

An Overview of the Lotha-Naga Cultural Life

Liyngbeni R Kithan (zestyorkithan2015@gmail.com)

Research Scholar, Department of English, William Carey University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee [The RCSAS \(ISSN: 2583-1380\)](http://www.thercsas.com). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). Crossref/DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55454/rcsas.2.8.2022.002>

Abstract: *As history proves every human fact occurring at places, and occasions, folklores and folktales continue to carry a lot of weight and evidences that has genuine historical records. Our attempt here is to define what is really meant by folklore and folktale, interpret, draw moral teachings, and make a remark of the stories in order to enhance our concern in the tribal world. Like any other tribal's in India, the Lotha Nagas have their own rich cultural heritage preserved in the form of oral traditions and artifacts. The Lotha Nagas area abounds with rich oral tradition which includes folktales and lores, local myths and traditions related to the local history, landforms and names of places. These oral traditions have been a source of value education as well as an entertainment in traditional rural societies, and they hold the essence of rich culture and traditions.*

This paper entitled "The Folklores and Folktales of the Lotha Nagas: A key in understanding Culture and Society" intends to evaluate the Lotha Nagas social system based on the idioms contained in Lotha Nagas Lore and Tales. It distinguishes folklore in relation to the culture of the Lothas. It will examine how folklore and tales offer philosophical insights into the culture and society of the Lotha Nagas. It also attempts to bring forth folktales and lores as an important part of the incarnated aspects of the Lotha Naga culture. Therefore to comprehend the Lotha Culture and Society, it is essential to study its various socio-cultural ethos, festivals and ceremonies which is unique to their culture. Folktales and lores are the instruments of education into a culture of the feelings in which a person's response to life's challenges will be based.

Keywords: Folklores and Folktales, Lotha Nagas, Oral traditions, Tribal Culture and Society

Introduction

The Lotha Naga community of Nagaland has a rich oral tradition of folktales and lore, local myths and traditions that speak about community history. These oral traditions have been a source of value education as well as entertainment in the traditional rural societies, and they hold the essence of their identity and value system.

This paper entitled "An Overview of the Lotha-Naga Cultural Life" Intends to evaluate Lotha Naga's social system based on the idioms contained in Lotha Naga Lore. Studies of oral tradition can be considered as an indispensable tool for the reconstruction of past historical events of any Culture around the globe, Nagas are no exception to it. Therefore to comprehend the Lotha Society and culture, it is essential to study its various socio-cultural ethos, festivals and ceremonies which is unique to their culture. Lotha Naga society is a communitarian one in their social aspect. But in the age of globalization and revolution in Mass media and cyber technology the indigenous quality of Naga society and many more tribal societies are getting effected both positively and adversely. Now the important question is how ancient tradition like Folk lore can sustain the glittering aspects of an industrialized digital world? This paper will open a discussion related to these issues of disappearing Lotha identity in the age of cyber revolution and the possible role of folk lore to reshape the exotic Naga culture in the present age.

Socio-Cultural Life of Lotha Nagas

Culture is the prism through which we understand the world and the tool by which we shape it. It is also the berth which opens up to other people the great diversity of meanings and experiences. It is much more than monuments, performing arts and books – culture is who we are. It is a wellspring of imagination, a source of belonging at a time of change and a force for innovation in an age of limits. No society can flourish without culture. No development can be sustainable without it. Culture is a driver and enabler of inclusive growth and it is also a channel to forge new forms of global solidarity and citizenship¹. The socio-cultural life of the fore-parents was basically based on a classless society. In short, there is no social stratification. Commenting

¹Culture Matters, www.britishcouncil.org

on the Naga society, A.W. Davis wrote: “Nagas have no caste, so the columns which had reference to distinction of castes presented no difficulties to the enumeration.”²Lotsuro (2000) p.9, mentions that “the Naga society is an aggregate of communities who share a set of structures or principles in common but emphasize them differently.”³ In the context of the Nagas, oral tradition has been indispensable to the reconstruction of the past historical events as in the case of other people across the world. In the same way, to know the Lothas, one need to have an idea of their various socio-cultural lives, their festivals and ceremonies that reflects it the uniqueness of their culture. As once quoted by Professor Vansina:

Whether memory changes or not, culture is reproduced by remembrance put into words and deeds. The mind through memory carries culture from generation to generation. How is it possible for a mind to remember and out of nothing to spin complex ideas, messages, and instructions for living which manifest continuity over time is one of the greatest wonders one can study, comparable only to human intelligence and through itself. Study of Oral tradition is central to student of culture, ideology, of society, of psychology, of art, and finally, of history.⁴There are a number of evidences to identify the Lotha Naga as communitarian in their social aspect. They all belong to one clan or the other which constitutes a village and which in turn also form different tribes.

2

Chumpo (Bachelor’s Dormitory)

In the context of the Lothas, their folktales or oral traditions are soul of their living culture. One cannot appreciate the beauty of culture without knowing the tales and how they are related to it. The seeds of the ancient traditions are found in the oral traditions of the Lothas. It is the dormitory which instilled the living culture of the Lothas. Usually every village is divided into several sectors (yankho), each with a common *chumpo* or bachelor’s house. Women were not allowed to enter except on special occasion. Every adult male is a member of this educational institution where the heritage of tribe, art, etiquette, manners, defense, religion, music, and folk stories are taught. They plan and discuss war policies in this place, and all heads taken were first brought here. Members are graded by seniority, and that is why the senior most in the *chumpo* is highly respected. This is also counted as a guardhouse, a recreation club, and a center of education. According to Mills (1922), even though the *chumpo* is not so attractive and rather dirty, yet the Lothas talk of their happy *chumpo* days like the Englishmen talk of their school days.⁵It is believed that through this center all literary narrative forms, living art, and elements of culture are inherited. It contains the rich and varied source of entertainment and wisdom. The bachelor dormitory plays a vital role in coordinating the activities of all male members of the Lothas and gain particular importance in societies which depend on the young men for the defense of the village, but with the gradual transformation of society and coming into contact with modernity the bachelor dormitory life is forsaken. The absence of the Chumpo (Bachelor dormitory) is a conscious abandonment in the lives of the Lothas as a result of social pressure and the influence of Christian missionaries. It is replaced with the modern Churches and schools, and the traditional beliefs, values, culture and customs have changed drastically. Today, it serves only few services and the rest of the Chumpo (Bachelor dormitory) activities have disappeared. The spirit of Chumpo’s life should be properly reestablished in the society of the Lothas so that the younger generations would have sense of identity and belonging. Now-a-days, *chumpo*s are found in every Lotha villages in the form of *rest house* in every sector, and significant changes could be observed which will be reflected in the course of our research. The construction and development of these are done by the Village Development Party (VDP). The motive is to offer a place where the community’s life of sharing and learning can be imparted to every succeeding generation.

Etssikho (The Sector Assembly)

Etssikho is a kind of assembly hall present in every sector of the village which acts as a place for recreation and social events. It is a open air stone-setting circle where all male members of village summons .It is a place for socializing of the Naga community.⁶At present day such culture is replaced by synthetic culture

² Quoted by Horam, in *Nagas Old Ways and New Trends*, 33-34.

³Lotsuro, *The Nagas: A Missionary Challenge*, 9.

⁴ Quoted by V.K. Nuh, in *165 Years History of Naga Baptist Churches* (Kohima: Council of Naga Baptist Church, 2006), 15.

⁵ Mills, *The Lotha Naga*, 25.

⁶ Murry, *The Introduction and the Growth of Christianity in Kyong*, 8.

promoted by global consumerism. Etssikho is not only a place of meetings, but it is a place which acts as a binding agent of Naga community.

Yinga (Labour Exchange Company)

Yinga or *yingaden* in Lotha community literally mean a kind of organization of working in community. It has several groups; junior, intermediate, and senior, these groups are working groups, laboring in the fields together in turns on the principles of synergy. The employer gives at least two or more meal in a day to the person who works there. It is not only of Utopian value but simultaneously also of aesthetical value where the community works together creating a performance art.

Festivals

The Lothas have varieties of customs, traditional festivals, dresses, ornaments, folk dance and folklore. Of all the festivals of the Lothas, the agricultural festivals are the most commonly wide spread. These festivals marked the beginning or the end of all seeds and the propitiation of the Gods of the crops for a good harvest. The two main agricultural festivals celebrated till today are the *Pikhuchak Emong* (this mean the marking of the beginning of the year) and the *Tokhu Emong*.⁷ Officially, according to the traditions of our fore-parents, every year is opened with *Pikhuchak* festival which marked the beginning of the year. The year then is closed with the festival of *Tokhu Emong*. It literally means day of celebration of the fruits of one's labor after a tiresome schedule of the year. It is an annual festival which usually lasts for nine to ten days. During the celebration, pieces of sacrificed meat are distributed to the families where death had occurred during the year. This ritual is performed to set the dead soul free. Villagers come out in full traditional attire to participate in the celebration; men folk join in singing and dancing, with the women folk whose role is of the observer. The next day of *Emong*, consists of removing the ornaments on graves signifying the separation of the dead from the living and the dead. This festival marks a joyous occasion, where past events are forgiven and forgotten, broken ties are reconciled, and close intimacy developed as they celebrate this festival. When all the villagers have brought home the product of their fields, the Priest performs a ceremony in front of their house to signify the end of the year and the ushering in of the New Year. Thereafter, the young men gather in the premises of the bachelor's dormitory and announce the commencement of New Year to the entire village. From this day onwards till the end of *Tokhu*, no stranger is allowed to enter the village and no one is allowed to leave the village on any purpose. Young girls and boys also engage and get married after the celebration is over. Thus the Lotha community agricultural year ends with *Tokhu Emong*.

Political Life

The political unit of the Nagas is highly organized. Some people belonging to a particular tribe stress on the virtue of a democratic outlook though some tribes stress on archaic system of choosing Chiefs on the basis of Royal inheritance. It is believed that the Naga society, including the Lothas was perhaps one of the oldest democracies in the world.⁸ They lived in the village with a specific democratic unit and each village was sovereign and self-sufficient. As B.M. Kaul (2005) p.57 states; "The Nagas had never been under anyone's strict administration control in the past. They therefore, resented over calling them citizens of free India after partition they began to grow suspicious and reacted violently to our projects designed towards their progress and their hospitality towards us grows and armed rebellion."⁹ Thus their administrative system covers almost all the conceivable needs of a Naga beginning from birth to death.

Every village is headed by a council of elders, and these elders represent each clan in the village. They are the source of power in the village and contrary to the hereditary system as in the monarchic and feudal systems they were elected and selected for leadership on the basis of their merit and efficiency. They settle all disputes in the village and ultimately protect peace in their respective villages.¹⁰ Besides, it is possible to

7 See also Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *Return to Naked Nags: An Anthropologist's View of Nagaland 1936-1970* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, (PVT), LTD, 1976), 18-19.

8 V.K. Nuh, *The Origin Of Naga: The Khezhakeno Legendary Stone* (Kohima: Vision Press, 2002), 10. See also MurkotRamunny, *The World of Nagas* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1988), 22-24.

9 Quoted by YanbemoLotha, in *Making Theology of Naga community* (Dimapur: Creative Printers, 2005), 57. See also Abraham Lotha, *History of Naga Anthropology: 1832-1947* (Dimapur: Chumpo Museum, 2007), 2.

10 Nuh, *165 Years History of Naga Baptist Churches*, 17.

infer here that the responsibility of guarding and ensuring the integrity of their land too rested upon the shoulder of this council.

Economic Life

The Lothas live a life grounded on simplicity, based on community and on simple praxis with self-sufficiency. Land, forest, and water are their primary source for their economic life. Land is important for the cultivation of paddy, millet, maize, and other crops. They also grow a variety of vegetables like cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, chilies, mustard, beans, pumpkins, gourds, brinjals and others. Fruits like, pineapples, peaches, plums, oranges, pears, papayas, lemons, guavas, and bananas etc are also sufficiently available through *jhum*, and *terrace* cultivation. They not only produce basic subsistence food for personal consumption but also produce surplus food.¹¹ The surplus of their crops indicates not only their sufficiency in life but it invigorates the idea of sharing with the have not's of their community. Among the secondary occupation, *animal husbandry*¹² is most important. Each house rears cattle that consist of cows, bulls, buffaloes, and pigs. Cane, and bamboo crafts, and blacksmith are subsidiary occupations. *Greeneries* provide housing materials, fodder and fuel. *Water* source provides fishes, crab, and other aquatic species for consumption.

Although the Lothas are primarily agriculturists, pottery, weaving, basket making and other cottage industries are also practiced. But in spite of the resources available Lothas are still economically backward. In this regard, while commenting on the manufactures and occupational structure in Nagaland, M. Hussain writes: "The poor development of industrial sector may be visualized from the fact that there are limited factories in Nagaland. Therefore, the absence of secondary sector may be taken as significant indicator of underdevelopment and economic backwardness."¹³ Nonetheless, whatever the economic condition of the Nagas, and the Lothas in particular, the traditional patterns of Naga economy seemed to be fast changing, as J. Jacob remarks on the present scene:

Trade was undertaken by women as well as men. Nagas men and women work in large number as government employees... A very interesting scene of present Naga economy is women's engagement in business. A large number of Naga women run business, importing huge qualities of foreign articles from neighboring countries.¹⁴

As we notice the old ways and new trends of the Lothas in the economic development we also notice that agricultural and animal husbandry has occupied an important place in their economic life since time immemorial. Since they learned dignity of labor right from their childhood, they indirectly contribute to the economic life of the people.

Conclusion

As evident from the above discussions it can be said that the Lotha Nagas who claims themselves to be a warrior race and who believes in solidarity although molding itself to recent technological changes simultaneously getting detached from their indigenous identity. Now at the time of industrial revolution iii how far they will be able to cope up with the pace while at the same time maintaining their uniqueness. Though they have several traditions of origin and migration, the term Lotha is remarkable, and that all are proud to be united under one Lotha Identity. On the theological part they believe in a Supreme Deity who acts as the benefactor of good souls and protector of community life of Lotha Nagas. Their ancestral religion Heraka once became a emblem of Naga identity in the face of British brutal Christianity missions. Although there are certain polarities even among the Nagas like language, certain customs, and traditions but at the end they believe in racial solidarity. All these are some of their history and traditions undisturbed by any of the foreign elements. However, old beliefs and traditions have been rudely shaken by the penetration of Christianity with their so called civilizing missions. A new value system has arrived which created chaos and upheaval among the loyal community. Present generation is being taught rudiments of science and the modern concept of the universe and it is positive at one hand. But on the other hand it demolished the little

¹¹ Lotsuro, *The Nagas; A Missionary Challenge*, 27-28.

¹² R.S. Raypa, *People of India: Nagaland*, Vol. XXXIV, K.S. Singh et al., (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1994), 115.

¹³ Quoted by Lotsuro, *The Nagas; A Missionary Challenge*, 28.

¹⁴ Quoted by Lotsuro, *The Nagas; A Missionary Challenge*, 28.

romantic values of Naga social life. As a result all the rich heritage ancestors legendary heroic stories have become only small-talks in the villages, schools, and colleges; young boys and girls have now learned the sophisticated mode of modern life, which are somehow preaching artificial values. Therefore, it is now questionable, whether modern Lotha community is sympathetic to their forefather's social values or not. It is very much necessary to renew interest on their traditional values which is on gradual decay, or else we submerge under the whims of alien values and culture. The time has come to ask of us where we revalidate our claim.

References

Culture Matters, www.britishcouncil.org

Furer-Haimendorf, Christoph von, *Return to Naked Nagas: An Anthropologist's View of Nagaland 1936-1970*, Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, (PVT), LTD, 1976.

Lotha, Yanbemo, In *Making Theology of Naga community*, Dimapur: Creative Printers, 2005

Lotha, Abraham, *History of Naga Anthropology: 1832-1947*, Dimapur: Chumpo Museum, 2007.

Mills, James Philip, *The Lotha Nagas*, London: Macmillian & Co.Ltd., 1922.

Mills, James Philip, *Certain Aspects of Naga Culture*. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 56:27-36, 1926.

Murry, K. R., *Anthology of Kyong poetry and Folk songs*, Wokha, Nagaland, 1993.

Murry, K. R., *Anthology of Kyong Prose*, Kyong Academy, Wokha, 1999.

Ngullie, N. T., *The Lotha Naga Customs and Cultures*, Nagaland, 1993.

Nuh, V.K., *165 Years History of Naga Baptist Churches*, Kohima: Council of Naga Baptist Church, 2006.

Ramunni, Murkot, *The World of Nagas*, New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1988.

Raypa, R.S., *People of India: Nagaland*, Vol. XXXIV, K.S. Singh et al., Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1994.

Sanyu, Visier, *A History of Nagas and Nagaland*, New Delhi: Commonwealth Publications, 1995.

Shiku, Inato Yekheto, *A Rediscovery and Rebuilding of Naga Cultural Values*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2007.

V.K. Nuh, *The Origin Of Naga: The Khezhakeno Legendary Stone*, Kohima: Vision Press, 2002.