

# INTERPRETING TRIBAL MOTIFS: A STUDY OF WOOD CARVING CULTURE OF POUMAI NAGA TRIBE OF MANIPUR

**Naorem Gautam Singh**  
Ph.D Research Scholar,  
Assam University Silchar  
Department Of Visual Arts, Assam

## Abstract

*This paper mainly focuses on Poumai Naga tribe of Manipur with regard to their wood carving culture. Here, I try to bring out the inner meaning of motif carvings on walls and pillars of houses with aesthetic value and creativity of this ethnic people. The paper also highlights their beautiful wood carving culture which is often associated with their interesting folklore and oral tradition. The motif used by Poumai Naga is mainly concerned with the belief system, socio-cultural and societal status of their community. The motif carving on their house walls not only act as a material means, but also explicit its hidden symbolic meaning representing the visual oral tradition of Poumai community. This study also tries to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Poumai Naga tribe of Manipur. The related data were collected from three selected villages through observation and consultation procedure.*

**Keywords:** *aesthetics, oral tradition, folklore, woodcarving, motif.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Poumai Naga tribe is a very old tribe inhabiting in Senapati district of Manipur and Phek district of Nagaland. They have their own unique enriched culture, custom and tradition. According to 2011 census report, the total population of Poumai Naga tribe is 1,87,180 and population of 1,27,381<sup>i</sup> in Senapati district Manipur and (6,000-10,000)<sup>ii</sup> of population in Phek district of Nagaland. The Poumai Nagas have a number of festivals, songs, dances and other performing arts. And they are also well known for their bright and colourful traditional attires and costumes. Besides this, they also have a beautiful wood carving culture from time immemorial. The Poumai Nagas are skilful in art of wood carvings and displaying clearly the hidden symbolic meaning in their carving culture. So, I choose this topic to find out the history of wood carving culture and also try to interpret their carving motifs.

## ORIGIN OF THE WORD “POUMAI”

The word “Poumai” is derived from two words “POU” and “MAI”. POU is the name of the ancestor and his descendants are known as MAI means People of Pou.<sup>iii</sup> Thus the name of any things, animals and songs have been named after the word “POU” since time immemorial.

According to Raini Pao *Folk tales of Poumai Naga* mentioned about various names which are identical with the term Poumai, such as POU YAOH (rice beer brewed by Poumai)<sup>iv</sup>,

POU HOUNG ( Spear made by Poumai),POU PHOU( Spade made by Poumai), POU LEE( Pottery of Poumai and POU LOU (Poumai songs) etc.

## ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF POU MAI NAGA TRIBE

There are various hypotheses regarding the origin of the word “Naga”. Today different scholars and historians have written that Naga are the indigenous people and they are distinct ethnic stock of Mongolian race migrated from China ,Tibet, and South East Asia countries, but they have no written historical records, their oral traditions, myths, folksongs and folk tales have traced the history about their origin, migration and settlement.

According to Raini Pao, in his book. “*Folk tale of Poumai Naga*” mentioned that POU was the grand old man leading his two sons “Pao and Leo” through the Indo- Burma route and reached the present Makhel. On reaching Makhel, it is said that the old man’s walking stick got stuck to the ground and took root. He decided that incident is a good omen. So he settled down at Makhel. With passing of years, Pou slowly migrated to different areas and his eldest son, Pao migrated and settled down at Saranamai village ( Sufu) and his two sons Ranapao and Raonapao formed different villages.<sup>v</sup>

## CONCEPT AND MEANING OF THE WORD “MOTIF”

When we see the definition of the word “motif”, it is defined as a distinct or separate element in any work of art as painting, sculpture, hand woven clothes etc. A motif in a work of art is defined as a distinctive recurring pattern, design, shape or form.<sup>vi</sup> When the motifs is isolated, apart from its design context, we can see whether it is elegant or naïve, naturalistic or abstract, organised or spontaneous, traditional or individual.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF WOOD CARVING MOTIFS

The motif carvings on their house walls enhance glamorous, and also show the creativity of this ethnic people. According to P.Delilah Paovii opinion that wood carving of Poumai Naga in their traditional houses where started form the time of head hunting culture . Wood carving of human head is specially used in the houses of head hunter and warrior.

Lion and Tiger motif is specially carved in the house of the Chief of the village. From this point we come to know that wood carving motif on their house walls mainly signifies their identity and societal status of their community and through motifs they convey important meaning about different dimension of life.

## DATA ANALYSIS

In data analysis of Poumai Naga, I conducted an interview with P. Delilah Pao (President of Poumai Naga Women Union) of Senapati district, Manipur. She provided me a detailed account on wood carving culture, and she also disclosed about their traditional belief system, and taboos of ethnic Poumai tribe. And I also had interview with the following persons i) Ng. Thaiho(70) of Purul Acutpa,Senapati. ii) Rodha Poumai (50) of Bridge colony, Senapati. iii) Schangiru (59) Purul Acutpa,Senapati . iv) Th. Thonai (60) Leyai khulel they all give me the important information about wood carving culture in detail. I have documented some wood carving images which are still present in this present scenario.

## WOOD CARVING CULTURE OF POUMAI NAGA TRIBES

Poumai Naga is also one of the skilful tribes in art of wood carvings. The proof of art can be witnessed from the work of their ancestors. Carving are done on Purlins<sup>viii</sup>, Planks, House walls and also at the village gate. They carved the motifs of human head, animals, birds, reptiles etc.<sup>ix</sup> For carving such motifs they use simple tools like axe, dao, chisel etc. we are also trying to know why they carved such motifs in their houses.

According to Dellilla Pao opinion,Poumai Nagas have a tradition of head hunting culture from the time they started wood carving in their houses. <sup>x</sup>,The actual period of head hunting practice is unknown, but according to their traditional folktale, the existence of headhunting was not heard of till the third and fourth maihe, It is also learn that there were frequent killings due to inter village feuds and fights arising from backlash of rape of one's wife or daughter and also attempts to dominate the weaker villages by the more powerful villages. But according to the folk tale they also believed that the practice of head hunting was

inspired and introduced by the handiwork of a cowherd who collected a local variety of tuber called Ripe( Ri-war; Pei-head) from the jungle and carved it into a replica of human head. The carved tuber was then tied to a wooden post with bamboo thongs and staked beside the footpath that link the village to the agriculture field. The villager who passed by it while returning from the field in the evening were filled with admiration and through that it would have looked even better if real human head were used as decoration across the footpath. Henceforth they made up their mind and start the practice of head hunting.<sup>xi</sup>

### CLASSIFICATION OF WOOD CARVING MOTIF IN POUMAI NAGA

According to my field study report wood carving motifs of Poumai Naga can be divided into three sections they are:- i) Human figure motif ii) Animal and bird motif iii) other important motifs based on tools, weapons and heavenly bodies .

**i) Human figure motif** The human figure motif has been subdivided in two section a) Human head carving b) Carving of full human figure.<sup>xii</sup>

a) Human Head carving -Poumai Nagas have done a lot of human head carvings in front of their traditional house walls and Pillars . The human head is carved in pentagonal shape without eyes and lip. In Phuba village of Senapati district there are a lot of carvings human heads in the chief house. The similar carvings also found in Purul village of Senapati. But in Oinam village there are carvings of human heads hanging upside down in the house of village chief.<sup>xiii</sup>

b) Carving of full human figure- In Purul Acutpa Senapati district of Manipur, there is a carving of full human figure on the wall of village chiefs house. In the exterior wall of the chief house, there are carvings of three human figure holding a head each in their right hands. The figures are carved in low relief with contour lines, and the carvings of this type are also preserved in Mutua Museum, Andro.

ii) **Animal and birds head motifs**- A large number of buffalo head motifs are carved in the village chiefs house .According to Dellilla Pao the figures of lion and tiger are specially

carved in the village chief's house and other animal heads like pig, buffalo are carved in the house of hunters.<sup>xiv</sup>

In Oinam, Purul, Paomata, and Phuba villages there is similar carving of buffalo head motifs in the house of the chief's or warrior house. If the village chief's build a house it is essential to search and kill a tiger for offering sacrifice. After killing the tiger, a representation of it, has to be carved on the front wall of the house with its head hung upside down. At the chief's house of Oinam, it is also customary to carve not less than three tigers. At Purul, not only at the headman's house, but in other houses tiger motifs are also seen, carved on the walls, that too in life size.<sup>xv</sup> According to Ng. Thaiho of Purul Acutpa, If a wealthy person in the community is capable of giving feast of merit<sup>xvi</sup>. Here the wealthy men has to donate one or two buffaloes or more depending on his capability. After holding feast of merit buffalo head motifs are carved on those wall in memory of those incident.<sup>xvii</sup>

In Ngaiki house of Purul Senapati district, the pig head motif are carved in front of the wall. Beak of hornbill and discs are also beautifully carved. Above all these carvings motifs, Carving of tiger and lion figure hanging upside down is one of the most unique motif of Paomei Naga tribes of Manipur.<sup>xviii</sup>

**iii) Other important motifs in Poumai house-** Some important motifs are also displayed viz. discs, spear, knife etc. engraved or hung on the wall. At Puki village in the head man's house there is a hanging of elongated spear like earing "Vongi" as a sign of head hunting prowess of the head hunter.<sup>xix</sup> In poumai house there is carving of heavenly bodies like sun, moon and stars motifs were also painted in front of the wall.

## INTERPRETATION OF POUMAI WOOD CARVING MOTIF

**Human head motifs** – Poumai Naga has carved a number of human heads in front of their traditional house walls and pillars indicating the memory of the past head hunting culture. According to Ng, Thaiho of Purul Senapati Acutpa there is human head carved on the wall, specially to show courage, pride, achievement and bravery. As interpreted by Delilah Pao

President of Poumai Naga women union, human head carving in their house is specially done in head hunter and warrior of Poumai tribe, human head carving is not done in normal house, the carving is done to show respect and honour in the community.<sup>xx</sup>

**Full human figures upside down motif** In Purul Senapati village, at the chief's house there is carving of full human figure motif carved upside down with a cut human head in the right hands, this carving indicates that he was a warrior who died bravely on the battle field..<sup>xxi</sup>

**Buffaloes head motifs-** Buffalo head motif on the wall, is a remembering symbol of giving "feast of merit" and massive feasting of the community. And also a symbol to show success and pride in their community.<sup>xxii</sup>

**Upside down Tiger motif-** At the house of Paomata, Oinam and Purul there is carving of upside down tiger motif, which indicates personal triumphs of the hero in hunting.<sup>xxiii</sup> So, when the village chief's build a house it is customary to carve a tiger motif in life size.

**U figure motifs – U figure motifs -It** is the design of Mithun horn. In Naga community Mithun is considered as a sacred animal, and this carving also believe that after death of a men his soul is led to heaven by the soul of the Mithun.

**Beak of Hornbill motif-** In Purul village Senapati, there is carving of beak of hornbill, which signifies fertility of their community.

**Discs motif-** In Purul village Senapati, there is carving of discs which signifies fertility of their community.

**Baskets motifs** –It is a symbol of offering of food edibles to the dead.

**Motif of human head in left hand and three spears in the right hand-** It indicates the strength and power of the hero, who had hunted three heads during his life time.

## CONCLUSION

In this short research of Poumai wood carving, I realise and understand the aesthetic value of motifs, which is acceptable in contemporary world. The advances of Poumai Naga wood carving culture is remarkable, because through this art people can get a strong sense to reflects the ideas of modernism. some of the wood carving motifs are as Mithun head, buffaloes head, human head, birds ,geometric form are most common wood carving motifs of Poumai Naga tribes.

It is really a vast area to study and research the ideological and aesthetic values of the life of Poumai Naga. Now-a-days Poumai tribes are forgetting this culture as it is being dominated by modern material culture. But in some remote area, this culture is still preserve. So, I chosen this topic to understand the beautiful wood carving culture, which reflects the life of Poumai Naga of Manipur.

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