



Case Study

Origin of the Lotha Naga and their early settlement

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Abstract

The study is an attempt to reconstruct the past history of the Lotha Naga through their folk narrative. Lotha occupy the Wokha district in the state of Nagaland. They show variance in terms of cultural practices and even in their appearance from the mainland people. So the question of how these people are displaced in their present homeland indubitably arises. Who are these people? Where have they come from? Or to put it simply their 'Origin'. Although there is no written documentation of their history, a part of these questions gets answered when the culture is looked at from the perspective of folklore which has been handed down orally. The Lotha deem that at one point of time there was written record inscribed on the skin of an animal. Unfortunately, a dog ate it and ever since it has been handed down orally.

Keywords: Lotha, Nagas, Folk narrative, Oral tradition, Migration.

Introduction

The term folklore is defined as the knowledge of a group of people which includes folk literature, folk narratives such as myths, legends and stories, folk arts including folk songs and dances, folk beliefs and customs, crafts and languages. One of the traditional meanings of folklore indicates that it is an oral tradition. The word folklore was given by William Thoms in the year 1846. Folklore, like any other discipline enables us to better understand ourselves and others¹, and it helps us to form and express identity in the midst of an always complex, sometimes confusing social context, in which our sense of who we are is frequently questioned and challenged². Folk narratives, component of folklore, covers a wide range of oral traditions, factual and fictions, modern and traditional, belonging to literate people as well as those lacking a written form of expression. Folk narratives represent a form of art and they arise directly from the cultural bases of the communities in which they are found.

The term narrative is derived from the root word 'naro' meaning 'telling' or 'gna' meaning knowledge. Knowledge when translated into telling becomes narratives. Knowledge can be individual knowledge or community's knowledge. Knowledge can be inherited or acquired in three ways. i. Sensory knowledge- something which one experiences. ii. Perceptual knowledge-what the community perceives, and which exists as a belief. It need not be the truths of life or reality. iii. Conceptual knowledge- how the community conceptualize from their experience and which forms the basis of ideology.

Objectives of the study: Emphasizing on the specific content of folk narrative, the study will try to understand how folk narrative serves to express Lotha values, ideas and world view

and to approach these metaphors as expressions of a shared understanding of Lotha life.

Methodology

The study was conducted among the Lotha Naga tribe belonging to the Wokha district in the state of Nagaland. Under the district are a total of about ninety villages, out of which the village of Longsa in the upper range was selected for intensive research. The village was preferred on the basis of it being one of the oldest and the largest of the Lotha villages in addition to having remnants of the old period. For intensive study, key informants were selected from influential persons who had a sound knowledge of the cultural practices of the Lotha. The interview technique was employed right through the course of fieldwork. Formal and informal interview, were, carried out, which facilitated the researcher to better comprehend the shared value of the community through the various ancestral beliefs, myths, stories, legends etc provided.

Observation method, both participant and non-participant, aided in eliminating the fallacies and helped the researcher in verifying details given out by the respondents. Use of the above mentioned methods and techniques helped in getting more information thus giving a better insight and understanding of the society as a whole.

The state of Nagaland

Nagaland, a land of luscious green valleys, lofty majestic mountains, gushing river, bountiful flora, and fauna is situated in the north-eastern part of India. It shares its border with Assam in the west, Arunachal Pradesh and a section of Assam towards the north, Myanmar in the eastern direction and

Manipur towards south. The state of Nagaland achieved statehood on 1st December 1963 becoming the 16th state India. The state has eleven administrative districts viz. Dimapur, Kohima, Wokha, Tuensang, Mokokchung, Mon, Longleng, Phek, Peren, Kiphire and Zunheboto. Kohima which is situated 1444.12 metres above sea level is the state capital. Dimapur is the commercial hub and the largest city of the state.

The People: The mystic, enchanting state of Nagaland, which is sometimes referred as the 'Switzerland of the East', is inhabited by a group of tribal's known as the Nagas. The Nagas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock. Nagas comprise 16 major tribes and sub-tribes, each with its own distinct dialect, customs and traditions. They are the Angami, Ao, Lotha, Sumi, Rengma, Chakhesang, Chang, Khiamniungan, Sangtam, Yimchunger, Phom, Pochury, Konyak, Zeliang, Kuki and Kachari. The Nagas belong to the Mongoloid race unlike the mainland Indians. All the tribes in Nagaland have their own dialects. However there are no written languages among the Nagas, so all the traditions, customs, and stories have been passed down orally through many generations.

Origin of the Lotha Naga: To obtain a comprehensive idea concerning the origin of the Lotha, there is a need to mention the origin of the Nagas as a whole. A separate migratory route of the Lotha alone cannot be traced, as the Nagas were supposed to have been displaced jointly and reached the present state of Nagaland. Similarly the Lotha assert that the Nagas have the same paternal ancestor, and all of them were considered brothers at one point of time. According to the oral tradition, the majority of them pursued the same wave of migration and arrived at their present homeland together. The state of Nagaland which the Nagas inhabit have no massive water bodies, but the use of conch-shells, and cowries in their ornaments, and attires they adorn substantiate the fact that they were once upon a time a sea faring tribe, and must have lived along the sea coasts.

Due to the unavailability of written records, it is difficult to ascertain the exact date on which the Nagas reached their homeland. But the researches carried out showed that they must have come around sometime between the 1st and 2nd century B.C. Documenting, the history of the people took place only subsequently to the coming of the British in the year 1832. Though writing started out very late one cannot undermine the authenticity of oral tradition³.

As Professor Vansina puts it, whether memory changes or not, culture is reproduced by remembrance put into words and deeds. The mind through the 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 constructions for living which manifest continuity over time is one of the greatest wonders one can study, comparable only to human intelligence and taught itself. Oral tradition should be central to students of culture, ideology of society, of psychology, of art, and finally of history³.

Nagas, whilst in the earlier course of migration were alleged to have belonged together as an enormous tribe, and were not separated into many tribes as they are at present. All of them shared the same customs and traditions and spoke one dialect. Although claiming to have belonged together, the stories told by the different tribes are not exact in their narration but there are quite a few situations where a common consensus is drawn upon. Nagas claim to have come from Mongolia, the first place the Nagas trace their origin from. As the traditions have been handed down through the word of mouth they have very vague memory of their displacement and the century in which they lived in. Nevertheless the Lotha are convinced of the fact that they had a predecessor by the name *Mono* while residing in Mongolia and thought to have dispersed from the place during his time. He was believed to be endowed with talismanic traits (*ozen oha*). The reason to have moved out of the place is attributed by them to great population density. Voyaging further, Nagas are believed to have stayed in Mansura (Manchuria) in China.

It is thought that along the course of centuries there was a great population density as a result of which the needs of the people increased and hence there was a dire need to shift and rummage around for fertile land. The people got divided into groups and started scattering out from their places to set up new villages. It is believed that while they started living discretely, devoid of any external contact, there arose discrepancy in the customs and the dialects spoken. The need for expanding the land led to recurrent conflicts and hostility between the adjoining villages and other tribes men. As a result of which, the practice of head-hunting is understood to have started and continued till about the beginning of the twentieth century among the Nagas.

The practice of head-hunting by the Nagas makes them akin to the South-east Asian countries. Head-hunting was practiced in the historic times in China, Indonesia, Phillipines, Japan, Taiwan, Melanesia, Micronesia, India, Myanmar, Borneo, New Zealand, Amazon Basin, Nigeria, Nuristan etc. Most of the tribes belonging to the north-eastern state of India such as the Mizo's, Garo's, Khasis, Nagas, Kukis etc were head hunters formerly. From this it can be assumed that the practice of head-hunting must have been imbibed in them when they were residing in the far-east Asian Countries and not something of recent origin.

Amid the Lotha, heads of its own tribesmen belonging to the other village were also not spared. Taking heads as trophies were considered a symbol a symbol of status and prestige. The man with the more number of heads was duly venerated. Because of foreboding most of the villages remained isolated for years together and there was negligible contact with the outsiders as a consequence of which, the dialects spoken by the populace became diverse as they strived to add their own distinctive touch to it. In order to avoid the adversary discern what they were speaking tried to converse in codes which in the long run led to the divergence in the dialect. A good example

can be drawn from the dialect itself. Lotha speak one dialect but one still comes across discrepancy in the tune as well as certain vocabulary used by the natives belonging to different villages. For example, the term for mother among some village is- *Apvii*, while some other villages use the term- *Ayo* for mother. Similarly the term for grandmother is *Atsu* for some and *Apyo* for some other village.

Lotha being a mountainous people crossed across mountains and dale before reaching their present homeland. They, in their early waves of relocation are alleged to have passed through the foothills of the Himalayas. They have a legend about their ancestors emerging out through a hole and settling in the new found land. The precise location, time and date is not clear. However, from their folk narratives it can be inferred that this must have been during the time when they were journeying through the Himalayas. The legend is presented below.

One day the ancestors of the Lotha *Longkvürü* went on a hunting expedition along with his brother. Their hunting dog pursuing porcupines (*Lisso*) went inside a hole. *Longkvürü* and his brother who were subsequently straggling the dogs too went inside the hole. They reached towards the other end of the hole and after emerging out of it found a new world. They were enthralled by the beauty of the new place. *Longkvürü* climbed up a gooseberry tree and looked around the place, and plucked a gooseberry and ate it. Nearby the tree there was a brook from which he took water and drank it. He found the water to be really sweet and tasty. Therefore, the two brothers conversed between themselves and held that even the water in the novel world is sweet, and so decided to migrate and establish their village in the new world. They plucked some of the gooseberries and carried along with them the water and went to their village through the same hole. On reaching the village, they went and distributed it among the villagers. Their forefather *Longkvürü* started persuading the villagers about departing and settling in the new location as it was better than the one they were staying in. But the people did not show much of an interest and stayed in the village for a long time. It was only during the time of *Longkvürü's* son *Limhachan* and his brother's son *Limhathung* that the village got dispersed. *Limhachan* and *Limhathung* were the ones who took the villagers and entered the new land. *Longkvürü* named his son as *Limhachan* as he (*Longkvürü*) was the first to view the new world (*Limha-world, Chanka-view*), and *Longkvürü's* brother was the first to have exalted the new world and consider it really mesmerizing, so named his son- *Limhathung* (*Limha-world, thungia-exalt*).

The reason for their dispersal from the old village is said to be because of a monster in their village known as *Rankhanda* who devoured the people as well as their livestock and created mayhem inside the village and distraught in the minds of the people. So *Limhachan* and *Limhathung* told the villagers that it was better to abscond the village and scurry for their lives instead of being eaten away by the monster. So the villagers

agreed to run off with them. Accordingly one day they packed all their possessions and left the village through the same hole without letting the monster get a hint of their plan. Yet the monster knew about it, pursued them and attempted going inside the hole himself, however his horn got wedged in the hole which prohibited him from entering the new place and was left at the rear in the old village. That is how the inhabitants got freed from the monster and came out to the new world and lived there, and later stretched out in different directions. *Limhachan* and *Limhathung* were brothers in the old world, but once they arrived in the new world in order to preserve their kinship and the upcoming generations consented their kinsmen to marry within themselves so as to save their generation from getting extinct. All the Lotha tribes are the descendents of them.

A mention of 'emerging out of hole' is found among the other Naga tribes as well. Angami assert that men came out through an earth hole, Ao Naga believe to have come through an underground hole in the course of migration and Rengma are also supposed to have come from earth hole somewhere in the east. All of them cite this, 'Coming through a hole' but the mention of the location in which they came out is different⁴.

If we contemplate on the story there is no way men would emerge from an earth hole. As already mentioned this was during the time when Lotha were settled in the foothills of the Himalayas. So a probable rationalization is that they might have resided in a far- flung place bounded by towering mountains on all of its sides, with a minute possibility of them going beyond the mountains and seeing what there was on the other side. So they stayed contented in their own world without taking notice of what was there, but as per the story they went hunting and chased after their hunting dogs who in turn was pursuing the porcupines which went through a hole and finally reached the new world. So the new world in all probability must be on the other side of the mountains. And it must have been going from one staggering mountain to another instead of coming out through a hole.

The Nagas after their sojourn in the Himalayas moved further and reached Burma and are said to have lived in the Irrawaddy valley. Irrawaddy River or Ayeyarwady is the largest river of Burma which flows from the north to the South of Burma. The Nagas must have lived in and around the area for years or even centuries. From Irrawaddy the Nagas followed the course of migration and dwelled in the mountains before reaching a place known as *jüsü likok*, the present Chindwin river valley. The geographical location shows the area to be bounded by mountains and forests and the Nagas being people from the hilly region must have settled around these places. It is said that they formed a village and settled there for some time.

Along the course of migration the Nagas are said to have made a brief stay in Imphal valley. Lotha Naga and the Sangtam Naga show great affinity. They were considered to be brothers who got separated during their sojourn in Manipur. During those

times both the tribes were classified under the generic term 'Kyong' the term presently used by the Lotha to refer to themselves. During their stay in Manipur they decided to segregate themselves from the rest of the group and establish a new village. The Lotha who were the elder of the two brothers set out first leaving behind the bark of *thümpak* tree as a trail in the direction they were going for the younger ones to follow. It is said that another tribe set out immediately after the Lotha did and correspondingly left the bark of *shümpok* tree as trail in the direction they headed. A mischievous person amid them is said to have swapped over the planted barks of the Lotha with the others bark. The inner white coating of the *thümpak* plant retains its color even if cut a few days ahead while that of a *shümpok* tree gets darker. So it is alleged that when the Sangtam set out for their journey a few days later, and reached the crossroads, they found the trails left behind by both the groups. They contemplated that since their brother, the Lotha, ventured out only few days ahead of them, they assumed it to be the white bark and for this reason set out towards that direction. Henceforth, the brothers got separated and began living away from each other. There is a lot of likeness found between these two tribes other than those depicted by legends and tales and one can find it even in the dialect used. So Lotha and the Sangtam still hold on to the fact they were once upon a time brothers.

As per the tradition, Makhel which is in the Mao area is deemed to be the place where all the Naga tribes had spread into the different Naga areas⁵. As per the legends, when the Nagas reached Makhel, a person kept his walking stick sunk in the soil. This grew up to be a tree of prickly pears and is still there in the hill top of Sajoba village. The tree has a lot of historical importance as it serves as an important landmark for those who are curious with the study of Naga migration. Nagas are very superstitious. The falling of any branches of the tree connotes an appalling omen. It was believed that if a branch falls, the people on that side would perish, so inhabitants took immense care to keep away from letting the bad omen affect them. If any of the branches of the tree fell. Nagas observed a non-working day which forbade them from going to the field. If the branches grew well towards one side, then that was an indication of fecundity.

The tribes such as the Tangkhul, Poumai, Zeliang, Kuki, Rongmei, etc are believed to have settled in Makhel while the rest moved onward. Among them were the Ao, Sumi, Lotha, Rengma, Angami, and Chakhesang. Moving further in their passage they reached *Khezhahenoma* which the Lotha call *Phitson*, the first village to have been inhabited by the Nagas after reaching the present state of Nagaland. While the Nagas were staying in this village, it is said that there was a huge magical stone on which if a basket of paddy was spread over then by dusk it doubled up. The stone was called *Phitson longha* by the Lotha. This boulder was outside the house of an ancestor known by the name *Kyingeki*. Most of the Naga tribes talk about this stone. The stone devoid of its magical properties

still exists in this village. There are different versions of stories attributing the vanishing of the magical value to different reasons.

According to the Lotha Naga it is said the stone was owned by a group of brothers who took turns to dry their paddy. One day a feud broke out between the brothers for the mere reason that each sought to dry their own paddy first, and along the process broke the stone. So after that it is believed that the blessings that was in the stone vanished and henceforth stop yielding double the amount as earlier.

A different version of the story is that one of the brother's wife clandestinely told her relatives about the stone. So her family members persistently asked the husband's family to give them the stone as bride price. The brothers did not wish to give it away and so discussed among themselves and allowed an old bachelor and an old widow to have sexual intercourse on top of the stone defiling it. From then on the spiritual power that was in the stone departed and after that even if the paddy was dried on it did not increase and lost its magical properties. The stone is still there in *Khezhakenoma* and most of the Nagas go by this story.

Determining the precise number of days or years spent by the Nagas in the village is difficult but according to the informants there are huge numbers of monoliths planted along the site so it might be assumed that they must have lived long enough. The tribes such as the Angami, Chakhesang, Rengma, Lotha, Sumi and Ao are held to have taken the same route and reached *Khezhakenoma* and then dispersed off to different directions, while the other tribes are believed to have taken a different route and reached their present settlement.

According to oral sources it is said that from *Khezhakenoma* some of the Nagas spread out in different directions while some continued to stay back in the old village. A huge group, among whom the Lotha were a part reached a place known as *Khayima*, presents Kohima which is the state's capital. On reaching the place, people tried counting the number of heads but they could not enumerate and so named the place as *Khayima* (meaning baffled). Some Naga tribes stayed communally in this place during the same time and for anonymous reasons moved further on their journey. This region now belongs to the Angami who must have stayed back and began settling in the adjoining area.

According to oral sources it is usually said that the Ao were the first to have embarked on the journey followed by the Lotha then the Sumi, Rengma, Angami and finally the Chakhesang. The terms used by the Sumi tribe to refer the other tribes show the pattern. Sumi call the Ao *Cholimi* meaning 'Who went ahead', while they call Lotha *Chuwami*, meaning who 'preceeded', and Angami as *Tsungaumi* which means 'left behind.' Terms used by the Khuzhami people of the Chakhesang tribe to refer to the above mentioned tribes have similar meanings. They use the term '*Lethami*' for the Lotha

meaning 'people who had gone far away' and 'Aowoo' for the Ao meaning 'unknown destination.' According to them the Ao set forward before any of the tribes did. As the Ao were the first to set off preceded by the Lotha, tradition has it that the Lotha through the practice of head-hunting invaded whichever place the Ao settled making them move further⁶.

According to the Lotha ancestors it is said that the Lotha settled in Tsenza wozhü (present Thizema) for a period of time. According to the tradition, this place belonged to a person by the name of Tsenza and hence the place became known as Tsenza wozhü. They moved further down and settled in the present Angami area of Nerhema, which then was known as Nerupa. Stayed for a while and further traversed through Chuichuma (present Chechama). One can still find the monoliths that were erected by the Lotha while commemorating the 'feast of merit' in that site.

Coming down from Chechama, the Lotha are said to have settled in Morayanke and Honoho yonton. When Lotha arrived at Honoho yonton, they sacrificed a cock by slitting its neck and executed a purification ceremony propitiating their deities to bring about opulence in the village. It is also said that the mountain of Honoho yonton which they occupied resembled the crown of a fowl as in Lotha dialect *hono* means a fowl and hence the name. This place is in the Rengma area and presently known as Teraganyu. The Lotha who were settled in Honoho yonton formed into three groups and went into three different directions. The first group went towards Koro village. Before venturing out they already selected a place by looking around the surrounding area from the mountain top of Honoho yonton. The place that they selected is in the Moilan-Pyangsa area. Once they moved out they could not locate the area and inadvertently crossed it and went and formed the Koro village.

The second group went to Ngochiphen and later they formed Phiro village. Ngochiphen is also called *echiü yan* (dead village). It is said that while the Lotha were staying in Ngochiphen several people died, and so people abandoned the village and went on to establish the Phiro village. The third group which formed the majority of the Lotha went to Kisüyo and then to Tiyi Longchüm. Koro, Phiro and Tiyi Longchüm were the foremost and the oldest villages formed in the Lotha area.

Tiyi Longchüm

This is one of the oldest villages established by the Lotha during the course of their migration after reaching the present Lotha area. This village was established in the hills of Mount Tiyi, one of the highest peaks in the Lotha area. The majority of the Lotha came and settled here. According to the informants there were altogether nine clans in the village and nine *chümpo* (dormitory) for each of the clan. Since it is one of the oldest villages, lots of stories and myths are associated with it. So or a researcher studying the culture of the people or their folklore, this place has

a lot of significance. For it is in this place where they dwelled, procreated, created myths, legends, stories, and followed their age old customs and beliefs and later spread out to the different Lotha regions where they presently dwell. The village is believed to be about seven hundred years old.

On visiting the vacant site by the researcher it was found that there are monoliths that were planted in those times during the celebration of 'feasts of merit', hearth (*nchü*), stones that were used as stands for keeping beer mugs known as *lümpfutongphen* and also ancient whetstone. A flat slab known as *vüktzüphen* erected by the people in those times is also found. This was used as a measuring stone and the size of the pigs that were to be slaughtered were measured here, there are certain marked lines with certain millimetres apart inscribed on the stone. Measuring tapes were unknown to them so instead they used this stone. Certain flowery patches are strewn here and there on the slab. People of those times used it as a mirror to their future. As per the informants it is said that by looking at it and also through the colour, the ancient people knew the number of boys and girls that were to be born in the village.

All the significant landmarks mentioned above are in and round the same site, and this site according to the informants is said to have belonged to Yanpentung of Ngullie clan. A tree alleged to have been planted by him is still present. The desolate village has demarcated boundaries, above which there are three medium sized stones arranged in the form of a triangle. According to the tradition there would be sentry sitting on each of the stones, and the sentry positioned at the top held the higher rank. The top rock looks like a chair and in that two guards would be sitted, one would be tying the *chorü* (shin guard) while the other will keep surveillance from the adversaries. That is the reason why the place is known as *chorütaphen* (*taphen*-place where it is done). If any visitor sought to come inside the village they had to ask the consent of the sentry sitting below who in turn would ask the ones sitting at the top and if they sensed the people not to be a threat, they would let them inside, otherwise the visitors were sent back. As the Lotha were head hunters during those times, the sentry kept a strict vigil not to let adversaries intrude inside the village. Irrefutably, the whole of the site provides confirmation of human habitation.

According to the tradition, there were two main reasons for them deserting the village. First reason was that the water was very scarce and they had to go to faraway places to fetch water. The pond where they went for fetching water known as *eran chükha* is in Niroyo village which takes about three hours by foot to reach and so it would take about six hours for the chore. Moreover they had to climb down a hilly terrain to reach the place. So one can envisage the adversity these people faced. It is also said that the water was so scarce that they would accumulate the water that are seeped inside the bamboo and use it for cooking. Secondly, plenty of tigers were lurking around which endangered their lives as well as livestock and created fear in the minds of the people. A sense of terror and uncertainty

was felt among the people. These reasons for abandoning the village cropped up from time to time and during one such time a group of nine women while going to the field were attacked and killed by a tiger. The above mentioned reasons created chaos inside the village which led to their abandoning the settlement and spread to all the different Lotha regions.

Conclusion

In an oral tradition folk narrative are used to construct the whole world or rather give meaning to the world around them within which they experience their life. Among the Lotha also we find that the narratives are used to explain the creation, the cosmos which are the physical aspect of the world, the origin of the community, the division and sub-division within the tribe, which emphasize on the social reality and very significantly the relationship that exists between man, nature and the spirit world. Observing the differences that exist among the races and social groups, the narratives explain the origin of the particular group. The Nagas, as having very different racial features from mainland Indians, undoubtedly realize their separateness. They see themselves as one group and have different narration as to how they exist as one unit who have migrated from a certain place. On the other hand, there are stories that explain the dispersion among the Nagas and the formation of various sub-tribes. The Lothas have stories of their particular tribe and their separation from others and what happened after they separated in terms of their settlement and inhabitation in different villages. The relationship between these villages is also depicted in their folk narratives.

Notes: i. Similar stories about 'coming out from holes', are also present among the Melanesian countries. The Baktaman myth

supplemented by Sillitoe (1998:234)⁷ showed that the mythical men in the story were brothers and that people descending from the same hole comprised the clans of their society. ii. Looking at the geographical proximity of Nagaland with neighbouring countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, Thailand and China it makes it easy to figure out the course followed by the Nagas in their early migration, voyaging through the borders of one country to another for centuries and reaching the state of Nagaland.

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