

## THE SYSTEM OF MORUNG OR BACHELORS' DORMITORY IN THE NAGA SOCIETY

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse how the system of Morung functioned in the past among the Nagas. Morung was the pivot on which the social, religious, intellectual and cultural activities of the young people revolved. It was in this institution that the boys acquired all the useful lessons of community living. They were also made to get acquainted with their history, folk tales, songs, dances and war tactics. The Morung was therefore, a training school in the art of life and war and also a club for entertainment and fun. The Nagas gave great importance to this particular institution and so it was rightly called as the Naga School. An attempt has also been made here in this paper to trace how the indigenous system of Morung was severely affected by the changing nature of the contemporary society.

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### 1. Introduction

The term *Morung* refers to a big building which is built separately for the young men to sleep at night and keep vigil against the enemies. In the olden days, when there was no school, this institution served as a traditional school where indigenous system of education had been passed down from one generation to the next and therefore, it was here that the young generations were taught, trained and disciplined according to their own traditional customs. In this regard Prakash Singh says, "It was in these dormitories or club houses that the younger generation of the village was reared to manhood in the tradition of that particular tribe."<sup>1</sup>

### 2. The Morungs

Various names were given for this institution by different writers such as Bachelors' House, Males' club, Men's hall, Public School etc. However, every tribal community has its own vernacular name for this particular institution like, the Aos call their *Morung* 'Ariju', the Semas call it 'Dekachang', the Lothas as 'Champo', the Angamis as 'Thebou',<sup>2</sup> the Changs as 'Haku', The Tangkhuls as 'Longshim' and so on.

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1 Singh, Prakash, *Nagaland*, Delhi, 1977, p.35

2 All the non-Angami writers called the Angami *Morung* as *Kich?ki*, but the term *Thebou* is more matching as it is for the exclusive use of the males. The connotation of *Kich?ki* is understood as 'the sleeping place' for the girls.

In early times, there used to be a *Morung* in each Khel and generally it was located in a strategic position where the inmates kept vigil against their enemies. So in this manner, there used to be several *Morungs* in the big villages. As for some of the tribes like the Tangkhuls and the Semas, the *Morung* used to be attached to the residence of the chief of the village. A typical traditional Naga house was divided into three rooms, viz, the outer, the middle and the inner rooms in which the outer room was used as the boys' dormitory.

The *Morung* was generally constructed in a prominent place of the village and it was built by the villagers, but its maintenance was the responsibility of its members. It was constructed with the best quality of wood which would last for a long time. Any kind of repair or renovation of the building was to be carried out by the members of the *Morung*. The construction of a new *Morung* building meant much feasting and ceremonies in which the entire khel or village would be involved. The shape and size of the *Morung* differed from tribe to tribe, depending on the size of the population.

The *Morung* was more ornamental and decorated with different designs of carvings than the other houses in the village. It was a source of pride for the village and a reflection of the past heritage. It is also said that, in former times, the condition of a *Morung* used to indicate the standard of that particular community, ie, when the building had started to decay, it indicated a decaying village, but a well-kept *Morung* reflected a strong and powerful community.

The log drum in the *Morung* was a special attraction for some tribes like the Konyaks, the Changs, the Sangtams, the Aos etc. This huge log drum was kept in the *Morung* and the boys were trained to handle this instrument which produced different rhythms and sounds according to the requirements of the situations. So in this manner, it could give a specific sound for each particular event which served as a very effective means of communication. A headhunter with an enemy head went straight to the *Morung* and made the announcement by beating the log drum.

The institution of *Morung* was common to all the Nagas but it had different working practices from tribe to tribe. All the young boys, as soon as they reached a certain age were compulsorily sent to the *Morung*. They had to sleep there till they were married. Here habits and manners were shaped, characters built up and discipline imparted. So the *Morung* was a practical school where its inmates were taught all the useful lessons of community living. Not only discipline, but various arts, ranging from basket making and wood carvings to war tactics were taught. The curriculum of *Morung* also included play, singing, and dances which were all a part of the



institution. The practices of learning by doing things or this experiential learning method was a commendable aspect of the *Morung* system.

It was in the *Morung* that the experienced elderly wise men propagated the practical education to the younger generations. These old folks used to come here, drinking their rice beer and keeping the old tradition alive with their discourses and this broadened the outlook and widened the horizon of the young generations. V.K. Anand has rightly assessed the functions of *morung* when he describes it as “the club, the public school, the military training centre, the hostel for the boys and a meeting place of the village elders.”<sup>3</sup>

A remarkable feature about the *Morung* is that, its members were very close-knit *i.e.*, they worked together, slept together and they had so much attachment with one another and really cared for each other. And this is shown from their actions, for instance, if for any reason, someone among them could not cultivate his field in time, then all the inmates of the *Morung* would readily extend their help to finish the task and such like things.

In former times, especially during the headhunting days, raids from neighbouring villages were quite frequent. The one main purpose of having a *Morung* was to prepare the young men to defend their village. So during an emergency the young men in the *Morung* used to keep a round-the-clock vigil against the enemy attack. Whenever there was a surprise attack, then the village youth in the *Morung* would act immediately as a group to fight with the urgency of the situation, as they used to keep their weapons ever ready to deal with any such situations. So in this regard, it was the duty of the veterans to impart training and skills relating to war and headhunting.

### 3. *Morungs* as Institutions

The *Morung* as an institution had its own set of rules and regulations. Only males became its member as women were not allowed to enter the *Morung* because it was believed that females entering the *Morung* would invite bad luck or misfortune to that particular *Morung*. For the same reasons, females were also not allowed to touch the log drum.

The girls used to have a dormitory of their own. When a girl reached the age of around ten or eleven years, she usually left her home at night to sleep with her friends in the girls dormitory which was generally attached to a rich man's house for some tribes. But among some other tribes, the Angamis, for instance, they preferred a widow to be the care taker of such dormitories.

3 Anand, V.K., *Nagaland in Transition*, New Delhi, p.91

This girls' dormitory served as a traditional school where they were moulded into womanhood. Here the young girls were taught and trained in various vocations so that they would be able to cope with the motherly responsibilities in future. Various kinds of handicrafts like weaving, embroidery, designing works were taught to the girls at night. The girls also had to bring their own items like spinning wheels, raw cotton, thread and even fish woven clothes for stitching. In this institution, here, the young girls learnt many things from their seniors which their parents themselves could not teach them.

The duties in a *Morung* were divided among the members according to their age groups. The junior most group was to run errands for their seniors. They were also entrusted with the task of collecting fire wood to be burnt in the dormitory. The intermediate group had the important functions of helping out the poor and needy in their community. They were also expected to help their seniors in the administrative works of the *Morung*. Men from the older age group had to supervise all the activities of the *Morung*.

The *Morung* served as a recreational centre. During the festivals, the boys of the *Morung* took the leading role in all the necessary preparations. In almost all the festivals, they had leisure activities like singing, dancing and merry making. The *Morung* produced good sportsmen and tough wrestlers. The villagers also used this building for all important meetings. Sometimes, it was used as a court to settle the disputes among them.

No crime was committed in the *Morung* and thus, it acted as a sanctuary for those who had committed crimes. No one was to be harmed once they entered the *Morung* as they became the custody of the *Morung*. Hence it was the duty of the *Morung* members to give them protection until the cases against them were settled. Any stranger entering a *Morung* was to be treated well and they were never to be refused night shelter. The use of high and abusive words were forbidden in a *Morung*.

Today, these institutions which played a significant role in the past, have lost much of their importance and relevance mainly because of the ever changing nature of contemporary society, for example war and headhunting have become something of the past and so the idea of sleeping in the *Morung* to guard the village does not have much relevance to us.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, at a time when we place great emphasis on modern education, parents can no longer send their children to sleep in the *Morung*.

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4 Professor V.V.Rao has rendered two reasons for the decline of *Morung* in the Naga Hills. Firstly, headhunting was banned and secondly, hostilities amongst the tribes have come to a stop. See Rao, V.V., *A Century of Tribal Politics in North East India 1874-1974*, Delhi, 1976, p.136

Changes are taking place everyday and new set of values are thus emerging in which the old order is yielding to the new. At the same time, many of those valuable activities which were imparted in the *Morung* have started to decay and so the present society should be encouraged to treasure the unique culture of the Nagas. We should put more effort into preservation of traditional literature in the form of folk lores, folk tales, folk songs, legends etc, so that an increasing awareness is created in the minds of the younger generation about the rich heritage of their culture. Also, the traditional hallmarks of the ancient life such as simplicity, honesty, truthfulness and fearlessness should be highlighted among the younger generation in order to let them develop a healthy attitude towards their own culture.

In the *Morung* system, the development of character was greatly emphasised. Valour and courage were given great importance and thus, young people were willing to render their best services and sacrifice their personal interests for the welfare of the community when called for. Similarly today, striving for excellence in social and academic pursuits have to be inculcated once more into the younger generation.

#### 4. Conclusions

We may summarise the topic by saying that the institution of *Morung* existed from time immemorial. This was the nerve-centre of the Naga society because it was here that the younger generations were moulded into good and responsible citizens. In earlier times when there was no formal education system the *Morung* acted as a school where the unique cultures of the Nagas were transmitted down the generations. It was here that the elderly wise men and war veterans propagated practical education to the younger generations. Thus, Chattopadhyaya summed up, "It is here that the foundations of each generation are laid, moulded and built up."<sup>5</sup> But those activities of the *Morung* were severely affected with the introduction of formal education and Christianity. Now the people were redirected into a new pattern of education and as a result, the old system of education has generally died down. It must be understood that changing circumstances have already altered and continue to alter our values and in the process many *Morung* activities and practices are fallen into decay. Today the *Morungs* are still constructed and repaired from time to time, but the rich heritage of the past cannot be seen any more in the *Morungs*. So the present society should be given a guiding hand to value and preserve the good qualities imparted by the *Morungs* so that the younger generations can develop an awareness of the rich heritage of their culture.

5 Chattopadhyaya, K, *Tribalism in India*, Delhi, 1978, p83



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