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## **TRANSITION AND TRANSMISSION OF LOTHAN ORAL TRADITION**

### ***Abstract***

*Oral tradition had been a persuasive and creative means of communicating day-to-day behavior and interactions among most Naga tribes, including the Lotha Nagas in Northeast India. This tradition offers a panoramic view of people and cultures that may have existed in the past. Earlier, the knowledge was transmitted through word of mouth across several generations in different circumstances at home and in the community, but rarely in recent times. It is now primarily transmitted through emerging social media and new media, sensing the loss of storytelling tradition. Further, the concern that arises from the transition from word of mouth to emerging social media and new media platforms has been long debated. Meanwhile, the author emphasizes the significance of diverse origins and earlier settlement narratives to convey Lotha's worldview and culture in totality.*

### **Introduction**

Oral tradition in common parlance is an oral form of receiving, communicating, and preserving knowledge, ideas and cultural material from one generation to another. Such oral transmissions occur through narratives embedded in songs, folktales, ballads, chants, prose, or verses. In addition, Oral tradition is believed to represent the earliest form of human existence that precedes written communication. As such, alongside Eurocentric binaries between oral and written culture persist in representing the level of civilization, the fine line between oral and written is further blurred through emerging social media and new media in contemporary times (Kallu, 2015). Meanwhile, the rich narratives of many cultures, written or oral, continue to serve certain functional utility. In defense of oral communication, Aryal (2009) believes both written and oral modes of communication equally convey important information about past events, society and ways of life and neither outweighs the other. Chamberlin also argues against the hierarchical and privileging perspective between oral and written cultures, for Oral cultures manifest elements of writing that are non-syllabic and non-alphabetic. Likewise, on the other hand, written

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cultures represent elements of oral traditions as observed in ritualistic and expected behaviour norms across many cultures.

Further, As Patton argues, a narrative has been recognized as an integral part of the contemplation of history, both interrelated and interdependent (Patton, 2017). In the context of the Lothas<sup>1</sup> and Nagas<sup>2</sup> at large, narratives endured the test of time and were told undeterred word of mouth much before their contact by the outer/colonial forces. The narrative was a shared community affair, not a personal affair encompassing the unmatched beauty and the rich legacy of the Nagas on how experiences are thought of in terms of stories. The lack of a long writing tradition has not deterred them from creative ways of imparting past beliefs and practices because oral narratives have been deliberately guarded and collectively shared. As such, they could be resourcefully relied upon to gather a comprehensive understanding of the past and the present, for oral narratives encompass both real and fictitious accounts of significant events, peoples, and places.

Further, a review of the existing literature suggests that writings on the Naga tribes began parallel to British administration in Nagaland. The British administrators and Christian missionaries documented some of the Naga tribes' cultural practices and later transformed them into monographs. Their endeavor remains as some of the earliest documents on the Nagas, despite allegations emerging from several quarters of their positioning to be ethnocentric. Regardless, the oral tradition of the Nagas had been affluent, and its centrality in the people's lives was undisputed.

With the above theoretical framework, the present paper attempts to navigate the transition and transmission of oral tradition through the origin and early settlement narratives of the Lotha Nagas. The narratives were further obtained from knowledgeable Lotha elderly persons and secondary resources.

### **Social relations as the unit for Transition and Transmission**

In the late 1980's born in a Lotha household, the author, spending early childhood listening to folk stories from her father, was then merely a lullaby and source of pleasure. Her father used tales, sayings, and songs to express and communicate. Alongside executing the household chores over the kitchen hearth, he offers persuasive and creative pieces of advice. Her father, the youngest of all-male siblings, is also the most favored child of his father by default that he was part of the Ultimogeniture tradition of the Lotha Nagas. He would often refer to his father- 'My father said so and so...' whenever he was about to express himself. According to his father, his reference and credit, who by consanguineal ties is her late Grandfather, became legit and resonated until the present time as his acquisition of many sayings, tales, songs, proverbs, legends, and myths has passed on to her and her other siblings. After she left home to pursue a higher degree, she would hear less from her father. A brief

stay during winter holidays at home facilitates situations whereby she could hear him again, although not frequently as during childhood due to time constraints.

In the present work in the southern part of India with a different lived reality, professional commitments seldom allow venturing into these narratives. However, as a beneficiary of various co-curricular activities initiated by respective Tribe Churches and student organizations in the college and university, she could somehow get in touch with the word of mouth mode of narrative transmission. In parts and pieces, she would receive updates by scrolling down Naga blogs and pages and scant written forms of documentation. Despite the change in the mode of transmission, her own experience makes her believe that spirit of storytelling has not lessened or died down if not for the time constraints and circumstances that do not favor word of mouth transmission.

As per Lotha Naga tradition, it was often an elderly knowledgeable member in the family and community who would impart beliefs, values, and practices of the past to the generation that succeeded them by word of mouth. Sometimes it was backed up with household demonstrations, agricultural fields, Community events and gatherings for feasting, deliberation, and Morungs. For instance, in the agricultural field and community gatherings where a large group of people is waiting to execute different activities, experts would be placed amid them to narrate tales, sing songs and even act out the same as part of the demonstration. The Morung or Youth Dormitory is a traditional institution for young boys and girls to gather, learn varied traditional skills, and seek potential mates. The skilled elderly member in the community would join them and impart their knowledge and talents. These skills include hospitality, traditional embroidery, weaving, cooking, and self-grooming for young girls. It is about acquiring a personality that reflects bravery, creating and handling hunting implements for young boys. However, the connotation of Morung remains in principle in recent times. In addition, the members who possess traditional knowledge and skills are lessening over time.

### **The Etymology of the term Lotha**

The Lothas identify themselves as Kyong and not as Lotha, although the latter term had been recognized in the official records for a long time. They recognize Lothas as Kyong, and not only is the term Lotha unknown to them, but they claim no authority upon the usage of the term except that Kyongs had been represented in the official records by various terms such as Latoos, Lotah, Lhota etc. This recognition is substantiated by both Hutton (1921) and Mills (1922) in their respective monograph on the Angamis and the Lothas.

Murry (2014) believes the term Kyong derives from the word *kyongtsu / kyonga*. In the course of movement, the Lothas had once assembled at a place

called Khayima (*kha-* count, *yima-* confuse), somewhere in the present-day Kohima, for the headcount. Because the numbers were huge, it was not easy to keep track of them. Hence the term *kyongtsu/ kyonga* represents the numerous crowds, consequently the confused count at *khayima*. The term Lotha is also thought to have been impressed by the outsiders/ British administrators. In Kuzhami<sup>3</sup>, *latha* means far, and of all the tribes who owe their origin to Khezhakeno, the farthest from Khezhakeno were the Lothas (Zehol & Zehol, 2009). Going by this presumption, the British who came in contact with the Angamis<sup>4</sup> might have confused *latha* with Lhota/ Lothas.

### From Seas to Hills

Before the Nagas took to the hills, there was the hypothesis of inhabitation in and around seas. Monsang references a voyage across big rivers, presumed to be the Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers, because some of the relevant folksongs of the Nagas tribes like Angamis, Chakhesangs, and Mayon (Zehol & Zehol, 2009). According to Pou (2006), Nagas moved out from the mainland of China, headed southward to the Moulmein Sea (Myanmar), where they stayed for a while and eventually retreated north-west to the Irrawaddy and Chindwin Valley along the Salween River and arrived at Imphal River and Barak River before occupying the Naga Hills. He believes that using seashells, beads, coral, and cowries in the Nagas' traditional costumes justifies the claim. Those who stayed behind in Moulmein must have advanced further south to the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which could be backed by the fact that some tribal communities in these countries share socio-cultural affinities with the Nagas.

Among the Lothas, water was undoubtedly one predetermined criterion for selecting a settlement site. If the settlement lacks or runs short of adequate clean water sources, they will abandon the place to seek a new one. Water is significant for the survival and prosperity of the tribe; a ritual is observed to propitiate the spiritual realm for blessing in the form of bounty water throughout their stay. While recognizing the significance of water in choosing a settlement, it is skeptical whether mere possession of cowries and other sea products is sizeable enough to argue upon inheritance near or surrounding seas because if it does, then there runs a risk. After all, the possibility of procuring raw materials such as cowries and other sea products from immediate and far-flung areas. Mill's account may, in parts, serve to clear the cloud.

“Wristlets (*khekap*) of cowries sewn-on cloth may be worn by anyone who has done the head-taking *genna*. A man with the first, second or third spear to kill an enemy has a little cross of cowries at the top of his wristlets. Those worn by the Northern Lothas (sic) are identical to the Sema type. They are bought from the Aos and are composed of cowries filed down till they are very narrow and sewn close together onto a cloth foundation” (Mills, 1922. p.12) Mills conceded to the use of sea products among the Lothas; but at the same time, specify how they have procured, also indicates contacts out of one's

community when he wrote the monograph. However, the contact is likely within the Naga territory. If the claim is confirmed, there is a strong probability that the sea products may have been procured from outside contact, not because they inhabited the sea. Again, reconciling with this scheme necessitates a further inquiry into the intra and interrelations of the Lothas and their Nagas counterpart under colonial and pre-colonial circumstances. In doing so, complexity in theorizing inhabitancy near or devoid of seas may ease up.

In another fascinating account, the prayer of a *pvuthi* (priest) references places like Manchuria,

Burma and Manipur. It says

“Oh Manchuria (sic) vanathung ronsyu Oh kutchu vanathung ronsyu

Oh thungpocheura vanathung ronyu”

In translation, it means that the harvest God never left them throughout their voyage to places like Manchuria<sup>5</sup>, Burma, and Manipur (Murry, 1995). Reference to places particularly out of Naga territory such as china, evokes speculation about whether Lothas are originally from China but if that had been the case, do the Lothas have any other plausible evidence? Otherwise, the reference to china by the priest may have been only a vague presumption prompted due to racial affinity.

### **Rankhanda**

A popular legend possibly points to inhabitancy in the Naga hills. The legend says the Lothas emerge from a hole to fear a spirit. The spirit was malicious, for he mercilessly devours both humans and animals. Despite the high fear on their minds, they lived on and refused to leave the village. Days pass, but the spirit persists in his evil doings and devours many humans and livestock. No words would match how forlorn they feel at a loss. One fine day, two brothers, Limhachan and Limhathung, the ancestors of the Lothas, mobilized the entire villagers and devised a brilliant plan in secrecy. One of the brothers exclaimed, “This is it! Let us disappear through the hole without the slightest knowledge of him. He would hunt every nook and corner but will not find a single soul to nourish his enormous appetite”.

Immediately, those gathered approved the brother’s words and headed towards the hole on the appointed day with their belongings. However, despite the confidentiality, the spirit learned about the plot and followed the crowd until Rankhanda<sup>6</sup> hindered his path. Meanwhile, another ancestor of Lothas wedged a hole with an animal horn, creating difficulty for the spirit to pass. In a tussle with the horns, the spirit was left behind. At the same time, Rankhanda offered a parting pledge to the spirit of yearly offerings in remembrance of him. The absconded crowd then headed towards their new dwelling amid wild berries and gushing crystal clear water, where they procreated and developed

in multitude.

Lothas had once observed a ritual called *epoe etha* to commemorate the pledge offered to the spirit by Rankhanda. A similar legend tells of emergence out of a hole and other Naga tribes such as Angamis and Rengmas. When we carefully examine the legend, one may infer that emerging out of the hole is beyond the scope of rational thought. The hole may be a natural cave carved out of stones or a hill somewhere in present-day Naga hills. Mills (1922), in his monograph, also tell of such a hole close to Khezhakeno in the present-day Naga hills.

### **Makhel to elsewhere**

Among the Nagas, the centrality of objects in the oral narrative is uncanny. Because they have the innate ability to evoke emotions and strongly mediate between human cognition and social reality as though they have lives. They are also not passive or dead in ways that convey symbolic messages either inherently in terms of their physical attributes or imparted by those who use or create them. They continue to exist as a testament to the core values of the Nagas, which are harmony and fraternity. Notable mention may be made of the slab of stone at Khezhakeno and the pear tree at *makhel* in Nagaland and Manipur correspondingly. The Nagas, in the course of their movement, halted at *makhel*. While tribes like Tangkhuls, Zeliangrongs, and Maos decided to inhabit and around *makhel*, the others headed towards Khezhakeno, where they put up for a brief period ahead of their respective settlements.

The pear tree at *makhel* is told to have sprung up from the walking stick of a woman. It is believed that any undesirable human disturbance brought to the tree by cutting its branches and stemming results in an awful omen for the entire community. Whenever this occurs, a male member performs a social *genna*<sup>7</sup> even days after the incident occurred.

In Lotha Nagas' version, the crowd once inhabited Mao, perhaps referring to *makhel* in the present-day Shajouba village of Senapati district in Manipur. This version may be substantiated from the Lothas history, which emphasized the existence of a suitable tree in the new settlement with a good water source, to the existence of a suitable tree in the new settlement. Such a tree is known to them as *mingetung* or head tree; its branches are used to suspend the head of the enemies taken during raids. Twigs from the previous settlement are brought and placed under the tree. Because the felling of branches and stem is an omen, social *genna* was observed by the entire village for averting such misfortune.

The slab of stone at Khezhakeno is a mysterious stone. The paddy dried on the stone gets doubles by the evening due to the presence of spirit. The brothers would take turns drying the paddy. However, it is believed that the conflict among the brothers led the spirit inherent in the stone to disappear.

The Lothas presume a man's indecency by means of physical contact with a woman over the stone was responsible for the loss of magical influence in the stone breaking the stone into pieces. Following the

During the incident, the crowd dispersed to different locations; some were carrying a piece of the stone with them, and Lothas are believed to be amongst the ones who brought pieces of the broken stone to their new settlement and, in fact, held the practice of gathering stones for use as *oha* or luck stones.

From Khezhakeno, the crowd dispersed and took a different route in due course of time. The Lothas still reminisce the headhunting days when they bravely outstate the Ao's settlement, whom they believe has left much ahead of them. The Lothas halted at places like *khayima* and Nerhema in the present-day Kohima district of Nagaland, where they left their Angami brethren and pressed further north with the Semas and Rengmas. At *Lozema*, in present-day Lazami village of Zunheboto district, the Lothas separated from the Semas and went ahead with the Rengmas until *honoho yonton*. In *honoho yonton* of the present-day Rengma area, the Lothas observed a ceremony involving the sacrifice of a cock, and for this reason, the place is remembered as *honoho yonton*, *hono* signifying cock. Another account says the physical contour of *honoho yonton* resembles that of a cock's crown, hence its name. From *Honoho yonton*, one group of Lothas went towards river Doyang while the majority progressed towards the foothills of Mount Tiyi (Mills, 1922; Sangma, 2017).

### **Tiyi longchum**

The Lothas, who inhabit the foothills of mount Tiyi in the present-day Wokha district of Nagaland, formed a village called *tiyi longchum*. The valley harnessed abundant water sources and rich vegetation, but they eventually ran out of water and took to different locations in the Lotha territory. In addition, on arriving at the foothills of mount tiyi, the Lothas had a headcount again, and that was how they came up with Wokha, *wo* means several people, and *kha* means counting (Mills, 1922). Presently, the area inhabited by the Lothas is officially designated as Wokha. In the abandoned *tiyi longchum*, Megaliths were erected after the feast of merit, and other occasions still tell of the magnificent precedent. In addition, some slabs of stones used for sitting purposes and as measures and a tree believed to be planted by one of the forefathers still exist. The Lothas, besides water shortage, were believed to be immensely terrified by tigers.

A tale is told of *tiyi longchum* days when the Lothas lived with the tigers. There lived in *tiyi longchum* a man by the name Ramphan. Because humans lived amid tigers and tigers amid humans, the human loss was not unknown, and with each passing day, they would learn of the tiger's feet. However, nothing scares Ramphan, for he is determined to tussle with the tiger.

One fine day, he took his machete down to where the corpse lay and waited patiently for the tiger. After long hours of waiting, the tiger finally arrived and, walking past each corpse, exclaimed, "I killed each one of them on my own, some on the way to the fields, some while gathering firewood and others while fetching water. I killed them all". After much bragging about his accomplishment, he went off to sleep. On ascertaining the tiger in deep slumber, Ramphan quietly slipped off his long machete and laid it mightily across the tiger's body until it was torn apart. Ramphan then held the tiger's head by his hand and immediately left the spot.

On his way back, as he walked up the hill, he saw a large crowd marching ahead. Presuming them to be his people, he cried aloud, "Look! I have just killed the monster, do not desert the village". However, there was no response, and he repeated his words. On hearing a faint call from behind, a voice quickly responded, "We are not far off yet; follow us along the path of rice husk we had dropped behind". Upon these words, Ramphan dutifully followed the path of the rice husk, and nothing dared to stop him until he came close to an injured woman. The woman's wounds were so severe that she could barely walk, and Ramphan did not dare walk past her. He nursed the woman until recovery and later took her as his wife and initiated a family in the new dwelling.

Ngullie (2014) carried out a significant preliminary investigation at *tiyi longchum*. Analysis of numerous finds such as potsherds, megaliths, hearthstones, and sharpening stones gathered from the site authenticate the claim that there was a settlement in Tiyi longchum in tune with the oral narrative. A comparison of the site findings, such as pottery-making techniques, was made and found to resonate with the pottery technique adopted by the Lotha nagas.

The above arguments suggest that the settlement choice was prompted by resource abundance and a landscape that favors the effortless tangible expression of the symbolic message. Both tangible and intangible evidence sustained through word of mouth in the narrative appears more assertive in the claim of habitation within than out of the Naga territory. This evidence is possible because Lothas never knew or inhabited their present homeland, even if they lived outside Naga territory. For instance, it must have been too extended back in a time scale in China and Mongolia that the evidence went into oblivion. However, any explicit claim must be further corroborated with genetics, archaeological, and other evidence. Further, despite similarities and differences in the told version of events, people, and places, one thing is apparent that the Nagas as a whole undeniably make sense of their everyday experiences, how and why certain things occur through the narrative, and these narratives are in no means detached from the social reality.

## **Conclusion**

The transition and transmission of Oral tradition among the Lotha



Naga tribes remain persuasive in pursuance of origin and early settlement. The diverse narratives further navigate the interpretation of the author's argument. The paper point toward the celebrated oral tradition, further advancing the significance of the narrative- worldview nexus among the Lothal Nagas. Despite the ongoing concerns with the transition and transmission of knowledge, the author concludes that oral narratives remain a significant cultural marker that serves as a substantial foundation for those venturing studies on varied cultures.

### *Notes*

- 1 Lothas constitute one of the naga tribes of Nagaland and inhabit the present-day Wokha district in Nagaland state of northeast India
- 2 Nagas are a group of tribes that occupy some states of Northeast India and parts of northwestern Burma. Different Naga tribes claim to share a common identity in social, cultural, and political matters, although their present settlements fall in parts within India and Burma
- 3 Kuzhami encompass the Khezha group within the Chakhesang tribe of Nagaland
- 4 Chokri groups within the Chakesang tribe are also identified as the eastern Angamis of Nagaland
- 5 Manchuria presently falls in large parts within the northeast territory of the People's Republic of China
- 6 In another version, rankhanda is portrayed as a monster
- 7 A genna is observed by the community for the propitiation of some mythical force and encompass complete abstinence of work in the field followed up with pleasing animal sacrifices and prayers

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