CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 A Folkloric History

The history of the Marams, as that of many other tribes of the Northeast India, is based on the folklore and oral traditions of the community, because of the absence of historical writings and historiography. Folk literature is the lore of unlettered peoples, transmitted by word of mouth. It consists of narratives, poems, songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, riddles etc. It is a known fact that until about 4000 BC, all literature was folk literature. Even today all groups of people rely on their traditional oral folk literature.¹ The myths, legends and tales transmitted through oral tradition are shared in their essential with regional variations in their embellishments. There is instant recognition of such tales and myths and all versions appear right and true. The large area of consistency in their accounts of genesis transmitted from one generation to another is remarkable.² Deducing history from folklore, legends and community experiences is, therefore, the only way to arrive at a more or less accurate understanding of the ancient history of this people.

1.2 The Origin and Migration of Nagas

The Naga ethnic group that inhabit the hilly confluence of India, China and Myanmar. The area is about 1,00,000 sq. km of the Patkai range within the longitudes

93°E and 97°E and in between the latitudes 23° ½' N and 28°N. 3 Verrier Elwin and the British school of anthropologists hold that they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of tribes.

"Though grouped as Indo-Mongoloids, the Naga tribes are not typical Mongolians; the Caucasoid element is present among them in a remarkable degree. It is for this reason that the Mongolian facial and other features are softened down in the Naga tribes. The Nagas are a result of the age old contact between the Mongolian and the Caucasoid people. Even before the Mongolian diffusion from the Tibetan plateau, Caucasoid people had migrated and spread to the farthest end of Southeast Asia and the outlying islands of the Pacific. This is probably the explanation of the apparently strange fact that the Nagas bear a close resemblance to the people right down to the Philippines." 4

The Nagas are very much akin to the Dyaks and Kayans of Borneo and Sarawak (now Indonesia and Malaysia respectively), Battaks of Sumatra and certain groups of Taiwan and several other groups in the Phillipines. 5

B. B. Kumar holds that the Nagas have a mixed origin, incorporating Mongoloid, Austric, Aryan and even Negroid ethnic elements in them. 6 According to Y.L. Roland Shimmi, a mixture of the Mongloid and Caucasoid races with the Proto-Austroloids is very probable in Assam, Myanmar and other parts of Southeast Asia. This mixture produced the ancient Mon people in central and southern Myanmar, the Palaungs and Was of Upper Myanmar, the Mizos, the Kacharis, the Khasis, the Nagas, the Meiteis and the Himalayan tribes of Northeast India as well as the Khmers, the Chams, the Sieng, the Bhanar and other Austric or Austro-Asiatic speakers of Siam and Indo-China. 7 Shimray says that in Central Asia, the Mongols have been in

close contact with Caucasoid people. The waves of migration went on further to Southeast Asia in pre-historic times, and preceded the first waves of Mongolic migration which radiated from the cradle-land on the Tibetan Plateau.\textsuperscript{8} The Nagas must have followed the southward movement and after reaching the Moulmein Sea coast (Myanmar) they migrated towards north-westward direction and lived in Irrawaddy and Chindwin Valley for some periods and finally migrated to the present Naga inhabited areas. The cause of these migrations could have been the displacement of the Pre-Chinese people of central Asia over hundreds of years. It is possible that Nagas were one of the groups who were displaced from central Asia and migrated to the Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{9}

Whatever be the cause of these migrations, the Nagas settled down in their present habitat as a result of various waves of immigration. The Nagas migrated into the Naga inhabited areas from Southeast China and Myanmar over a long period of time.\textsuperscript{10} It is probable that the group dispersed into at least two different directions from the Yunnan province: westerly and south-westerly. Those following the south-western direction might have reached Myanmar and northern Thailand like the Chiangmai area among others. It is also likely that the group which went towards south-west Myanmar, on encountering Bay of Bengal, took the south-western fringes and moved northward to reach Indo-Myanmar frontiers. The bulk of the Naga group could have been one of those groups which took westerly direction from Yunnan province, and on reaching the head-waters of Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers, branched off into several directions, ultimately leading to Tibet, Assam, and to the hill ranges between Assam and Myanmar. The branch that came to the hill ranges moved further west and south west and entered Naga Hills. There is also the probability of another wave that came from the Southeast Islands taking a north westerly direction

\textsuperscript{8}n. 5, pp. 12-13.


\textsuperscript{10}n. 6, p. 8.
and entering Naga Hills using Myanmar as a corridor.\textsuperscript{11}

1.3. Origin and Derivation of the word Naga

The origin and the meaning of the generic term, Naga is still shrouded in obscurity. But its usage started from nineteenth century. The appellation Naga is referring to a group of more than 30 tribes that live in Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and the bordering nation state of Myanmar.\textsuperscript{12} Not only the tribes calling themselves Naga today, but even the Kukis, the Kacharis, the Abors, the Mikirs and the Nepalis settled in this territory were called Nagas.\textsuperscript{13} A variety of theories have been put forward by many scholars including Verrier Elwin regarding the origin of the word Naga.\textsuperscript{14}

Some hold the view that Naga comes from the Sanskrit word, Nagam which means ‘hill’. Nagas therefore would mean ‘hill men’. G. Kabui, a prominent anthropologist and an authority on tribal matters in Manipur is of the opinion that this theory cannot easily be disregarded.\textsuperscript{15}

J.H. Hutton, an authority on Naga tribes, accepts the origin of the word Naga from Sanskrit nanga which means “naked”. In the past, several Naga tribes wore very little or no clothing. The name Naga must have been given to them by Assamese plainmen with whom they came into frequent contact.\textsuperscript{16} William Robinson (1841),

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{11} n. 3, p. 20.
\bibitem{12} n. 6.
\bibitem{13} n. 6, p. 20.
\bibitem{14} Elwin Verrier (1969), The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century, Bombay: Oxford University Press, pp. 46–47.
\end{thebibliography}
in his "Descriptive Account of Assam", does not subscribe to this theory. "The origin of the word Naga is unknown; but it has been supposed to have been derived from the word Nanga and applied in derision to the people from the paucity of their clothing; but there seems little foundation for the etymological derivation, as the term has never been known to be applied by the Bengalees either to the Khasis or the Garos with whom they were better acquainted than with the Nagas; and besides, the Garos especially are habitually accustomed to a greater degree of nudity than any of the Naga tribes with whom we are acquainted". Yet, the Nanga theory continued to enjoy acceptance as it was supported by eminent scholars like J.H. Hutton, H.B. Rowney and Christoph von Furter Haimendorf.

In the latter part of 19th century, S.E. Peal, a British explorer and tea cultivator propounded the theory of Nok meaning man or folk as used in the Tibeto-Burman languages like Ao, Nocte, Garo, etc. This theory became very popular and is supported by scholars like Holombe, E.A. Gait, Verrier Elwin, M. Horam. "It is common throughout India for tribesmen to call themselves by words meaning 'man', an attractive habit which suggests that they look on themselves simply as people free from communal or caste association." Authors like R.R. Shimray are of the opinion that the word Naga is derived from the Burmese word Naka meaning pierced ears, as Nagas had the tradition of making holes in the ears for ear decorations.

G. Kabui traces the derivation from Nok or Nokhar. He says that the term "Naga was derived from the Cachari word Nok or Nokhar meaning warrior or fighters as the Cacharis came into violent conflict with Naga tribes like the Angamis and Zeliangrong." 

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18 n. 3, p. 12.
19 Ibid.
20 n. 5, pp. 41-42.
21 Interview with Prof. Gangmumei Kabui
Whatever may be the truth of the origin and meaning of the term Naga, it was not a term used by the Nagas themselves initially. For long this appellation of Naga was resented by these people, till political expediency caused it to be accepted as describing the separate identity of these people as distinct from other ethnic tribal people and also from the people in the country at large.  

1.4. Nagas in Manipur

In the state of Manipur, the Naga tribes dominate in four districts, namely, Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel. Ukhrul district is inhabited by Tangkhuls, while Zeliangrongs (Zemei, Liangmei, Rongmei and Puimei) dominate the Tamenglong District. It is also the home of the Kharam Nagas. The Maos, Pounsais, Marams and Thangals are concentrated in Senapati district. Zemeis and Liangmeis are also found in the extreme western part of Senapati district. In Chandel district, eight Naga tribes are found, namely, the Maring, the Anal, the Lamkang, the Moyon, the Monsang, the Chothe, the Chiru and the Tarao. The Koirengs, the Chirus and the Chothes are sparsely distributed in Bishnupur and Senapati districts. Originally, the Moyon, the Monsang, the Lamkang and the Anals belonged to the Kukis. However, in the recent past, they changed their affiliation and are included among the Naga tribes. They seem to form a bridge between the Naga way of life and the Kuki-Chin way of life.

The Kuki-Chin tribes include: Aimol, Kom, Purum, Gangte, Paite, Simte, Thadou, Hmar, Vaiphei, Ralte, Sahte. To this group may be added also the Lushai (Mizo) tribes. These tribes live in the Sadar hills, Churachandpur, Jiribam and Tengnoupal sub-divisions of Manipur. Of the two tribal groups in Manipur the Naga tribes have ethnic and cultural affinities with the Naga tribes inhabiting in Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. The non-Naga tribes belonging to the

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Kuki-Chin family have affinity with the Chins of Myanmar and Mizos of Mizoram.