



NARRATIVES IN AO FOLK SONGS AND PROVERBS: A REPOSITORY OF PEOPLE STORIES.

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Abstract:

Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social organisations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws of a certain group of people. Orality is a complex phenomenon which configures its own ways and means of expression and transmission. It is that great highway of information where an existing intersection of ideas, forms and styles takes place at different levels, creating processes and dialogues with inter-linkages between form and content, genre and theme, visual and aural, local and regional, traditional and contemporary. The oral literature or the traditional literature, transmitted to us from generation to generation, represents the most valid and appropriate expression of religions, mythological, historical and cultural milieu of the rural folk. It was the only form of literature that existed among the tribal society as a vehicle of expression and share knowledge and stories of an oral tribe in the form of proverbs, sayings, folk songs which held the community together.

Narratology is the art of narration through which folk tales, proverbs, myths, etc. are conveyed from one generation to the other orally. Narratives function as markers of ethnic or cultural boundaries. They also perceive through narration, the changes and loss of images in their society and their cultural differences. Thus all narratives are expressions of a given culture, and represent and transport its norms and values.

The telling of stories is such a pervasive aspect of our environment that we sometimes forget that stories provide the initial and continuing means for shaping our experience. Stories are the repository of our collective wisdom about the world of social and cultural behaviour ; they are the key mediating structures for our encounters with reality. All forms of narration are a reflection of culture. Folktales, proverbs, sayings and all kinds of everyday narration are expressions or representations of the cultural system of a people of its worldview, its value orientations, attitudes and habits, its customs and its history. Ordinary everyday communication is usually interspersed with short narrative forms like saying or proverbs, anecdotes, quips, stories, etc. With oral narratives, there are no reference books. Hardly anything is written down or recorded.

The present study will concentrate on a small part of a vast oral literature of the Ao Nagas, a major tribe of Nagaland, The Aos have a rich culture which is reflected in their oral literature like the use of proverbs, sayings, songs and folklores. Use of proverbs in everyday life and daily conversation is commonly practiced among the Aos. Some of the most popular proverbs used among the people are discussed here which speak about their culture and traditional wisdom. In the Ao society, many elderly persons converse with a song. Each occasion calls for the appropriate song. In the context of the traditional Ao society, songs and folklores are the major components of their discourse. Songs and folklores are major components of a non-material culture specially in the context of a traditional society. The past history of civilisation in the context of modern society can be

understood better through study of oral traditions like folk songs and use of folk elements like proverbs. . It is important to preserve this oral tradition for the retention and continuity of one's culture and tradition.

Keywords: Oral tradition, Songs, proverbs, narratology, traditional society, culture.

Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social organisation, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws of a certain group of people. Orality is a complex phenomenon which configures its own ways and means of expression and transmission. It is that great highway of information where an existing intersection of ideas, forms and styles take place at different levels, creating processes and dialogues with inter-linkages between form and content, genre and theme, visual and oral, local and regional, traditional and contemporary (Sen and Kharmawphlang, 2007: 1) G.P.Singh says, 'the oral literature or the traditional literature, transmitted to us from generation to generation, represents the most valid and appropriate expression of religions, mythological, historical and cultural milieu of the rural folk. It was the only form of literature that existed among the tribal society as a vehicle of expression' (Sen, 1985: 226).

Thus orality, in general terms, means word of mouth and refers strictly to the habit of relying totally on oral communication. Oral tradition consists of any oral transmission passed from one person to another through word of mouth like proverbs, sayings, songs, folktales which hold the society together. Among the definitions given by various writers, N. Scott Momaday in his essay *The Man Made of Words* quotes oral tradition as: "The oral tradition is that process by which the myths, legends, tales and lore of a people are formulated, communicated and preserved in language by word of mouth, as opposed to writing. Or it is a collection of such things' (Aobson, 1979: 167). Folktale is one of the materials out of which narratology grew and around which the account of narratology is centred (Benson, 2003: 18).

Narratology is the art of narration through which folk tales, proverbs, myths, etc. are conveyed to generation after another orally. Narratives function as markers of ethnic or cultural boundaries. They also perceive through narration, the changes and loss of images in their society and their cultural differences. Thus all narratives are expressions of a given culture, and represent and transport its norms and values, and the narratives about the 'other' express collective images of groups about each other (Handoo and Kviddane, 1999: 118).

The telling of stories is such a pervasive aspect of our environment that we sometimes forget that stories provide the initial and continuing means for shaping our experience. Indeed, without stories our experiences would merely be unevaluated sensations from an undifferentiated stream of events. Stories are the repository of our collective wisdom about the world of social and cultural behaviour; they are the key mediating structures for our encounters with reality.

Thus, it is not surprising that a great deal of scholarly investigation has focused on both the nature of stories and their central role in human affairs. They are the source through which our experience with reality is related. Across many disciplines including linguistics, literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, researchers have begun to see how the analysis of story structure is fundamental to our understanding of individual intention and potential.

Narratology is perhaps best understood as a term with a stricter and a looser sense. Broadly speaking, it is the name given to the critical and theoretical study of the numerous forms of narrative discourse. The narratological approach is characterised by its overriding concern with narrative structure, and the close attention it pays to the effects that this structure has on the shaping and unfolding of narratives. It scrutinises the internal relations

of a narrative's component parts, and dissects how these relations are constructed in practically any given aspect of the narrative text. For

some narratologists, these structures are what bring narrative texts into being, and even provide them with meaning.

It is also important to understand the concept of orality while studying any oral narratives like those intended in the paper. Orality can be defined as thought and its verbal expression in societies where the technologies of literacy (especially writing and print) are unfamiliar to most of the population. The study of orality is closely allied to the study of oral tradition. Primary orality refers to thought and its verbal expression within cultures "totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print." It has been a habit of literate cultures to view oral cultures simply in terms of their lack of the technologies of writing. This habit, argues Ong, is dangerously misleading. Oral cultures are living cultures in their own right. All forms of narration are a reflection of culture. Folktales, proverbs, sayings and all kinds of everyday narration are expressions or representations of the cultural system of a people of its worldview, its value orientations, attitudes and habits, its customs and its history. Ordinary everyday communication is usually interspersed with short narrative forms like saying or proverbs, anecdotes, quips, stories, etc.

With Oral narratives, there are no reference books. Hardly anything is written down or recorded but the best source of the oral narratives are through oral narrators and elders of the village who are good sources of information. If you listen to them, for the first time one would like that cotton first grew out of the white feather of a kite, who told us that the leaves and branches of certain trees are auspicious?' Thus a story or narration begins to unfold as a storehouse of many meanings.

As young children one gets to hear stories like that of the war between the fish and the stars which are myths and legends, and as one grows he outgrows those stories as childishness' and 'fairy-tales.' Their significance are realised only with maturity and we realise the need to identify oneself as belonging to a particular place and a community. It is actually these stories, myths and legends which were passed down to us through village elders, the orator, our forefathers etc form a part of our lives and despite the 'alienation' from one's own land, and people, it can be safely affirmed that these stories are inseparable from the routine of everyday life, customs and practices of a community. They are no longer considered as stories or myths but as beliefs determining a way of life' (Dai, 2005: 4).

It cannot be overlooked that most of the ancient tales have been discarded as irrelevant with the changes ushered in by the modern world. Stories of war, bullets, communal factions etc. have replaced these legends and stories but to many of us the stories and myths which we have heard as small children still are as Mamang Dai writes a wellspring of thought of emotions that are restored in a peculiar blend of myth and memory unique to the region' (Ibid: 5).

This paper will study a small part of a vast oral literature of the Ao Nagas, a major tribe of Nagaland, a land of 'headhunter' to the outsiders and a land that once echoed with the sounds of nature, tucked away in the small region of the 'North-East - a land of scenic beauty. Who says oral literature is dead literature?' It is alive, and an attempt is made to re-connect with the past through this unique literature, based on the older narratives.

The Aos have a rich culture which is reflected in their oral literature like the use of proverbs, sayings, songs and folklores. Use of proverbs in everyday life and daily conversation is commonly practiced among the Aos. In the Ao society, many elderly persons converse with a song and a word, and 'a talk with a proverb' even in their daily lives. The art of using proverbs and saying in everyday conversation enhances the beauty of the speech. A person who used proverbs and traditional songs in his speech was highly respected and honoured.

Thus the wisdom of a person and his knowledge is judged through this kind of speech using proverbs. Unfortunately, the use of such proverbs is also gradually decaying in modern Ao society and many youngsters are not aware about such deeply rooted cultural values and customs.

The origin and usage of such proverbs are unknown but most of them are associated to society from where they learn many lessons. Some of the most popular proverbs used among the people are discussed here which speak about their culture and traditional wisdom. These lessons are essentially important to be used in contemporary society today (Jamir and Lanunungsang, 2005: 252). Some commonly used proverbs in day to day life, and their meanings are provided below:

- (1) "Somomo tuo ngur su shisa ama", like the proverb, "Ayir ngur kinungtsü bala", which means seeing a beautiful girl, the husband divorced his wife.
- (2) "Nük-in-panginer küpang tsüja aier"
- "Nuktangtar ari mashir", meaning, "Adulterers die early".
- (3) "Angui shi makumer, aser shi agi angu makumer"- "Sosemjisa sosem", which means, "blood relations cannot be ignored."
- (4) "Kimong matsüng ki asüba",
which means "Tangatetba tejangja makaii inyakba", just like attempting to construct a house without foundation, a man behaving or doing something erratically without proper understanding.
- (5) "Tsükla mi ama" (Olulu karakara-a perokshiba);
which means "rumour spreads like wild fire." (Jamir and Lanunungsang 225: 253-263).

No account of the oral tradition among the Aos would be complete without a reference to its songs . Singing, either of ballads, lullabies, hunting or fishing songs always formed an integral part of any narrative account, because whatever the subject may be, the punch line is always delivered in the form of a poem sung by the narrator. Different occasion calls for the appropriate song (Ao, 1999:13). In the context of the traditional Ao society, songs and folklores are the major components of their discourse. The Aos used to communicate through songs their inner most feelings which could not be expressed through their spoken language. Most of these songs are derived from traditional beliefs and practices and usually the meanings of such songs, deeply rooted in culture are difficult to understand. Different types of songs are sung on different occasions. They are songs of warfare, head hunting, love songs, songs of worship, ritual, cultivation. These songs cannot be sung at all occasions. They have to be sung only as per the occasion in which the song is sung. Most of these songs are sung from memory as there is no written document of the lyrics. They are either sung by a soloist but mostly sung in the form of a poem or between individuals. They sing as though they are talking to each other. They instantly respond to each other through songs. The "Tsüki," 'Ariju' and fields were the places where these songs were learnt. But after the downfall of the socio-cultural institution like *Ariju* and *Tsüki*, the younger generation missed out on the opportunity of learning such traditional songs. Different categories of songs are discussed in this paper to highlight the beautiful treasures of traditional songs.

A song discussed here is a 'war song,' sung by the women encouraging men to fight bravely;

Longtrok nung poker

(the Aos came out or emerged at Longtrok).

Menang ali tetenzükdang

(in the beginning of the world)

Shari tesaksoba Shotoker;

(there arose the ferocious warriors of Shotokor tribe)

Anaru leisure orung sharirudenü

(with the warriors of Anaru, and Oronger)

Zuniseka tongtep akone

(every sunrise we battled with them)

O Chumgliyimti tsür jatelari

Ayu lemtettsüba;

(the women of Jamir clan of Chungliyinti arrived at a resolution).

Shari longpang koka ru

Arr ngangyiner nem;

Mangkotepsü atatsüi ta lemtetakone.

(defeating the enemy and driving them away),

To the warriors a shawl of painted skulls shall be presented (Folksong).

The Aos are a major tribe among the Nagas who according to the ancient folklore is believed to have emerged out of the earth at "Longterok" which means six stones? Some of these stones are still to be seen at a village called Chungliyinti on the south bank of the river Dikhu. The Ao myth records that, of the six stones, three were males named Longpok, Tongpok and Longjakrep, and the remaining three females named Longkakupokla, Tongmenala and Elongse, "The myth further says that Tongpok married Elongse, Longpok married Longkakupokla and Longjakrep married Tongmenala. Thus was the institution of exogamous marriage established by the first fathers, which continues till today and is an inalienable tenet of Ao social custom" (Ao 2004: 3). The song talks about this popular myth among the Aos about their emergence. It further goes on to talk about a particular tribe - the 'Shotoker,' which was a warrior tribe. Warfare among tribes was a common practice. All the boys who attained ten to twelve years of age go to sleep in the 'Ariju,' where they are trained to use simple arms, and receive training to be warriors, ready to defend their village.

Woman in Naga society were supportive of their husband's war activities, understanding that it was often essential for clan survival (Stern and Ham, 2003: 124). Such support is shown on the song towards their husbands by the wives of the Jamir clan of Chungliyinti that to the brave warriors who defeat the enemy, a shawl of painted skulls would be presented. The Naga textile designs reflect the social and religious system of the tribe from which they originate. Motifs depicted on the garments are of a purely symbolic nature. The Nagas adorn their textiles with cowry shells, which represents the moon and the heads of slain enemies. The source of this symbolism is the fertility cult, which is an integral part of Naga culture.. Among the Aos, "Tsongkoteosu' is a beautiful warrior shawl, whose central band depicts mithuns which signifies the owner's wealth, human figures symbolic of his prowess in headhunting animals like tiger, elephant, lion symbolising his bravery as well as cocks, daggers and spears signifying his virility (Stern and Ham 2000: 66). The painted skulls represent the human head taken by the warrior, symbolic of bravery, victory and fertility.

Another song celebrates the 'Morung' or 'Ariju' which was the learning place of the young people. This song is sung in honour or praise of 'Ariju':

O longtroko poker;

(with the emergence of the Aos at Longtrok)

Bochi asem aki lima tasen one

(the sons of three clans),

Lima tasen mesemteta yur;

(after finding a new place)

Chungliyimti ali tema pang nung

(At Chungliyimti land)

(Senden Riju yangerkone)

(The Senden Riju was constructed)

(Folksong).

There are mixed opinions among the Aos regarding their origin. The Aos hold the clan system very strongly. The tribe is divided into two main tribes namely the Mongsen and the Chungli. The Ao Mongsen clan claimed that they did not emerge out of the six stones or 'Longterok,' as held by the Chunglis. But the most commonly accepted theory is that of the Chunglis. According to the tradition of the Chungli clan, the Aos came out from the 'Longterok,' the 'six stones' situated on the top of a spur on the right bank of the Dikhu. Out of these six stones, three were males, from which the different clans of the Aos originated, mentioned in the song. The song further mentions of the 'Ariju' which plays a significant role in a social fabric of the Aos. 'Ari' means enemy and 'ju' means capture. It is the preparatory place for the youngsters where they are trained to face the enemies and guard the villages against external attacks. It is as well the centre for the social, religious and political activities of the boys and the elders of the village.

Each of the Naga tribe, be it the Aos, the Angamis, Semas, Lothas has its own distinctive culture and folk tales of its own. Their past history can be understood better through study of oral traditions like the folklore. The folk lores brings to reality their customs and traditions. Folktales are the major source of the transmission of culture among the Nagas. They bear allegorical meanings. To get information from folklores, elders of the village are the perfect source. In every Naga village, singing of folk songs and narration of folklore are very common.

Songs were a major components of a non-material culture specially in the context of a traditional society. The Aos in the past used to communicate through songs. In fact in a traditional society, songs were the best means of communication. The following is an example of an Ao traditional song;

Ongertsür Nungshijunglai atenba ken:

Pendangerkela kü chindong nung senden-angni,

Ngangba maorata tesha yatsüni.

(All strangers gather in my room but tell no one about the marriage)

Ao tsükong sema mongbu anchetria

Ora chuba kima, muluzübu arong da

Koba meshimer, küyim ongna ongsemsanger.

(All suitors travelling throughout the region of Ao tribe,

brings different gifts of ornaments and beautiful traditional costumes to my compound to woo me).

Shinaroa mekiimleni

She is a woman, whom every man wants to marry (Longkumer, 2007: 22). This song brings out the beauty of Nungshijungla, from the Onger tribe, talks of her desire to get married, as marriage was considered to be a very important aspect of the AOs social life. Every man and woman showed his/her desire to get married once they attained a marriageable age unless due to some personal reservations one preferred to stay celibate.

Nungshijungla is the most beautiful woman in the village who can really talk eloquently and every man wants to marry her. She cannot choose whom to marry and she finally decides not to marry at all because she could not get married to some young men of two or three clans in her village. As per the AO custom inter marriage between some clans was not allowed. It was strongly decided upon, keeping in mind all that is to happen or can happen.

The past history of civilisation in the context of modern society can be understood better through study of such oral traditions like folk songs and proverbs. Whether a myth or reality they bring to light about one's culture, customs and traditions. Elderly persons are the main source of such stories. They are the rich source of a society's values and the practices where a tribal society's wisdom and culture are enshrined.

The narratives give a more or less detailed description of certain aspects or elements of the culture of a given community. It is important to preserve this oral tradition for the retention and continuity of one's culture and tradition. The family is the basic setting for acquiring competence in culture as well as the circulation of such stories (Handoo and Kvideland, 1999: 241). The Nagas have a cultural distinctiveness of the hill people. The Naga society is a traditional society, where the cultural patterns are reflected in the folklore and in the life breathing oral traditions of the community (Sen and Kharmawphlang, 2007: 1). Folk tales are ingrained in the very culture of the AO Nagas. It is within the social set up of a community. As a tribal community, the AOs like many other Naga tribes do not have a written literature. People have come to accept the valuable knowledge and wisdom handed down by the forefathers orally without questioning. For the AOs, the oral tradition is not just a process or form of storytelling but it forms the basis of the people's customs, religion, their history and their very little written literature.

The AOs like many other tribal societies do not have a written script of their own. Whatever has been passed down by the ancestors to the younger generations have been done through word of mouth or orally. There is also no evidence whether what we are made to believe has actually been practiced but no one has questioned the authenticity of our customs, beliefs and practises which makes up culture. The religious ethos of the AOs is embedded in myths, oral history and rituals (Miri, 2004:175).

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