

Parallels and contrasts in the popular folklore of the Chinese and the Nagas

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Abstract

This essay attempts to comprehend the similarities and differences between the Chinese and the Nagas folklore so also to gain remarkable insights and cultural awareness of the both. The paper therefore aims to explore and analyze the parallels and the contrasts in the popular folklore of the Chinese and the Nagas. It is an attempt to revisit into the valued heritages whereby trying to show its significance and its contemporary relevance into the different fields of academics and more importantly into the peoples' life, thus defining their cultures. It is also an attempt to highlight the necessity of insightful research and emergent documentation of the folklores, especially the Naga tradition patterns.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Folklore, Myths, Legend, Soul, Ancestral, Chinese, Nagas

Introduction

Folklore as a system, in the broadest sense includes legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, traditional lore, etc. (Barua, 1999). The extensive field of folklore provides a rich treasure of human experiences throughout the ages. Regardless of its origins, folklore seems to have been serving as a means to meet various needs of human; the answer to mysteries of natural world, articulation of dreams and fears, finding entertainments and also source of solutions and measures to the random chaotic nature of life. Thus, folklore can be considered as a valued repository of wisdom, knowledge, history, and beliefs of various human civilizations. However, with rapid urbanization and capitalization around the globe, this jewel that plays an invaluable role in educating, preserving culture, ensuring understanding among people has been declining over the period of time. Even so, scholars and artists alike in various parts of the world are motivated to

preserve and uphold the rich oral traditions of human kind for posterity (Greg, 2007).

Debates about how folklore should be defined have been waged continuously ever since the word was coined in 1846 by William Thomas. Most definitions concern the ‘lore’ but some concern the ‘folk’. Lore – the materials of folklore rather than the people who use the materials – has been described in terms of origin, form, transmission, and function. However, there has been no wide spread agreement among folklorists about what folklore is. Edward Leech sees folklore as the collection knowledge of homogenous, unsophisticated people. E.S. Martland defines it as anthropology dealing with the psychological phenomenon of uncivilized. G.W. Boswell defines folklore as:

The unwritten history of ancient societies preserved in the minds of the people and handed down through ages by the medium of language or practice. In the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, the term folklore has been defined as, “Folklore means folk learning; it comprehends all knowledge that is transmitted by word of mouth and all crafts and techniques that are learned by imitation or example as well as products of those crafts” (Sills, 1968: 497).

But A. Taylor (1946), an eminent American folklorist has succeeded to a great extent in defining the term folklore. According to Taylor (1946) folklore is the material that is passed on by tradition, either by oral or by custom and practice. It may be folk songs, folk tales, riddles, proverbs or other materials preserved in words. It may be traditional tools and physical objects like fences or knots, hot cross buns, or Easter eggs; traditional ornamentation like the walls of Troy; or traditional symbols like the Swastika. It may be customary procedures like throwing salt over ones soldier or knocking on wood. It may traditional beliefs like the notion that elder is good for the ailments of the eye. All of these are folklore.

China with more than five thousand years of history with the pride of being one of the existing ancient civilization and diversified nationalities across its vast and varied landscape is endowed with rich folk cultures. However, on the other hand, the antiquity of the Nagas is in ambiguity with the lack of common prevailing history among the various tribes and foreign accounts. Regardless of this fact, the folksongs, folk-tales, myths, proverbs and legends of various Naga tribes often narrated by elders to the younger ones, passing down from generation to generation are the sorts of Naga history that are present today, which are but orally transmitted.

Myths of Creation

In Chinese mythology, *Yin* (a goddess) and *Yang* (a god) were born from the chaos when the universe was first created; later *Yang* governing the heaven and *Yin* the earth (Mukherji, 1999). Among the popular creation stories which evolve in China, the most striking is that of *Pan Gu*. He is hatched from a cosmic egg. Half the shell is above him as the sky, the other half below him as the earth. He grows taller each day for 18,000 years, gradually pushing them apart until they reach their appointed places. After all this effort, *Pan Gu* falls to pieces. His limbs become the mountains, his blood the rivers, his breath the wind and his voice the thunder. His two eyes are the sun and the moon. The parasites on his body are the mankind.

Likewise, according to a popular Naga myth, Tiger, Spirit and Humankind (man) were three brothers who came into existence through the miraculous union between the already existing first woman and the clouds of the sky. The woman *Dziliimosi*, one day, was resting under a tree with her legs wide apart, at a place called *Makhel* in the present day Manipur state. Suddenly a cluster of clouds came over her and some drops of liquid came down over her private part and she became pregnant. Subsequently she gave birth to a Tiger, Spirit and Man or human being. By the time the three children became adults; their mother was quite old and sick. So the three brothers took turns to look after their ailing mother. The

woman represents reproductive energy. Her name signifying pure water, being fertilized by a cluster of clouds is perhaps a metaphor of the union between the sky God father and the receptive earth mother from which all things have originated (Mao, 2009). This resonate the Chinese mythology of *Yin* and *Yang*.

The other myths of creation among the Nagas include coming out from holes, emerging from stones, brine spring etc. Unlike the Chinese myths where concepts of heaven, deities and other supernatural being are depicted, most of the Nagas myths on creation are mostly rooted to the earth, though they believe in the existence of Supreme Being (Lkr, 2014). As for instance, Angami Nagas have the concept of *Ukepenuopfu*, which means the Supreme God.

Legends of Kuafu and Pou:

We can also draw parallels between the Chinese and the various Naga legends.

According to a Chinese myth, one day, a giant named *Kuafu* decided to chase and catch the Sun. With each stride he gets closer to the Sun, however, he could never catch up to it. He followed the Sun from the East to the West, draining all rivers and lakes crossing his path as sources of water to quench his burning thirst as he closed in on the star. However, he wasn't able to finish his quest because he died of the extreme heat and exhaustion. The wooden club he was carrying grew into vast peach forests. The forests were flourishing all year round, which provides shades and peaches for the passersby and hard-working people to quench their thirst. Although *Kuafu* sacrificed himself, his undying spirit keeps inspiring the Chinese people. There is a mountain named 'Kuafu Mountain' to commemorate him

Similarly but interestingly, according to a Naga legend, one day, the Naga tribes came for a meeting for a deliberation at Makhel. Before their departure, there a man name *Pou* who erected his walking stick on the ground after the meeting and left for home. But his walking stick sprouted and rooted inside the earth. The then walking stick grew to be a wild pear tree, which is still alive near

Makhel even to this day. Whether it is sprouted from *Pou's* walking stick or not, the pear tree is believed to be planted during the Nagas departure from Makhel meeting. The Nagas called this pear tree as 'departure tree' since it was planted during their departure. The falling of any branches from the wild pear tree due to storm or wind signifies bad omen like famine, drought or attack from the enemy. Cutting off even a small branch from that tree is forbidden because it is believed that anybody who cuts even a tiny branch of the tree will die instantly followed by heavy rain and storm over the entire region. The tribes who dispersed from Makhel include Poumai, Angami, Mao, Tangkhul, Zeliangrong, Sema, Lotha, Maram and some other Nagas. These tribes observe a day, as their departure day and on this day working in the field or any kind of activities like hunting, fishing or building huts, etc. are strictly forbidden (Pou, 2006).

It is interesting to note the similarities in both the stories; the wooden club turning into peach forests in the Chinese case and the walking stick turning into pear tree in the Nagas case. It is quite intriguing as the similarities are quite corresponding. Though both the forests in Chinese story and the tree in Naga story hold a sacred place in their respective culture, disparities between the two are also worth noting. The peach forests in China are believed to be a shelter and provider of human needs with its fruits and shades for laborers and travelers alike.

However, the pear tree in the Naga legend is more to do with divine connection, in which the fate and the prosperity of the tribes are predicted by the falling and withering of the tree. Even the harming or cutting is also attached with omens and consequences. Nonetheless, it can also be said that both communities immensely regard and uphold the sacredness of natural world and worship it.

Features of Animism and Concept of Soul

Though the traditional religion of the Nagas is usually described as animism, few Naga scholars more recently have reservations with the conceptual terms like 'paganism' used by the missionaries as equivalents in the Bible or anthropological terms

like ‘animism’ or ‘totemism’. Animism means belief in the spirits of the dead. According to anthropologists, animism is the belief that spirits inhabit all objects, both animate and inanimate. The spirits are understood to be distinct beings who survive the death or destruction of the objects they inhabit. It is believed that all activity is caused by the spirits. It is also believed that some spirits are good and helpful, while other spirits are malevolent or even evil causing harm (Kikhi, 2017).

A close examination of Naga traditional religion shows that it is much more complex in nature, and cannot be simply called animism. For example, Naga traditional religion includes a belief in a Supreme Being. The Supreme Being is also said to be the creator who sustains human beings and other creatures. An important element in the traditional Naga religion was the observance of *genna* days (Haimendorf, 1976). The practice varied from tribe to tribe. But the general significance was that certain days were sacred and had to be observed by a clan or the village usually to avert calamities caused by the spirits.

The concepts behind the words *Hun*, the human soul, the spiritual part of man that ascends to heaven; and *Po*, the animal soul that goes to the earth with the body were so popular during the Zhou Era (Mukherji, 2013). Similarly the popular belief of the Nagas, particularly among the Ao tribe; every human being is believed to have three souls; one which reside in his house, the second which resides permanently in his head and the third is born with fate which in turn also has three souls. The point of contact between a living person and his fate is that, one of the man’s souls is a heavenly *Mithun* (Bison) belonging to his fate, and one of the fate’s souls is an earthly *Mithun*. The life of a person depends on the fate he is born with (Imchen, 2004).

Though the interpretation and connotation of soul in both the cultures can have different meaning and connotation, the interconnection of human body and that of animal soul has a striking similarity, implies that both the cultures has strong and uncanny affinity with the animal kingdom.

The Ao Nagas believe that there are two layers of the sky above him. The first layer is occupied by *Anung Tsungrem* (Sky God), and the second layer is occupied by *Kotaker* (Sky Folk). The Sky Folk are believed to be resided by the living pre-existing soul of man before he is born. This concept of layer occupied by Sky Folk in between the Sky God and that of man on earth according to the Naga myth and that of a popular Chinese belief of calling their king or emperor *Tianzi* (son of heaven) who is believed to have received his authority from heaven, can also be drawn to an explanation that, both the cultures perceived the notion of the existence of a 'third person' between man and the gods (Longchar, 1995).

Popular Animal and Human Relations

Both the Chinese and the Nagas having close affinity with the natural world are bestowed with abundant source of connections with both the animal and the plant kingdom. In both the cultures, different animals are portrayed as benevolent and maleficent. Some animals are symbolized or totemised as the bearer of wealth, good luck, guardian, etc. while there are some other animals which are despised and feared for reasons like danger, bad omen, ill-luck, ferocity, etc. Whatever the differences and similarities the two cultures might share, the fact remains that both the groups have high reverence for the animal kingdom which is visible in the significance of animals in the lives of people belonging to both the cultures.

Chang or *Chang-Gui* of Chinese culture is the ghost of a person devoured by a tiger. He helps the tiger to entice other people for food (Mukherji, 2013). Here a ghost of a person is maliciously helping a tiger in bringing harm to mankind. The Nagas with high esteem for tiger as his fellow brother, though feared by people particularly the hunters, is nevertheless considered as a sacred animal. Among the Nagas oral tradition, it is a common saying that, some men possess the spirit of tiger, and these particular types of men changes its form from man to tiger and roam about the forests especially at night.

It is often believed that if their kinsmen happened to pass them, they cause them no harm but instead protect them from the other predators and dangers. Killing of tigers, be it intentional or accidental are considered ill-fated. And thus, in order to atone oneself from the wrongdoing, the person who killed the tiger has to undergo various sacrificial rituals and perform a *genna*, prohibition of doing anything (Hutton, 1921). Though man with tiger is depicted in two different lights between the two cultures, it can be clearly seen that tiger is closely link with the one who possess supernatural power. This kind of notion could have emerged from the very nature of tiger for being fierce, daring and aggressive; and the menace it used to create not only to humans but also to his domesticated animals in the ancient times.

The myth of *Zhu Bajie* in Chinese classical novel, *Journey to the West* is yet, another interesting character of an immortal and an animal. In this story, *Zhu Bajie's* banishment into the mortal world as a result of trying to flirt with the moon goddess *Chang'e*, turns him into half-man and half-pig. His indulgence in women led him to the *Gao Family Village*, where he posed as a normal being and wedded a maiden. Later, when the villagers discovered that he was a monster, *Zhu Bajie* hid the girl away, and the girl wailed bitterly every night. At this point, *Xuanzang* and *Sun Wukong* arrived at the *Gao Family Village* and helped him. *Zhu Bajie* was renamed by *Xuanzang* and he consequently joined the pilgrimage to the West.

One of the most popular folktales among the Zeliangrong Nagas is the story of an orphan, who transformed into a 'hornbill'. The boy lost his mother at a young age and his father remarried. His stepmother turns out to be a vicious woman, treating him inhumanly and deliberately distancing him from his father. As years passed by, he grew into a handsome young man and a skillful trapper becoming independent and helping his family far more than the other young men of his age group. However, his step-mother continued to find ways to accuse and harass him, and treats him cruelly. In course of time, he fell in love with a beautiful girl. The village folks hope to see him propose the young girl and marry her to end his hardship in

his father's house. But the frustration and shame he suffered made him sulky and morose. Sometimes it even provoked him to contemplate suicide. At times he wished to become a hornbill and free himself. One day after declaring that he would enter into a new phase of his life, asked his friends to give him a present. Then after wholeheartedly concentrating on becoming a hornbill, he ate a good meal with his friends and climbed up into a tree refusing to come down. On the thirtieth day, as his two female friends returned to the place, he bid them his farewell and also to his former life of human being. He forgot his shamed and caged past and lived as a dignified free bird. Upon his leaving, he promised his friends that he will come back during *Matui* festival (youth festival) and present them with beautiful hornbill feathers to adorn their headgear. He kept his promise and gifted them with the best feathers, but his shameless step-mother also begged for the feathers. But, the inhuman treatment meted out to him by his stepmother was indelibly etched on his mind and he took revenge by killing her with his feathers.

In the Chinese narration too, we can see the transformation of an immortal into a mortal and half animal as a punishment for his misconduct of indulgence in heavy drinking and flirting with female goddess, he was once more rejected by humans after he was discovered to be a monster but was later helped by the monk *Xuan Zang* and joined him in his journey. In sharp contrast, the orphaned boy who transformed into a hornbill in the Naga folktale is portrayed as a way to freedom from the evil and cruelty of human and finding solace in the company of the birds without human interference. But, looking beyond the differences in the two narrations, it cannot be ignored that, animals are often used as form of appeasement and also as a form of chastisement. One thing which we cannot rule out is the fact that, both the cultures in its own ways tries to convey the message that humans with all its compassion and benevolence are also equally corrupt and callous, as in one culture human world is depicted as a place for punishment while in the other it is drawn as a place to be abandoned.

Ancestral Worship

Like many other cultures that held high reverence for their ancestors and their spirits, the Chinese and the Nagas also in their own respective ways are embedded with beliefs and myths surrounding ancestral worship.

The *Qingming* festival of the Chinese is a day when one gets the opportunity to remember and worship ancestors at the grave-sites. While distinct from the *Qingmingjie* (tomb sweeping day) in spring; the Ghost Day in autumn is where the deceased are believed to visit the living on (Mukherji, 2013). On this festival, the Chinese are believed to perform rituals and ceremonies in order to escape the indignations of the ghosts. It is believed that ghosts of the dead roam among the living on during this time. The Chinese observed it by burning incense, preparing food, etc. to appease the spirits. Foods are placed for ghosts on the table; it is widely believed that the livings receive a blessing or punishment from their ancestors by giving an account of their actions (Wu, 2015).

The belief of life after death is also widely practiced across China and is well documented. When a person dies, it is believed that he should be prepared well for his after-life in the netherworld, with all his earthly tools, clothing and other necessities. The well-preserved terracotta warriors of the *Qin Shihuang*, can served as a prominence in projecting the belief of netherworld and preparation for it among the Chinese. The clay figures of servants were supposed to serve their royal masters' souls in the netherworld (Mukherji, 2013).

On parallel lines, the Nagas also believe that the failure to please the spirits of their ancestors can cause misfortune in the family as well as in the village. Reverence for the ancestors is appreciated and their spirits are well-honored with sacrifices and offerings. Belief in life after death is also very common among the Nagas. The deceased spirits are migrated to the abode of the death. The abode of the death has two places, one for the good and the other for the bad. The people who are morally upright, who perform all the required duties and practice justice while living on the earth are said to enter the abode of the righteous but those bad ones are

not allowed to enter the abode. On not entering the abode, they are said to be restless having no peace and they remain as evil spirits trying to harm people around. They continue to live in the state of suffering, uncured and miserable condition. It is believed that the dead souls also need some basic elements for survival in the land of the dead. Therefore, during funeral, the deceased family members have to kill animals, put shawls, clothes and items that the dead person had used while she/he was alive. Failing of which, the dead soul would keep reminding them to do soon. There is also a prevalent belief that the dead souls could be transformed into living being such as bird, butterfly, tiger, grasshopper, etc.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study has provided a significant field for identifying similarities and differences between the two cultures (Chinese and Nagas) and also endows with the unique cultural values from both the social worlds. The paper has help us to understand and appreciate the values learned from the studies of different cultures through folklore and eventually facilitates in developing cultural awareness through affinity and also by contextualizing the different cultures, enable the readers to learn more about the social worlds.

The paper also throws light on the progressive texts concerning the huge preponderance of the Chinese folklores which are well-documented and well-preserved available in its literature form. This credit of well-preserved history of Chinese heritages spanning across many centuries goes to the Chinese writing and scholars. In contrast, the Naga heritages and cultures, traditions and patterns and folklores face the probable danger of becoming extinct which necessitate immediate insightful research and the emergent documentation of Naga folkloristic patterns.

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