

ABSTRACT

A Study of Naga Tribes in Nagaland: An Oral History

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Abstract

This thesis explores the oral history of the Naga tribes inhabiting Nagaland, the sixteenth state of the Indian Union. Located in the northeastern region of India, Nagaland shares its borders with Myanmar and three Indian states. The state's rugged topography, dominated by the towering peak of Mount Saramati (3,841 meters), spans 16,527 square kilometers and sustains a population of approximately 1.9 million people. Though modest in comparison to the Indian subcontinent's demographic scale, Nagaland's cultural landscape is remarkably diverse, comprising 17 distinct tribes, each with unique traditions, languages, and social structures. Typically, each of Nagaland's 15 districts is governed by one dominant tribe or a cluster of smaller tribes, reflecting the region's intricate tribal dynamics.

The state experiences a temperate climate, with summer temperatures averaging 31°C and winter temperatures dropping to 4°C. Geographically and socially, Nagaland remains predominantly rural, with two-thirds of its population residing in villages. The village is not merely a residential unit but the highest level of traditional political organization, structured around the clan system, which governs social, economic, and cultural life. Community-centric activities form the backbone of Naga identity, emphasizing collective decision-making, oral traditions, and ancestral heritage.

Given the absence of a written script among the Naga tribes, oral history serves as the primary repository of their historical memory, myths, and cultural values. This study aims to document and analyze these oral narratives, examining their interplay with Nagaland's economic evolution, religious transformation (from animism to Christianity), and political structures. By doing so, it aims to preserve the intangible heritage of the Naga people and illuminate their adaptive resilience in a rapidly modernizing world.

Oral history is indeed a crucial and dynamic field in modern historiography, particularly for communities like the Nagas, who have relied on oral traditions to preserve their history, culture, and identity in the absence of a written script. The passage highlights several key aspects of oral history and its significance in Naga society:

Nature of Oral History:

- Oral history involves collecting historical information through audio or video recordings, which are then organized chronologically.
- It employs diverse methodologies across different cultures and nations.

Importance for Historians:

- Historians must analyze oral data alongside socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts to draw meaningful parallels.

Naga Oral Traditions:

- The Naga people lack a written script, so their history is preserved through oral narratives, legends, and folktales passed down through generations.
- These traditions serve as verifiable accounts of Naga origins and identity.

Naga Clans and Political Context:

- While 16 major Naga clans in Nagaland are officially recognized, there are over 40 Naga clans outside Nagaland (both recognized and unrecognized).
- Nagaland became an Indian state on December 1, 1963, and is situated in Northeast India.

Research Challenges in Nagaland:

- Since 1947 (India's independence), there have been limited research opportunities in Nagaland, making oral history even more vital for preserving Naga heritage.

Broader Implications:

Oral history is indispensable for indigenous communities like the Nagas, whose histories might otherwise be marginalized in written records.

The political recognition of Naga clans remains contested, with many groups outside Nagaland struggling for acknowledgment.

The lack of extensive academic research in Nagaland underscores the urgency of documenting oral traditions before they are lost.

This thesis is a detailed study of the oral history, culture, economy, and social structure of the Naga tribes in Nagaland, India. It highlights the critical role of oral traditions in preserving the history of a people with no written script. The work is based on extensive fieldwork, including interviews and a review of existing literature from British colonial administrators, anthropologists, and Naga scholars.

The thesis is structured to first establish the historical and cultural context of the Nagas, then present raw oral data from interviews, and finally analyze this data across key themes: economic history, cultural/social issues, and religious/political evolution.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces oral history as a vital methodology for studying the Nagas. It provides a geographical, demographic, and historical background of Nagaland and its 17 major tribes. It details the state's formation in 1963 after a period of political struggle. The chapter also includes an extensive review of literature, citing key works by British officials like J.H. Hutton and J.P. Mills, as well as Naga writers like M. Alemchiba and M. Horam. It outlines the study's objectives: to document oral histories of origin, compare tribes, and study their economic and cultural practices. The methodology relies heavily on qualitative data from interviews and fieldwork. The introduction establishes that due to a lack of written records, oral history is the primary source for understanding the Naga past. It sets the stage for a deep dive into the tribes' unique identities and shared experiences.

Chapter 2: Documentation of Oral Data

This chapter presents transcribed and interpreted interviews with members from various Naga tribes (Sumi, Konyak, etc.). The interviews cover origins, migration myths, festivals, the impact of World War II, and social customs. It also details sources for constructing Naga

history: archaeology (e.g., the Kachari ruins in Dimapur, the six stones of Longtorok), foreign accounts (British colonial records), indigenous chronicles, and personal knowledge. The chapter includes a population breakdown of the 17 tribes by district. The oral testimonies confirm a strong belief in a shared migratory origin from the East (China/Myanmar) and a dispersal point at Khezhakenoma. The chapter underscores the value and challenges of using oral tradition and Archaeology alongside colonial records to piece together history.

Chapter 3: Economic History and Infrastructure

This chapter analyzes the traditional economy, which is predominantly agricultural. It describes the two main farming systems: Jhum (shifting cultivation) and Terrace cultivation. It also covers other economic activities like forestry, cottage industries (weaving, pottery), and the recent growth of tourism. The economy is described as transitioning from a self-sufficient, community-based model to one increasingly integrated with the market, though still reliant on imports and central government support. The chapter also covers inheritance customs (patrilineal, disinheriting women) and the cultural significance of ornaments, which denote social status, bravery, and identity. The Naga economy is historically rooted in agriculture and community ownership. While modern infrastructure and education are developing, the state faces challenges due to its terrain, outdated farming practices, and a structural shift away from the primary sector. Traditional customs around property and wealth display remain strong but are gradually changing.

Chapter 4: Culture and Social Issues

This chapter explores the rich and diverse cultural fabric of the Nagas. It describes their vibrant festivals, the unique institution of the Morung (youth dormitory, which was central to education and social cohesion), and the role of taboos and totems in maintaining ecological and social balance. A significant portion is dedicated to narrating various myths and folktales from different tribes, which explain origins, teach moral lessons, and embody cultural values. The chapter notes social changes, including a move away from strict communal living towards class distinctions and materialism, while highlighting the ongoing respect for elders and community. Naga culture is a complex system of shared social structures (like the Morung) and diverse tribal expressions (seen in festivals and tales). While Christianity and modernity have brought change, core values of community, respect for nature, and storytelling persist.

Chapter 5: Religious Change and Political History

This chapter contrasts the pre-Christian era (characterized by animism, headhunting, and village-level governance) with the Christian era. It details the arrival of American Baptist missionaries (e.g., Dr. Clark, Dr. Witter) and their work among different tribes (Ao, Lotha, Angami, Sumi), which led to widespread conversion. This transformation ended practices like headhunting and introduced modern education and healthcare. The chapter also explains the traditional political systems, which ranged from autocratic (Konyak Angh system) to more democratic (Angami) village councils governed by customary law. It traces the evolution of these systems into modern Village Councils and Village Development Boards (VDBs) under

the Indian administration. The advent of Christianity was the single most transformative event in modern Naga history, reshaping spiritual, social, and political life. The traditional political structure, based on village autonomy and customary law, has been formally integrated into the modern administrative framework of the state.

Chapter 6: Finding and Conclusion

Bibliography

This chapter synthesizes the findings on the origin of the word "Naga," tribal migration, and the core aspects of Naga identity. It concludes that the term was an exonym given by outsiders, and the people likely migrated from Southeast Asia. It reiterates the importance of oral history and the dormitory system (Morung) in preserving culture. The chapter provides a detailed account of the beginning of Christianity for each major tribe, crediting missionaries with ending inter-tribal warfare and headhunting and introducing education. It concludes with the "good culture of the Nagas" – their bravery, respect for elders, rich artistic heritage, and strong sense of community. The thesis concludes that the Naga people possess a deep and complex history preserved orally. Their society has undergone a profound journey: from a collection of autonomous, animist villages often engaged in conflict to a predominantly Christian state within the Indian Union, striving to modernize while fiercely protecting its unique cultural heritage and identity. The study underscores the successful integration of traditional customary laws with modern governance and the lasting impact of the Christian mission on Naga society.