



Indigenous Knowledge and Identity Markers in Angami Folktales

Prof. Jano S. Liegise, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema
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Abstract: Angami folktales are simple narratives on the surface, but the stories reflect embedded indigenous knowledge of skills and the native way of life, including their rich biodiversity, material culture, values, and philosophical thoughts. Variations in story lines occur, but embedded identity markers being vital components of the narratives, which stem from common knowledge and shared experience, are not affected, as such. Qualitative analysis of the stories will go to show that Angami folktales are a rich site reflecting folk ways which can act as identity markers of the people as a tribe within the larger Naga community in the northeast of India. There are many Naga folktales but, sadly, there is a lack of in-depth studies on them, while some have been lost with the passing away of the oral way of life.

Key words: Traditional knowledge, Identity Markers, Angami folktales.

Introduction

Traditional Knowledge has been defined as knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous local communities across the world. Developed from experience and transmitted orally over the centuries, it takes the form of stories, songs, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, local language and agricultural practices (UNESCO *Glossary*). As such, Angami Folktales can give cues and leads about their indigenous knowledge of skills and culture, and shed much light about their distinct identity as a tribe among other fellow Naga tribes.

Angami tribe is one of the 17 recognized Naga tribes of the state of Nagaland in the northeast of India, where the different tribal folks speak different languages which are mutually unintelligible. The Angami people are the native dwellers of the Capital, Kohima, and the adjoining villages of the district, as well as, some other parts of the State. The tribal name, Angami, can be interchangeably used with the larger umbrella group, Tenyimia. It follows that all members of Angami tribe are Tenyimia people, the descendants of their ancestral father, Tenyiu, and the Angami tribe is one among others. The language of the Angami people is also called Tenyidie. Tenyidie, like the other Naga tribes, is a tone language but have more tones than most. Ura Academy which is their literature board, marks 5 tones viz, high, mid, low, rise-fall and fall-rise which is recorded in their dictionary *MKS Dieda*.

Writing about the competing theories and concepts of folklore and folk studies, Dorson concludes, "No observer can be impartial, and I myself am committed to one of these twelve outlook. Still some generalizations can be advanced" (47). As is the nature of oral narratives, critics are cautious and wary of modifications that occur. So also, there are slight surface variations of folktales from village to village, however, embedded traditional knowledge which is the vital component of the narratives are not affected as such. Ethnic identity markers, both in the sphere of material and non-material culture, like their traditional working tools, household objects, costumes, animals and plants, festivals, beliefs, philosophical views, ethics, customary laws and practices, which belong to common knowledge and shared experiences, are presences within the folktales which act as unmistakable indicators of the Angami identity.



The four Angami folktales given here can be found in standards IV and V school text books, *Tenyidie Kephrüda Diau* and *Tenyidie Kephrüda Pengou-u*, respectively, brought out by the Directorate of School Education of the state of Nagaland. The first story is from the former text book, while the other three are from the latter. Free translations have been made here, and kept close to the native language text as much as possible. It is of interest to note the significance of the oral story-telling markers *shie* and *eei* which is equivalent to “so it goes” and “okay”. In *tenyidie*, which is the Angami language, there is a difference in the manner of articulation of the words, *shie* and *Eei*, in story-telling. At the start of the story, as also throughout the narration, at pauses or intervals, the articulation of these words is that of a level tone (-) which suggests that members around ought to listen, and their corresponding response is that of saying, okay continue. While the same expressions at the end of the story, the tone is one of a falling (\) tone, marking a closure of the story which is represented here as “so went the story” and “aah okay”. This important feature of Angami story-telling has been highlighted to give a sense of the intimate and participatory traditional storytelling time.

Objective

There are many Angami folktales but sadly there is a lack of in-depth studies on them, hence, this study will be undertaken to narrow the gap.

This study will examine how the Angami folktales have, embedded within the stories, pointers of aspects of the knowledge and skills that the natives of the Angami Naga tribe possess, as also the traditional practices that accord them their unique ethnic identity as a tribe, even within the larger conglomeration of tribes of the Naga community.

This article seeks to target both native and non-native readership. To retain the native stamp, native terms, story titles and native idiomatic expressions, have been retained. For smooth reading and quick comprehension, certain unfamiliar, native terms have been combined with English terms as hyphenated words, as in Cat-Tenya, and dao is written as dao-knife.

Methodology

Qualitative approach will be adopted. Close reading and analysis of select folktales will be carried out.

Angami Folktales and their Analysis

“The Story of Chükhieo / Chükhieo Dze ”

Narrator: Thiedzüe shie / Long ago, so it goes.....

Listeners: Eei / Okay.....

There was once a man who set out every day to watch over his field. It so happened that without fail, he finds his whetstone wet and damp. From this, he came to know that someone comes to sharpen his dao-knife before he could make his way there. So, one day, he decided to stay back in his field in order to find out, once and for all, who the mysterious person was. Lo and behold, early next morning, he found *Chükhieo*, the deity of the wild animals, with his leafy rain-shield cloak over his shoulders, sharpening his dao-knife. At once, the man sprang up and grabbed *Chükhieo*, who began to plead with him saying, “If you let me go, I will give you whichever animal you desire most.” When the man let-go his grip, *Chükhieo* whistled and the wild animals came running and gathered before them. *Chükhieo*, then, instructed the man saying, “I will walk up the mountain top, meanwhile choose an animal you most desire. I will whistle again on reaching the mountain top, and all the wild animals will, then, depart.” So saying, *Chükhieo* set off for the mountain top.

Now, in order to select the best animal, the man began to carefully examine the animals, one by one, but was unable to make up his mind. In the mean time, *Chükhieo*, having reached the mountain top, whistled, and all the animals ran away, save for a small wild cat-tenya that



lay trampled on the ground. Having no option, the man picked up the lifeless limp cat-tenya and went home and made a meal out of it.

So went the story / Shie.....

Ahh Okay / Eei.....

Notes and Analysis

This Angami folktale is reflective of the agricultural, hunter-gatherer existence of ancestral Angami Naga tribe. The Angami fields consist of mainly paddy rice cultivation. They are especially known for their knowledge and skill in wet paddy cultivation. Their fields are called *tekhu* and are terraced and water-logged along the slopes of the mountainous dwellings which are prominently visible till today. There are many steps and stages to go through in such type of cultivation, including the intricate method of channeling water to the terraced fields, logging water by small embankments, sowing seeds, transplanting from the nursery to the fields etc., which requires constant watch over the fields, as indicated by the daily activity of the man in the story.

The whetstone and dao-knife mentioned in the story, are part and parcel of their lives. The multipurpose heavy dao-knife is usually a medium-sized tool which is handy for domestic chores and craft-works, as well as, in the fields and the forest. Menfolk carry them daily as they venture out to the fields, slung in a wooden holder, tied around their waist, which can be placed beside them at night to serve as a protective tool. Writing about the significance of the dao-knife for the Nagas in general, Mills elaborates on how the dao is the constant companion of the Naga. Of how without it a native “could not fell jungle to sow his crops, build his house, cut up animals for meat or deal with his enemies, human and animal” (37).

Chükhieo, the deity who presides over the wild animals, appears in the story, humanized with the leafy cloak which is another useful rain-shield, a common sturdy accessory during the rainy seasons which can last for years. *Chükhieo* is an important deity for the hunters who perform rituals to the deity for blessings of good fortune in hunting. After a successful kill, paying homage to the deity, the hunter would announce, “Ketakezo Chükhieo mhayie!”/ “Let there be continuous handing-outs of Chükhieo’s bounty!” (*Traditional Idiomatic Expressions abbreviated as TIE* 8). In the Angami village of Khonoma, which is considered to be the first green village of India, the steep side of a mountain cliff bears facial features, which natives fancifully call it as *Chükhieo’s* face.

Nagaland is well-known as a biodiversity hotspot and is home to many types of animals and plants. *Tenya* is a commonly found small wild cat in the jungles of Nagaland. It is, hence, not a prized animal and certainly not a beautiful one, and when children get into a fight, they start calling each other repeatedly, “Tepfi! Tenya!”/ “Monkey! Wildcat!” In the story, the fickle-minded man has to pay the price for his hesitation, and somewhat comically, landed with a trampled cat-tenya as a consolatory reward, instead of a prized animal whose skull-head of majestic horns or artistic antlers, would have made an imposing trophy as Angami hunters are wont to display. As such, the story is also a lesson about fickle-mindedness which can result in lost opportunity and misfortune, a survival strategy that was aptly taught by *Chükhieo*, the master hunting deity, the indigenous educator of the story.

“The Message of Cat-Tenya / Tenya Dielie”

Narrator: Thiedzüe shie / Long ago, so it goes.....

Listeners: Eei / Okay.....

Man, Spirit, and Tiger were once siblings, the oldest being Spirit, Tiger in the middle, while Man was the youngest. After the death of their mother, they took to separate ways of living.



Spirit being flexible, lived wherever it wished. Tiger was fierce and got the forest as its natural habitat, and Man being the youngest, inherited the homestead and lived in the village.

In the course of time, it came to be known that man cannot escape death. Such being their fate, Man requested the small wild Cat-Tenya to take a message to his oldest brother, Spirit, and say, "Even it be so, that all men must die, let it be that the elderly die first and the young die afterwards." However, it so happened that when Cat-Tenya relayed the message, it said, "It is being requested of you that the old and the young die without any kind of order of who should die first." It came to be said that because of the bungling of Cat-Tenya, death comes to both the elderly and the young alike.

Ever since, if a person makes an error or inverts a message while delivering it, such an incidence is idiomatically expressed as, "Tenya Dielie/ Cat-Tenya's Message".

So went the story / Shie.....

Ahh Okay / Eei.....

Notes and Analysis

There are series of stories about the three siblings of Man, Spirit, and Tiger. Another story tells of how the Tiger, though considered a brother, came to live in the forest. It narrates of how the fierce Tiger made their aged mother's life stressful and precarious, while the man took gentle care of her till her death. The story tells of how the oldest sibling Spirit helped the youngest one, Man, and they colluded to drive the fierce Tiger to the woods. As such, stories about these three siblings, indicate a close bond between the larger world of spirit and mankind which embraces religious kinship. In the story given above, the man, in anguish by the thought of sure death, makes a prayer to the spirit brother, but was thwarted due to the bungling of the messenger, cat-tenya. True to its lesser image, Cat-Tenya appears again in this story, this time as the culprit of the dilemma of man. The precariousness of life and death is a subject of deep rumination as reflected in this story. Angami world views and philosophical utterances express such deep sentiments as in the following reflective expression, "Sia rei tuo ro, tsa rei zhü molie/ If death is certain, to grow old also, ought not to be" (TIE 11).

The story can be seen as a narrative that tells of how the youngest son came to inherit the parental house, which comes as a rule, among the Angami tribe, unlike some other Naga tribes. With the Konyak tribe, the eldest son is the heir of the parental house, while among the Ao tribe, the father's property is "divided into equal parts" according to the number of sons (Alinger 163). The expression "Tenya dielie"/"Cat-Tenya's message" to refer to a misleading or inaccurate message, as earlier pointed out, has its origin in the folktale and is still in usage as part of Angami idiomatic expressions.

"Finding Seeds Again / Tsia Ngu Lakelie"

Narrator: Thiedzüe shie / Long ago, so it goes.....

Listeners: Eei / Okay.....

Long ago, our land passed through a difficult time of a long period of famine. It was so bad that all our seeds were also eaten up. So, even when things improved, there were no seeds to plant in the fields. At that time, there lived a man whose sister was married off to a man from another village in the land of the Zeliang people. So the man travelled to the land of the Zeliang tribe where his sister dwells, in search of seeds. However, the villagers decreed that none should give seeds to the man who had come from another village. So, then, the man's sister got up early in the morning, grabbed some rice paddy and fed one of her hens. After the hen had her fill, she gave the hen to her brother. It so happened that due to the long duration of the famine, the people of the affected village lost all track of the seeding time. So the man's sister picked



up and carried her child even if it was not crying, and on the pretext of putting her child to sleep, she began to croon a lullaby, singing:

When HutuoTeguo are flowering

It is the time that seeds can be sowed.

As soon as the man learnt of the seeding time, he quickly departed with the hen. Just as soon, when he crossed the village gate, he killed the hen, scooped out the hen's crop, collected the paddy seeds and took them home. In this manner, we, the Angami people, who lost our seeds in the famine, got back paddy seeds to cultivate the fields again. Ever since, this variety of rice paddy came to be called as 'Thevürü' (thevü - chicken, rü - denotes the act of scooping out something).

So went the story /shie.....

Ahh Okay / Eei.....

Notes and Analysis

The focus of this folktale, about losing and finding paddy seeds again, is of a traumatic experience that leads to a euphoric state of great relief, because rice is the staple food grain for the Angami tribe, unlike some other fellow Eastern Naga tribes, who also cultivate other food-crops in great measure, like, kolar beans, yam, corn, millet. Godwin-Austen reports about the Angami region and adjoining lands and notes down that he had "never, even in the better-cultivated parts of the Himalayas, seen terrace cultivation carried to such perfection" and that the "rice raised is exceedingly fine and very nourishing" (11).

Again, there is the mention of a lullaby in the story. Folksongs are a part of folks' lives, where work and worship, fun and festivity, are all of a piece. As such, with the Angami folks, their festivals are related mainly to the cycle of rice-paddy cultivation. So also, there are many plaintive lullabies. The married sister in this folktale who ingenuously and strategically sings her instructions to her brother through a lullaby, is not only relatable, entertaining, but can also reflect multiple facts about Angami culture. Embedded in the story, is the fact that blood ties of clanship based on shared forefathers, runs strong with the Angami close-knitted family structure. Here in the story, the sister rises to the occasion, against all odds, to help her blood relations through her brother. As in the story, there is also the fact that there are instances of women wedded off to far away villages. That such instances can be a matter of great hardship and loneliness for women, find expressions in many Angami poetic songs recorded in the collection *Üca* - 53, such as 'Sopfünuo' and 'Khrieü' (7, 6). Zeliang tribe and Angami tribe, both fall under the larger group of Tenyimia people, but that a Zeliang village is projected to be far off, is in keeping with the olden times when people journeyed across valleys, rivers, and rugged mountains.

Angami folktales also reflect their flora and fauna. Hutuo and teguo trees, blooming here and there, is still a common sight today. Hutuo and teguo trees are found nearby each other, one with white blooms and the other with red flowers. Considered to be pair-trees, lovers are also compared to them. As indicated in the story, in Angami traditional knowledge system which is acquired through experiences of life and observation of the signs of nature, the blossoming of teguo trees is an indication that the time of sowing their paddy seeds has arrived.

As also witnessed in the story, gifting of chicken to another is common enough among the natives, but it is seen as a respectable gesture to a worthy recipient, as in the gifting of prime hens and roosters "to the brides' brothers or relatives" during marriages (Department of Art & Culture 22). Chicken also has a prominent role in making ritual predictions called "thuophi" (Documentation Committee 120). That a Naga village gate is not only a defense measure, but are territory markers, can also be deduced.



“The Story of the King and the Orphan/Kediu mu Merünuoyo Dze”

Narrator: Thiedzüe shie / Long ago, so it goes.....

Listeners: Eei / Okay.....

There was once a clever orphan who was a servant boy to a king. He knew how to please the king. He not only does exactly what the king tells him to do, but does it very well and quickly, too. This is why the king takes the boy along with him wherever he goes. During one such journey, the king learns of the orphan boy's cleverness. As a result, he grew jealous and planned to kill the boy.

One night, the king complained of the hot weather and told the orphan boy to prepare his bed outside. Accordingly, the boy prepared the King's bed outside. The king, then, told the boy to sleep at his feet that night. Fearing that the king may stretch out his legs and set him rolling down the steep edge to his death, he pretended to be sleeping there by wounding the stump of a tree with a piece of cloth and placing it at the king's feet, while he himself crept under the bed. By the time the boy ought to have fallen asleep, the king kicked the tree stump and set it rolling down the steep slope and thought that the boy had surely met his death. However, the orphan boy peacefully slept on under the king's bed, his cleverness preventing the wicked king from doing him harm.

Again, on another day, the king went out with the orphan boy. When the king got tired and hungry, he told the boy to prepare their meal. While the boy was moving to and fro, preparing the meal, the king secretly placed poison on the boy's plate. However, the precocious boy, besides being clever, sensed that the wicked king had put poison on his plate. So pretending to be very busy cooking, moving to and fro, he picked the poison from his plate and transferred it to the king's plate. So, then, the King ate the poison and died after a severe stomach ache.

On his return to the king's house, the boy narrated the whole incident, and all the people opined that the orphan boy must become their king. Hence, from that day onwards, the orphan boy lived his life as a king.

So went the story / shie.....

Ahh Okay / Eei.....

Notes and Analysis

There is a series of folktales about the King and Orphan. These stories stress on ethical and moral issues, of how punishment is meted out to a person for his/ her wickedness eventually, and the good or virtuous one is rewarded, the orphan, in this case. It is significant to note that Angami village communities being close-knitted, “the handicapped(*lulilukhwii*), the orphan, the weak” find acceptance and actively engage in “the social life of the age group” (Documentation Committee 120). However, such a story is a curious story because it is about a king, whose status is not so relatable as Angami people do not have kingship or chieftainship unlike some other Naga tribes, like, the Semas and the Konyaks, who have royal-like chiefs and king-like *Anghs*. A closer study of this Angami folktale will unravel interesting details or the absence of it. The way a king is perceived and represented in the story, not so much as a royal personage but more as a mean rich character, is in keeping with their lack of realistic imagination of kings and kingship because of the absence of such a figure in their egalitarian community. Many early western writers and British officials, too, have described the Angami community as democratic, even to be of a pure democracy (Hutton). It remains to be said, that seemingly far-fetched creatures of the imagination, are more intimately represented in their folktales because the supernatural world is a relatable, realistic world for them. As for instance, the representation of the deities like *Chükhieo*, who is a supernatural figure but intimately portrayed as discussed earlier.



Conclusion

Angami folktales are simple narratives on the surface, but are indicative of embedded traditional knowledge of skills and their way of life and practices, values and ethics, biodiversity, worldviews and philosophical thoughts, that accord the people a unique identity. With the Angami folktales, it can even identify them further as a tribe within the larger Naga community, as the stories analyzed above go to show.

Native Angami idiomatic expressions have been quoted by way of corroborating statements made while analyzing the folktales. Angami folktales also have a simple narrative style, but one which is an integral part of the story-telling, skillfully and strategically designed to be actively passed down for posterity, by adopting the narrator-responder, *shie-eei*, which is a participatory oral structure, flexible yet attention-demanding. This feature sadly is omitted when setting down in print, but has been partially restored here to create the spirit of shared story-telling among the Angami folks. Angami folktales also reflect their rich biodiversity and material culture, as the four given folktales as samples, go to illustrate.

Amid fast changing times, there are much visible and felt continuities of indigenous knowledge of skills and culture of the many Naga tribes which are yet to be fully and systematically documented, to safeguard their Naga identity, respectively and as a whole.

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