

Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Nagas

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Abstract: Cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible heritage that are inherited from one generation to the next. Intangible cultural heritage are the immaterial identity markers of a community. This paper takes cognizance of the rich intangible cultural heritage of the Nagas and deliberates upon the various intangible cultural aspects. It delves into some of the tangible cultural materials that are teeming with symbolic meanings which are intangible. Culture is dynamic and changes over time due to various agents. This paper discusses how the intangible cultural heritage of the Nagas is going into oblivion due to modernization, globalisation and industrialization. The importance of intangible cultural heritage and its safeguarding is emphasized.

Keywords: Endangered, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Nagas, Safeguarding

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Introduction

Cultural heritage does not end with material objects, but it goes beyond its tangibility. There are some aspects of culture that may not be visible in a physical form but yet forms an essential element of culture, and those are the intangible cultural heritage of a community. Intangible cultural heritage consists of the immaterial identity markers of a community that has been transmitted from one generation to another generation. Such heritage is passed on without much conscience effort but becomes an inherent part of a person or community as 'acquired behavioural forms' (Machuca 2013, p 58). Cultural heritage does not end with material objects but as it is defined in the 32nd session of the UNESCO general conference in 2003, article 2 includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts which are passed on from one generation to the next. It is essential to recognize the intangible cultural heritage to understand the culture of a community. Intangible cultural heritage gained much importance when in 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention

for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), recognizing it as the mainspring of humanity's cultural diversity and its maintenance, a guarantee for continuing creativity and this went into effect in 2006(UNESCO 2003).

This study is an attempt to look into the intangible cultural heritage of the Nagas. Nagaland which is in North East India is home to a conglomeration of several Naga tribes. The tribes that are recognized as indigenous inhabitants of Nagaland include, Ao, Angami, Chakesang, Chang, Kachari, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Kuki, Lotha, Pochury, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Sumi, Tikher, Yimchunger and Zeliang. They have a rich cultural heritage which is both tangible and intangible. Though on the outside the different tribes look quite homogenous yet they are quite distinct from each other. The Nagas are known for their colorful dresses and ornaments, enchanting songs and dances, elaborately decorated village gates and house entrances, megaliths, arts and crafts and exotic food items which are all very much visible to the eyes. And these tangible cultural materials are impregnated with meanings. Some of the intangible cultural heritage of the Nagas are the folksongs that have been sung and dances that are performed for various occasions, the oral tradition and folklores that have been told and retold, the languages that each tribe speaks, the numerous festivals that are celebrated throughout the year, the various artistic crafts and skills that are exhibited in varied forms, the palatable food items and cuisines, the social practices and moral values that have guided the people for generations, traditional knowledge and practices, natural resource management systems, rituals and beliefs. However, these intangible cultural heritage have undergone a sea of change as no society or community lives in isolation and the Nagas are no exception. The contact with the American Christian Missionaries and the British in the nineteenth century and other neighboring areas has brought tremendous changes in their lives and their outlook. These contacts resulted in the acculturation and assimilation of their culture and as a consequence, many of their traditional ways of life are given up. With each passing generation, a bit of their traditional way of life is obliterated. Thus as time passes, much of the traditional cultural heritage of the Nagas may face extinction. Tangible heritage may persist to exist perhaps just as showpieces on the shelves without any cultural meaning, but intangible cultural heritage is facing a perilous situation as they are immaterial and have a high chance of becoming oblivion if they are not preserved or practiced. The paper discusses the vulnerability of the intangible cultural heritage of the Nagas in the face of modernity, industrialization and globalization and the need to conserve and preserve the same for posterity as it is endangered. The material culture of the Nagas was motivated primarily not by their aesthetic considerations, but by their semantic ones, they served to distinguish their bearers and to denote their social position in the village, and as such they were closely woven with their owner's identity (Oppitz, *et al* 2008:20). The Nagas are known for their exorbitant and colorful culture which is quite obvious to the world. But more than what is visible as tangible culture lies the intangible with tales to tell and teeming with meanings to be deciphered.

Oral Tradition and Language

One of the most invaluable intangible heritages of the Nagas is the oral tradition and folklore that has been passed on for generations together. The folktales, folksongs, legends, myths, taboos, sayings, proverbs, and prayers enlighten and enrich our knowledge about the past ways of life, values, belief system and traditions. The history of the Nagas was not recorded in a written form till the coming of the British and Americans into their land. Knowledge about their past was etched and lodged in their memory and it was passed on from one generation to the next generation orally. The Nagas have numerous oral traditions pertaining to their migration route, settlement areas and rituals associated with it, clan genealogy, belief system and philosophical ideas. The origin and migration of the Nagas is still

uncertain and such knowledge that has been passed on for generations is important in the reconstruction of Naga's history. It helps in identifying some of the ancestral sites mentioned in their migration narratives and in recent years based on the oral tradition a number of archaeological excavations are also undertaken at places like Chungliyimti, Longtikimong, Kubok, Phor, New Phor, Lüradvü, Tiyi Longchum, Sangpuyimti. (Jamir *et al.*, 2014, Ngullie 2014, Chubatoshi 2022). Habitational areas are located and cultural material items have been recovered from these sites during the archaeological excavations.

Folklores tell us about the past social and political setup and also knowledge about their environment. The folksongs were often composed commemorating some event or person. The Nagas trace their ancestral lineage based on oral tradition. It is interesting to note that they can trace their genealogy to a number of generations. These oral traditions are a window to the cultural past and so much can be learned through them. However, people who are conversant in such knowledge are slowly dying out and along with them, their oral tradition is also fading away.

Language is intangible, yet it is very powerful and essential as it is considered the transmitter of culture. Oral tradition and traditional knowledge are transmitted through language from one generation to the next. Interestingly each Naga tribe speaks a different language and their cultural heritage is passed on in their own language. Therefore it is very important to speak and promote the local languages to keep the culture going. Sadly many of the archaic words are no longer in use and their meanings are not known to the present generation. They are slowly losing their ground and along with them, the cultural heritage is also vanishing away.

Material Culture and Symbolism

The artefacts that society makes are not simply physical objects but also the carriers of immaterial meanings and value notions ((Oppitz, *et al.*, 2008, p, 26). Artefacts are just material objects on their own but when the underlying meanings are deciphered, it comes to life and the dynamic relation that they have with their creator and environment is unravelled. Tangible cultural heritage has symbolic meanings embedded in them and those symbols are as significant representation of the people. It is important to uncover the meanings behind to understand a community. The Nagas have a number of material objects with symbolic representations of their culture. Some of the best examples are the shawls with various designs and the traditional house decorations. All the Naga tribes have their own design patterns on their traditional clothing such as the shawls and *mekhalas* (warp around for women) and these design patterns have symbolic meanings embedded on them. In the olden days, they were worn according to their age group and the designs signified their status. Some of the clothing is exclusively made for a certain clan or social group. In the past when other means of communication were not available, some of the Naga tribes devised their own way of conveying messages through the log drums. Log drums resonated with the community's feelings and situation. Messages were conveyed through the rhythmic beating of the log drums. Each message had a different beat and sound and it conveyed enemies' approach and attack, an outbreak of fire, death and victory in a head-hunting spree or calendrical events. Log drums were not chosen and constructed randomly but they involved a lot of rites and rituals which were solemnly observed. Log drums played a very important role in their community life in the olden days however in the present time most of the log drums are just lying around as show pieces and hardly beaten except on some very special occasions. The intangible role played by the log drums is unknown to those who have no idea about its history.

The Nagas also have a rich Megalithic tradition where stones are erected commemorating a special occasion, demarcating an area or enhancing one's social status. In the olden days, a man had to perform

a number of rites and rituals to gain recognition and enhance his social status. Only after giving a feast of merit to the community, could one erect megaliths. After that, the donor was also entitled to wear a shawl with specific designs like *Longpensu* of the Lothas. On the house of such persons, horns were put up at the entrance of the house symbolising his newly acquired status. Another example of material object with symbolism can be drawn from the Yimchunger Nagas of Mimi village. The village is famous for its pottery products. Amongst the various products, they have a special plate on the stand known as “*liphro*” which is exchanged between two close friends on important social occasions. The exchange of *liphro* symbolises and affirms that they are close friends known as *payading* and assures to help and stand by each other through thin and thick. *Liphro* was used for funerary purposes as well. When a person dies, the family members put rice, egg, chicken, etc., in the *liphro* and is kept in a safe place in the house till the body decay and is put in an urn and given a secondary burial. These tangible materials have intangible symbolic meanings and functions that cannot be known unless understood within its cultural milieu.

Traditional Food: Procurement, Preparation and Preservation Processes

Nagas are traditionally agriculturists and thus their food is mostly agro-based. In addition to that they hunt both small and big game and catch fish and other aquatic animals in the streams and rivers. Worms and insects are also relished by the Nagas. They also forage the jungles and collect wild vegetables and herbs. The Nagas have developed various indigenous means and techniques for procuring food whether it is grown or hunted. Cultivation methods suitable to their land and climatic condition are developed. Rice is the staple food of the Nagas and they are cultivated through the slash and burn method also known as *jhum* cultivation and wet rice cultivation method usually in a terraced manner. Different types of tools and implements are made for working in the fields and for their hunting endeavours. Community fishing between different villages and tribes is also practiced by tribes like Lothas and Sumis. This traditional practice is not just about catching fish but it entails community sharing of food and extending cordial relations with other villages and tribes and alliances are forged. Nagas have developed rich indigenous cuisines in preparing their food items. Traditionally Naga food is usually boiled, steamed or fermented. The various tribes have their own way of preparing food. The Lothas are known for fermenting varieties of bamboo shoot items, Aos in making *anische* fermented yam *colocasia* leaves, Sumis are famous for fermenting soya beans popularly known as *axone* likewise the other tribes also have their own specialty. In the olden days rice beer was an important beverage for the Nagas. It was not only a daily beverage but an important cultural item served at various social and cultural events. Vegetables and meat are not always readily available so they were preserved and stored by fermenting and drying. These food items not only fulfilled their dietary needs but play a significant role in cultural life. With the availability of industrial-based food, many of the traditional food are losing their ground. Taste is acquired and if traditional food is not served often they might lose their foothold and the traditional way of acquiring and preparing food may be long forgotten. The traditional knowledge of procuring, preparing and preserving food is intangible and the whole knowledge can be easily forgotten if traditional items are no longer consumed or made in traditional way.

Festivals

The Nagas are known for their festivals which are celebrated throughout the year. Festivals are celebrated to mark various occasions like sowing, harvesting, construction of road, etc. Nowadays the festivals are celebrated on the earmarked day only but earlier the festivals used to be for several days

and each day was significant with specific work. For example like collecting firewood and vegetables on the first day, making of rice beer on the second day, cleaning the community pond and village surrounding, self-cleansing rituals and it ended with feasting. The major festivals celebrated by the various Naga tribes are Sekrenyi by Angamis, Moatsu and Tsungremmong by the Aos, Sükrunyi and Tsükhenyi by Chakhesangs, Naknyulüm by Changs, Tsokum by Khiamnungan, Aoleang by Konyaks, TokhuEmong by Lothas, Monyu by Phom, Yemshe by Pochury, Ngada by Rengmas, Tuluni by Semas, Mongmong by Sangtam, Metemneo by Yimchuger, Mileinyi, Langsimyi and ChadaGadi by Zeliangs. These festivals are celebrated fervently with folksongs, folk dances and feasting. Festivals were also a time to forgive, reconcile, exchange visits, express love and share with family and friends. They also marked certain cycles of their activities and life.

Traditional Knowledge and Crafts

The Nagas have good knowledge about their environment and make use of their local flora, fauna and other natural resources. Many are engaged in traditional crafts such as spinning and weaving, wood carving and bamboo works, pottery making, black smithy, etc. They have knowledge about the source of raw materials, the time of collection and have developed indigenous techniques in making them. This traditional knowledge is passed on from generation to generation informally. Basketry is one of the crafts that has survived even to date, perhaps for its utilitarian purpose. In the olden days, it not only showed the skill and creativity of the artisans but also reflected their social value system (Odyuo 2008.p155). Nagaland also has a rich biodiversity and there a number of people who are specialised in making indigenous medicines using various herbs and other forest products to treat and cure various kinds of ailments and sickness. Tattooing was another significant art that many Naga tribes practiced. The tattoo on their body symbolizes their social status and rites of passage.

Discussion and Conclusion

Most of the Naga cultural practices are community oriented. During such community activities, crucial knowledge is passed on, frequently without any conscious attention or effort to the process, and vital cultural traits are learned and acquired. But such community activities are becoming lesser in recent years due to various factors, the most imperative being modernization. In the olden days, Morungs used to play a significant role in providing space as well as in transmitting traditional knowledge but there are hardly any Morungs in existence these days and their significance has gone down considerably. As a result knowledge and skills that used to be transmitted in the Morungs have dwindled.

The Intangible cultural heritages are manifested in the tangible arts and crafts but rather than just preserving the crafts, it is very important to encourage the artisans to pass on their knowledge and skills. The indigenous ecological knowledge and traditional management practices that the Nagas possess are a rich intangible cultural heritage that needs to be safeguarded and carried forward. Old folksongs, folk dances, folklores, sayings, prayers, proverbs, myth, legends and language also need to be recorded. With modern technological advancement, recording of speech and action is possible and can be archived. The Nagas were known for their hospitality, honesty, bravery, and hard work and it is important to keep up such values. Culture is a continuous process, changes with time and the intangible cultural heritage being immaterial can with the passage of time sink into oblivion without any notice. The 'ephemeral' character of intangible cultural heritage also makes it susceptible and easily absorbed into another culture. The increased globalization has also added to the dilution of cultures. It is an apt time to create awareness about the intangible cultural heritage of the Nagas and preserve and safeguard them for posterity. Conscious effort has to be undertaken by all the stakeholders and local participation

is a must. If the tangible things that we can see are perishing at an alarming rate how much more are the intangible heritage at threat? Such rich heritage is going into oblivion if not recorded and preserved.

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