



Rethinking Traditional Cultural Expressions As Folk Drama: An Ao Naga Perspective

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Abstract

Folk drama offers an in-depth and dynamic exploration of traditional cultural expressions. Folk drama is believed to have originated in rituals and festivals. This expressive art form evokes alternate worlds by giving voice, commenting and narrating about the way of life of a community. It is a living theatrical performance rich in symbolism with a structured narrative, a collective cultural memory enacted in the present.

Traditional cultural expressions carry performative characters in a community with an oral tradition. “Yimphio” is an oral mode of communication where the announcer metaphorically steps into the role of a conventional character in the drama of community life. The “Tsüki” song is a simple, mundane interaction between two girls, with certain structural principles which lend an aura of theatricality. The verbal performance of “Nülaksü” creates a sublime space- the “play frame”, and here the oratorical skill of the speaker inculcates a profound realisation of cultural wisdom upon the listeners.

Rituals performed by priests become “performative” The priest transforms into a symbolic, powerful entity, communicating with supernatural forces and hence invoking an “alternative world” Community actions, especially those associated with the ritual of the dead, reveal how the belief system of ancestors is continually “re-enacted” in our daily life. Folk drama is therefore a mirror which reflects the essence of a community.

KEY WORDS: traditional cultural expressions, verbal performance, cultural memory, play frame, cultural wisdom, alternative world, re-enacted, intergenerational.

INTRODUCTION:

Folk drama is a traditional form of theatre deeply connected to local identity and their culture. It is a composite art form that combines music, dance and dialogue. Folk drama is orally transmitted from one generation to another. It relies on the memory of the performer, without a written script. With the rise of literacy and the surge of modern technological mass media platforms, folk dramas have lost the popularity they once enjoyed. It is believed that early men used gestures to communicate, and these gestures produced different bodily movements and sounds. These physical movements may have developed into many forms of dance and song along the passage of time.

Anthropological studies discuss the importance of celebrations and festivals in the lives of early humans. These celebrations have a strong foundation in their social structures, religious beliefs and agricultural cycles. The growth of folk drama shows how daily activities get incorporated through imitation. Folklorists inferred that folk dramas have deep connections with religious festivals, which strongly impacted the creation of folk drama. A study of Greek drama tradition reveals that it was born from religious festivals honouring Dionysus, the god of wine and theatre in ancient Athens.

Scholars bring in a broad range of performance traditions under the term “folk drama”. The concept of what it actually means is in a gradual process of change or growth. Therefore, it is problematic to formulate a universal definition of folk drama. But despite the absence of a definitive explanation, folk drama, as a vernacular cultural performance, is regarded with reverence in many communities. Thus, folk drama can be approached as an expressive art form that evokes an alternate world which gives voice, makes comments and narrates about the ways of life of a community.

In *Folklore and Folk Life: An Introduction*, Roger Abrahams shares his view of how the earliest scholars considered folk drama to have arisen from festivals. *The Golden Bough*, by James Frazer, has greatly impacted folklore studies. Influenced by his theories, scholars have attributed ritual origins to folk drama, and this influence continues well into the twentieth century. According to Thomas A. Green, “folk drama was presumed to be the detritus of pre-Christian ritual, the rustic reworking of literary material, or a popular survival of liturgical drama” (Green 1981, 423). Again, Christie Fox in *Breaking Forms: The Shift to Performance in Late-Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* writes of how folk drama has been analysed as a form of literature and a species of text rather than a variety of performance. Ben Amos in *The Strands of Tradition: Varieties in Its Meaning in American Folklore Studies* states that the text of a play was “the tradition”, and scholarship focused on the text or script. Such scholarly dialogues suggest that, from early on, folklorists have placed folk drama into a stage of evolution and a comparative framework.

Scholarly dialogues about folk drama underwent a paradigm shift in the hands of theorists like Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman, and Victor Turner, whose works suggest similarities between everyday life and drama.

“Burke, a philosopher of language and rhetorician, re-conceptualised communication as a form of symbolic action, and his “dramatic pentad” introduced in 1945, included theatrical terms such as act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose that could be applied to human interactions. Sociologist Erving Goffman, who was, developed his influential idea of “dramaturgy” in 1959, which suggested that individual identity was a socio-cultural construct and that the presentation of self in everyday life was a kind of “performance” that resulted from the individual putting on a mask and roles for an interlocutor/ audience. Goffman an idea picked up by Richard Schechner, who argued that because theatre drew on everyday life, theatre was closely linked to ritual. Finally, Victor Turner, who worked closely with Schechner, developed his idea of “social drama”, which also contributed to the expansion of theatrical concepts in social theory (Gabbert, 2018: 7 (1) 2 P.3)

Based on the above scholastic dialogues, this paper attempts to “rethink” some Ao Naga cultural expressions as “folk drama”. Rethink implies re-evaluation or reinterpreting cultural practices beyond their surface level. The discussion is done under two broad categories. Such an approach invites an in-depth and more dynamic exploration of the intergenerational nature of the traditional cultural expressions. This approach reveals how these practices are not just rituals or customs but living theatrical performances rich in symbolism, participation and meaning. In this regard, Lisa Gabbert has stated that “folk drama is a valuable window into culture and should be taken more seriously” (Gabbert, 2018: 7 (1): 2. 1)

TRADITIONAL CULTURAL EXPRESSION THROUGH COMMUNITY EXPRESSIONS:

Thomas A. Green, in his article “*Towards a Definition of Folk Drama*”, discusses how human behaviour or social interactions reveal a systematic or regular use of theatrical metaphor. By transferring the theatrical metaphor to everyday conduct, Philip A Dennis depicts the Oaxacin village drunk as a conventional character in the drama of community life in “*The Role of a Drunk in an Oaxacin Village.*” Further, Thomas Gregor considers the social interactions of the Mehinaku of Brazil as improvisational drama in “*Mehinaku: The Drama of Daily Life of a Brazilian Indian Village.*”

A traditional practice for the Ao Naga community, known as the “Yimphio” (public announcement), is explained for the study. It is an oral form of communication. The “yimphio” or public announcement is normally done only after sunset. The public announcer is a member of the village council. He is generally someone from one of the major clans of the village. Beginning from a starting point, he would halt at designated locations and, in a high-pitched tone, make the necessary announcement.

Ohohh..... isa yimer ka....a...
 Asang, süngchem bening tema ajunga
 Aluyin pe-ü ni..i
 Süba mera ola tentsa li ü ni...i

Translation: ohohh.. all our villagers
 Tomorrow, starting from the youngest age group in the male dormitory
 The Way to the field will be cleaned
 Whoever is absent will be fined.

According to the age-old custom of the Aos, only menfolk within a certain age group will participate in such community work. Elderly men, after a certain age, are exempted from such community work. It is said that when the “Yimphio” is made, no trespasser should talk with the announcer. Again, the announcer will not give any reply to queries made, even if some heedless or unmindful trespasser should speak to him.

In Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, we see one such town crier giving important information related to the community:

“Gome, gome, gome, gome, boomed the hollow metal. Then the crier gave his message, and at the end of it beat his instrument again” (Achebe 2001, 8)

In both cases, the “announcer” resorts to the oral mode of communication. Such a behaviour in both cases can be considered performative. Such performances are always done under a systematic and specific mode of conduct. Indorsing the views of Philip A Dennis, we can say that the “announcers” metaphorically step into the role of a “conventional character in the drama of community life”.

Such performative actions can also be called folk media. They are the living expressions of a community which has evolved through the ages.

“Yimphio” is deeply ingrained in the heritage of the Ao community, disseminating important information within its people. Even when modern media have penetrated almost every nook and corner, such traditional forms still uphold their significance and validity. As an indigenous method of communication, “Yimphio” breaks all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and appeals directly to the people. This practice is integral to the cultural fabric of the Ao Naga community.

Every action of a particular community is interlinked with human civilisation. The genesis of early dramatic history, we will find that different folk forms have been developed by celebrating religious and social ceremonies. Songs and dances always form an integral part of these folk forms. Musicality is one of the greatest characteristics of the folk drama.

A study of Ao Naga cultural life will show that no account of their oral tradition will be complete without referring to its poetic form of singing. Singing in its purest form is governed by certain norms because each occasion calls for the appropriate song.

It was the tradition among the Ao community that, when a boy or girl reaches adolescence, they will sleep in the “Arju”, the male dormitory; for the girls, they will sleep in the “tsüki”, which is the female dormitory. These dormitories were equivalent to an Academy, where the young people were taught all important life skills and lessons. In the “tsüki”, girls from different family backgrounds would gather. Therefore, female social dynamics would sometimes show signs of intra-gender conflicts. A song is described below to show an atmosphere of intra-gender conflict. This is a “tsüki ken”, a song sung in the girls’ dormitory.

SONG:

Ning phen den la
 Ei phen tepongba
 Ning jang den la
 Ei jang tepongba
 Ku ra ra su azükla
 Zü ki chi ang
 An ki chi ang

TRANSLATION: compared to your arms

My arms are prettier
 Compared to your legs
 My legs are prettier
 You, wearing a necklace of cheap shells
 Bar the tsüki door
 Bar the chicken coop/ hen house's door

The song discussed above is probably sung by a rich man's daughter, undermining the status of the poor man's daughter. An errand is assigned to the poor girl even though both belong to the same peer group, and mutual respect is called for. The emphasis here is not to bring out the economic disparity but the dramatic elements evident in the performance. We, as readers, become vulnerable to reading the dramatic qualities. We become acutely aware of certain structural principles which lend an aura of theatricality to even the most mundane interactions. Here, the "tsüki" is the "setting/ theatre", where the action is performed, and the two young women are the actors enacting their assigned roles. One can also sense the presence of conflict, an integral element of drama. This presence of conflict will drive the narrative forward. The presence of Conflict helps in character development and thematic exploration. The character of the one who sings the song is seen as arrogant. These indigenous folk performances become dramatic because of the presence of 'action' in them.

In concurrence with the concept of Amos, about "the tradition" as text, the indigenous game of tug of war of the Ao Naga people can be studied as a performative text to learn about the traditional practice. The Ao Naga people are a community that loves festivals, and indigenous games are always at the heart of any festivals. Traditionally, for the rope, a very long, mature vine of some plant is used even today. Participants on both sides are strong, young menfolk. A mark is made in the middle of the vine, and a man is positioned as the referee. Awaiting the "go" signal, all the participants will initially sing a song in anticipation of their victory.

SONG:

Arr... atsü..ü.. teplina
 Arr... tongpang... arr...atsü..teplina
 Asen jenjang jungrapang
 Molu tonga ludina..

TRANSLATION: Let the tug of war commence

It is a contest, let it commence
 If luck favours and we win
 Down till the great seas,
 We shall drag down our opponents.

The Ao Naga forefathers believed that the great seas were located in the far-off lands. To sing that they will drag their opponents to such a far-off land is a testimony of their virile masculinity. The tug of war songs will differ from village to village. This particular song is sung at the tug of war game in Longjang village, under the Mokokchung district in Nagaland. Traditional games like this assume the status of "performance" as suggested by Erving Goffman. Every participant will enact the specific part allotted to them. The man who stands near the marker in the middle would put his foot firmly upon the vine. He holds a strategic position; his signal of "go" is awaited by all participants on both sides. They will remain in a stationary position and will not pull the vine until the signal is given. Among the participants, the strongest is positioned at the end of the line, with the vine coiled at his wrist. Another of the strongest men will stand at the front or foremost and exhibit his strength by pulling the rope towards his side. The audience enacts the role of 'prompters'. Such an activity or performance will always bring out an atmosphere of playfulness and gaiety. In this indigenous game, we notice "a scripted performance which incorporates mimesis and role-distribution among two or more players and which adheres to the traditional aesthetic and communicative models of the performing community" (Green 1981, 428)

A very auspicious cultural practice among the Ao community is called the "Nülaksü". This term is a combination of three words: "Nü" means spear, "Lak" means the sharp tip or end of the spear, and "Sü" can be understood as the act or action of putting the sharp tip of the spear into the earth or ground. It is an important cultural practice, handed down from the forefathers, and resorted to in events of misunderstanding

or to settle disputes between the village communities. This practice is relevant even today. It is always held or observed at the “sanctified” spot of the village, at the highest altitude, where the founding forefathers had first “made the fire”. The most prominent male member of the clan or someone who holds the foremost position in the village council as a representative of their clan can perform the “Nülaksü”. This cultural custom of the Ao people embodies a “verbal performance”. Even today, it is believed that if, during the process, the speaker indulges in any form of lying, he will be severely punished by the gods. The punishment would be in the form of death, becoming insane, or being physically impaired.

This verbal performance of “Nülaksü” helps create an enchanting and sublime space, the “play frame”. Once the speaker enters this play frame, with the help of his oratorical skill, he “transports” the listeners to a profound realisation of their cultural wisdom. Such performances act as a local platform to settle disputes and help the community acquire an all-encompassing knowledge of their lore. The speaker becomes an integral component of the play frame. As the speaker starts his speech, he will enter a heightened mode of expression. He will first say “ohoi”. Such an utterance will attract the attention of the spectators. In this case, the spectators are the village community folks who have assembled to listen to the ritualistic oratory of the speaker. Once the right atmosphere is invoked, the speaker will begin his speech. Occasionally, he will raise his spear, then, with some force, thrust the tip of his spear into the earth and continue with his speech. Such an act becomes a form of folk drama in which the villagers or audience assembled to hear the “Nülaksü” is the “folk”. Gregory Bateson, in his essay, *A Theory of Play and Fantasy*, speaks about the alternative world as a “play frame” wherein the participants consider such a transformation as “not real”.

TRADITIONAL CULTURAL EXPRESSION THROUGH RITUALS:

Renowned American folklorist Roger D Abrahams’ significant contribution to the study of folk drama is his understanding of it as a “play activity”. According to him, play activities “call(s) for the establishment of a play world that is recognizably removed from the real world and yet in many ways similar to it” (Abrahams 1972, 325)

As the term clearly signifies, play activities create alternative worlds wherein the participants create an imaginary world different from the mundane world. The people assume completely different characters as they step into the life of an imaginary persona in this imaginary world. Anything or everything is possible here. According to Bogatyrev, in *Forms and Functions of Folk Theatre. In Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, folk theatre involved “transformations” of actors into specific characters (Bogatyrev 1976, 51).

In the Ao Nagas' tradition, when a man is set to marry, he must build a new dwelling to house the new bride. On the wedding night, the groom and relatives would await the new bride at the new house. She would arrive accompanied by her Ilangtsür (clanswomen) singing and with rejoicing. Here, the priest will seek the blessing of the gods by sacrificing a cock.

“Iba kibong madak wara abenba mopung tesüidaktsü. Jentsülen mapu melangmelanga atangba ama mezütepa chirnur sotetdakjang. Alu nung tsükjang ajak perhperha lungsang ama dang, tsüksü aser tam kecha telidaktsü” (Ao T. Senka 2013, 38)

Translation: Let not the evil wind that carries sickness pass through this family. May many children be born to this family, just as healthy pumpkins would grow in places with ample Sunlight. May the paddy harvested in their field contain mature and full grain. May the rice grains be as taut as pebbles. May there be no unfilled rice resulting in empty or underdeveloped grains.

Speaking thus, the priest would cut the neck of the cock, and the head would be thrown outside the house. Then, rice beer will be sprinkled outside the house. The body of the cock is taken home by the priest to be eaten. It was believed that if the head of the cock was found lying outside the house compound the next morning, the gods did not favour and bless the newly-wedded couple. But if the head is found missing the next morning, it was believed that the gods favour the new family. They would prosper materially and live a long, healthy life.

In such rituals, the priest, in the words of Bogatyrev, “transforms” into a symbolic, powerful and persuasive entity, communicating with forces who inhabit the supernatural realm. In this manner, an “alternative world” is invoked. Here, unnatural things could also happen. Today, scientifically oriented minds may question such actions or find them unreasonable. For the forefathers, such acts were actions affirming their faith in god. For our study, we can assume that such rituals contain elements of drama, enacted

ceremonially. It consists of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order. The priest would send meta-communicative messages to sources, unknown to ordinary spectators, and the “alternative” world is invoked. Such actions help to construct and share a symbolic reality.

Again, the significance of the “play frame” and “play activity” can be studied by evaluating certain practices associated with death in the life of the Ao community. In the past, when a death occurred in a family, a mourning period of six days for men and five days for women was observed. But today, it is reduced to only three days. This period of mourning is called “Nokhomong”. On the last day of mourning, the mourners would go to a ‘Tsüti’ meaning a big river, for the “ceremonial bathing and cleansing” (Ao 2012, 67). The Aos believed that the river “Longritsü” (river of bitterness) in the underworld form the barrier between the land of the living and the dead. In the river, the mourners would probably take a bath or wash their bodies. This “ceremonial bathing” in the river becomes metaphorical because the act is less of a bodily bathing or physical cleaning, but more of a creating of the ‘barrier’ or ‘border’ between the living and the dead. Here, the physical surroundings of the river become the designated space, the “play frame”, where the relatives of the deceased perform the ritual of creating a border. In their mourning, the near and dear ones would participate in the performative acts to ward off any likely visitations from malevolent forces ensuing from the death.

To further develop the significance of the performative actions and the belief embedded therewith, another Ao Naga ritual is discussed, which is again closely associated with the ritual of death. The Aos believe that every person has several souls; six for men and five for women. After the death of a person, the people believed that one soul would turn into a hawk. Mills writes,

“Two days later, the soul in the form of a hawk will appear over the house (there are plenty of hawks in the Naga Hills, and one always appears at or near the proper time). As soon as it is seen, water from the “Chunga” is poured on the ground with the words: “Drink this water. Do not be angry. Go. Do not seek us. You have become different and we have become different”. Thus abjured the bird is supposed to take its departure”. (Mills 2003 281-282).

The religious framework that governs the spiritual aspect of Ao folk life is founded on the belief in the existence of a soul or souls, and, during the mourning period, “no members of the household may kill anything, in case it should be the soul of the departed” (Mills 2003, 281-282). Again, in a family where a death has occurred recently, if some members dream of the dead person continuously, it is believed that the dead person is trying “to ‘take’ that person too to the Land of the Dead” (Ao 2012, 62). In case of such happenings, the family members would keep a vessel filled with water at night “near the person’s head in order to ‘tell’ the dead that now the ‘water’ divides the living from the dead and that no one can cross this water before his/her time has come” (Ao 2012, 62). Such actions and beliefs show how the ancestors’ belief system is continually “re-enacted” even today, and that the past is still a part of the present. Simple though it may seem, through these acts or performances, the people acknowledge certain mysterious and unknown forces which control their lives. Such events show how ordinary time is temporarily suspended, and the mourners engage in activities they ordinarily would not do. The space where such ritualistic performances happen becomes the arena where “the folk” perform.

CONCLUSION:

Mainstream academic discourses have located the peripheries of literatures of the “folk”. The reason was due to the understanding that folk tradition or folk practices were considered to belong to the illiterate or the savage, or people with inferior intellect. However, a study about “folk” is increasingly recognised as an archive, a repository of intangible cultural heritage and a vernacular knowledge system. A careful study of the Ao Naga traditional cultural expressions will help educate the young generation of the community about their cultural values by inculcating a sense of responsibility to preserve the slowly and gradually eroding folk expressions.

Oral folk performances would help people understand the nature and depth of their folklore. Giving due attention will ignite the interest of scholars to meticulously examine how traditional histories and social norms are transmitted through songs, rituals and community cultural expressions. It should be recognised as crucial for maintaining the unique identity, customs and traditions, beliefs and rituals. By giving due recognition, these traditional cultural expressions can help document and preserve the marginalised expressions. It will help empower local voices and preserve the community's knowledge and aesthetics.

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