

**REVISITING TANGKHUL NAGA'S CULTURE  
THROUGH ORAL TRADITION: DISCUSSING *MAITONPHI* AND  
*SHIMREISHANG* AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE**

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**Abstract**

*Oral tradition has been marginalized and considered as unconstructive for research purposes but since, there is no written script available, oral tradition or folktale is the only source available to reconstruct and retrace the history of the tribal. It is not being retrogressive but there are much more interesting areas to be explored. Tribal too have epics, myths and legendary which is still hidden from the world literature. It needs to be told and must reach out to the reader community. Here, Maitonphi and Shimreishang a Tangkhul Naga folktale which is very significant and a beautiful folktale which carries their culture and identity that cannot be taken away from them, needs to be exposed. As Romeo and Juliet symbolize love for the English people so does Maitonphi and Shimreishang symbolize true love for the Tangkhul Nagas. We shall read Maitonphi and Shimreishang and explore the rustic beauty and its authenticity. Researcher has the urge to work on this topic to communicate to the outsider and expose their rich culture through literature.*

**Key words:** Folktale, culture, identity, retrace and retrogressive.

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**Introduction**

**O**ral tradition or oral lore is a cultural material and tradition transmitted orally from one generation to another generation. Song is an integral part in the oral tradition. When we talk about Tangkhul Naga folklore, songs are often sung to communicate and to express their deepest feelings. There are victories songs, war song and a different kind of festival songs. The songs carry many information of the past. Oral tradition still exists in Tangkhul Naga, it is more than just story telling. It is a sacred trust that the old man passed on before he dies or lost his memory. There are many folktales in Tangkhul, but Maitonphi and Shimreishang is the most popular tale as this is so distinguish from all other love stories. The Angelic beauty and the graceful nature of Maitonphi and the dedicated heart of Shimreishang has captured everyone's sympathy and love. Everyone from the very old to the very young is familiar with this story. This is considered as Tangkhul cultural heritage as the tradition, culture and identity the story cannot take away from them. Their story is dramatized specially during cultural meets and in special occasion related to cultural festival. This story reflects an authentic tradition and cultural aspect of Tangkhul Naga society.

**Discussing Maitonphi and Shimreishang as a Cultural Heritage**

Maitonphi and Shimreishang is a Tangkhul Naga folktale which is said to be a true love story of 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is very popular folktale among Tangkhul. It is considered as the Romeo and Juliet of the Tangkhul but their love story is beyond comparison, a renowned one mainly because of the angelic beauty and the graceful nature of Maitonphi and the dedicated heart of Shimreishang which couldn't be found anywhere. Their story is immortalized and exemplified for the lovers of integrity and simple pure hearted lovers.

Maitonphi belong to the clan of Lungleng the lowest clan in the village and a daughter of a widow whereas, Shimreishang was the only son of Zimikwo, who was held in high esteem in the village. In those days, everyone followed strict customs set by their

forefathers. Intermarriage between the lower and the higher strata was not easily admitted. It is believed that just as, Buffaloes could never mate with a cow, the marriage between the poor and the rich was considered unpractical. Moreover, Maitonphi was just a daughter of poor widow. Thus, their love life couldn't be materialized into marriage due to the existence of the social barrier. At last Maitonphi was compelled to accept a marriage proposal from Pansa a rich man from nearby village. And thus, Shimreishang end his life in frustration and despair and off course this led to their tragic end.

Now, we will discuss in details how Maitonphi and Shimreishang has been a cultural heritage for the Tangkhul Nagas.

## **Patriarchal society**

We know through the story that Tangkhul society during 17<sup>th</sup> century was a patriarchal society. It was totally male dominated society. Male took all the responsibilities of the family and social affairs. Man does all the heavy work in the family. They took care of the field work, like jhumming and terrace cultivation. When the father is too old to handle family issues, the eldest son in the family took in charge of the father yet he continued to be an instructor. The old men advice is considered as valuable and indispensable. Any family without a father or a son is less respected by the people even though they are a descendance of wealthy family. A poor widow's families were double marginalized by the society. It was a little hard for the widow's family at that time. Particularly we find this mistreatment in this story, to Maitonphi and her mother.

We say patriarchal society because even in marriage man has the right to propose a woman but women were not allowed to choose her life partner, she has to wait for a man to propose her for marriage and she will marry only with the permission of her father and the elders of the clan. She has to accept whether she like it or not. They strictly followed the custom set by their forefather. Respecting their forefather's custom made them strong and binds them together. A very distinct feature of patriarchal society we find in the story is when, Ashang request her mother to convince his father to permit him to marry Aton, at this she replied "my son, I am just a woman and I am not allowed to speak in this matter by the custom." We also see that there are no single words from his mother when they talk about the marriage.

Women have no voice in the family and in the social affairs. They were not allowed to speak in a men's discussion if ever she interrupt she is considered as disrespectful. Women needs to beloved, respect and protected by men as they are considered as weak and fragile. Women play a very important role in the family and in the domestic affairs.

They took care of domestic work, specially cooking food, taking care of the kids, weaving cloths, fetching water and preparing rice beer and so on. The values of respect and love and the responsibilities they have shown and lived continue to be with us today. Man continued to be the head of the family till today.

## Social life

Everyone live in peace and in harmony. Everyone followed the rules set by their forefathers and that bind them together. There was a very important place call Longshim or Morung(dormitory) in Tangkhul which play a vital role in social life. Longshim is a place where all the youths stay together in one hall as an education place. Usually, it is located at the village gate for the defense purpose. In Dr. Maheishang in his *Shaping Modern Tangkhul* he writes

*Long* means union, *Shim* means House. It is play where every boys and girls had to live and sleep from the time they had reach their puberty up to the time of their marriage.in the Tangkhul society there was no education system like that of western education today. This Morung is referred to an institution where both male and female learnt lessons from the elders of the community (97). All the boys and girls of the community learnt a number of lessons from the dormitory. Though there was no writing and reading, the lessons were taught by the elders among them. The lessons mainly consisted of building moral character towards their elders, parents, and friends. Folktales, games and sports warfare, etc., were some of the important topics they learnt from the dormitory (98).

Boys and girls were taught different things that are necessary for their future. This Longshim was a very important social life in Maitonphi and Shimreishang's story. Shimreihang sleep at Longshim though Maitonphi didn't go often as her mother was alone.

Social life like, fishing and hunting was also a very important part in the youth life. When we read Maitonphi and Shimreishang, the village youth go together for fishing which was a kind of picnic. This was a part of youth activities that add fun in the youth life. They also get to know each other through these activities.

## Marriage

Marriage was a compulsory for everyone unless he/she is disabled. The age of marriage is from eighteen to twenty for man and fifteen to eighteen for woman yet there were no strict rules of the age.Maitonphi was 16/17 years old when she married to Pansa. She was married off at the right ageby her mother. Once a girl reached the age of 15,

parents start to look the right man for her, since they want them to get married at the right age when she is young and beautiful. They are afraid of becoming spinster since it will bring humiliation to the family. Marrying their sons and daughter at the right age with the right person is their greatest concern. A man or a woman cannot marry anyone they like but marriage was arranged by the elders of the clan and by the parents depending on their choices and social status. Strict marriage custom was followed by the people. As we read in *Maitonphi and Shimreishang* a poor widow's daughter was never accepted to marry a royal family. More preferred marriage was cross cousin marriage and an arranged marriage with those equal social statuses. They look for stability to maintain their social status. Love marriages are rarely happened. Maitonphi and Shimreishang who truly love each other could not be materialized due to existence of social barriers.

## **Moral values**

They maintained strict moral values. Men and women maintain purity and sanctity before marriage. The virginity of women was highly valued. The virginity test also done through the virgin dance that took place during spring season every year. Whoever did not join in the dance was considered immoral and she was fined heavily. An old experienced woman will check if any girl dancing in the group is virgin or not and if, any girl is found to be not virgin then she brings shame to her family and to her clan. Fearing this every girl strictly maintain their sanctity before marriage. Maitonphi and Shimreishang love story is the exact portrait of true love with integrity. We find no immoral act or behavior in the story. This has always been an example of purity and loyalty till today for the lovers of Tangkhuls.

## **Folk songs**

Song play a very important part in their life. Song are sung to communicate in different ways and mood. Often, song is sung to express their deepest feeling when it is hard to speak. In the story *Maitonphi and Shimreishang*, most of the deepest feelings were express through songs. Aton sang this song when she was taken away by Pansa.

Oh Ameishang, let me go to an unknown land.

I never want to go away from you,

I have to leave this place though I love.

Oh coward! Don't blame me, it is not my fault.

This song brought satisfactory since this was the only way to communicate her feelings. There was also another song from the story, when they sent messages to each other through the bee.

Shimreishang sing to Aton

Oh Maitonphi, my love!

I send you my hair to this mysterious bee.

Will you ever receive it or not!

Oh! mysterious bee please take it to my love.

Maitonphi sing as a reply, when she received a strand of hair from the bee.

The mystic bee brought me your hair.

Here I send you my beads back in return,

To the far hills it flew away.

Will you ever receive it or not, my love!

So, song plays an important part in their life. There are different types of folksong which cannot be ignored. This carries the purest form of history and culture. In the absent of written script songs is important agent to retrace their history.

## Belief

During 17<sup>th</sup> century before the entry of Christianity, they have that certain believe that there is life after death at *Kazeiram* (a place where all the death people resides). Every dead people live there as normal life reuniting with their earlier gone friends, love ones and family. So, does Maitonphi and Shimreishang according to the story, they united in the *Kazeiram* after dead and live happily together. They practice *khongthengkahei* (It is observed in a huge wooden basin filled with clear water, through which they watch the life the dead people). We see practicing *Khongthengkahei* in Maitonphi and Shimreishang's story, both the family seat together and watch the live of Maitonphi and Shimreishang in the wooden basin which is filled with early morning clear water. They saw through the basin that they are lovingly sharing their moments together. As they start to blame each other fault every time they watch them. Shimreishang's father kicked away the basin as they can no longer bear the pain they have cause them and the inability to bring them back to live. It is said that from that day they can no longer perform *Khongthengkahei*.

## Conclusion:

Oral tradition has played a vital role in preserving history, identity and culture. Though there are various kind of history sources oral lore occupies a special place for

Tangkhul Naga. Oral tradition still exists in Tangkhul Naga. Most of the history sources are collected through oral narration since there are no written scripts available. Maitonphi and Shimreishang is an authentic cultural heritage. Their moral life and the integrity that they kept till their last breath shows the culture of the people. Their social life, moral values and the practices are continuing till today. Though some belief like existents of *Kazeiram* no longer exist. Soon after the coming of British and the introduction of Christianity, many practices like virgin dance and *KhongthangKahei* has been stopped. People were more fearing to the Lord with reverent than to the customs. They stopped believing in unpractical practices. Social life and youth activities like fishing, hunting and picnic still exist. Man continue to be the head of the family yet women are loved and respected. Unlike, the past culture, women are now allowed to speak up their opinion and included in decision making in the family and in the society. All the rich and valuable cultural identity and tradition are inherited from the forefathers. All this has been passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. people keenly practice all the good example led by the forefathers. Oral tradition has been a great value to Tangkhulnagas. oral tradition and oral lore are still the main sources for scholar for the research purposes since there is no written script.

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