

EXPLORING UNIVERSAL HUMAN VALUES THROUGH THE ETHNIC CULTURE OF THE PHOM TRIBAL NAGAS

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Abstract

The objective of the paper is to discuss the unique culture of the Phom Nagas which includes their origin, their way of life in relation to the *Morung* (*Bang*) as an educational institution which has imparted knowledge and shaped the thoughts and values of life since time immemorial. The *Morung* is nearly extinct among the more developed tribes of the Nagas. However, it is still a thriving institution and is getting revived in the eastern part of Nagaland. The paper explores the role of the *Morung* in promoting harmony of human conduct and in the light of the reflection of universal human values. The paper also touches on the aspects of the traditional dresses, crafts and ornaments which are skillfully handmade, with their own unique interpretations. Moreover, the ethnic expressions, motifs and values of the festivals, the languages and the arts are highlighted. They intertwine in harmony with nature, uniting the Phom populace.

Keywords: Phom Naga, tribal, culture, *Morung* (*Bang*), values.

The Land and the People

Longleng district is mainly occupied by people affiliated to the Phom tribe. Like the other Naga tribes, Phom people also have Mongoloid attributes. Phom Naga people were known to be fierce head hunters in the past with instances of rivalry among themselves. The advent of Christianity and formal education, ceased such practices and at present the community, particularly the younger generation, is

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progressing in different ways and the community is at par with other communities of the state.

After the 2001 census, two more administrative units were created namely, Sakshi and Namsang (morungexpress.com). According to the 2011 census, Longleng district has 1 (one) statutory town and 5 (five) administrative circles (UNDP Report of Longleng, 2013). The native inhabitants of the Longleng district are considered as Phom. Though the Phom community is comparatively small as compared to the Sumi, Ao, Angami and the Lotha Nagas, Phom people speak five different languages. Common people speak the language of the Yongnyah village, which is one of the biggest villages of the district. The bulk of the Phom population lives in villages. Agriculture sustains the Phom people and therefore, their livelihood (ipr.nagaland.gov.in). In view of the topography and the climatic conditions, people practice the Jhum type of cultivation or the slash and burn cultivation.

The origin of the name 'Phom' is uncertain. In fact, there are various beliefs concerning the origin of its name. One school of thought asserts that the name originates from '*Bhumla*', meaning 'the lady of the cloud.' A folk tale gives the account that *Bhumla* and her spouse had numerous offspring and their successors were named 'Phom'. Others are of the view that the name was given by the British after the word '*Bhum*' which means 'cloud' because the Phom region remains mostly overcast by clouds particularly in the cold season. Some people assert that the word 'Phom' was derived from the word '*Bham*' depicting either the rubber tree or the banyan tree. Certain sections of the community describe how, when the British visited the Phom area, they would find a banyan tree at every main entrance gate of a Phom village (Image 1). On enquiry with regard to the name of the tree, the natives called it '*Bham*'. Hence, there are different interpretations of the name which makes it impossible to give a precise understanding regarding the origins of the name 'Phom' or to point out which oral history it is connected to. However, the Phom people welcomed and retained the name as it is (longleng.nic.in).

Longleng district has plenty of foliage. It reaps the benefits like a few other locations in Nagaland where pristine jungles are still preserved. Sub-tropical mixed forest distinguished by broad-leaf evergreen trees and deciduous plants are plentiful. The forest resource is the main source of livelihood for the people (morungexpress.com). Jhum cultivation is the most common form of agriculture. Terrace field cultivation is practiced by very few villages. To name some of them:



Image 1: Banyan Tree at Sakshi Village: 09/09/2022
(Note: Photo taken by the author during field work)

Tamlu town, Yangching, Auching, Pongo and Sakshi village areas which have some wet fields of cultivation.

Some of the rich agricultural products include rice, millets, carrots, radish and green peas. A variety of vegetables and fruits such as pumpkins, sweet potatoes, tapioca, brinjal, cabbage, mustard leaves, chilies, cucumbers, spring onions, pudina (mint), tomatoes, raja chilies, beans, bitter gourd, sticky beans, bananas, papayas, sugarcane, oranges, guava, pineapples, plums, passion fruits, are grown organically.

Local markets are managed by the Phom womenfolk. There, one can get forest products such as bamboo shoots (both dry and fresh), forest leaves, frogs, crabs, gooseberries, wild plants/leaves and fruits and plantain. Moreover, people of Longleng in recent years have developed an interest in growing certain cash crops such as coffee, rubber, betel nut (tamul) leaves and cardamom which give higher returns. Brooms made of both soft and hard materials found in the forest are commercially exported to Assam. These products are in high demand in the neighboring state and districts. Nowadays, farmers have started cultivating particularly hard brooms (Image. 2 a & b) for commercial purposes because of the good profits. The low lands of the district bordering Assam are rich and offer prospects for terrace cultivation. Additional means of earnings for the people are from different avenues such as handlooms, handicrafts and blacksmithing of different designs.

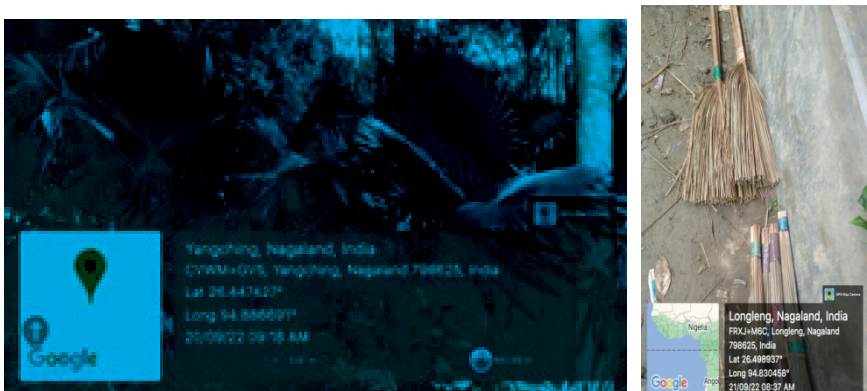


Image. 2 (a)

Image. 2 (b)

Hard broom Image 2 (a) Plantation Yangching Village, Longleng.

Image 2 (b) Finished Product

(Note: Photo taken by the author during field work)

Morung as an Institution

Morung has held an important place in Naga society since ancient times. It was a platform and a place for young unmarried adults. It was the place where young men and women slept at night in their respective *morungs*. The boys' dormitory of the Sumi Nagas is called *Apuki* and for the women folk, it is *Ilike*. Likewise, the other Naga communities also have specific names for the *morungs*: *Arju* in Ao, *Kichuki* in Angami, *Herangki* in Zeliang, *Chumpo* in Lotha, etc. In the *morung*, young women were taught the art of weaving, knitting, basketry making; they were also taught human values - to become responsible citizens of the society. Moreover, women were also guided in the choosing of a suitable life partner. Likewise, the men folk too were taught the craft of making iron tools and were trained in warfare. *Morung* as an institution has almost become extinct among the major indigenous tribes of the Naga people after the advent of Christianity and modern civilization. People were motivated to go to church instead. The missionaries viewed the *morung* as a primitive institution associated with paganism. The pioneers, i.e., the Christian missionaries, most probably were unclear of the distinction between religion and cultural values. Perhaps they viewed the centre of the *morung*, a cultural centre, as a heathen institution, and therefore, the practices of the institution were deemed to go against the beliefs of Christianity. Moreover, with the spread of formal institutions of education, the *morung* has slowly declined. However, in the context of the eastern Naga people, the *morung* as an institution is still thriving because they acknowledge that the *morung* has many facets

Table 1: The sixteen districts headquarters of Nagaland: 2011 census populations, areas and elevations (of the seat) are

<i>District</i>	<i>Seat</i>	<i>Area (km²)</i>	<i>Elevation (m)</i>	<i>Population total</i>	<i>Population rural</i>	<i>Population urban</i>	<i>Date created</i>
Chümoukedima District	Chümoukedima	610	171	125,400	81,884	43,516	2021
Dimapur District	Dimapur	70	145	170,000	0	170,000	1997
Kiphire District	Kiphire	1,130	896	74,004	57,517	16,487	2004
Kohima District	Kohima	1,207	1,444	267,988	146,900	121,088	1957
Longleng District	Longleng	562	1,066	50,484	42,871	7,613	2004
Mokokchung District	Mokokchung	1,719	1,325	194,622	138,897	55,725	1957
Mon District	Mon	1,786	655	250,260	215,816	34,444	1973
Niuland District	Niuland	n/a	154	11,876	11,876	0	2021
Noklak District	Noklak	1,152		59,300	59,300	0	2017
Peren District	Peren	2,300	1,445	95,219	81,429	13,790	2004
Phek District	Phek	2,026	1,524	163,418	138,843	24,575	1973
Shamator District	Shamator	n/a	n/a	12,726	n/a	n/a	2022
Tseminyü District	Tseminyü	256	1,261	63,629	60,766	2863	2021
Tuensang District	Tuensang	2,536	1,371	137,296	100,522	36,774	1957
Wokha District	Wokha	1,628	1,313	166,343	131,339	35,004	1973
Zünheboto District	Zünheboto	1,255	1,852	140,757	113,160	27,597	1973

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org › wiki> ›

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Nagaland from 1961-2011

<i>Particulars</i>	<i>1961</i>	<i>1971</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2011</i>
Total population	3,69,200	5,16,449	7,74,930	12,09,546	19,90,036	19,78,502
% Decadal variation	73.55	39.88	50.05	56.08	64.41	-0.47
Density of population	22	31	47	73	120	119
% of rural population	94.8	90	84.48	82.79	82.26	71.14
% of urban population	5.2	10	15.52	17.21	17.74	28.85
Literacy rate	17.91	27.4	42.57	61.65	67.11	79.55
Literacy rate of male	27.2	35.02	50.06	67.52	71.77	83.29
Literacy rate of female	13	18.65	39.89	61.65	61.92	76.69
Sex ratio	933	871	863	886	909	931
% of total work force	39.4	50.75	48.23	42.68	42.74	49.23

Source: Statistical Handbook of Nagaland 2013.

of good things to offer in life which formal systems of education may not be able to address. In this context, the best analysis could be of the Yaongyimchen village, upper area of Longleng district.

Morung in the Phom Naga Society

Common usage of the term *morung* (Image. 3 (a) & 3 (b)): in Phom Naga it is called *bang*. The meaning of the word *bang* is to, 'listen or obey.' The term varies in different dialects such as, *bang*, *leng*, *jan*, *mangshum*, *aliju* (Phom, 2018). However, *bang* is used commonly by the majority of the people. In earlier times when there were no formal schools of learning or institutions, the *morung* served as the medium for social engagements. Such was the importance and utility of the *bang* that each and every village had its own *bang* for carrying out all public affairs. The *morung* is also known as a men's club. It is seen as an agency for equipping young unmarried men for their all-round development. In Phom dialect, *morung* for women is known as *Yow* (Phom, 2009). Women too learn several things there like self-reliance, discipline, manners, responsibility and the qualities of good citizens of society. *Morung* education was free and mandatory for young people after a certain age. The materials commonly used for making the *morung* are wood, bamboo, and leaves for roofing. Bamboo fibers are used as a substitute for binding wires. It is observed that in most of the Naga tribes, the *morung* is located near the village gate, erected as a village defense built in strategic locations.



Image. 3 (a) *Morung* at Longleng Town Image 3. (b) *Morung* at Yaongyimchen village

(Note: Photo taken by the author during field work)

In the olden days one criterion to become a member of the *bang* was when a man completed the age of 15 years. Also, he was qualified to be a member of the *bang* only when he is able to split the bamboo into two halves single handedly at one strike. Except for the offences committed for criminal acts, no one could be terminated as a member of the institution (Phom, 2018). *Aliju/bang* has thus become known as the “*Centre of Learning*,” since time immemorial.

Traditional Functions of Phom Morung, *Bang* in the Earlier Times

Morung as the centre for schooling in Phom society equips young men with knowledge, customs, war craft and basketry making. It also serves the purpose of a traditional learning institution for skills in the form of arts, crafts, dance, folk music and so on. Likewise, young women too were imparted lessons about the way of life, weaving, basketry, songs and folk dances. In contemporary times, among the Naga people, *morung* is still active in the eastern part of Nagaland. The passion is for learning and to carry on the traditional values of fraternity, dignity, labour and honour.

In ancient times all the male folk used to sleep together in a dormitory where different values and skills were taught. The womenfolk slept in a separate dormitory. The *bang* was in the form of a small village, since each *bang* used to maintain its own drinking well, burial area, jhum plot, fishing spots and so on. Penalties were imposed if people from other *bang* encroached on other *bangs* to fetch water or to go hunting or fishing.

The *bang* served as the basic medium in the everyday life of the ancestors. It was the centre where all the important matters were deliberated. (It just cannot be said to be a place for young men to rest for the night). *Bang* served as the educational institution when there was as such no formal platform of schooling. It was the medium to educate the youngsters about tradition, values and customs. Social ethics about respecting the elders and caring for the elders was strictly inculcated. Failure to practice these values was reprimanded (Phom, 2018).

Beyond its educational role, the *bang* also functions as the parliament and a court of law, legislating in the social, administration, religious and economic spheres. The legislated laws were not written down but they remain rigid and immutable in practice. As a court of law, it is the highest body of appeal. The decisions taken by the seniors and the village leaders from the *bang* are taken as final

and therefore, binding on all the citizens. Allocation of power to the elders and the village leaders are bestowed by the community, therefore, retaliating and/or non-compliance of the laws made by the *bang* is met with heavy punishment (ibid). The authority, administration and its functions are mostly monitored by the seniors with the help and advice of the village elders. There is no power imbalance based on age, clan, or social status, since there is no caste and class stratification in the Naga society.

In the olden days, *bang* performed the role of purification for incidents of accidental deaths like drowning in the river, succumbing to death after falling from a tree, killed by wild animals or any instance of unnatural death which were considered as impure. If any of the unfortunate incidents occurred, the victims' associates had to stay in quarantine in the *bang*, at least for one night to cleanse themselves. Food was also not served to them directly but from a distance. As a sign of final cleansing, one could go home only the next day (ibid).

Aliju (Morung) Traditional Institution in the contemporary Yaongyimchen village: A Case Study

Yaongyimchen village uses the term *aliju* (*morung*) for the traditional institution. *Aliju* is the social and skill educational centre in the community set up particularly to impart social norms and pass on traditional values from one generation to the following generations. The institution acts and serves as the traditional centre of education where young people are trained and equipped with knowledge of village migration history, culture, traditions, folklore, indigenous music, traditional dances, warfare skills, clan history and craft making etc. The centre is set up for reviving the rich heritage of Yaongyimchen village and its traditional concepts of learning which is rapidly declining with the influence of mass media and communication. The institution plays an active and vital role in the community as it visualizes and preserves the rich tradition and culture of the past, the history, labour, honour and heritage.

In Yaongyimchen village, every Friday evening after the work in the field is finished for the day, the elderly people come to the *aliju* to teach and train the young people gathered at the *morung* with practical and valuable life lessons (Image. 4 (a) & 4 (b)).

In the institute of learning young people are taught, in practice and theory about

- 1) The village migration story, times of settlement.
- 2) Clans that were involved in establishing the village.



Image. 4(a) Image. 4 (b)

An elderly man and woman teaching the art of basketry and knitting at Yaongyimchen village, *morung*: Community Service
(Note: Photo taken by the author during field work 26, August 2022).

- 3) Association and relationship between Yaongyimchen village and other villages/tribes.
- 4) All clan systems and their relation with other tribes/clans.
- 5) Marriage system.
- 6) Customary laws and their utility.
- 7) Studying and preserving Yaongyimchen historical sites.
- 8) Skills development in the form of basketry, pottery, knitting, crafts, life values etc (Phom, 2022).
- 9) Preserving and protection of ecosystem and the environment.

Identity and the *Morung*

The *morung* trains the youth in physical fitness. Ursula Graham Bower observes that, '*dormitories are an admirable institution that discipline and educate the young and unite the householders*'. In the village, the *morung* stands out as the most magnificent house. It is the centre which furthers the conservation of social harmony and group bonding within the villages and communities. It serves as the place where the quality of discipline, customs, folklore and culture are imparted. The youth get conversant with the history, culture, folklore, songs and dances. The *morung* serves as a socializing agent of learning, and guides one to be responsible till one is married. Shaping the future of the young generation, to be responsible citizens and inculcation of the values of life and skills are taught in the *morung*. The dormitory infuses in youths of both genders, a strong sense of fraternity and

associated life in the village, which is considered important for sustaining the tribal community life.

The uniqueness of the *morung* and the reason it makes a huge impression when compared to other institutions is because though modern education has imparted knowledge and shaped the thoughts and attitudes to life, it has made children too self-centered to be able to satisfactorily sustain themselves and the society. However, the attempt to form connections with the traditional value systems is gradually declining. In fact, the present education system is purely academic in nature and children are now really busy learning and cramming from and easy notes (Jamir, 2008). Thus, in this process of learning, traditional values have begun to lose their touch.

To inculcate human values, a sense of sacrifice and selflessness in the young people, motivating them to render voluntary services addressed towards the community's needs and welfare is viewed as the core principle of the *morung*. When viewed through the lens of harmony alongwith values, the *morung* serves as an institution of distinction where educating and imparting traditions, customs, the notion of community service etc., is passed on to the young people as is evident from the case study of *aliju* of the Yaongyimchen village. The other strong qualities of the *morung* are how it guides the people to render various social services, the gaining of an understanding of life skills, community welfare such as helping the poor and needy, while seamlessly assimilating these values as part of their education for life. There are numerous activities centered around the *morung*, including free tuitions and discipline of the young; the inculcation of tribal moral values and training in arts, warfare, social behavior, manners and discipline (Kahmei, 2021).

Log Drum: The Shem

Log drum (Image 5 (a) & Image 5 (b)) plays a significant role in the *morung* and in the *Khel* (*collection of clan*). It was one of the earliest modes of communication in village life, bringing the community together. Though the use of the log drum is ancient, its origin is not exactly known. It is a belief that the idea of the log drum was derived from a log boat while crossing the river Chindwin in Myanmar during the migration to the present region. Though the origin of the log drum is swathed in vagueness, it played an important role in the social life of the people in the ancient times. The length of the log drum is normally 18 to 20 meters and 2.5 to 3 meters in girth depending on the tree (Phom, 2018).



Image 5 (a) Log Drum (*The Shem*) Image 5 (b) Log Drum Striker
(Note: Photo taken by the author during field work)

There are multiple uses of the log drum, carved in the middle portion of the log, in the socio-cultural life of the Phom Naga people. Every beat has a symbolic meaning. According to the different beats and rhythmic sounds of the drum, the community communicates and comprehends the message, and acts accordingly. It was the medium through which messages of war, festivity, celebration, death, fire alarms or other disasters and mishaps were sent; it was also through this that the call to the community to go to work, rhythms heralding the youngsters to come to the *morung* to sleep were given (Jamir:2008). Through the different rhythms of the log drum, the villagers were warned about the attack of enemies on the village. In modern times, it can be taken as a secret code. To beat the log drum, the men folk would stand in two rows facing each other holding drum strikers (Phom, 2018).

Language

Though less in number, the people of the Phom community speak different languages because it was a belief held by the elders that when a new village is formed, the citizens should speak a different dialect with a slight variation from the old village based on the belief that if the new village speaks the old language, it will not grow and prosper. Therefore, at present, the Phom people speak five different languages: Yongyah circle, Yachem circle, Sakshi circle, Longleng circle and the Tamlu, Yongya, and Namsang circle. However, the most common dialect spoken is that of the Yongyah circle (Angh, 2020). However, the different languages bring out the beauty of interpersonal relationships that humans create in the form of a

sustainable development of a value system in the Phom society which contributes to the harmonization of a culture grounded in the human attributes of language and values of humanity.

The Traditional Dresses, Ornaments, Arts and Crafts

Like the languages, each village has its own traditional *mekhalas* (sarongs) and shawls for both men and women. However, some *mekhalas* and shawls are common for the Phom community as a whole. The pattern and the colour schemes of the attire have different interpretations and history. Mostly all the traditional clothes are colorful, in striking bold red colors (Phom, 2005). The Phom people of every village, *khels* and even clans have their own unique patterns of weaving of colorful variants of dresses (Image 6). Each pattern of dress has its own interpretation and shades of meaning and stories. The pattern of the dresses indicates the warriors, the rich and the ordinary people. For instance, shawls such as *Henyiu*, *Byiooyam* and *Lakshong* were used by all. *Apphs asak* (cowry shawl) was used by warriors and the donors of the feast. In the present times, the colorful costumes have been replaced by sophisticated modern fashions for everyday wear. The modified patterns of shawls are made into waist coats, bags, neckties and hair bands. Nevertheless, traditional dresses are also used during festivals and other important occasions and this trend is catching up with the whole Naga community by blending traditional pieces with modern motifs. In the olden days when no proper clothing was available, men covered themselves with a few pieces of clothes, the bark of trees and canes woven into belts. Cane leggings were carefully dyed and worn around the calves or ankles. Nowadays, during festivals, artificial dyes are used for the dresses when participating in folk dances and songs (Phom, 2005). For traditional ornaments, people use conch shells, cowry shells, pearls, fangs of lions and bears, hair of goats and horses dyed in red or black colors, hornbill feathers and the forked tails of swallows which were popularly used and are still used in present times as well (Phom, 2015).

Nagas in general are very skillful people. Likewise, the Phoms are rich in the art of weaving, wood carving, blacksmithy, pottery etc. These arts and handicrafts have been practiced since ancient times and are not new trades/skills. Wood carvings with splendid representations of men and women, animals, birds and reptiles were very popular and are still prevalent. In the past, pottery was professional work. Pongo village is known for its pottery, then and

now too. The weaving of baskets in intricate designs is still popular (Phom, 1998). Naga women weave clothes of varied styles by sitting on the ground with the traditional loom strap. The myriad traditional, mostly handmade *mekhalas*, the shawls, the attires reveal a harmony with nature and the colourful designs depict the rich tribal life.

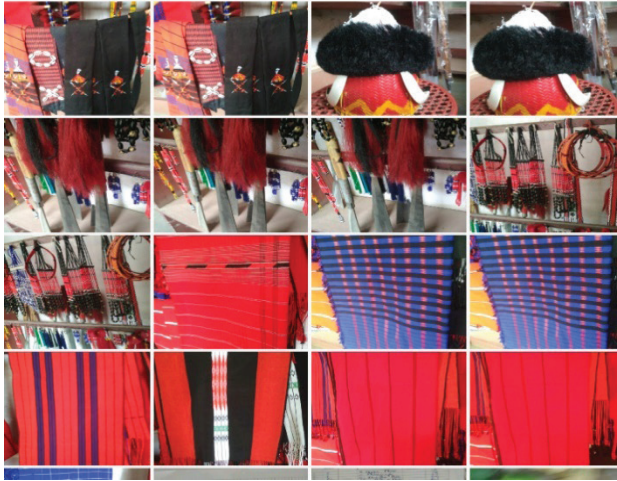


Image 6: Dress and Ornaments

(Note: Photo taken by the author during field work)

The Festivals

Like the other districts of Nagaland, Longleng district is also a district of festivals. Several festivals are celebrated in a year. But the *Monyu* festival is the biggest festival, celebrated with great pomp and show. The whole community immerses itself in a festive mood and merry making for a week. Now *Monyu* is uniformly celebrated from 1 to 6 of April every year. Earlier it was celebrated at different times by different villages. During the festival week, people exchange gifts of the meat of pigs and cattle. The festival cannot be observed as such without the slaughtering of cows, pigs, chickens, mithun (a bovine species) and buffaloes. Rice beer, made of fermented rice was very commonly drunk in the olden days but this practice has been discouraged after the advent of Christianity. Married women are invited to their parents' place for feasting. During the one week festival, parents and brothers shower love on their daughters/sisters. Love and courtesy is displayed by gifting a large chunk of meat to their daughters or sisters who may be married to someone in their own village or to someone from a distant village. It is considered to be bad manners if this token of love and recognition is not

offered. Parents make sure that their daughter's basket is filled with delectable items when she goes back to her marital place (Phom, 2009). During the festival community gathering, people present folk dances according to the clan and village. (Image 7).

The other traditional minor festivals of Phoms are *Tapve ma*, *Moinyuk mo*, *Moha*, *Pang ma*, *Hehu mo* and *Man mo*. But these festivals are hardly celebrated by the people nowadays. Festival themes naturally revolve around the agricultural seasons. Traditionally, agriculture played a significant role not merely as a means of livelihood but also as a way of life. In the community, religion and spiritual sentiments are inter-woven into secular rites and rituals. Culture has been ingrained with social structure on the one hand and religion on the other (Ibid).



Image 7: Men and Women Folk Dance Group: *Monyiu* 6 April 2022 : The whole of Longleng district celebrated the auspicious event together at Longleng public ground

(Note: Photo taken by the author)

6 of June, 1952 is one of the distinct, important social events for the Phom Nagas who observe it as the Phom Day, celebrated every year. It is observed as the Peace Making Day that was signed on marking the conclusion of the head hunting exercise and enmity within the Phom people. The day is marked as general period of leave for the Phom people by the state government.

As mentioned above, there is inclusiveness and cohesiveness in the Phom community which helps individuals find inner peace to connect with their spiritual selves. Also, the Phom Naga festivals sculpt the celebration of universal human values because the festivals are rooted in universal values like sharing, bonding, love, compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude. These celebrated values lead to personal growth and a more spiritually aligned life. Festivals imbue the people with a sense of purpose, going beyond materialism, allowing them to

forsake negative emotions and connect to the positive attributes of their lives while keeping the connection to their roots - culture and traditions - alive (Kumar, 2023).

Conclusion

Every culture, every community and its ethos has its own tales to share and the Phom Nagas, with their unique and distinctive culture and traditions have many qualities and lessons to offer to the outside world. The question here is, can we really recapture and revitalize the *morung* as an institution as another kind of learning mechanism in our contemporary times? The value and strength of the institution is that power is internalized and it is not imposed on anyone. There is voluntary acceptance of responsibilities which itself throws light on the cohesiveness and inclusiveness of the tribal society. These practices also provide further insights into tribal culture. Culture as a way of life through the rich dialects, colorful festivals, handmade attire, ornaments, vibrant crafts, tribal institutions and way of life can positively infuse the society at large with an awareness of sustainable practices which is such an integral part of universal human values.

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