazy youth who takes advantage of the villagers' trust. While he is tasked with babysitting children during the day, *Mache* neglects his responsibility and instead consumes the meals meant for the children, leaving them hungry and distressed by evening. He deceives the villagers by attributing his large stools to eating green leaves, masking his selfish behaviour with clever lies. Though the tale is humorous and often dramatized for entertainment, it carries an unmistakable moral weight. *Mache's* story serves both as a critique of laziness and exploitation, and a cautionary tale about the consequences of deceit. Looking at the other side of the tale, with the way the villagers fell into his lies also shows the innocence of the villagers. It can also be a lesson for the villagers to not totally trust someone blindly but to understand and act according to the situation and to be cautious in taking decisions which may directly affect them or their children. Widely known across Angami villages, this narrative exemplifies how oral tradition teaches communal ethics by highlighting the value of honesty, responsibility, and care for others, even as it entertains. Through characters like *Mache*, Angami oral tradition passes on not only cultural memory but also essential moral lessons to younger generations.

Te-l- Khukhu

The origin of *Te-l-khukhu*, a festival for girls.

It was told that long time ago in an Angami village an Angami damsel who was wondering in the forest saw a *Zabe* (big pond) and as she approached towards the pond, she saw an *otshü bo* (millet plant) fully ripened, in the middle of that *zabe* (big pond). Seeing the plant, she wanted to have the millet plant so, she sent a *Teli* (squirrel) to pluck the millet plant for her, but the squirrel did not return to her. The next, she sent and *Oka* (parrot), to her disappointment, the bird instead of bringing the millet plant to the girl,

started eating the millet and did not return either. At last, in her desperation to have the *otshü bo* (millet plant), finally, she sent a *Te-l* (toad) for the task. The toad brought her an ear of millet. The damsel happily and gratefully received from the toad the ear of millet and promised the toad that she will give a serving of millet to him every year. Thus, *Te-l* (toad), *Khukhu* (serving) came into being. Till this day *Otshü* (millet) is a very important ingredient in the preparation of *Te-l Khukhu* food.

Te-l-khukhu, the name given for the festival is now, a festival of girls that falls on the 13th of July every year. It is dedicated and celebrated only by innocent head shaven damsels during the olden days and with the passage of time, it is now celebrated by girls who are not necessarily head shaven. It is celebrated yearly as a time of giving and sharing food with each other. The promise made by the girl to the toad is kept alive in the form of sharing food. One remarkable feature of this festival is that it is the only festival for girls. *The Origin of Te-l-Khukhu* offers a compelling example of how Angami oral tradition encodes systems of value, survival, and resistance within seemingly simple narratives. The story centres around a woman's search for a ripened millet stalk located in the middle of a pond. After attempts by more agile or clever animals fail, due to selfishness or ineffectiveness, it is the humble, persistent toad that succeeds. In gratitude, the woman promises to offer a share of millet to the toad each year, thus giving rise to *Te-l-Khukhu*, a festival rooted in remembrance, reciprocity, and the celebration of nourishment.

This tale is significant on multiple levels. On the surface, it conveys values of humility, thankfulness, and the honouring of promises. More subtly, however, it reflects the oral culture's capacity to preserve ecological knowledge and emphasize sustainable, reciprocal relationships with nature. The central role of millet, ties the story to subsistence and survival, while the act of ritual offering reinforces community memory and ecological balance. *Te-l-Khukhu*, the girls' festival that emerges from this narrative, further reinforces the oral tradition's function as a space

for asserting identity and continuity. Celebrated by young, head-shaven girls, it symbolizes innocence, purity, and a collective cultural belonging. In a patriarchal and rapidly modernizing society, such traditions act as forms of subtle resistance, honouring the agency of girls, foregrounding female-centred spaces, and reaffirming indigenous identity through seasonal rituals and communal sharing.

Thus, this tale is more than a folktale; it is a living narrative that challenges the dominance of external systems by sustaining ancestral knowledge, and reaffirming community values across generations. As with many Angami oral narratives, *The Origin of Te-l-Khukhu* stands as both a cultural memory and a quiet yet powerful form of resistance against forgetting.

The two examples from the folktales show how lessons are taught in Angami communities through stories and also the outcome of being good, bad or being responsible or irresponsible. The following folktale also reminds us how they are closely connected with nature and how they give back to nature. This communion between nature and the community bring the beauty of living simple life and a life that is at peace with their surroundings.

Folktale on Resolution of conflicts

Once upon a time, in an Angami village, a man whose pig had given birth to some piglets found that every day, one of his piglets would go missing. He thought to himself that if he keeps quiet while one by one his piglets are stolen, there will be nothing left for him, since in olden days they could either sell their piglets or would rare them and sustain their livelihood. So, In order to catch the thief, he tied a very long rope on his toe from one end of the rope and the other end of the rope he tied on one of the bamboo poles, laid horizontally, which was used as a gate for the pigsty so that, as and when the thief comes to steal the remaining piglets, he will know and could alert his neighbours or anyone. Fortunately, that same night, as he was sleeping, he felt the movement of the rope. So, he rushed towards the pigsty and to his utter surprise he

saw the shadow of a man and as he approached towards the pigsty, he witnessed a man quietly stealing a piglet. He later identified the man and informed his clansmen so that they will decide the fate of this thief. Here, one needs to remember that in the past all important decisions were made by the elders of the village. So, the next day everybody waited for the elder to decide the fate of the thief. The elder after a prolonged interrogation and understanding the case, it was decided that the thief must pay seven (7) times the amount of what he has stolen. The thief cannot deny but agree because if he disobeyed the decision of the elders, he will not be allowed to live in the same village. He agreed and the case was settled. It is believed that because of this punishment, everybody feared stealing.

In traditional Angami Naga society, conflicts are often resolved through the intervention of elders or village councils, and these mechanisms of justice are reflected in their stories. The narratives often involve conflicts that arise from violations of sacred norms, moral wrongs, or breaches of social etiquette, and the resolution of these conflicts plays a key role in restoring social harmony.

The three folktales have been passed down from the older generation. The idea of retelling and analyzing these three folktales is to give a better understanding about the oral tradition of the Angami Nagas. It is through these tales that we see the significance and essence of the oral tradition of the Angamis.

However, with the passage of time and with the exposure to the modern world this system of passing down knowledge is becoming a forgotten history. If these are not recorded, they will be erased with time and the history and culture of the Naga people in general and the Angamis in particular will fade away. The need to document these kinds of tales has been felt and spoken of by many writes. However, the idea to delve deeper into the meaning of these tales are hardly undertaken. Therefore, this research paper has made an attempt to discuss these three folktales from the surface to the meaning behind these folktales.

Conclusion

From **Morungs** most of the folktales have been passed down to the younger generation and with the introduction of modern education the morungs have ceased to exist, yet the oral narrators could recollect these tales so that they could be documented. Folktales play a very important role in a community like the Angami Nagas because in the absence of the written documents, it is through these folktales they preserve their culture and through these folktales they keep their society grounded and through folktales they instruct their people. The folktales that are told, are passed on to the younger generation to not merely entertain but to teach and make them aware about their history and to bring information about how certain festival that is celebrated had its origin. For example, *T-e-l Khukhu*, the festival for girls is celebrated to remember the covenant between a girl who was helped by a toad. Similarly, the tale of *Mache* is narrated to the young boys and girls to be on their guard when responsibilities are given to them because when trust is broken, no matter how witty one is, he will be caught and may have to go through shame and also taken example of in every household. Also, the tale of Resolution and conflict is popularly narrated to the younger generation so as to remind them that for every action there is a consequence.

The key findings of this article using the Inductive thematic analysis, we can say that Angami oral tradition presents a colorful dimension of teaching lessons by infusing examples in folktales which stands as warning in exploiting others and its sanctions. Folktales also serve as moral lessons to younger generations. Folktales also teach this group of people values of humility; thankfulness and these folktales are also passed on to the younger generation to uncover the idea of honouring of promises. These folktales play an important role in bringing about peace and restoring social harmony and also these folktales reflect the relationship of Angami Nagas with nature.

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