



Role Of Women In The Promotion Of Culture In Naga Society

¹ Adila Imchen,

² Prof Dr Sunny Joseph.

Assistant Professor/Research Scholar,

Professor/Research Guide

Department of Education,

St. Joseph University, Dimapur: Nagaland.

Abstract

There is a need to explore the recognition of women and their role in promoting cultural value

This paper attempts to highlight the role of Naga women in preserving cultural values of Naga society. Naga women and their cultural world had been veiled throughout history with the different cultural activities. Women have been carrying the identity of the Nagas in various walks of life from generation to generation, its arts and skills, habits, customs and tradition which influence the life of the Naga women. This paper seeks to understand how women have used their oral histories and knowledge to promote cultural values that have been handed down through generation.

Key words: Women, culture, values, tradition, knowledge.

Introduction

Nagas are among many of the ethnic groups of the North-Eastern India that inhabit in the state of Nagaland. Historically and culturally the Nagas are different from the rest of Indians in race, food habits, customs and traditions. Nagas have their own cultural heritage preserved in the form of oral traditions. As per the history the Nagas claim that they had recorded the sage on an animal skin which unfortunately was eaten by a dog. Since then, they say that the history and traditions are being preserved in their memoir and disseminated orally in the forms of expressive behavior and their material culture.

Genetically, the Nagas belong to Tibeto- Burman group of Mongoloid race. There are as many as seventeen social groups which were further sub divided into several major clans. These cultural groups sustain their distinctiveness in different walks of their tribal lives in tradition, customs, food, religion, organization, customary law and order and thus protect their respective identities even amidst the changing world's scenario.

The objectives of the study

- i. To explore the recognition of women and their role in promoting cultural values.
- ii. To highlight the role of Naga women in preserving the Naga culture.

Methodology

The data for the study was garnered from primary sources. Secondary data was drawn from journals, books, magazine, relevant publications and websites. Observation was used as a tool to record data from primary sources.

Culture of the Nagas

Nagas have rich and diverse cultural traditions. Each of the Naga tribes has their own distinct cultural identity. Naga culture includes all the ways of life of the Nagas in general, the inherited behavior and thoughts of their fore-fathers passed on to the new generation through oral traditions and day to day practices in the form of customs, norms, values, beliefs, morals and conventions acquired through the process of time, growth, evolution, contact, imitation and acculturation.

The colorful Naga tribes speak numerous languages though in many cases these are classified only as dialects. According to philologists, the Naga language belongs to the Tibeto- Burman linguistic group of Sino-Tibetan language family. All the tribes have their own language. However in practice the language even within one tribal area varies from village to village. The multiplicity of Naga language is mainly because of the living condition of the past when villages were isolated and there was little friendly inter-connection between the villages.

Naga society is casteless as there being no lower or higher caste. Nagas were known to be casteless and classless in economic, social, political aspects though of late distinction between have and have-not seems to be appearing. Another important feature of the Naga culture is the equality of sexes in most matters.

Status of women in Naga society

All Naga tribes have patriarchal family and hence the father was considered as head of the family and the line of succession was patrilineal. The subordination of mothers and children to the authority of the father is practically universal. K. Mitra (1991), states that "Naga women enjoy as much social rights as their men-counterparts. The study states that one may be astonished to learn that on the question of social status and individual liberty, Naga women are in a much better position than their sisters in other states of India who claim to be more advanced. It also states that the ability of Naga women to put in physical labor in the farms and the fields ensures economic freedom for them even if they fail to secure job in the Government or private concerns due to inadequate or little academic education."

Traditionally, women in Naga society have often been assigned the primary responsibility for managing the household and taking care of the family. U.A Shimray (2002) in his article Equality and Tradition: women's role in Naga society observes a Naga mother having no less significant role to play in the family as most of the domestic affairs are in the mothers hand. Accurate and extensive approach has been made to study about almost all the household maintenance work that falls on women. It is an approach to study and observe the nature of Naga women where the eldest daughter often helps in domestic affairs, while the mother looks after her children, teaches them, weaves cloths for the entire family and passes on the art of weaving to her daughter. He stated that Naga women are hard- working and dutiful to their men folk with their efficient management; the family earns reputation and respect in the villages as well as in the society.

Naga women also plays a vital role in preserving the rich cultural values through their involvement in different traditional and social activities and are responsible in passing down the knowledge and skills to their children. Traditionally, Naga women have been the backbone of the family their hard work and expertise hands in agricultural activities, their exquisite craftsmanship in weaving, pottery and basketry making which not only reflect their artistic talents but also provide a vital source of income for many

families. In addition to these Naga women have ventured into production of organic food products, indigenous herbal medicines, handcrafted items, cosmetics and many other value-added goods.

Preservation of oral traditions

Oral traditions are exceptionally a rich source of knowledge among the Nagas. Oral traditions are verbal memories that the firsthand observer have passed along to others. There are actually historical accounts that are transmitted from one generation to the next through the word of mouth. They can be in the form of praise, poems, and songs telling of the heroic deeds of an ancestor, a clan or a whole community of people.

Naga culture relies heavily on oral traditions and women are often responsible for passing down songs, folklores and customs to younger generation which transmits cultural values and history. These oral traditions not only connect individuals to their cultural roots but also serve as a means of identity formation and community co-hesion. One of the important aspects of Naga oral tradition is the preservation of historical accounts, genealogies and tribal narratives. Folksongs are also a significant source of oral traditions in preserving cultural continuity and identity. These songs often recount significant events, heroic deeds, love stories, seasonal celebrations, agricultural practices and ancestral wisdom encapsulating the collective experience and ethos of Naga society.

Discussing the oral tradition of the Ao Nagas, the Ao Nagas talk of "Longtrok Otsu" ('Long'- stone, 'terok'-six, 'Otsu'-story, Ao's are believed to have originated from the six-stones) an oral tradition of how they came into being. This oral tradition of Longtrok is linked to the Ao Naga ancestral village of Chungliyimti (presently in Tuensang district of Nagaland, inhabited by the Sangtam tribe). The oral narrative of "Longtrok" is so central to the Ao world – view that in Ao folklore, songs, narratives and all other customary practices are traced to "Longtrok" (A Walling, 2016)

Traditional Food: Procurement, Preparation and Preservation.

Nagas are traditionally agriculturists and thus their food is mainly agro-based. Naga women play dominant role in agriculture and food production. They are often the primary cultivators of household farms that contribute significantly to the family's livelihood. Women also play a vital role in preserving traditional farming practices which are passed down through generation. Traditionally Naga food is usually boiled, steamed or fermented. The various tribes have their own way of preparing food. Every Naga tribes have their own specialities, the Lotha tribe is known for fermenting varieties of bamboo shoot items. Ao's in making Anishi (fermented yam colocasia leaves), Sumi's are famous for fermenting soya beans popularly known as axoni likewise the other tribes also have their own specialty. R.C Ngullie (2023). In the olden days rice beer was an important beverage for the Nagas. It was not only a daily beverage but an important drink served at various social and cultural events. These foods items not only fulfilled their dietary needs but play a significant role in cultural life of the Nagas.

Spinning and weaving

Spinning and weaving is performed by women and every Naga women is supposed to weave the cloths of her family. For spinning, a few simple tools are used in the whole process. Like to clean off the cotton seeds it is been rolled on a flat stone with a short stick used like rolling pin. Some Nagas gin the cotton by a cotton-gin consisting of two wooden rollers geared to revolve in opposite directions and turned by a crank with the right hand. The Naga spindle is a very primitive affair; it consists of a pin of bamboo stick about 22cms long tapering to a fine point at the top and about the thickness of a pencil at thickest point near the bottom. This is made by rubbing on other stone still it is flat and round. The clean cotton is gently rolled by hand with the help of a round stick over a flat stone or plank into sausage like slivers about 20cms long, after which it is to be spun into thread. (I. Longkumer, 2012)

Majumdar writes: 'Naga females spin yarn from cotton with which they weave cloth. Every family has a spinning wheel and a handloom for weaving purposes'. Every Naga women weave variety of colorful shawls and clothes even in the present days. Each Naga tribe has a distinct pattern of hand woven cloth that identifies the wearer tribes depending on one's clan and social status. Naga women are gifted with more creative talents they are expert weavers and thus they produced sufficient cloths with variety of colorful designs and every mekhala (sarong, a wrapped around the waist that covered the lower part of the

body), while a shawl covered the upper part of the body. These clothes had their own distinctive patterns according to one's clan or tribes. (W.C.Smith.1925), 'The Naga cloth of his time was considered the best fabrics produced by the simple loom. Cloth of a dark blue color was in most common use, the dye being produced from the leaves of the hill indigo plant'. Among the Ao Naga men, the rich and the warrior had a much coveted shawl called 'Tsungekotepsu' with embroidered pictures of lion, tiger, human head, cock, spears, dao and mithun. 'Tsungekotepsu' (Chungli dialect) or Mangkotepsu (mongsen dialect) is a striped cloth of red and black. There are five big red stripes followed by a small red stripes on each segment. Another piece of white cloth with five inches in width is attached between the red and black stripes cloth on which different pictures are embroidered on it.

Pottery making

Naga women are the sole potters in the villages and they are well appreciated and respected by the entire community for their excellence in this activity. Women produce indigenous pottery wares mostly for domestic use and not for decorative purpose. (D. Vasa 2023). Local indigenous pottery making is not a mandatory but a voluntary activity. It attracts some young women because it combines lucrative, social and entertainment aspects allowing women to contribute financially to their household while keeping in touch with their peer groups. Most of the vessels are made and use for cooking purposes in a variety of sizes ranging from 7-12 cm in maximum width and 11-26cm in height. Besides cooking vessels, storage jars were also made. Storage jars could hold up to 20kilos of grains and were arranged in granaries built close to residential areas.

Festivals

Festivals are one of the oldest institutions for imparting social and cultural values to the people of the Nagas. In the absence of formal system of education, the most effective agent of education of the younger generation was through the festivals. Every Naga tribe has its own festivals. Folks songs and folk dance are always associated with festivals that brings bonding among the people Festivals are the core of cultural heritage, traditional practices, community bonding, spiritual expression and social celebration.(Dorson. M. Richard, 1972). Naga society is basically agricultural and hence festivals are mostly on agricultural significance. As Horam (1929,p 39, social and cultural life of the Nagas) puts it, 'Agricultural success or failure depends on the nature. Gennas are observed and rituals are performed in festivals to propitiate the Supreme Being for protection of crops from destructions by devastating wind and hailstones. Rituals include offering prayers for bumper harvest for the year. In Naga society, women play a vital and multifaceted role in festivals contributing to the cultural fabric and spiritual well-being of the community. They are deeply involved in various rituals, traditions and preparation and their contributions are highly valued. Traditional songs and dance forms is the most distinctive part of the rich Naga culture and are generally performed during the festivals.

Discussions

In the context of Naga society, Lucy Zehol (1998) in her book women in Naga society opined that the status of the women is impacted due to the patriarchal norms and attitudes, wherein social institutions and traditions are inspired by the belief in male dominable and female inferiority. She sheds light on the status of women in traditional societies where they were usually described in relation to her family as a daughter, wife, sister and mother. However, in the new emerging situation a women's status is seem in terms of her educational and career achievement and position in society.

Conclusion:

Naga women have contributed and played an important role in the not only in managing the household affairs but also played a vital role in contributing and preserving the cultural heritage through multiple activities because Naga culture means the way of life of the Nagas. The inherited behavior and thoughts of their forefathers passed on to the new generation through day to day practices. The Naga culture, therefore includes feast of merit, log drum, food and drinks, dress and ornaments, tools and weapons, festivals, rituals and ceremonies, painting, wood carving, tattooing, songs and dances, Morung system, food gathering, weaving and spinning, bamboo works, earthenpot making, manufacturing of salt, shifting cultivation ,rearing of animals, herbal medicines and indigenous methods of healing, the emergence of Christianity and education etc as the indispensable components of Naga culture.

Therefore, without women it is not possible to carry on the culture and traditions because women are key custodian of Naga culture. Women's contributions are invaluable and are recognized for their strength, resilience and dedication to their communities by promoting cultural preservation, economic empowerment, community development and leadership roles in various spheres including politics, education and advocating women's rights, social justice which brings a positive impact in shaping and safeguarding the Naga customs and traditions which continues to flourish even in the face of modernization.

References:

- Alomi Cynthia Shikhu, Dr Toshimenla. Women and Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Nagaland: issues of sustainability. Vol-5-issue 9, Sept 2016. ISSN No 2277-816.
- Ditamulu Vasa. Pottery Production among the Phom's of Nagaland.
- Imtirenla Longkumer, 2012. Material cultures of the Ao Nagas of Nagaland Social Issues their customs and jewellery.
- Jessymol & Dr Avinuo Chupuo-ISSN: 2320-2882.2021 IJCRT; Vol 9, issue 11, Nov 2021.
- Khriekisano Metha. (2025) Property Inheritance its Impact on the Status of Women among the Angami Nagas.
- Longchar, Resenmenla. (2011) Oral Narratives of Ao Nagas Constructing Identity.
- Rawan.Role of Women in Nagaland's Economy. Dec 24, 2024.
- R. Chumbemo Ngullie. (2023) Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Nagas. Vol3, No1, 2023.
- Temjenmongla Imchen, Dr R. Subramanian. From Traditional roles to Economic Catalysts: The Transformative Influence of Naga Women in Handicrafts and Rural Entrepreneurship.
- Walling, Aokumla (2016) Oral traditions and Archaeological Reconstructing the pre-colonial History of the Ao Nagas with special reference to the Naga Ahom Relationship.
- Yano, Vitsou (2021). Cultural World of Women in Angami Naga Society.
- Zeliang, Inzule (2015) A Study of Education and Socio- Cultural Life of the Zeliang Nagas.