

Ecosophy in the Select Folktales of the Konyak Nagas

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Abstract

The Konyak Nagas are one of the major Naga indigenous tribes of Nagaland. The Konyaks are known for their rich oral traditions that has been passed down orally from generation to generation and where much of the tale has not been recorded in writing. The aim of this paper is to explore the inherent ecological wisdom in select folktales of the Konyak Nagas written by Wangjin, Konyak and Konyak, in the book, *Konyak Naga Folktales – A collection* (2013). It will help us to understand the Konyak Nagas' indigenous social and cultural practices, their beliefs and worldviews which are interlinked to the ecological web of mutual coexistence of all life forms on earth. This understanding can help promote pro-environmental behavior- of responsible practices, reciprocity and balance in man's relationship with the natural world.

Keywords: Konyak Naga, folktale, sacred, rituals, ecology, kinship, reciprocity, balance

Nagaland, one of the North Eastern states of India, is home to seventeen (17) major indigenous tribes and the Konyak Nagas are one of the major Naga tribes inhabiting the Eastern-most part of the state. Nagas have rich repositories of oral traditions which have primarily been the means of archiving history for the Nagas and the art of storytelling is interwoven in the fabric of oral tradition. The Nagas' oral tradition of storytelling is replete with different forms of literature such as folktales, folk songs, folk poems, proverbs and riddles, rituals and ceremonies and so on. Their oral traditions are 'the living dynamic practice that includes an interactive and spiritual relationship to specific places that is expressed and perpetuated through forms of ritual and ceremony with the power to heal and to cause harm' (Porter & Roemer 2005, 43).

The socio-cultural and ecological worldview of the Konyak Nagas is their belief in a sense of kinship with the rest of the world where human, natural and the supernatural world live in tandem with one another. This sacred kinship is evident in almost all the folktales of the Konyak Nagas. The three varying tales of 'The Origin of Rice,' narrates about the interconnection of all life forms (Wangjin et al. 2013, 88-93). The first variation tale narrates about the villagers of Changlang village where they faced the mysterious incidents of their children disappearing from the village. The reason behind the incident was none other than the malevolent spirits. When one of them is caught by the villagers, it gives them rice grains in return for its release. The second variation narrates about a woman and her son who lived in the forest, and who are given different seeds of

paddy, maize and millet by the forest spirit and also continuously helped by the spirit in all their activities. Konyaks attributed their knowledge of cultivation, woodwork and sculpting, weaving, their livelihood, and prosperity to the supernatural elements as revealed in the tales. The third variation tale of the 'Origin of Rice' narrates how the Konyaks migrated from one place to another in search of food and shelter and crossing over the Deilao Valley towards the present area through Dikhu river (Wangjin et al. 2013, 92-93). When they reached a mountainous area, they climbed up its cliff top which they named 'Wungbei' meaning the 'hanging sky' (Wangjin et al. 2013, 92). There they found two huge rocks identified as 'male and female' and another rock in the shape of a paddy carrying baskets of the Konyaks. As they settled there for some time, they discovered different types of weeds and plants growing out of the female rock of which one of the plants was the red rice. They named the female rock as 'Tahnyim Longnyu' meaning 'stone where paddy grows' and marked their settlement there (Wangjin et al. 2013, 92). It is also said that the present habitat of Kongan village is on top of this mountain.

Land indeed occupies an important place in the lives of the Konyak Nagas, for it is from their land, their place of origin, that their identity, culture and tradition, is derived from. The tale not only describes the pristine and fertile ecology of the tribe where they make their settlements but also attributes the land with the 'feminine life force of the universe; a mother to all...the source and the being of the people, and all [we] are equally the being of the earth' (Fleck 1993, 233). This feminine power of fertility and procreation that the Mother Earth offers to all creations transcends to that of the other natural world as well (Imsong 2009, 155).

The tale also speaks of the Konyak Naga tribe's belongingness and identity to a particular place in which they share common memories of the past, portraying the intimate connection between place, self and community. As Esther Konyak writes, "The belief that as 'land belonged to the human, the human belonged to the land' was a strong ethical and moral foundation of everyday Konyak life. And therefore, 'The loss of land is seen as loss of identity, an alienation from nature'" (FNR 2018, 53). Land is not only a piece of property to the Nagas but a part of their being and therefore, the location, the land, the place of their dwelling and civilization includes the concepts of homeland, culture, religion, spiritual sites, the natural environment, other natural resources which are all sacred to them as they are sites from where their ancestors emerged (Imsong 2009, 159-160). Whenever land dispute arises among the individuals, the settlement of the disputes involves the clan and the community at large. The protection of the land ownership by the community conveys the 'religious sensibility of community response and relationship and expresses a deep sense of attachment between people and the land they inhabit' (Garrard 2007, 126).

However, the pristine ecology that the tribe once shared with all is deteriorating with the colonization of their land by the Britishers. The settlements around the place mentioned in this particular tale and beyond the place became a place of Coal extraction for the colonizers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries leading to the establishment of a coal loading station at Naganimora which is still existent even today; and eventually by the government at present and other individuals, to derive economic prosperity from their lands. Today, the local communities where coal is extracted, faces displacement and dislocation of

their homes, deforestation, landslides, pollution of water sources, destruction of cultivable lands, unhygienic and risky conditions of mining, loss of lives and livelihood. What had once linked the self and the community intimately i.e., the land is now being commodified for economic prosperity and development. What we can do to minimize the impact of the present ecological crisis that we face today is to “put our inner house in order - the inner house of our communities, our nations, our gender, our species” and thus, enhance our relationship with nature in ways beneficial to both to people and to our environment (Fox 1998, 229).

The tale of ‘The Heavenly Princess’ narrates the tale of a young man named Ngampa in Wakching village who planted Canna lily (*Aw-iy*) in his garden, which was dark red and extremely beautiful and bloomed in all seasons (Wangjin et al. 2013, 60-62). He took such care of the plant that he was disheartened to find it continuously being plucked every night. As he waited for the culprit, one whole night, he found to his surprise, a small thread rolling down from the sky and a girl descending from it and plucking the full bloomed flower. She was an angelic being, exceptionally beautiful whom he named ‘Helem’ and they were soon married. Like any other human, Helem began to learn all types of work and duties. In the course of their life on earth together, they purchased a plot of land to cultivate crops which was filled with big trees and had to be cleared for cultivation. Time and again throughout the tale, we find them approaching the Supreme Being’s assistance and advice in uprooting the trees, clearing away the debris and the weeds in their field. Even during their surplus and overflowing harvest of paddy, Helem is advised by the Supreme Being to untie her hair and run around the hut. However, this makes the paddy vanished from her sight. And

once again she calls upon the Supreme Being to restore the lost paddy, where she is then advised to slaughter a rooster and perform a sacrifice. The sacrificial ritual brings back the lost paddy. It is a belief among the Konyaks that before the harvest, they have to perform a ritual to appropriate the spirit and observe ceremonies after the harvest acknowledging the Supreme Being for his blessings. Even today, this post-harvest festival is celebrated by the Konyak which is known as, ‘Lao Ong Mo.’ Helem continually takes the advice of the Supreme Being even when she decides to end her life. It is believed that when she was crushed to pieces by the animals as she awaited her end, her remains were metamorphosed into three different birds, ‘Muyak,’ ‘Shokphat’ and ‘Gonggong’ (Wangjin et al. 2013, 62).

The coexistence of man, animals and spirit in the natural environment and the transformation of man into insects, birds, animals and spirits is a widely accepted folk belief among the Nagas. Powers of transformation interrelated animate and inanimate beings in a reverse form of spiritual anthropomorphism depicting their shared bonds of kinship and unity (Lincoln 1983, 25). Such unity is seen in the marriage of Ngampa and Helem and the transformation of Helem into different types of birds in the mentioned tale. It bespoke of a time in which mutual co-existence of the spirit world and the natural world was accepted as a natural course of life among the indigenous Naga tribes. Deep ethical regard for the earth and the sky and reverence for the natural world is seen in the invocation of the Supreme Being, ‘*Kahwang*,’ (the omnipresent Spirit on the earth, ‘*Kah*’ and the Sky, ‘*Wang*,’) in all their daily activities – clearing of the jungles, cutting of trees, weeding, cultivation and harvest of crops, festivals, rituals and ceremonies.

Taboos are an integral part of the folkways of the Nagas. In the tale, it can be observed that when Helem untied her hair while harvesting, she lost her surplus crops to unknown elements. It became an important taboo for the tribe to not untie their hair while harvesting nor carry the paddy through the backdoor of the hut. The Konyaks consider it taboo to sit on the rice bag, to throw or waste rice or edibles without any reason and to be too boastful of one's harvest. Observance of the taboo was to ensure the balance in the ecological world of the community. The context of the observance of taboo portrays the worldview of the Konyak Nagas where the secular is blended with the religious and the physical with the spiritual. This is similar to the worldview of the Native Americans as written by Booth and Jacobs (1998) in, *Ties that Bind: Native American Beliefs as a Foundation for Environmental Consciousness*: 'Everything is a recognition and affirmation of the sacredness of life' which is why it is difficult to 'split between their secular and the sacred and between humanity and the rest of creation' (261).

Later, the restoration of the lost paddy is made possible by performing a sacrificial chicken ritual before starting the harvest and appeasement is offered to the natural and spiritual world by celebrating the Post-Harvest Festival (Lao Ong Mo) for the bountiful supplies. The Konyaks, like the other Naga tribes, pronounced blessings of good health, abundance, fertility and good life in all their daily activities through rituals and ceremonies. The Aoleang Monyu festival of the Konyaks is celebrated to pronounce blessings for the New Year and Lao Ong Mo is the thanksgiving celebration for the harvest. The making of rituals and ceremonies is an ecological virtue showing reverence towards nature, 'an act of celebrating sacred times and sacred places and the sacred beings with whom people share this planet' (Fox

1998, 234).

The story, 'The Origin of Tattoo' narrates how in those days, a group of young men from a certain Konyak village went to the forest for hunting and came upon a strange and mysterious animal never seen before (Wangjin et al. 2013, 85-86). It led to a debate amongst themselves whether to eat the meat or not. An old man suggested that it was wise for them to butcher and distribute the meat among themselves. Heeding the old man's advice, they carried the animal to the village, butchered and distributed the meat to all the households and members of the village except for an old widow who lived at the edge of the village. Within the next few days and months, an unusual sign and calamity came upon their village. The Rooster stopped crowing, the rice beer became wasted, sickness and diseases increased, the land grew barren and harvests was poor. This unusual phenomenon compelled them to summon a shaman to investigate and find the reason for these misfortunes. After a long period of ritual, ceremonies and prayer, the shaman conveyed the message that they had killed an animal that belonged to the Supreme Being and that the Supreme Being was angry with them. The shamans also warned the villagers that they would not be able to live and prosper anymore in the same village they had lived and prospered for ages. Having received this ominous message, the villagers dispersed and scattered to different places. When the inhabitant of another village heard about these misfortunes, they decided to tattoo themselves on their face as reverence to the spirit and also to prevent themselves from the wrath of the Supreme Being and find its favor. The news of this particular villagers tattooing their faces spread to another village and other villagers decided to tattoo their shoulder. This chain of tattoo continued in different villages with each opting for different patterns and designs. And that is how tattooing in different styles and patterns emerged.

The Konyak Nagas lived as a closely knitted family, generously sharing each other's material and spiritual wealth with each another. Values of loyalty, harmony, cooperation, helpfulness; respect and reverence, mutual co-existence and responsibility are accorded great importance in their lives. It is taboo for them to violate any of these values. The proximity of the spiritual world to the world of men dictates that men live a highly moral life, considering the taboos carefully and avoiding their violation because repercussions of violations of taboos can be felt on earth (Iralu 2000, 73). In the tale, it can be observed that they violated the values of respect, reverence and mutual co-existence by killing the mysterious animal out of curiosity and not because of their need and by ignoring the plight of the impoverished i.e. the old widow, in not sharing the meat with her. It indicates the failure of man to understand the animals and the poor and weak as beings who share kinship with all creatures and the spiritual world, for everything has a being, a life and a self-consciousness, and the earth itself is perceived as a living, conscious being which must be treated with respect and care (Booth and Jacobs 1998, 257). Failure to understand this sacredness created imbalance in their cosmic universe tearing it apart irreparably. The wrongful act of the community incurs the wrath of the Supreme Being and disastrous calamity befalls upon them in the form of famine, earthquake and landslides to the extent of making them leave their home. "For everything that was taken, something had to be offered in return...and a fair exchange for what had been taken to maintain the balance" (Booth and Jacobs 1998, 261); and what the tribe's people had to offer for taking away the life of a mysterious animal and not including the widow as their kin was to make rituals, an act of appropriation in which they had to tattoo different parts of their body which later

became a part of their life and identity. This making of the rituals enables the community to heal itself, enlighten itself, gain favour from everyone and to let go; and that is how the tribe passes on their value systems of eco-consciousness and eco-sensitivity to the young through rituals, songs, ceremonies and festivals (Fox 1998, 234). The tale thus reflects and perpetuates the Konyak Nagas' cultural and ecological worldview of maintaining relationships of mutual respect, reciprocity and caring with human, natural and spiritual beings through their religious beliefs and ceremonial rituals (Booth and Jacobs 1998, 258).

One of the Konyaks' folktales, 'The Story of a Crab,' narrates a chain of chaotic events in the lives and habitat of the animal kingdom creating imbalance in the natural world (Wangjin et al. 2013, 13-14). The story starts with a crab accidentally dropping a *Hodsonia* fruit (Pai), when asked by the squirrel to share with it, on a peacefully sleeping earthworm. Chaos ensued as the startled earthworm panicked and wriggled all over the place entangling itself onto the leg of a deer grazing nearby. Taken by surprise, the deer ran as fast as it could hustling into a groove of wild boars who ran amok shaking the banana plantation which was home to a colony of bats. The agitated bats then flew here and there looking for shelter only to find an elephant's trunk as their safety net which in turn choked the elephant leading to its death. The sudden demise of the elephant spread far and wide and the tiger had to call upon all the creatures to assemble for its funeral service. During the funeral, when everyone was weeping for the elephant chanting, they suddenly heard someone addressing, "My beloved...my child... my child!" (Wangjin et al. 2013, 13). It was a goat and when enquired why the goat had addressed the largest animal as a child, it justified that its

grey beard deems it fit to address it so. The other creatures were annoyed with the displeasing act of the goat and cursed the goat for life which is why it is believed that goats suffer from fits and seizures even to this day. Meanwhile, the creatures after investigation came to learn that it was the crab that created the mayhem in the first place resulting in the death of the elephant. When asked to explain, he had no answer and ran away from the angry mob taking refuge under a huge rock. All the animals took turns to bring out the crab from its hiding place but to no avail. Finally, a gibbon taking advantage of his long upper limbs decided to take the chance and as soon as he tried to grab the crab, the crab attacked him with its sharp claws giving a painful facial expression which is why it is believed that gibbons carry painful expression and never drinks from the stream to quench their thirst from that day onwards. Left with no option to avenge the crab, all the creatures leaped on the rock and jumped on it to crush the crab with their weight. This led to the flattening of the crab which was once believed to be oval.

The tale emphasizes the “inter-relationship of all people [all life forms] where no one can act within a vacuum; for everyone’s choices ripple throughout the population” just as the dropping of the nut creates a ripple effect throughout the tale (Coulombe 2011, 72). The tale is an anecdote to show the interconnectedness of multiple threads of all life forms and everything that is on Earth with no particular species occupying a superior or central position; and once this interconnection is

destructured, it could lead to a cascading sequence of events in the whole cosmic system as was created in the world of the animal kingdom in the tale (Gupta 2022, 5). Through the tale, one can but imagine the advocacy for community over individualism, the unity and interconnectedness of all things- of people to land, of stories to people, of people to people (Coulombe 2011, 73). Balance can be maintained when one recognizes the world beyond oneself and considers others inclusively and holistically.

Oral traditions are rich repositories on the indigenous ways of social, cultural, religious and spiritual life. The tales explicates how the sacred kinship that man shared with inanimate and animate beings and the reverence given to nature through rituals, ceremonies and festivals helps maintain balance in the tribal community. The essence of the Konyak Naga tribe is being in harmony with nature and other tribes and their folktales reveals valuable insights that can inform us to understand ourselves, our tribes, our culture and our environment. The ecological sensibilities evident in the tribe’s folktales can be utilized in bringing about a transformational change and deliberate willingness to learn from and conform to indigenous traditional ecological practices in dealing with the pressing issue of the ecological crisis that humanity is facing today. This can help us reshape our dealings with nature- revering all life forms with a sense of mutual respect, harmony, responsibility and balance leading us to the discovery of new directions for the contemporary world.

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