

## **Ethnic Culture of the Phom Nagas**

Dr. Toli Achumi  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science,  
Yingli College, Longleng  
M.No. 9612327668

### **Brief Profile of Longleng District**

Phom-Naga tribe is one of the tribe of the Nagas. The district headquarter of the Phom people is Longleng. It is nestled in the north eastern part of Nagaland with a population of 50,484. The district is bounded by Assam on the north, Tuensang district on the south, and Mon district on the east and Mokokchung district on the west. The distance of the district headquarters is 232 Kms from Kohima the state capital via Mokokchung. Like any of the districts in Nagaland, Longleng district is mountainous with an area of 1066.80 Sq. Km. which lies between 94<sup>0</sup>E-95<sup>0</sup>E longitude and 26<sup>0</sup>N- 27<sup>0</sup>N latitude of the equator. It was established in 1951 with Shri Ranjan, Assistant Political Officer as the first administrator. Longleng got the full fledged revenue district on 2004, the tenth district of Nagaland formed by transferring 3 circles namely Tamlu, Yongyah and Longleng out of Tuensang district through Government of Nagaland. Till 2001, census Longleng was a part of Tuensang district. Only after becoming a full fledged district the first separate census of Longleng was done in Census 2011. During 2001 census Longleng town was treated as a rural area and later on it was upgraded to statutory status. Similarly, after 2001 census two more sub-districts were created namely, Sakshi and Namsang. According to 2011 census Longleng district has 1 (one) statutory town and 5 (five) administrative circles. (UNDP Report of Longleng, 2013). The people of the Longleng district are known as the Phom. Though Phom community comparatively a small community comparing to the Sumi, Ao Angami and the Lotha Nagas Phom people speak five different languages. But commonly people speak the language of the Yongnyah village, which is one of the biggest village of the district. Bulk of the population lives in village. Agriculture sustains the Phom people and therefore, the livelihood. Because of the geographical factor and the climate people practice the Jhum type of cultivation or the slash and burn cultivation

## **Land and the People**

Longleng district is predominantly inhabited by people belonging to Phom tribe. Like all other Naga tribes, Phom have Mongoloid features. Phom Naga people were known to be fierce head takers in the past with instances of rivalry even among themselves. But with the advent of Christianity and western education now at present the community has transformed themselves into a refined society and are now progressing at par with other society of the state, particularly the younger generation.

The origin of the name Phom is not very certain. In fact there are many opinions regarding the origin of its name. Some say that the name is derived from the beautiful lady 'Bhumla' which means 'the lady of the cloud.' Legend says that she and her husband had many offsprings and their descendants were called 'Phom.' Some also has their version of stating that the name was given by the Britishers after the word 'Bhum' which means 'cloud.' Their calculative understanding was because Phom area was mostly covered by clouds particularly during winter, yet, some claim that the name 'Phom' came from the word 'Bham' which means rubber tree or Banyan tree. Certain section of the people are also of the view that when the Britishers visited the Phom area they found the Banyan tree in every main entrance gate of the Phom village. (Picture )When asked about the name of the tree native replied that it was called 'Bham'. Henceforth, the name 'Phom' came into existence. Therefore, having this different interpretation it is difficult to give a definite meaning to the word 'Phom' nor is it possible to accurately say to which tradition it actually belongs. But the 'Phom people accepted the name and keep the name 'Phom' as theirs.

Longleng district is rich in natural vegetation. It enjoys the distinction of being one of the few places in Nagaland where virgin forests are still found. Sub tropical mixed forest characterized by broad-leaf evergreen trees and deciduous abounds. The forest resource is the main source of livelihood for the people. Jhum cultivation is the most common form of agriculture. Terrace field cultivation is practiced by very few villages. To name some of them are Tamlu town, Yangching, Auching, Pongo and Sakshi village area has some wet fields of cultivation.

Some of the agri products include rice, millets, carrots and greenpeas. Varities of vegetables and fruits such as pumpkins, sweet potatoes, topaica, brinjals, cabbage, mustard leaves, chillies, tomatoes, raja chillis, beans, bitter gourd, sticky beans, bananas, sugarcane, oranges, guava, pineapples, plums, passion fruits, are grown without chemicals.

Local markets are managed by the womenfolk. In the local market one can get forest products such as bamboo shoots both dry and fresh, forest leaves, frogs, crabs, plantain. Moreover, people of Longleng in recent years have developed their passion to grow certain cash crops such as coffee, rubber plantation, bettle (tamul) leaves and cardamom which gives higher returns. Brooms both soft and hard materials are found in the forest which are commercially send to Assam. These products are a high demand from the neighboring state and districts. Nowadays, farmers have started cultivating particularly hard brooms for commercial purposes as well because of good profits.

The low lying areas/foothills of the district bordering Assam is fertile and has the potential for wet cultivation. Handlooms, handicrafts and blacksmithing of different designs are also found in the district which is another means of income for the people.

### **Language**

Though with less populace people of Phom community speaks different languages because it was a belief hold by the elders that when a new village is formed there the citizens should speak different dialect with slight variation from the old village on the belief that if the new village speak the old language the new village will not grow and prosper. Therefore, at present Phom people speaks five different languages, that is, Yongyah circle, Yachem circle, Sakshi circle, Longleng circle and the Tamlu, Yongya, and Namsang circle. However, the most common dialect spoken is from the dialect of the Yongyah circle.

### **Dress and Ornaments**

Like the languages each village has its own traditional mekhalas (sarongs) and shawls both for the men and women. However, there are common mekhalas and shawls for the whole Phom community. The pattern design and the colour schemes of the attires has different interpretations and history . Mostly, all the traditional attires are colorful in striking bold red colors. Ancient Phoms used to produce their own clothes. They spun yarn out of cotton, wool or threats were dyed in paint made from certain plant or leaves to produce different kinds of colors.

For the Phom people every village, khels and even among clans has its own unique patterns of weaving of the colorful variants of dresses. Each pattern of dresses has its own interpretations of shades of messages and stories. The patterns of the dresses depicts the dresses for the warriors, rich and the ordinary people. For instance, the shawls such as *Henyiu*, *Byiooyam* and *Lakshong* were used by all. Apphs asak (cowrie shawl) was used by warriors and the donors of the feast of merit. In the present times the colorful costumes, are replaced by sophisticated modern fashions for the everyday wear. The modified patterns of shawls are made in to 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 formal clothing was available men covered themselves by few pieces of clothes, bark of trees and canes as belt. Cane leggings are carefully dyed and worn around the calves or anklets. Now days during festivals artificial dyes are used while participating in folk dance and songs.

For the traditional ornaments people use ivory conch shells, cowries shells, pearls, teeth of lions and bears hair of goats and horses, dyed in red or black colors, hornbill feathers and swallow's forked tails were popularly used and is still used at present times as well. During feuds and in normal times also Daos, guns, spears and shields were used. Neck pieces are worn by both gender.

### **Jhum Cultivation/ Terrace Cultivation**

Agriculture as the main source of livelihood of the peoples life of the villages, they practice the traditional method of farming. The village was economically self sufficient. Their daily needs could be met within the village. Here, community practice the jhum cultivation because of the geographical location and area. The approximate percentage of jhum cycle is usually nine years, however, time span is getting shorter because of the rapid need to use the land again for cultivation. The preparation of farming includes clearing of the patch of forest, followed by burning the felled trees and then the ceremonial sowing. Harvested products are stored in the barn. In this practice of farming mixed cropping is generously used. The major crops include maize, yam, millet, vegetables and paddy, corn, millet, yam, tapioca, and vegetables such as cabbage, soya beans, pumpkins, potatoes, pulses, squah, ginger, mustard

leaves and various seasonal vegetables. The fruits included bananas, pears, oranges, jack fruits, guava, pineapples, papaya and many other seasonal fruits. Livestock of the people include cows, mithuns, goats, pigs, buffaloes, cats, dogs, ducks, fowls (chickens), pigeon, geese etc. For the daily sustenance the villages were self-sufficient depending on their own produce, crops and harvests from the fields but on some days they practice the barter system by exchanging their products and domesticated animals for the items particularly for the iron and salt from the plain areas, ie, Assam. They use Brass plate and Jabile ( in Phom *Langnyu* and *Chapulung*) as the mode of money as a trading system.

Besides the extensive jhum farming very few of the people practice terrace/wet cultivation. Terrace fields are either individually or collectively owned by clan-men. Normally one can locate the terrace fields near the river side, adjoining plain and foothill. To make terrace fields land on the foothills slopes are dug to build terrace fields having different shapes and size. Here the main source of irrigation is river.

Customary laws are practiced for the disposing off of terrace fields. For the individually owned assets one can sell at his own terms and condition. However, it cannot be sold to strangers or persons from other village. Also, collectively/clan lands can never be sold/transferred without the consent and knowledge of the owning members. There has to be a general agreement for transferring and disposing of the clan land. Ancestral land is never transferred but it is collectively inherited by the male heirs of the family.

Customarily the order of the preference for the transfer of land are followed in this pattern,

- a. *Own family members*
- b. *Own clan member*
- c. *Own villagers*

A villager cannot sell his land to other village, tribe or to non-locals. Dealing of land transfer to private agency, institution or government for developmental purpose is negotiated through proper deliberation between the parties involved. Generally an agreement is done through compensation of cash or kind. This practice is in existence till the current period of time.

The tradition of inheritance is such that it is the son who inherits all the properties of the family both movable and immovable properties. In case the family is without the male heir the properties goes to the close relatives of the paternal members.

It is a taboo for the daughter to inherit any property except her mother's dress and ornaments and those properties transferred to her as gifts by her aunt or parents. Daughters are not entitled to inherit any landed properties. But in the current times father can give away some of his acquired properties to his daughter as a gift.

Also, there is no share of property for the adopted son in the common clan properties. There is also the tradition that the person who takes care of the aged parents or the person who looks after the funeral expenses of the parents inherits the ancestral hut. Any clan members who takes care of the aged parents and elders are given a good plot or property.

### **Arts and Crafts**

Nagas in general are very skillful people. Likewise, the Phoms are rich in the art of weaving, wood carving, blacksmithy, pottery etc. And, these art of handicrafts were practiced since ancient times and is not a new trade/skill. Wood carvings with splendid representations of men and women, animals, birds and reptiles were very popular and is still at present times. Earlier in the past pottery was a professional work. Making of baskets in different intricate designs are still popular. Phom women weave clothes of varied styles by sitting on the ground with the traditional loom strap.

### **The Festivals**

Among the many festivals of the Phoms celebrated today *Monyiu* festival is the biggest traditional festival. Earlier it was celebrated in different times by different villages. But now it is uniformly celebrated from 1 to 6 April. Festival cannot be absorbed as festival without slaughtering of cows, pigs, chickens, mithuns and buffaloes. Rice beer which was made of fermented rice was very commonly used in the olden days but this practice has been stopped after Christianity. During the one week festival practice of showering love by parents or brothers to married draughts and sisters takes place. Love and courtesy is shown by giving the thigh of the animals to their daughters or sisters who are married to their own village or to someone from a distant village. It was considered to be of low profile if this token of love is not offered. Festivals themes naturally revolve around agricultural seasons. Traditionally agriculture played a significant role not merely as a means of living but also as a way of life. To 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.

Like the other district of Nagaland, Longleng district is also a district of festival . Several festivals are celebrated in a year. But Monyu festival is the most celebrated one, celebrated with pomp and show. The whole community sinks into festive mood and merry making for a week. Monyu is held from 1 to 6 of April every year. During the festival week people exchange delicacies in the form of meat with one another. Also, married women are invited to her parents place for feasting. Parents make sure that their daughter basket is filled with goodies when she goes back to her marital place. During the festival community gathering, people according to the khel and village wise, presents folk dances and folk dances.

Another significant occasion for the Phom Nagas is the celebration of Phom Day, on 6 of June every year commemorating the Peace Making Day that was signed in 6 June, 1952 marking the end to the head taking practices and enmity among the Phom people. This day is marked as public holiday for the Phom people by the state government.

### ***Morung as an Institution***

*Morung* holds an important place in the Naga society in the ancient times. It was a platform and a place for the young unmarried adults. It was the place where young men and women sleep at night at the respective *Morung*. For instance, for the Sumi Nagas, for the boys dormitory it is called as Apuki and for the women it named as Ilike. Likewise the other Naga communities also have specific names of *Morungs*. Here, in the morung, young women were taught the art of life skills, such as, weaving, knitting, basketry making and also about the choosing of the life partner. Likewise for the menfolk, they too were taught the art of making iron tools and trained in warfare,. *Morung* as an institution has almost become extinct with the major indigenous tribes of the Naga people after the coming of the Christianity modern civilization. People were motivated to go to church. Also, with the penetration of the formal school of education, *Morung* has become defunct. However, coming to the context of the eastern Naga people, *Morung*, as an institution is still thriving. The best analysis can be studied from the Yaongyimchen village, Upper area of Longleng Village.

## **Morung in the Phom Naga Society**

Common usage of the term *morung* in Phom Naga is called as *Bang*. The meaning of the word *bang* is to, 'listen or obey.' The term is named in different ways for Morung in different dialects such as, *bang, Leng, Jan, Mangshum, Aliju. Phom*, But *bang* is used popularly by the majority of the people. During the earlier times when there was no formal school of learning and institution, *morung* serves as the medium for social engagements. Such, importance and utility was the *bang* that each and every village had its own *bang* for carrying out all the public affairs and references. *Morung* also known as a men's club. It is addressed as an agency for equipping young unmarried men for the all round development personality of a person. In Phom dialect Morung for women is called as Yow. Women too learn the triats to be the responsible citizens of the society. The most interesting thing about the *Morung* was that the services taught were free and it was also made compulsory to be in the respective *Morung* after they attain the certain age. One can become a member of the *Bang*, after a man completes the age of 15 years. He is qualified to be a member of the *Bang* only when he is able to split the bamboo in to two halves single handedly at one go of the stroke. It is said that no one can remain a member of the *Bang*, except that of an alien. Except for the offences committed for criminal acts no one can be terminated as a member of the bonafide .

Morung called as *Alijo/Pang* in Phom Naga dialect is known as the "Centre of Learning," since the time immemorial.

In the olden practices where no formal schooling was available, *morung* served as the institution of learning. *Morung* served as the centre for schooling the young men for equipping them with knowledge, customs, war crafts, basketry making. It also serves as the purpose of traditional learning institution for development in the form of arts, crafts, dance, folksong and so on. Likewise, young women too were imparted about the way of life, weaving, basketry making, songs and folkdance.

In the contemporary times, among the Naga people, *morung* is still active in the Eastern part of Nagaland. The passion is for learning the traditional values to carry on the traditional values, labour and honour.



## **Alijo (Morung) traditional Institution in Yaongyimchen village**

Yaongyimchen village use the term, *Alijo* (Morung) as the traditional institution. *Alijo* is the most social and skill educational centre in the community set up particularly to impart and learn and relearn the social norms and traditional values from one generation to the following generation.

The institution acts and serves as the traditional centre of education where young generations are trained and equipped with 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 that are fast declining with the influence and rapid means of mass media and communication.

The institution plays an active and vital role in the community as it visualizes and preserves the past rich tradition, culture, history, labour and honour and heritage.

In Yaongyimchen village every Friday evening the young people gather at the morung to get acquainted with valuable lessons from the elderly people.

In the institute of learning young people are practically and theoretically taught about,

- 1) The village migration story, times of settlement.
- 2) Clans that involved in establishing the village
- 3) Association and relationship between Yaongyimchen village and others villages/tribes
- 4) All clan system and their relation with others tribes/clan.
- 5) Marriage system
- 6) Customary laws and its utility
- 7) Studying and preserving Yaongyimchen historical sites.
- 8) Skills development in the form of basketry, knitting, crafting, life values etc.

Modern education though has imparted knowledge and shape the thoughts and attitudes of life but it has made the children so self centered and self directive so as to be able to satisfactorily reward themselves and the society. But paradoxically attaining and learning the

traditional value systems gradually declined. In fact the present education system is purely academic in nature. Children are now so much busy learning from the ready made books and notes. And in this process of learning, traditional values has lost its touch in the form of its values and skills.

### **Traditional Functions of *Bang* in the Earlier Times**

Every village is a coalescence of *Bang*. In the ancient times all the male folk used to sleep together in a dormitory and in the dormitory different values and skills were taught. The womenfolk also sleep in 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 encroach on other *Bang* in fetching water, hunting or fishing.

The *Bang* served as the very important 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 the tradition, values and customs. The skills and values imparted are the folk songs, folk dances, histories, basketry, blacksmith, carvings, and war techniques. Social ethics about respecting the elders and caring for the elders was highly inculcated. Failure to practice these values were reprimanded.

*Bang* also serves as the parliament and the law courts. The *Bang* legislates on the social , administration, religious and economic spheres. The legislated laws were not in scripted forms and it was in simple, rigid and immutable. As the law court it was the highest appeal body. And there was no other body which could take up any matters apart from *Bang*. The decisions taken from the *Bang*, was taken as final and therefore, binding on all the citizens concern. Retaliating and noncompliance of the law passed by the *Bang* was met with heavy punishment.

In the olden days, *Bang*, performs the role of purification for the incidents of accidental deaths, drowned in the river, succumbed to death fallen from the tree, killed by wild animals or any instances of unnatural death were considered as taboo. If any of the unfortunate incident occurs, the victims comrades has to stay in the *Bang*, at least overnight as a sign to purify

oneself. Food were also not served directly to him but were served only from a distance. As a sign of purification completed one can go home only the next day.

### **Log Drum The Shem**

Log drum plays a very significant role in the morung and in the Khel. One of the earliest mode of communication in the village life. Though the use of log drum is primitive its idea of its origination is not exactly known. It is a belief that the notion of log drum was derived from a log boat while crossing the river Chinwin in Mynmar during the migration to our present country. Though in obscurity about the origination of the log drum, it plays an important role of 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.

There are multiple utilities of the log drum in the socio-cultural life the Phom Naga people. Every beating has its symbolic meaning. It is curved out in the middle portion of the log. According to the different beating and sound of the rhythm of the log drum, the community communicates the message and act accordingly. It was the mode where messages of war, festivity, celebration, death, alarming the fire or other accidental issues, mishaps, rhythms calling the community to go to work, rhythms heralding the youngsters to come to *Morung* to sleep. Rhythms alarming the people when the enemies come to attack were announced, through the different beating and rhythm of the log drum strikers. To beat the log drum men folk would stand in two rows facing each other holding drum strikers.

With the advancement of communication and information technology and formal schooling the utility of the institution is fast eroding. The diminishing impact of the institution is making the people, particularly the youth to adapt to a new culture, new life style in their behavior, an independent life, notorious in nature, lacking in moral life, lack of respects etc. Therefore, now people has now realized that the traditional institution has been more meaningful, skill oreiented community centered, life giving and liberative because it has reached the hearts of the people, making a fruitful impact on the people and community. This impact has made the Yaongyimchen community to revitalize, re-interpret and reclaim the lost heritage.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the question and the objective which I want to bring out is, can the mainstream community learn from the tribal experience from the values imparted from the *Morung* where power is internalised and is not imposed to anyone. The elders come to the *Morung* to teach the young people voluntarily. This is the uniqueness of *Morung* as an institution. Can we recapture it as another level of learning mechanism?

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