

Cultural Traditions of the Lotha Nagas: Analyzing the Folktales in Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree: Lotha Naga Tales Retold*

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Introduction:

Nagaland, a land of exotic charm and diverse culture, splendid mountains and rivers, abundant greenery and wild life, is home to sixteen major tribes and several other sub-tribes as per the official record of the Government of Nagaland (2004). Each of these tribes has their own distinct identity and culture, and is distinguished by their unique traditional attires and the dialects they speak and varies in their socio-political systems as well. One of the most recognised tribes from Nagaland are the Lotha Nagas who occupy the Wokha district in the hilly mid-western part of the state. Originally known as the *Kyongs*, the Lotha Nagas have noteworthy difference from other native communities worldwide in terms of their socio-cultural milieu. They have their own customary laws and social system which help them to exist as a community as well as to govern their day to day life. The tribe shows significant variance in terms of their cultural practices as well and even in their appearance from the other Indigenous communities of the state. In 1922, with the publication of J.P Mills' monograph, *The Lhota Nagas*, a detailed graphic description of the tribe, "whose dour attitude towards inquirers has caused them to be somewhat neglected in the past" (Mills, 1922, p. v), comes to the fore. Thereafter, the origin and migration history of this tribe, their domestic life, the laws and customs of their society, religious faith and many other aspects of their everyday living captured the attention of the critics and theoreticians of Indigenous studies. Mill's ethnographic research on this hunter-gatherer community has shown how the cultural landscape of the Lotha Nagas has changed over the years due to the infiltration of various migrant populations.

Cultural Changes in the Lotha Naga Community:

The origin of the Lotha Nagas cannot be traced in isolation from the story of the origin of the Nagas as a whole. According to Sanyu (1996), Jamir (1999), and Nshoga (2009), the Nagas belong to the Mongoloid racial stock. It is believed that the Nagas have been collectively displaced from their original home in Central China (D'Souza, 2005) owing to their great population density, before they arrived at their present homeland. The Lothas too, being the tribe of the mountains, crossed the foothills of the Himalayas in their early waves of relocation. However, since there has been no written language among the Nagas, this Indigenous tribe has no documented history of their earlier course of migration. The advent of the British administration in the life of the Lotha Nagas brought a significant transformation in their lifestyle. Prior to their arrival, the Lotha tribe had a simple isolated existence in their respective villages, a life that was in tune with nature and reminiscent of the old ways. There was no scope of mixing up with other groups of people.

However, the British colonial rulers made their first entry into the Naga Hills in 1832, and later in the year 1841, they came in direct contact with the Lothas. (Sema, 1986) The British administration brought along with them the Christian missionaries. They intervened with the Indigenous political institutions and later the Christian missionaries brought changes in the Indigenous religious beliefs and practices. As a consequence of this process of westernization, the socio-cultural and economic set-up of the Lothas encountered a drastic change. Afterwards, with the independence of the country in 1947, the Government of India launched a series of developmental programmes for the native communities of Nagaland to improve the communication system, transportation, expansion opportunities and contact with people from other cultural groups. (Ganguly 1995; Philip 1976) In the long run, those alien cultural elements led to the gradual decline of traditional system of village administration, religious beliefs and practices, customs and traditions. In response to such changes, the Lothas started adapting to a new way of life, disregarding their primitive ways.

The changes that have taken place in the traditional Lotha way of life due to the arrival of Christian missionary activities and later owing to the government developmental projects include wide usage of modern consumer goods, attires, ornaments, communication system, shift in occupation from cultivation to government

jobs, from barter system to cash economy, rearing of domesticated animals for commercial purposes along with personal use, change in household structure and pattern of residence, food habits, role and function of the dormitory, socially approved age of marriage, cottage rice mills in place of age-old mortar and pestle, religious views from animism to Christianity, and most importantly, introduction of modern educational practices. (Horam 1988; Sinha 1986) The written form of literature started gaining impetus along with the traditional oral folk culture. Eventually, the oral tradition took a back seat due to the estrangement of the younger generation from their cultural roots. The process of globalization along with the national policies collectively put the folk belief system and socio-cultural practices at risk posing wholesome threats and dangers to these fragile knowledge systems. At such a crucial juncture, the onus to preserve the lost tales and disseminate them among the youth through the medium of storytelling rests on the creative minds of the state. However, the present century has seen the emergence of a few literary writers from this region who has attempted to document their cultural wealth in the form of literature in order to conserve it for the generations to come.

Jasmine Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* in the context of Lotha Naga History:

One such prolific author is Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton whose "marvellously brave book", *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree: Lotha Naga Tales Retold* (2017), is the first ever anthology of Lotha Naga folktales in English. The book is a collection of thirty short tales that talk about a growing, changing, and evolving cultural system characterizing the Lotha Naga community life. The retelling of the well-established stories that has been transmitted orally for ages, serves as a potent medium to express Lotha values, ideas and world view. In her introduction to the book, Patton (2017) comments:

Nagaland is one place in North East India where orality is still very relevant as well as significant. Like their counterparts among the African and Native Americans, Nagas also made sense of the vast universe around them through storytelling, as a way of keeping their culture and ipseity alive... Nagaland is among the most heterogeneous [states] in the North East, housing more than sixteen tribes... Every tribe has its unique collection of stories, concurring at many points, yet somehow different in complex ways as becomes evident with each retelling. (p. 5)

As a part of the Lotha Naga community, Patton has associated herself quite closely to the rich storytelling tradition of her people. This has been substantiated further in the 'Foreword' to the book by another renowned author from Nagaland, Easterine Kire: "This is a book that should be used as a pathfinder for other books on oral narratives. Literature from the Northeast has been suppressed too long by mainstream publishing that requires writers from the region to write within a prescribed box and format" (Patton, 2017, pp. vii-viii). Written chiefly in the form of fables, the stories in Patton's book refer to a wide array of issues ranging from relationships to friendships, the constant battle between the good and the bad, the binary between human and non-human existence, the status of women, and the like. Each and every story of this collection reflects on some exclusive aspect of the social life in a Lotha village which, ultimately, is an acknowledgment of their uniqueness and a celebration of their customs, beliefs and structure. The book basically serves as a window to a culture that perhaps has not been written about quite often.

Folk Customs and Belief System of the Lotha Nagas:

The folktales in Patton's collection can be regarded as an almanac of practical wisdom of the Lotha Nagas who live in an eternal synchronization with their folk conventions. In all the stories, she has reflected on the thoughts and beliefs of her tribe that is embedded in their collective unconscious, and has also provided an in-depth understanding of the age-old traditions that define the Lotha ways of life. For instance, the first story of the collection, "Arilao", tells the tale of a charismatic young man who is killed by the other young men of his village who were envious of his looks and hunting ability. Through the description of the protagonist, Arilao, the story provides a detailed image of "what every Lotha man should be":

He was the most handsome man in the village, a prize catch. He was a tall, muscular lad, blessed with smooth skin that had not been ravaged by the hard toil of a man's life ... His hair was so fine and straight that a *lepok* could shear it at one go ... To add to his physical attributes Arilao excelled in everything known to man; he mastered all arts and activities- hunting, fishing, farming, singing, dancing or carrying loads. He was a god-kissed child. (Patton, 2017, p.24)

The story also informs the readers about the agrarian lifestyle of the Lotha villages where men and women divide up the labour in the field in the harvest season "to glean out the grain and crops" (Patton, 2017, p.30). It talks about a community life where every member of the village willingly supports each other and generously share with their neighbours whatever is available in their kitchen, where "people never made any fences to demarcate their land against somebody else's ... even doors were never shut because theft was a thing unheard of" (Patton, 2017, p.23). The next story "Humchupvuli Elo" talks about another Lotha tradition in which a man of marriageable age has to seek for the hand of the intended maiden from her parents and also has to undertake extensive labour in the house of the prospective bride for a considerable amount of time in order to prove the

sincerity of his intentions. This period of *lonhyaka* or betrothal establishes the image of a Lotha Naga man as “chivalrous and honour-bound” (39).

The story titled “Longtsarhoni and the Snake Man” describes another Lotha tradition in which the young boys and girls from the village go into the forest to gather firewood and then bring it back to the community woodshed where “the young men rested in their *chumpo* for that night ... and the girls all gathered in one of the bigger houses in the *khel*” (Patton, 2017, p.48). This vibrant community activity is also a time of enjoyment for the young people since the errand involves joking, singing songs and various other forms of lively banter. The Lotha villages are usually settled on the border of the forests. Thus they are constantly under the threat of being attacked by wild beasts. A village which has a brave young man amid them faces the attacks with utmost courage. This is exactly what has been depicted in another story of the collection, “Ranphan, the Brave”, where the men folk are shown as the saviour of the community from external assaults whereas women are entrusted with the responsibility to take care of the agriculture fields and crops. In the same story, it has been revealed that the offering of a bride price is a common ritual among the Lotha Nagas. For them, the *otssup* or the straight shaped wooden rice ladle signifies the male, the *yongkuk* or the curved wooden spoon for curry represents the female, and thus they symbolise fertility and are given to brides as part of their wedding tradition. These two items collectively stand as a symbol of family prosperity as they represent the eternal balance between the archetypal yin and yang.

The story “Rhonthunglo” depicts the Lotha custom of taking resort to the diviner or soothsayer in case of ailments as “modern science was an undreamt of phenomenon, so there were no doctors or hospitals where the sick could be taken. The village diviner was also the witch doctor and soothsayer, who diagnosed the ailment and gave herbs and potions for treating the sick” (Patton, 2017, p.58). The author also talks about the concept of “genna”, which is a public feast hosted by one man for an entire village; a Lotha man’s worth is often measured by the number of feasts he has thrown. In “Apvuh and the Emi”, a notorious trickster figure whose family lineage is unknown, is shown to fool a village widow woman and rob her out of her only possession. The story talks about the Lotha cultural tradition of imposing fine on someone who hurts the domestic animals of a neighbour. In another tale titled “Sheriithi Friends”, the readers are informed about the Lotha folk custom of gathering ‘sheriithi’ or the wild red berries that have dark red juice during the fruiting season and drying and stocking them up for the next year. The story titled “The Sterile Wife” talks about the special care that the Lothas believe in offering a lactating mother who is always given the finest food and utmost rest in order to ensure healthy nursing of the infant. Further, the Lotha cultural practices of head-hunting, barter system, arrangement of adventurous community activities to evoke the sense of brotherhood are also highlighted in a few stories like “Rhonthunglo”, “The Emi and the Forty Young Men from the Chumpo”, “The Tale of Tchupvuo and a Man” and the like.

Each story in this collection is developed around a certain folk belief that has rationality about it. They are not mere figments of imagination or ephemeral and loosely constructed narratives. All of them are entrenched in deep philosophy, unveiling the true fabric of the Lotha community life and passing down valuable life lessons for the future generations. For instance, the story “Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest”, the tale of two young sisters putting their life at risk by ignoring the advices of their elders, can be used “as an example by folks to remind children to heed elders’ admonition. The wisdom of age is a voice to reckon or so the belief goes among the Lothas” (Patton, 2017, p.76). Similarly, the story “Sheriithi Friends” can be interpreted as a warning to make the younger generation aware of “fair weather friends and to encourage brothers and kindred to love one another as there is no relationship worthier or stronger than one’s own family” (Patton, 2017, p.187). The story of “The Crab’s Sideways-tilted Walk” is often cited in Lotha folklores even in the recent times to remind the parents to be cautious about their words and deeds, since the children always imitate their footsteps while they are growing up.

Some of the stories in the book also highlight the status of women in the socio-cultural set up of the Lotha Nagas. As Patton herself points out,

These Lotha folktales also exhibit the limited role of women in stories; in the text but out of frame. The inherent patriarchal ideologies are ubiquitous and so firmly rooted in the social machinery of society, from the customary laws to the simple folktales and songs, that there is little assertion of the woman’s voice in public forum. (Patton, 2017, p.17)

In the world of the Lotha Nagas, women are perceived in terms of two extreme opposites- either they are passive homemakers whose rule is restricted to the home and field, or they are shown as anti-heroes who challenge the existing norms. “The Pumpkin Bride and the Gourd Bride” is one such tale which depicts these two contradictory roles where the Pumpkin bride is the embodiment of all the virtues, and the Gourd bride is the typical jealous and vengeful female. “The Sterile Wife” narrates the life of a woman who is considered to be evil and ostracized as a witch when she fails to bear a child. Some other stories like “Longtsarhoni and the Snake Man” and “Rhonthunglo” projects the image of a step-mother as cruel and conniving and their demonstration of love is inevitably a “flimsy facade” (Patton, 2017, p.59). In stories like “The Emi and the Forty Young Men from the Chumpo” and “Apvuh and the Emi”, Patton shows the helpless state of the widows in the

Lotha social set-up whose pleas are hardly given any importance- “an *emi*’s voice was unimportant in Lotha Naga society” (Patton, 2017, p.86).

Further, Patton depicts through her stories how the Lothas impart a living spirit to almost every object of nature. She basically explores the animistic faith of her community which attributes life essence to each object, place and creature that surrounds them. The cultural practices of this tribe reflect their genuine concerns for the “nonhuman kin” (Selvamony, 2014, p.7). Their tribal festivals and ceremonies like “Tokhu Emong” and others centre round the celebration of their close association with the animistic worldview. In fact, they “practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world” (Dai xi), in a similar vein with the other Naga communities of the territory. They believe that they are a part of a world where “man and animals could communicate with each other. It was a world that did not understand notions of structure and social order as in present times, so it was a world of possibilities” (Patton, 2017, p.57). Patton demonstrates how the knowledge and perception of the environment and the relationship that the Lotha Naga people have with it, are often important elements of their cultural identity. Like all other Indigenous communities across the world, this tribe also holds an extraordinary wisdom of the earth, forests, the ecosystems, the wildlife and other interconnected and interdependent living systems on earth.

For example, the title of Patton’s collection has been derived from the story, “The Tale of the Fortunate Sister”, in which two orphan sisters go to a forest and one of them climbs a tree to pluck flowers from it. The tree, angry that a human “had trespassed its space without seeking its permission”, starts swallowing the girl. The dependence of the Lothas on nature and natural objects is also revealed in the story “How Chilli was discovered” which, as the name suggests, tells the history behind the identification of chilli as a part of the staple diet of the Lothas and its medicinal value and ability to heal cold and cough. Even the title of a few stories clearly shows the nature oriented lifestyle of the Lothas; for example, “The Legend of the Sungalia Plant”, “The Pumpkin Bride and the Gourd Bride”, “The Akao and the Jerhan” and so on. The reference to a number of objects that the Lothas use in their day to day life which they have obtained from their immediate surroundings, like *ono*, *pyozhulo*, *oyo*, *phariis*, *ophyak*, *lejub*, *tchuthi*, *otssup*, *yongkuk*, *khantsiing*, gives a clear understanding of their sustainable resource use. Besides, such an elaborate documentation in written format on the part of the writer is indeed laudable as it definitely restricts the chances of bio-prospecting and bio-piracy.

According to Aerts et al. (1994), “A worldview is a coherent collection of concepts and theorems that must allow us to construct a global image of the world, and in this way to understand as many elements of our experience as possible” (p.8). In case of the Lotha Nagas, their worldview constitutes of an exclusive conception regarding God, spirituality, the positioning of humans in the theological belief system, and most importantly, the human relationship with the supernatural mechanism which occupies a major part of their unique cosmic vision. In every sphere of the Lotha Naga life, the magical becomes a manifest part of the natural world and the fear of the unknown spirits always controls their activities. The knowledge of the mysterious facilitates their survival in remote and isolated forest areas, far away from the amenities of modern lifestyle. However, with the changing cultural landscape in the present century, this exceptional worldview which has been preserved since ages is depleting rapidly.

This is precisely the reason why Jasmine Patton highlights in each story of her collection the intercommunion between the human, the divine and the mystical. As described in one of the stories, “Shoshamo and the Longkumvu”, Patton talks about the quintessence of the extramundane in her reference to a particular time-

Before civilization and modern structures limited the scope of the supernatural, it is believed that the Earth was a place where different forms of creatures, many human in shape but different in manifestation and size used to frequently come visiting the mortal inhabitations. These creatures were both feared and dreaded by all: dwarfs, goblins, tree monsters, fairies, water spirits, evil spirits and more. (Patton, 2017, p.65)

As depicted in this story, the Lothas believe that when an unruly and errant person is caught by a *longkumvu* or a dwarf of mythical origin, it becomes very difficult to bring them back to normal life. The well-established folktale mentions that the *longkumvus* are capable of metamorphosing into different forms at any time. They could talk like humans and were very similar to human beings in terms of their look. These dwarfs also have the power to change their appearance into birds and animals. In another story, “Rhonthunglo”, Patton mentions about an old Lotha Naga folktale which believed that “forests are a natural habitation that sheltered all kinds of wild animals, ugly monsters, and bad spirits” (Patton, 2017, p.61). Patton even refers to shape shifting creatures in her stories, like the one in “Longtsarhoni and the Snake Man” where a giant snake metamorphoses into a handsome young man to woo the girl of its choice, or the transformation of the beautiful young bride into a young bamboo shoot and then to a majestically green orange tree in the story “Humchupvuli Elo”. Moreover, as narrated in the story, “Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest”, the Lothas strongly accept it as a truth that the middle of the forests are infested with spirits who are capable of kidnapping young girls or even eating them up. For them, the line between reality and fantasy is blurred, and that is why they can straddle various worlds with equal ease to formulate the ultimate meaning of their existence. The faith of the Lotha Nagas in the existence of

supernatural beings which is ingrained in every layer of their cultural practices is vividly reflected through the stories in Patton's book as she firmly believes that "these supernatural stories and origin-stories were a conscious mode on the part of the tellers to explain the universe and the world as they understood them or wondered about" (Patton, 2017, p.16).

Conclusion:

Since the Lotha Nagas "do not have a written history" and because of the "ignorance and disinterest" of the young generation and the "fast depleting oral culture", the unique folk heritage of this Indigenous tribe is gradually proceeding towards the verge of extinction. In such a context, Jasmine Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree: Lotha Naga Tales Retold* is a bold assertion of the author's respect towards the native identity to which she is integrally related. Through this book, she embarks "on the journey of recovering what is left of (her) identity, in a sense a sojourn towards a more heightened political sensibility of preservation" (Patton, 2017, p.12). Through her attempt of recording the cultural practices of her tribe, she has undertaken the task of translating the folktales in order to preserve them. Besides her extensive use of culture-specific Lotha words and the vocabulary of her people that beautifully render some of the cultural traits of the community, help the readers to gain an in-depth understanding of their way of life. The book is a timely reminder of why oral folk tales must be preserved as they document a history of the imagination; it is an "invaluable treasured legacy" which is going to disappear shortly. With firm faith in the power of folktales in representing reality, Patton gives voice to a community that has always been on the margin. The "political sensibility" and moral obligation that she talks about lead her to documenting, rendering, and retelling the Lotha Naga folktales that "allow the reader to visualize the socio-cultural life of the people" (Patton, 2017, p.15). She believes that her narratives have the potential to engage the future generations in tracing their ancestry and understanding their roots. The cultural rootedness that she demonstrates through her stories and the wonderful world of folklore that she so painstakingly weaves are exceptionally important since it is through this sense of belonging that an authentic portrayal of the beliefs and values, traditions and myths, habits and cultural codes of the Lotha Nagas open itself up in the global academic arena.

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