

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES TRENDING: A READING OF NAGA LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

In the first two decades of the millennium, the autobiography/memoir has noticeably proliferated amongst different forms of writing in Nagaland. Self-writing is an act of assertion and agency and the autobiography serves well a society that wants to speak for itself. The paper looks at the value of life stories when placed within a larger context of history and culture. It also examines the literary aspects of the narratives.

Keywords: *Naga writing, autobiography, identity, history, affect worlds.*

Oral to Written

While it goes without saying that Nagas have always expressed themselves uniquely through their rich oral culture and tradition, they had to learn to express themselves through a different mode to the New world. During the period of encounter and exchange with British authority and American missions (1872-1950s), the language and its script was being formalized, and the sporadic writings in native languages that began to emerge were of the level of transcription of oral narratives and some translations from English to the native language (Wati 2011, 31).

Till about the 1970s, barring a few exceptions, others wrote about Nagas. Despite the presence of an educated group, several factors contributed to the paucity of literature written by Nagas before the 70s, notes Chasie in his insightful article "The History of Nagaland Reflected in its Literature." The region and its people were impacted by the two world wars, and the people

were engaged in a movement for self-determination from the 50s onwards hence, for a long time survival was their chief concern, and political issues preoccupy till this day. He also offers some reasons that aided Naga authors to produce a steady stream of books post 1970 : A sizable population acquiring higher education, many of whom were employed under the recently inaugurated state government, enjoying relative stability of life and livelihood, some among them could devote time for writing. Another reason was, the beginning of publishing under the patronage of church, tribal literary boards, individual initiatives, besides, the coming of tabloid newspapers, fueled an increase in publication in the 80s and 90s.

Looking at the publications in Nagaland (in English and also vernacular) of particularly the two decades of the present century, it can be surmised that Naga writing is coming to its own. The advancement of communication and technology and the thrust towards a global

community, have multiplied the areas of discussion and increased participation among stakeholders in publishing- writers, publishers, and albeit at a slower pace, readership.

Of Life Writings

In recent years, genres like biography, autobiography, memoir, travel writings, including any kind of narrative that has propensity for personal expression and has become a part of public culture like online blog, testimony, interview, genealogy, genomic databases, documentary photograph, such forms have come to be categorized under the larger umbrella of Life Writing. Laura Marcus notes how the term 'autobiography' came into existence only by the beginning of the nineteenth century, though in the western literary tradition the origin of autobiographical writing goes back to the fourth century to St. Augustine's Confessions and later on used in the secular context by Jean Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* (1782). Thomas Dequincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* published in 1821/2 and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850) contributed to making the autobiography a more familiar literary form. Later, Virginia Woolf's autobiographical text *A Sketch of the Past* (written in 1930s) would bring up pertinent questions about dual time frames or double identity, of the 'I' of the present writing self and the 'I' of the past self whose story is being recounted. Much of the critical focus in the 1970s and 1980s, were upon the discussion and development of these concepts. So beyond the presentation of 'truth' and lived experience by the writer, today autobiographical writing has to do with issues of self, identity, subjectivity and how these are affected by time/memory and circumstances (Marcus, 148-154).

Among the different genres of writing that has begun to proliferate in Nagaland, the autobiography/memoir has caught the imagination of Naga authors, particularly in the two decades of the millennium. It may be mentioned that in the Nagaland context, one of the earliest autobiographies, *The Prisoner of Nagaland* by Dalie Namu was published in 1987, and biographies, relatively more in number, began to emerge around the same time with titles like Longri Ao (1986) by O.M. Rao (Lanunungsang 2008, 9-16). This paper has limited itself to only the publications in English of the last two decades, however autobiographies in the tribal languages and also biographies far exceed in volume and may be sites of interest for a wider representation of the society in terms of numbers and social categories.

Some select works in English referred for this article are: *My Early Years (2008, 1999 in Ao)*, *My Training Years (2012)* translated works of Ben Wati, a pioneering man of faith; *Lessons From Life (2009)* by Kiremwati, educationist; *Once Upon a Life (2013)* by Temsula Ao, writer and educationist; *Hails and Blames (2013)* by Scato Swu, leader of Naga political group; *Encountering Life: Antics Of a Govt. Servant (2015)* by Khekiye K.Sema, Retd. Civil Servant; *A Naga's Quest for Fulfillment (2016)* by S.C. Jamir, statesman; *A Naga Odyssey (2017)* with R. Broome by Visier M. Sanyu, former academic; *Undying Spirit of Freedom (2020)* by Rtd. General Mowu, leader of Naga political group. The autobiographies have been selected on the basis of their wide reference and availability.

Implication of Autobiography in the Context of Nagaland

That autobiography has come to appropriate a space in Naga writings is significant. The difficulty of speaking for a collective in a highly political environment ridden with fissures across ideological and tribal lines, in a context where the written word is not taken lightly, and in the midst of several contending versions of history and circumstances, presenting an individual truth becomes the most sensible way of speaking, and perhaps the best way of confidently placing the cards on the table. In a sense, autobiography lends that liminal space for assertion and presentation of perspective by an individual, allowing its tenuous truth to stand in a postmodern way. It is only natural that the Naga society, which is maturing over the years should have speaking voices for themselves, and the autobiography serves well for the times. Writing life stories is an act of agency in these conditions and indicates a consciousness about one's place and role in the world.

At the time of writing, the authors referred to here have all written post retirement and are persons who have attained some level of acclaim and accomplishment in their own fields, perhaps the more reason for confidence to write. It is noted that in Nagaland autobiographies have emerged from an elite (of the educated or acknowledged) section though, almost all of them have risen from small village settings, crossed boundaries at various levels with great resilience and went on to hold important positions of authority, saw and experienced the larger world. One author quite aptly terms the journey as an 'Odyssey'(Sanyu) and another celebrates his new identity of becoming 'a citizen of the world' (Ben Wati). These authors enjoy

social prominence, and are among the 'recognized' and hence deemed 'worthy' by the society to be read or known closely. Acceptance is already precluded in the writing of their life stories, as there are also 'emotional currents underlying the cultural fascination' with the famous or well-known social figures, according to celebrity studies (Mayer & Novak, 150).

A recurrent stated intention by some of the authors is the 'legacy' that has been established for 'posterity' and in a more indirect way, for themselves and their families. Some have included genealogy connecting them to families and clans of significance (in *A Naga's Quest, Lessons from Life, Early Years*) and others, justifications for correcting or countering dominant perceptions, especially by political leaders (in *Antics, Hails*). It may be added that the obvious social emphasis and the religious and philosophic musings in several of the works is also culturally appropriate, as would leaders and pioneers bequeath lessons of life to the community and readers. A 'persona', an identity, is created in the autobiography which is shored up by the socio-political and cultural forces. Therefore, the speaking voice in these instances are more formal and restrained, offering precise and deliberate information and lessons. In most of such autobiographies, the present 'I' with a retrospective gaze is more dominant, and the moment of experience of the past self is more interpreted than presented.

Whereas in some other recent works (*Antics, Early/Training Years*), a more discursive and confessional type of narration is found, taking a more informal and personal tone, and typically peppered with disarming 'Naga' humour and colloquialism. *Once Upon a Life* by Temsula Ao is unique in its evocative quality. The speaking

voice does not assume that which memory cannot recall, in this case, of whether she even bade goodbye to her brother as they parted, but replaces it with an intense feeling, “The only conscious memory of that relocation was the deep sense of being truly 'orphaned', away from my siblings and the familiar environment of my troubled childhood” (Ao 61). It is observed that in the narratives written by men it is common to find names of people, places and other definite markers to be in place, however in this story by a woman, the sentiment and emotion, perhaps not accuracy of details is prioritized.

Like in modern autobiographies the select narratives have a pattern, of education or growth through experience, and the continuity of narrative is maintained by the antecedents of life. For authors like Jamir and Sema, these details provide the framework for progression of their narrative. However, autobiography is inextricably imbedded in history and the authors weave their own personal story along with multiple narratives. In some cases, history presented is obvious with an ideological turn, indicated very often by the choice of event/circumstance by the author. The broad-based history that emerges when the story is placed against the backdrop of the larger issues of the period, is valuable. And it is in the judicious reading of history that these autobiographies provide much interest.

For instance, *Lessons from Life* gives a panorama of a period and a life that spans across transitions of the region, from around the 1930s prior to the statehood of Nagaland to the millennium. It records the unique circumstances of an individual who had to adapt to the changing political landscape and carve out a working system of education in his state -

growing up in British India, after independence serving as Headmaster in a school run by national workers, later becoming a Principal of an school in the Naga Hills Tuensang Area (NHTA) under the Indian government, and after statehood in 1963 serving in the state government and higher education for about two decades, thereafter joining the university (NEHU) in the 1980s, and after a stint in politics and retirement, in the year 2000 for the next five years, as Education Consultant.

In *Antics*, the author being a former civil servant, highlights the larger questions of contemporary governance, entrenched systems, inter/intra community issues, providing a picture of the social reality in Nagaland. The author's personal interventions and experiences intersect with these realities, and for the reader it becomes much more than the antecedents of the individual, providing cues or ideas for future deliberations of society. In this sense, the autobiography is much about the present as it is of the past.

American cultural critic Lauren Berlant's concept of 'intimate publics' in contemporary consumer culture points to the 'autobiographicalization of public culture as a whole.' This concept is also relevant to understand life stories in the public domain creating a kind of 'affect' or emotional bond (sentimental) through a rhetoric of intimacy. These 'affect worlds' operate at various levels, whether it be to address a personal or psychological need, socio-cultural identity, gender affiliations, class/professional alliances, etc.

For Berlant, these 'affect worlds' of public spheres possess latent power for political agency or advocacy, and may be useful in so far as such influence is garnered to achieve political goals

(as is found in queer advocacy that seeks to change state-civil society relations) (Jolly v-vi). Mention can be made of some important autobiographies of political leaders of the Naga nationalist movement that surfaced in the decade of the Framework Agreement of August 2015. *Hails and Blames* and *Undying Spirit of Freedom* are two such narratives that seek to put the record straight from the horse's mouth, and along with several other political treatises published around the same period, negotiate a political position that could influence policy making.

For Nagas, autobiographies and life stories have created a climate for 'presenting truths', and serves as a tool for fostering identity and

recovery of their history, in whatever form, in mapping the gap - cultural, political, psychological, chronological, spatial- that has occurred due to change from an oral to literate society, including experience of colonialism, and in a short span of time catapulted into a modern global society. The other impetus being, that after a transitional period of assimilation and the political instability of several decades, the autobiography has given confidence for advocacy, of speaking out, by and for themselves carrying all the ravages of an emergent identity. The sprouting of the autobiography augurs well for a participatory public.

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