Vanishing Naga Culture and folklore

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The author of this article, Shri T. Penzu, belongs to Ao Naga Tribe of Nagaland, which is considered to be an advanced Naga Tribe. After graduation Shri Penzu started his career as a teacher. Later he served in different capacities in Govt. of Nagaland. Paying heed to the wishes of his native village Merangkong and its neighbours, he joined politics and rose to be a minister in the state government. But since few years past he is completely engrossed in writing a few books on Naga Society and Culture. These are likely to be out by the end of 2005.

Study of Naga culture and preserving its good traits have been major concern of Shri T. Penzu. He has also indulged in writing poetry in his mother tongue Ao. The literary output in Ao language is modest so far but the crusaders of culture like Shri Penzu and others have added to its worth. With advent of time many more creative writers in Ao language are bound to emerge.

The Naga indigenous tribal culture and folklore are vanishing gradually. If the present trend is allowed to continue without taking up measures for its preservation, the precious culture and folklore may vanish within a few decades.

The National Geographic Magazine, in its Millennium Supplement : Culture (issue of August 2, 1999) has listed in its world map the cultural identities that are vanishing. Among them, ‘Naga’ is prominently mentioned in the map.

Nagas were warrior tribesman. They were ferocious head-hunters. Head-hunting, though horrific, was treated as a manly game. It was in vogue in some parts of Naga country near Burma boundary even as late as 1950s. While head-hunting was an occasional social practice, cultivation of rice paddy and other cereals like maize, millets, etc. was their main occupation. The heroes of folk-tales, dance form etc., are all offshoots of head-hunting encounters.

In one sense, head-hunting was a savage Naga cultural trend. It is totally vanished by now. However, Naga culture is not at all bad. What I mean by ‘vanishing’ in my article is the vanishing of some very good items of Naga culture. The four items that can be placed in the vanishing or endangered list are as follows :-

1. Naga folk dances,
2. Naga personal names,
3. Naga tribal dialects,

In spite of progress & changes in fashions, health care and almost all other sectors of development, Naga folk dances remain unchanged. Dancing dress or costume is not modified. No uniformity has been achieved. The rich dancers wear heavily while the poor wear lightly. No modification in dancing. All are in primitive form. In spite of annual Naga fashion shows, it seems, gent or lady, nobody, had thought of evolving a well-thought costume for each of the Naga tribe.

There is no organized patronage, no systematic pattern, no modification, no standardization, no well-set costume, no trainers or tutor, no promotion.

There is not a single training institute where folk dances trainings are imparted by trained-instructors following regular syllabus and curriculum and offering degree or diploma or certificates on completion of a set course.
Naga personal names:- Nowadays many modern Naga youths prefer Western personal names, usually English and American names. Naga indigenous names given by their parents at birth are changed to such Western names on their own will while in school or college.

Also, many Naga Christians want to christen their new-born babies with Biblical names, like Peter, John, Mary, Esther, etc., instead of giving Naga indigenous names.

Many modern Naga youths, mostly those residing in urban towns, do not know their respective tribal dialect or language. In the next 100 years some Naga tribal dialects may vanish.

Nagaland is a rich repository of folk-tales which are yet to be written down. These folk-tales have been transmitted from generation to generation. These folk tales should be collected and properly documented before they die down. Such an exercise will be a national asset.

Let’s have a look at the factors responsible for the present state of the Naga culture and folklore.

First, since Nagaland has the large concentration of Naga population among all the Naga habitats, the State Government, the Department of Arts and Culture, to be precise, has an important role to play in preserving the vanishing Naga culture.

However, it seems that the State Govt. is not aware of the gradual vanishing of Naga culture. Or may be Government does not care to save and preserve its culture and folklore.

It is not due to the apathy or disinterest of the regular departmental officers and staff, but the people at the policy-making levels are turning a deaf ear to the cries to preserve vanishing Naga cultural heritage. As a result, many precious aspects of Naga culture and folklore, some of which may excel as world-class master pieces, are allowed to disappear.

Second, apart from State Government, there is no other agency, like government-sponsored autonomous body, NGO or private organization, to patronize the preservation and development of the rich cultural heritage.

Third, there is no formal training center, no trained instructors, no systematic organizations with well-defined syllabus and no concerted effort to take care of the issue.

Fourth, no Naga scholars or writers with high academic qualification have ever attempted to undertake research work on the cultural heritage of the Nagas. Because, the research materials are to be collected, not from city or university libraries, but painstakingly from the members of old generation in the interior villages which may not be easily accessible. To go to such places one has to walk long distance on foot. A researcher, normally an educated town dweller, may not be habituated to such a feat. After reaching the village, a researcher has to mix up freely with the villagers through interpreter or through direct interactions, eating and drinking whatever they offer, as they do, and sleep in uncomfortable bed, which may be difficult for town/city-based scholar. As very few scholars dare to go into such remote areas, many fascinating items of Naga folklore and culture are perishing undocumented.

Fifth, though in the early part of the century German anthropologist and writer Haimendorf wrote about the Konyak Nagas after travelling in Naga countryside, a foreigner today may find it a little difficult to travel the countryside of the Naga inhabited areas.

Lastly, an indigenous Naga scholar, though ready to take up the job with strong determination in any difficult circumstances, may be handicapped by shortage of fund at his/her disposal.
Naga culture and folklore are precious. They belong not only to the Naga people, but these are national treasures as well as the treasures of the entire world. It ought to be a national concern to undertake rescue mission to preserve these perishing treasures.

These should be rescued and preserved for the future generation. Also, the oral Naga folklore, legends and myths, as and when written with nourishing care can attain the unique position of oriental literature.

Our culture and folklore are the primary root of the tree of our racial identity. Without our ancestral identity, all political slogans of ‘national identity’ will be like a tall, golden statue with feet of clay.

Old people who are the repository of the rich folk culture, are living in remote rural areas. It is high time one approached them before they breathe at their last and a rich folk culture met an untimely death. So, the best option for us now is to utilize their services at the fag-end of their life. We must collect the folklore and document from them properly.

Regarding folk dances, songs and dramas, there are still a sizeable number of middle-aged persons, including men and women in their forties and fifties in many villages. They know the performing art form. The younger generation should be encouraged to learn the vanishing culture from this middle age group.

But initiative by someone is needed to bring together the younger and the older people. There should be close interaction between the would-be learners and the older resource persons. The process of handing over as well as taking over of the cultural and folklore treasures should not be in mere age-old traditional oral form. The process should be supported and supplemented by writing, recording, filming, and with all possible methods of available documentation. In this way preservation of a vanishing folk culture can be ensured simultaneously during this current decade before it becomes too late.