Sacred Chants and Irreverent Limericks: Expressions of Women in Ao Naga Folk Songs

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According to oral lore, Rongmangsen[1] was an Ao Naga girl from Dekahaimong[2] who was so beautiful that she caught the attention of the Ahom king Sutumpha. The fact that she was already married to someone from the same community was hardly a deterrent for the king, who sent his soldiers to kidnap her. While her husband was away from home toiling in the field, the soldiers released a myna that was trained to call out Rongmangsen's name. Naturally, Rongmangsen was utterly enchanted and she tried to catch this beautiful singing bird adorned with bells on its feet. Preoccupied with pursuing the bird, she barely noticed the soldiers hiding in the forest who abducted her and took her to Rangpur,[3] where she was married to the king. Her husband searched all over for her, but in vain.

Many years later, a chance encounter reunited Rongmangsen with her previous husband, the one she had married willingly. She took this as an opportunity to escape from the king and returned with her first husband to

[1] Rongmangsen's abduction by an Ahom king is a popular oral narrative that has been circulated within and outside the village of Molungkimong, her ancestral village. It has also been documented in written form in Purtongzuk Longchar's *Historical Development of the Ao Nagas in Nagaland* (2002).

[2] Dekahaimong is the Ahom term for Molungkimong village in Mokokchung district of Nagaland. Deka means 'young' and Haimong means 'villagers' so *dekahaimong* means 'young villagers' or 'village of young people/warriors.'

[3] Rangpur was one of the capitals of the Ahom kingdom and it currently falls under Sibsagar town in Assam.

his village, where they resumed life as a married couple once again. Of course, her sudden reappearance shocked the villagers and generated plenty of gossip. Overlooking a very important detail, which is that she had been kidnapped and forced into marriage, they could not understand why she had chosen to return. Many questions arose. Why would any girl not want to be a *chubatsür* (queen)? Why would she prefer a simple farmer instead of a royal king? Why would she choose a life of struggle and toil over a life of supposed luxury and privilege? Rongmangsen replied in a song:

Abhi Jaya Jangho-wa,
Tzüma Ahom Lar Dene;
Jangjo-angta ha-no-na.
Kitanger na kuyu meshi,
Nina pa yu meshi,
Nubenti aka kijung masung.
Menong ra-no, na.
Atsu yimbang naro remova[4]
(In a far-off land,
with mainland Ahom people;
away from my husband and neighbours.
They don't know my language,
And I don't know their language.
Even with a child, I am unhappy in this union.
I yearned for you,
Fading like the garden flower)[5]

Rongmangsen's song provides an alternative viewpoint of her marriage to the Ahom king. Contrary to popular assumptions, being a wife of royalty was neither rosy nor fairy tale-like. The song articulates her anguish and frustrations at being strong-armed into marriage with a man she did not know or want. Her unfamiliarity with the language and culture intensified her yearning for her previous life, and motherhood made her feel even more trapped. Her side of the

[4] Longchar (2002).

[5] This English translation of Rongmangsen's song sung in Ao Mongsen dialect documented in Longchar's book cited above has been done by the author.

story is articulated through song, singing being the medium of self-expression and communication that Rongmangsen was most comfortable and familiar with.

Singing is an integral feature of the Ao Naga oral tradition and according to folklore, our ancestors in the ancient past communicated primarily via songs not just with humans, but with animals and non-human entities as well. There are songs for almost every occasion and activity; from birth till death, from agrarian chores of planting, husking, and threshing of paddy; to spooling of cotton. Folk songs are therefore oral repositories of history and culture and a musical storehouse of clan histories, genealogical data, trade secrets, normative traditions, and anecdotal narratives that are circulated through generations, undergoing subtle transmutations in the process.

Certain songs are exclusively sung by particular genders, while some require the collaboration of both. The *yilangtsür ken* are clan songs that can be sung only by women who belong to the same clan. These songs chronicle the origins, migration, and other significant details related to their clan, weaving them into the larger fabric of the oral history of the entire community. Singing is also an important element of ritual ceremonies where chants and verses are offered as vocal supplications to the deities along with animal sacrifices and offerings of food. During the Feasts of Merit[6] which entails a series of elaborate ceremonies, the *yilangtsür*[7] or clanswomen of the sacrificer's wife undertake the task of brewing and serving rice brew and performing chants and verses to complement certain rituals thereby invoking the blessings of the deities.

The next day comes the day of *sensenmong*. On this day, early in the morning the in-laws gather together in the house of the sacrificer. As has been the practice, the day begins with an offer of *amsu*. At this hour, the womenfolk of the husband's clan come to the house. They are all served wine and meat by the in-laws. Then the oldest of the clan's women starts the formal chanting, *'Au-ang ghri-ri-ri. auok, auok'* followed by the rest of the women. After the chanting is over, they all go to the sacrificer's granary for bringing wine. They usually go singing songs and the oldest of them carries the wine to be given away on the way to anybody having a good name whom they come across.[8]

[6] The 'feasts of merit' is a cultural practice of the Nagas that entails a series of elaborate ceremonies and sacrifices, the completion of which bestows an elevated social and cultural status to the giver.

[7] Yilangtsür is also spelled as *elangtsür* and *ilangtsür* in different villages and written documentation. They all mean the same—clanswomen/women of a clan.

[8] Bendangangshi (1990).

The ritual connotations associated with folk singing is why the Christian missionaries were suspicious of any kind of folk singing and chanting. To sever all ties with their old way of life, they prohibited folk singing in its entirety among the Nagas as also all other indigenous rituals and practices. While singing was an integral element of indigenous belief practices among the Nagas, beyond sacred invocations to divine beings there is a diverse range of folk singing repertoires that are expressive of the myriad experiences of earthly, quotidian life.

A song can be a chant, an invocation, a curse, or a blessing; it can be irreverent, playful, and humorous too. Music can be inspired by profound emotions of joy and pain but it also emanates from the humdrum of everyday life. It can also be an alternative medium of expressing dissent and challenging the existing status quo and normative ethos of its time. We find articulations of these themes in folk singing repertoires of the Ao Nagas called *lütsütep ken*. *Lütsütep* in Ao means to ridicule/insult and *ken* means song/s, so the amalgam of these two words can be translated as 'songs of ridicule/insult.' One of the sub-repertoires is *Wawa Menü*, a comic tradition of the Ao Nagas which is usually performed by two duelling groups with an audience that cheers and applauds them. *Lütsütep ken* was also performed in inter-village/clan meetings and ceremonies. During such ceremonies, a seasoned performer represented each side (village/clan) and they roasted each other through songs. Trading offensive verses and limericks is a popular social custom and an an ice breaker for the Ao Nagas, and as they were performed in jest they were usually received with roaring laughter on both the sides.

A popular subject of *lütsütep ken's* performances is the clichéd 'battle of the sexes' where men and women take turns slinging poetic insults at one another. The tone is light-hearted and humorous but it is also loaded with innuendoes and undertones that are flirtatious and provocative, much like this exchange documented from my fieldwork:

'Tebur*: Yangalarbo, nuku atsü na,*
Mongpu atsüngben ashijanüa.
Tetsür*: Zungabar-o, nükü atsunaka*
Süngsa ongchirang ashijanü-a.
Tebur: *Sungsa ongchirang-e-la.*
Atsük yimko tsük tele.

Tetsür*: Nunu bendu tsük,*
Nüma yangkü jen.
Tebur: Nübok ali tangket
Atsükum la jako meijak."[9]
*(*Men: *My dear, your hair is as coarse as the plant that is used for making brooms!*

Women*: My dear, your head looks like a bare tree that has shed all its leaves in winter!*
Men: *At least the tree gives firewood which provides warmth in the cold season.*
Women: *Your private part looks like roasted aubergines!*
Your face droops like an old bag!
Men: *Your belly touches the ground and your ego is so huge that it can't be hung anywhere!)*

The frivolous facade of folk singing repertoires like *lütsütep ken* means that such expressions are not supposed to be taken seriously, but it is this very nature that gives performers the agency to articulate what they would normally not express on a conventional social platform. The comic form of this tradition also provides a liberating space for the performers to vocalise issues pertinent to their lives and society and question social and cultural conventions. From poking fun at domestic issues about who chops the firewood or cooks dinner, to cultural standards of beauty and conventional gender roles, the duels explore the constant play of conflict and collaboration that occurs in gender roles and relationships ascribed by society. It is particularly empowering for women because their spaces for expression and autonomy are considerably more limited than those for men in Ao Naga society. Folk singing repertoires like *lütsütep ken* give them an outlet to creatively articulate their concerns without worrying about severe repercussions and backlash that may occur in other circumstances and or in other mediums.

These verbal exchanges are also an exercise in creative oratory and an exhibition of wit and talent for the performers; oral eloquence being an ability

[9] Longchar, Takachiba in discussion with the author, Sungratsü, April 28, 2012 (The transcription and translation of this song in English was done by the author and the interview was part of the fieldwork for her doctoral thesis).

that is respected in a community where such skills are necessary for survival and continuity through generations. The myriad repertoires of singing within the Ao Naga oral traditions from *lipok ken* (origin songs), *nungsang ken* (songs of praise), *mangyim ken* (mourning songs) to *lütsütep ken* reveal the different aspects of life and culture of the Aos. *Lütsütep ken* gives one a better understanding of the humour in the Ao context and what that entails within the social and cultural matrix of the community. It is a departure from the reverent tones and fantastical themes that we find in other repertoires like *nungsang ken* (songs of praise) and *lipok ken* (origin songs) where there is a tendency to amplify the heroics of warriors and featured protagonists who are predominantly male.

Music, like other arts, has always been revelatory of the beliefs and customs of society through individual and collective expressions. In the Ao Naga context as well, it is in music in its barest and most visceral form like traditional folk singing genres that we find powerful articulations of women's voices. The poetry of these songs also makes a case for the richness of Ao Naga language/s and rhetoric, all of which continues to diminish with shifting contexts and worldviews.

Some months back, we were on a drive to Chümoukedima and my playlist was plugged in for the drive. We were listening to 80s rock and some classical and contemporary pop, all too familiar musical genres for Naga people when the list transitioned to an old folk song. As the first strains of the song came in my aunt was quite taken aback, and she turned to me and commented, 'Oh, you listen to *alimapur ken*?' *Alimapur* or *limapur* in Ao Naga literally translates as 'worldly people' and *ken* means song/s, so together it translates as 'worldly songs' or 'songs of the worldly people.' What does this actually mean? In local Ao Naga terminology, '*alimapur'* or '*limapur*' refers to non-Christians and anything related to the old beliefs, both tangible and intangible. Denouncing the old way of life was a rite of passage for converting to Christianity. So old beliefs and customs were considered 'savage,' 'uncultured,' 'pagan,' 'immoral,' and 'inferior.' These pejorative sub-texts apply to *alimapur ken* and considering the dominance of Baptist Christianity in Nagaland's contemporary religious landscape, it is no surprise that this viewpoint prevails even in current contexts. These internalised prejudices have hindered us from recognising the value of our singing traditions, the stories these melodies tell, of lives before us, and its resonance even in current contexts. Rongmangsen's remarkable story is hundreds of years old and yet it is a relatable one for so many women today. It is a tale as old as time, starring a woman, a predatory criminal disguised as a king (insert any other

profession), and people around trying to gaslight her, telling her what happened wasn't wrong. In this version, she makes the choice of rejecting the life forced on her and manages to escape with the help of her farmer husband. While we don't know with certainty if things really worked out for her; the narratives and the song perhaps alludes to that possibility.

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