



Echoes Of Tradition: Analyzing The Role Of Proverbs In Naga Society

Neizevonuo Suokhrie
Assistant Professor
Tenyidie Department
Pfutsero Government College
Pfutsero, India

Abstract: This paper presents a discourse on the Naga Proverbs with special focus on the Angami Naga Proverbs to highlight the richness of Naga Oral Literature. In the face of modernization and constant waves of change, the oral literature of the Nagas, especially the proverbs stands on the verge of erosion. The Naga Proverbs like those from other cultures carry significant insights into the rich cultural heritage of the people. It is therefore deemed necessary to document them and preserve them. The paper presents the multifaceted significance of the Naga proverbs through an analysis of the Angami Proverbs.

Key Words: Oral literature, proverbs, cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Nagaland, with its distinct tribes and communities, is a captivating mosaic of cultural diversity. Each tribe carries with it a unique set of oral traditions, encompassing myths, legends, folklore, and proverbs. All these folklore and folksongs have played a significant role in their everyday life that depicts a symbiotic relationship between men and nature (Martemjen, 2014). These traditions have been meticulously preserved and passed down through generations, contributing to the rich and vibrant heritage of Nagaland. Within this rich oral history, proverbs emerge as timeless gems, serving as vessels of cultural wisdom, moral values, and social norms. These aphoristic expressions, often steeped in metaphor and symbolism, convey essential life lessons, ethical principles, and insights into the human condition. They serve as a bridge between the past and the present, preserving cultural identities and ensuring that the wisdom of ancestors is not lost to time. Proverbs are not merely linguistic artifacts but living testaments to the enduring spirit of Naga traditions. This paper embarks on an illuminating journey into Nagaland's oral literature, with a keen focus on the Angami Naga proverbs. It seeks to unravel the multifaceted themes that are woven into these linguistic gems. From the reverence for nature to the importance of community, from morality to practical life lessons, the themes within the proverbs mirror the values and beliefs cherished by the people. Through this exploration of the rich oral literature of the Nagas enshrined in the proverbs, the paper seeks to uncover the layers of cultural significance as well as celebrate the enduring heritage of the Nagas and their commitment to preserving their cultural wisdom through the ages.

SIGNIFICANCE OF PROVERBS IN PRESERVING CULTURAL HERITAGE

Proverbs are concise and memorable expressions of widely accepted truths or wisdom, often passed down through generations within a culture. They are a form of traditional oral literature that encapsulates the collective knowledge, values, beliefs, and experiences of a community or society. Jaja (2005:112) states that “proverbs are derived from a detailed observation of human beings, animals, plants and natural phenomena, from folklore, beliefs, values attitudes, perceptions emotions and the entire system of thoughts and

feelings". They are characterized by their brevity, simplicity, and universal applicability. They are typically expressed in the form of short, pithy sentences or phrases that convey profound insights.

Proverbs are a reflection of a culture's values and traditions. They express the unique identity and worldview of a particular community. According to Obiechina (1975) proverbs are 'the kernel which contains the wisdom of traditional people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words, and they form a mnemonic device in societies in which everything worth knowing and relevant to day-to-day life has to be committed to memory. To understand the implications of the proverbs, the context in which the proverbs emanate from becomes an essential factor (Finnegan, 1976). This is because proverbs

Proverbs are educational tools, particularly in oral cultures. They are used to teach life lessons, traditions, and societal norms to younger generations. In this light, Umeasiegbu (1986) sees proverbs as any expression recognized by a people as embodying the wisdom and philosophy of their ancestors. Proverbs facilitate the transfer of knowledge and wisdom from one generation to another. They serve as a bridge between elders and youth, ensuring that traditional wisdom is not lost. They encapsulate the values, traditions, and historical experiences of a community. By passing down proverbs, cultures ensure the continuity of their heritage.

In the words of Onuekwuso (2011), "a proverb is a philosophical, allusive and metaphorical citation that gives credence to traditional truth and wisdom. It is allusive and metaphorical because it refers to some truth outside itself. It is philosophical because it is a product of a long period of reasoning and observation which expresses some timeless truth".

THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF PROVERBS IN NAGALAND

Proverbs in Naga culture are not mere linguistic expressions; they are living repositories of cultural wisdom and knowledge. These concise, often metaphorical phrases encapsulate the collective experiences, values, and traditions of the various Naga tribes. Proverbs are deeply embedded in the everyday lives of the Naga people, serving multifaceted roles. They act as custodians of cultural values, ethics, and norms. They transmit these values across generations, ensuring their continuity. They are used as pedagogical tools, imparting moral lessons and ethical guidelines to the young generation. Proverbs are a vital component of Naga identity.

The study of Naga proverbs offers a unique window into the cultural, social, and linguistic diversity of Nagaland. These proverbs reveal the deep-rooted traditions and philosophies that shape Naga society. They provide a platform for cross-cultural dialogues and enrich our understanding of indigenous knowledge systems. Moreover, Naga proverbs are integral to preserving and celebrating the cultural heritage of Nagaland. Having said the above, it may be mentioned that there is a lack of documentation and studies particularly in the domain of nagaproverbs. An initiative to document and preserve the richness of the Naga proverbs was witnessed in the form of a book titled; "*Compendium of Proverbs and Sayings of the Nagas*" which was published by the Department of Arts and Culture, Government of Nagaland in the year 2019. It included an exhaustive collection of proverbs and sayings from all the 16 officially recognized tribes in Nagaland. In terms of documentation, it has been a significant effort. In the same vein, this paper also seeks to document the Angami Proverbs in an attempt at preserving the rich cultural essence embedded within each of the proverbs. It also makes an attempt at analyzing each of the proverbs presented here to showcase how they act as a repository of knowledge, wisdom and cultural values.

THE ANGAMI NAGAS

The Angami-Naga tribe, one among the various Naga tribes, possesses a unique cultural identity. According to Tajenyubam(1993), "The Angami tribe found itself among the initial Naga tribes subjected to the expansionist endeavors of the British colonial authority" Hutton (1921) gives notable credence to their unwavering commitment to honesty in his description of the Angami Nagas. Within Angami culture, honesty isn't merely a facet; it's an integral part of their way of life. Hutton in his study of the Angami

Nagas stated that ‘a diverse composition emerges’ within the Angami Naga Tribe and he classified them into four distinct groups namely; i) the Khonoma group, ii) the Kohima group, iii) the Viswema group, and iv) the Chakhroma group. This classification that finds basis on the geographical location is still followed today. The Northern Angami reside in and around Kohima, while the Western Angami inhabit the western region. The Southern Angami are located in the southern areas, and the Chakhroma Angami communities reside along the slopes of the national highway stretching from Kohima to Dimapur. This geographical distribution continues to play a significant role in identifying and categorizing these Angami groups. (Kire, 2019)

THE ANGAMI NAGA PROVERBS

This section presents some Angami Proverbs as documented in the book “TenyimiaKelhouDze” by KiezotuoZhale. The interpretation for each of the proverb has been attempted in an effort to unravel the layers of meaning and significance.

1. *Dzoru me zo* (translates as the Dark Kernel Fruit Proverb)

The *dzoru* here is a reference to a fruit that is found in Nagaland. It is a fruit that grows on creeper plants. On the outside it has an enticing red and ripe exterior but when it is cut open, it is black and unappealing. Based on its nature, the fruit has been termed as the dark kernel fruit for the purpose of this paper. This proverb draws a compelling analogy between the fruit and human behavior, illustrating how some individuals may employ flattering speech to project an attractive facade while harboring malevolent intentions beneath the surface.

2. *Chüzhieru zo* (translates as the deer proverb)

The *Chüzhie* here is a reference to deer are known for being skittish and cautious animals in the wild. They prioritize their own safety and well-being. In the wild, deer are not known for sharing their food or resources readily. The Deer Proverb employs the symbolism of deer to highlight the observation that some wealthy individuals can exhibit selfish tendencies, emphasizing the importance of considering the ethical use of one's resources and wealth. It serves as a reminder that true richness is not solely measured by material possessions but also by one's willingness to share and contribute to the welfare of others and the community.

3. *Chiedenyü zo* (translates as the fig leaf proverb)

The *Chiedenyü* here is a reference to fig leaf. This proverb employs the metaphor of fig leaves to draw a comparison between the physical nature of the leaves and the behavioral tendencies of certain individuals. It highlights the connection between the rough exterior of fig leaves and the abrasive and easily angered demeanor of some people. Fig leaves are known for their rough and abrasive texture on the surface. They can cause discomfort and minor injuries if touched or handled carelessly. This rough exterior symbolizes the irritable and abrasive disposition of individuals who are quick to anger.

4. *Uhulie ketherü* (translates as the tooth eruption and shedding)

The tooth proverb draws a powerful analogy between the process of teeth shedding and the cyclical nature of life's challenges and joys. It suggests that, much like how our primary teeth fall out to make room for permanent ones, difficult or unhappy moments in life are temporary and eventually give way to happier times. The tooth shedding process is a natural part of growth and development. Similarly, in life, change and renewal are essential for personal growth and progress. The proverb encourages us to embrace change as an opportunity for growth and improvement.

5. *Miphudo nu mi chü rüü.* (translates as the fireplace proverb)

The Fireplace Proverb draws a vivid analogy between building a fire from a hearth and the human tendency to revert to old habits, even after expressing remorse or seeking redemption. The proverb begins by referencing the simplicity of starting a fire from a hearth. A hearth is a designated and controlled space for making a fire, emphasizing the ease and predictability of the process. The proverb then shifts its focus to human behavior, specifically addressing those who have strayed from the right path or have engaged in negative habits. It suggests that just as it is straightforward to ignite a fire from a hearth, it can be similarly effortless for individuals with wayward tendencies to return to their old habits. The proverb serves as a cautionary message, urging individuals to remain vigilant and steadfast in their efforts to break free from negative patterns or behaviors. It suggests that the ease with which one can fall back into old habits requires a heightened level of self-awareness, determination, and consistent effort to maintain positive change.

6. *N vopho wepfü di mia vopho tha.* (translates as "Pointing at others' neck lumps while carrying your own".)

This proverb may also be referred to as the goiter proverb as it refers to a time in the past when goiter, a swelling of the thyroid gland in the neck, was prevalent among the people. Goiter is a visible physical deformity, making it an apt metaphor for noticeable flaws or imperfections. The Goitre Proverb draws attention to a common human tendency: the inclination to criticize or judge others for their imperfections or shortcomings while ignoring or being oblivious to our own. It uses the visual image of goiter, a visible neck lump that was once common in the past, to convey this message. The central message of the proverb encourages self-reflection and introspection. It suggests that before we criticize or judge others for their faults or shortcomings, we should first take a closer look at ourselves and acknowledge our own imperfections. It serves as a reminder that none of us are without flaws, and it is unfair and unwise to point fingers at others without considering our own shortcomings.

7. *A dzie theli a me rasa* (Translates as "The Mouth Still Waters When the Hands Have Ceased")

This proverb serves as a reminder of the natural progression of life, where physical abilities may diminish with age, but the capacity for enjoyment, sustenance, and adaptation remains. Despite the physical limitations represented by the hands that have "ceased," the proverb emphasizes that the mouth still "waters" or hungers for sustenance. This implies that the desire for food and nourishment remains intact even as individuals age. It encourages an appreciation of the present moment and the pleasures it brings, including the ability to continue nourishing oneself, even when certain physical tasks become challenging.

8. *U rümia sü u pecütsie* (translates as "Our Adversaries Can Be Our Most Valuable Allies")

The adversary proverb carries a thought-provoking message about the dynamic between adversity and personal growth. It emphasizes that even our adversaries can play a significant role in our development and success. It highlights the idea that the presence of enemies can motivate us to excel and achieve our goals. The desire to prove oneself or overcome opposition can fuel determination and drive. It promotes the idea that we should not allow our enemies to derive joy from our setbacks or failures. Instead, we should uphold our dignity and self-worth by demonstrating resilience and success in the face of adversity. The proverb implies that adversity can be transformed into an opportunity for growth and achievement. Rather than succumbing to the negativity of enemies, we can use their presence as a catalyst for positive change.

9. *Thehu jü rei dzietsenuo kiya* (translates as "When teeth wane, gratitude turns to the fingers")

The Fingers Proverb imparts a valuable lesson about adaptability and resilience, particularly in the context of aging and changing abilities. It underscores the resourcefulness of utilizing one's fingers when certain faculties, like teeth, may decline with age. The proverb addresses the challenges that come with aging, specifically the potential loss or weakening of teeth, which are essential for chewing food. It highlights the importance of adaptability in adjusting to these changes. The proverb carries an undertone of optimism and gratitude. It suggests that even in the face of physical

limitations, there are still reasons to be thankful and find joy in life's simple pleasures. Ultimately, the proverb exemplifies resilience and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. It underscores the idea that, regardless of age or physical limitations, individuals can find ways to continue enjoying life and its offerings.

10. *Seimou shütsei pou kerüya chü.* (translates as “The Buttonquail proverb”)

The term *Seimou* here is a reference to the small and flightless bird, Buttonquail which is found in Nagaland. This Proverb conveys a poignant narrative about the hopes, wishes, and ultimately unfulfilled desires of a small, flightless bird, the buttonquail. Despite its limitations, such as being unable to fly or climb trees, the buttonquail possesses grand aspirations symbolized by its hope and expectations that the sesame flowers will bloom and bend towards it. Just as the buttonquail eagerly anticipates the blooming of these flowers, individuals often await the realization of their own dreams and ambitions without putting any effort. However as the sesame flower blooms, the branches bend backwards and is never accessible to the bird.

DISCUSSION

Each of the proverbs carries its own unique message and wisdom, offering valuable insights into various aspects of Naga life, and serving as a cultural repository for the Nagas, encapsulating their heritage, values, and traditional knowledge. The proverbs draw analogies from nature and daily experiences, reflecting the deep connection between the Nagas and their natural surroundings. This connection to nature is a significant aspect of Naga culture. Proverbs are not merely linguistic expressions but living testaments to the cultural richness and resilience of the Naga people.

Proverbs, such as the Dark Kernel Fruit Proverb, Deer Proverb, and others, contain cultural knowledge and values that have been passed down through generations. They reflect the Naga community's collective wisdom and traditional beliefs. Proverbs often convey ethical and moral lessons, such as the importance of sharing wealth (Deer Proverb) or the need for self-reflection before judging others (Goiter Proverb). They serve as guidelines for behavior and ethical conduct. Proverbs like the Fingers Proverb and the Tooth Eruption and Shedding Proverb acknowledge the inevitability of change and the importance of adaptation. They demonstrate how Nagas have used proverbs to cope with changing circumstances and age-old challenges. Proverbs reinforce the unique cultural identity of the Nagas. They illustrate how Nagas perceive and interpret the world around them, emphasizing their distinct perspectives and values. Proverbs are used as teaching tools to impart cultural values and traditions to younger generations. Elders pass down proverbs to educate the youth about their heritage and guide them in making ethical choices. Some proverbs, like the Buttonquail Proverb, address contemporary issues and challenges, demonstrating that proverbs continue to evolve and adapt to modern life while retaining their cultural essence.

The proverbs of Nagaland serve as profound windows into the cultural tapestry and collective wisdom of the Naga people. These age-old aphorisms are not mere linguistic expressions; they are repositories of cultural heritage, encapsulating the values, beliefs, and traditional knowledge that have been cherished and passed down through generations. From the Dark Kernel Fruit Proverb's caution against deceptive appearances to the Deer Proverb's reminder of the ethical use of wealth, these proverbs reflect the Naga community's unique perspective on life, nature, and human behavior. They reveal a deep connection to the environment, emphasizing the importance of harmony with nature.

Moreover, these proverbs offer guidance for ethical conduct and decision-making, making them indispensable tools for teaching and passing on cultural values to younger generations. They underscore the enduring relevance of traditional wisdom in navigating contemporary challenges, such as the Tooth Eruption and Shedding Proverb's reminder of the cyclical nature of life's difficulties. Ultimately, Nagaland's proverbs affirm that the wisdom of a community is not solely found in textbooks or historical records but is an integral part of the living language and traditions of its people. They serve as a testament to the cultural

richness and resilience of the Naga people, reminding us that the past continues to shape the present and guide the future.

CONCLUSION

In the context of the proverbs discussed in this paper, it becomes evident that these age-old aphorisms are not merely linguistic expressions but invaluable repositories of the rich oral literature of the Nagas. The proverbs serve as a reflection of the Naga cultural identity, encapsulating the wisdom, values, and traditional knowledge that have been passed down through generations. Nagaland, like many regions, is witnessing waves of transformation that are reshaping traditional ways of life. In this rapidly changing landscape, the oral traditions of the Nagas are increasingly vulnerable to fading into obscurity. This paper serves as a humble attempt to counter this erosion by documenting and preserving these proverbs. It employs textual analysis to delve into the layers of meaning and cultural significance embedded within each proverb. Through this analysis, it highlights how these proverbs are not just linguistic artifacts but living embodiments of the Naga cultural identity. By examining the proverbs, the paper reaffirms their role as a rich cultural resource that offer profound insights into how the Nagas perceive the world, their relationship with nature, their ethical values, and their understanding of human behavior. These proverbs provide a window into the collective consciousness of the Naga people, reflecting their unique worldview and cultural heritage. In conclusion, this paper serves as both a documentation effort and a cultural affirmation. It seeks to ensure that these gems of oral literature continue to shine brightly, illuminating the path to a deeper understanding of the Naga cultural identity even in the face of the sweeping changes of the modern world.

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