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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### CHALLENGES OF ORAL NARRATION IN MAO TRIBE

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#### ABSTRACT

Oral Narration plays a prominent role in the life of the tribal's. It chronicled the history of the people and its identity. This tradition recorded the very life of the people, their beliefs, the wars fought, the cultivation systems, the values and beliefs, the customs and traditions, events of peace and war and their entire social life. This rich oral tradition has been the only source of history handed to the present generation according to each narrator's best knowledge and memory power. The hegemonic narration influenced the life of the people in all aspects. Songs, tales, fables, folklore, folktales, myth and legends recounted the very detail life of the past. They are the carriers of the meaningful civilization of the tribals. With no written scripts the traditions of mouth to mouth narration for generation after generations has been the only source of knowledge about the past of the tribal. For years till today the Nagas flourished without any written script of their own like any other tribals. The legacy that has been handed to them through oral has been the only source to ascertain their roots. Though the Mao tribe has no script of their own, the memory served best knowledge of oral legacy sustained them in their unique history and philosophical belief of life. Have the narration and tales so altered after many generations? With no narrative techniques each narrator is bound in their own narrative style.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Mao Naga tribe inhabits the northern part of Manipur state in Senapati District. Mao is the oldest hill stations in Manipur. Makhel, the historical place of Nagas dispersal and legendary place of common origin have peepal tree and the oldest pear tree serving as the tourist spot. For long research scholars and anthropologist has been researching on various aspects of the Nagas. The Mao's has no written script of their own as any of the Naga tribes. The only history they know of their origin is through oral or verbal narrations. The hegemonic culture of narration still continues till today but the question often asked is, "Is oral narration transmitted in crystallised narratives? The oral form of narration carried a great weight on the maintenance and creation of identity. When any researcher or scholars tend to find any authentic answer to their queries, they tend to search for the oldest person in the village. The oldest person sometimes is reluctant to share the story and some do not remember the correct terms and the tales correctly. So they tend to embellish the tales. The validity, reliability and credentials of the verbal legacy are challenged by both historians and non-historians.

The recent boundary dispute<sup>1</sup> between the Mao tribe and Angami tribe questioned the oral tradition itself. Both the tribes believed they owned the land and not the other because their forefathers hunted the land. The land among the Naga tribes are not measured and demarcated. The boundary is marked by a stone or a tree or is passed down orally from generation to generation through the head of the families. The fact that the legacy is passed down orally questioned the authenticity of the deed. The memory served as the only means of passing down the history, culture, philosophical belief, tradition, and customs of the tribe. The oldest person in the family's or clan's word is mostly taken as final in everything. Any land disputes between two families are settled by the elders in the village according to their wish claiming they remember the land belonged to certain family and not the other. Going against the wish of the elders is an offence because the Mao Nagas believe them to be next to God. In Maola it says, "*Kostiimai hi Oramai theshue*" which literally means the elders are next to God. In most cases, the verdict might have been true, or not but the village elders have their own propaganda.

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<sup>1</sup> Both the tribe, Mao and Angami Naga claimed the ownership of Koziirrii, a wild forest yet to be explored by the people. The deep forest is a home to many natural habitat.

The inability to remember and solve the case might bring them shame. It has nothing to do with best memory. As Wingfield puts it "Modern memory theory has come to learn that we are not studying the dream, but the dreamer" (1981:47) in relations with the work in psycholinguistics where story grammars involve passive memorizing but scripts through which people actively structure and manipulate conceptual elements within a narrative organisation. A human cognitive mind change and developed with the age. A person is not expected to remember everything. Memory is not permanent. But even both the arguing party would accept the decree of the elders whether right or wrong. The wrong member would also be advised to take "*Orachiithobo*", which literally means one who accept the will of God.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of oral narration in the forms of songs, fables, folksongs, myths, legends is to teach a lesson or to describe characteristics of one's culture. The Mao Naga folksongs reflect how season of sowing seed takes place. But the folksong differs from one person to another. For example, folksong of the sowing seeds goes as:

"...*Mikrii-a pah ti pahli, mati tijii tholo*"

When the peach tree blossoms, sow the main seed.

And for another person it says:

"...*Kostiia pah ti pahli, mati tijii tholo*"

When the wild turmeric plant blossoms, sow the main seed.

In similar way another says, "...*livo pah ti pahli, mati tijii tholo*" When the Bauhinia blossoms, sow the main seed.<sup>3</sup>

There is every possible ways of the narrator or the singer in this case to fabricate on their own with the seasonal flowers and plant during the season when the main seed is planted. In most cases the songs are similar with each singer except for the names and places. The narratives of the village elders guaranteed almost everything in the village. Many ugly incidents are hidden and are not narrated to the younger generation. Years ago the forefathers did not know the proper seasons for plantation and famine occurred. People tried to survive by various means. One such tales of woe and miseries are not much recounted by the people. Few claimed people killed their own children and ate their flesh out of hunger. There are rare tales of how the forefathers tied their waist with river stones due to intense hunger. They even drink the cow urine, some said. Still many would not account for it. Few said it is not for the children's ear.

Thus some tales are hidden away. In certain cases stories are embellished to narrate the gravity of the situation. The lack of paper and pen and drawing culminates in this embellishment. The narrator is forced to draw the imaginations of the

<sup>2</sup> This is based on the author's own observation.

from the village cases and meeting held regarding land disputes. When the wronged group rebel against the elders, the whole village advised against it and would say, accept the verdict and take "*Orachiithobo*". The person who take *Orachiithobo*, "*Orachithobo kopfomai*", is not a revengeful minded but one with a controlled temperament.

<sup>3</sup> This folksong was explained by Nenio Athia and Matia of Kalinamai village.

audience. The sequence of the tales and songs, names and places varies according to each person. The tale of a girl's name lost in the forest by her father on her step-mother's behest varies with *Kholia* and *Asha-a*<sup>4</sup> to different narratives. The art of narrativity is not present to many of the narrators. The narration is proportion to individual's best memory and cognitive mind. Another important factor of the narration is the propaganda of the narrator.

In most cases, in stories and other aspects the narrator holds the key. It is in his hand to manipulate and divert the tales, the legends and the myths and even the folksongs. In a certain case the origin of the story of "*Kateni and Kajini*" and how the story ended is refuted. For few villages of other tribes claimed the origin of the story. The tales of *Arijii and Akajii*, *Mari Asha-a*<sup>5</sup> are instances of stories which have been handed down orally by the forefathers but with their own tribal names. The tales does have different variation and differs according to each narrator. The same tales are recounted among other tribes but in their own tribal names. The plot and the structure remains the same yet it is not the same. The endings, the names and places differ. Even the tales of the notorious, brave and strong legendary man *Tolejii*. *Tolejii* is rumored to have been killed because of his notoriety by youth from other villages but the tales of his killing is purposefully forgotten and it remained a controversy.

A narrator said that if his killers' identity and village is found there would be war so it is never revealed.<sup>6</sup> In many of the cases such things are hidden and later forgotten and the unfinished tales with no proper endings are handed down orally. Few are ornamented and retold by narrators but in most cases it is just another unfinished story. An unfinished story of a brave and strong young man which few have forgotten or the forefathers thought it is best to be forgotten. There is no narrative technique used by any of the narrators. Each narrator used their cognitive mind and fabricate in their own conveniences with each narrations. The oral narrations are thus many times removed from the original versions. The Mao Nagas believed that a certain miracle gun called, "*Khuburiidzii*", a gun which can shot the person even from afar, if the owner tells the gun to do so, is hidden under a flat stone in front of the king's house in Makhel. The tales in

<sup>4</sup> From the tales and interviews of the villages elders in Kalinamai village. Mostly from Nenio Athia, Katia, Apei Matia and some few village elders who goes around conducting land dispute cases and other problems within the village.

<sup>5</sup> *Kateni and Kajeni* is a tale of a girl and her step sister. A Mao village and a Poumai Village of Poumai tribe claimed of the origin place of the story. Few of the narrators claimed that *Kajeni* felt prey of the enemy while others claimed she was captured and married by her captors but lived happily. *Arijii* and *Akajii* and *Asha-a* has similar tale among the Mao, Angamis and Yungchunger and other tribes of the Nagas but with their tribals names and places. The story deviates in tiny plots and words but the major plot remains the same.

<sup>6</sup> From Mobo Athia, a woman of 70 yrs

handed down orally for generations,<sup>7</sup> though the accuracy is never proved. Many stories stood today with a tale of its own. For generations it has been a continuous process of legacy in the form of oral narration. Though one cannot deny that oral narration served as the best means of tracing the history of the Mao, one cannot but feel the gaps of all the narratives between each narrators. Few of the narrators have their own propaganda in their narration. One such narrative drawback is the ongoing debate on the authenticity of the identity of the Song Song village<sup>8</sup>. Each narrator has their own propaganda. The Mao tribals are peace warriors, the elders do not want to share tales which could hamper the relationship of the people, and for fear that the peaceful co-existence would be disturbed. Thus many of the tales lies buried or forgotten with the passage of time. As few narrators claimed, the stories of the controversy should die with them rather than handed down to create war between the two.<sup>9</sup> A.R George said, "The development of an awareness that tales can change or be altered as they are transmitted from person to person and from place to place, and that variability might be common rather than anomalous." (1976:161). As the compositions, transmission, and circulations are created and recreated and even politicized in many forms. This also includes the pressure from the educational, commercial, religion, institutions, and other current situations with newer influences.

The other reason is also shifted to memory and remembering, the cognitive mind. The lack of narrative technique adds an advantage to the narrator to twist the story as in their own convenient. The researcher can only deduct a logical conclusion depending on the narrations and tales one collected. The verbal art remains are the sole identity creator and lift the status quo of the people which directly or indirectly influence the narrator.

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<sup>7</sup> This is based on authors own observation and tales from her grandmother.

<sup>8</sup> From Komuhra of Punanamai village.

<sup>9</sup> From an elderly man who does not want to be named and authors own observation.