Oral Tradition in contemporary conflict resolution: A Naga perspective

Lanusashi Longkumer
Reader, History Department,
NU, Lumami, Mokokchung

In the ancient pre-literate world of tribal societies, oral tradition played the dominant role as the chronicles of history, source of knowledge and wisdom which guided and influenced the people in all aspects of their lives. Naga culture and oral history flourished without any written script of their own. Yet they had an effective medium of communication and records that have been preserved for many centuries through the oral tradition based on deep-rooted and time-tested foundations. Any oral narrative of traditional history, origin and migration of the people (tribe, clan, individual, etc.), formation of the village, events of war, peace, festivals and so on are transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to another through songs, poetry, ballads, prayers, sayings, stories and tales or as public oration when the situation demands. Through such means youngsters were trained not only to learn but to master them.

This tradition is so vital for the Nagas that it goes much beyond their culture. Indeed, the very history of the Naga people, their religion and entire social life is shaped by their oral tradition. In the socio-cultural and political life of the Nagas, oral narration was, and still is, a powerful weapon to prove or disprove, substantiate and support any dispute/claims or for resolving any dispute or conflict. It is instrumental in peace negotiation or to conduct truce in times of war or confrontation.

Pledges and promises made between two conflicting parties ensuing after peaceful negotiations were highly respected and honoured. Any violation of such pledges was considered not only as an insult and offence but cowardly, invoking wrath for vengeance and invariably resulting in more conflict.

Even the names of persons are important in the oral tradition because they are commemorative not only of persons of exceptional courage and bravery but also to distinct clans which are eventually identified as owners of specific land holdings. These circumstances and evidences help substantiate legitimate claims of ownership in disputes regarding land and boundaries. After the presentation of evidence in such cases, there is a last and final act of swearing or oath-taking which involves eating a morsel of earth invoking divine intervention for a just solution. Generally it is a priest who stipulates the waiting period for receiving God's judgment because it is believed that the guilty oath-taker will suffer a great misfortune, either instantaneous death, loss of wealth or a calamity in the family or that of a relative.

Oral tradition has thus played a pivotal role not only in intra-village conflict situations but also for maintaining cordial relations among the different Naga tribes and with the neighbouring communities in the North East region of India. For instance, a dispute over ‘Tsula’ river water between Yachem village of Phom tribe and Changtongya village of Ao tribe started in 1919 leading to serious confrontation including armed conflict. There were several unsuccessful attempts by the British administration to resolve the problem. Ultimately, a lasting solution was arrived at in 1955 only when both the conflicting parties came to an understanding to resolve their differences through the traditional methods of oath-taking and honouring the words of resolution.

With the neighboring Manipuris, the relations of the Nagas were anything but friendly, often interrupted by raids and hostilities from both sides. But such temporary disruption of neighbourly relations was always restored through negotiations and dialogue. There is a legend in the oral tradition about the younger brother of a Tangkhul Naga chief of Hundung village who became the Raja of Manipur. It is no wonder therefore that the coronation of the Raja of Manipur is never complete without the presence and blessing of the Nagas.

Another example of the oral tradition documenting trans-border friendship with other tribes is regarding the Ahoms of neighbouring Assam. The Nagas’ contact with the Ahoms
began as early as the 13th century A.D\(^1\). The initial contacts were marred by strong feelings of hostility on both sides. For quite sometime the hostilities continued, but these skirmishes never resulted in the subjugation of either one by the other. Many historians agree that the Ahom-Naga relationship was a blend of hostility and friendliness. Geographical proximity and economic exigencies has made them inevitably dependent on each other. Besides, there were other factors. In times of trouble in the Ahom kingdom, the Ahoms and their rulers fell back on the friendly Nagas for help. For instance, an Ahom king named Godadhor once fled his kingdom and took shelter in the Naga territory\(^4\). The captive prince Godapani and his two sons were hidden in the Naga hills (1685). King Godadhor Singhho married Watlong, daughter of a Konyak Naga chief (Wakching). Another Naga damsel Senticila also got married to an Ahom king. Such alliances further strengthened the relationship between the Nagas and the Ahoms. Another remarkable instance according to the oral tradition is that of a Naga boy who was raised by an Ahom king (Borahi) as his own son and was later made the Barphukan (Viceroy) of Guwahati\(^5\).

Even after the advent of British colonial rule, the people in the plains of Assam continued to pay ‘tax’ to 23 Naga villages in the form of annual customary tribute for using their land. At the same time, Nagas were completely dependent on Assam for salt and other economic exigencies. Though there were occasional conflicts, the Naga-Ahm relationship remained generally cordial with great respect for each other. Their relationship was guided by high values enshrined in the oral tradition.

The advent of colonial rule brought along new culture, policy and regulations, almost completely replacing the existing systems. Foremost, in furtherance of their economic interests and administrative convenience, the different Naga tribes and their land were placed under the administrative cloak of the existing kingdoms such as Assam and Manipur. Subsequently, vast tracts of Naga territories were transferred to Assam in 1901, 1903, 1923, etc\(^6\), for purposes of opening tea gardens and maintaining forests as buffer zones between Assam and Naga territory.

By mid-1800s, colonial planters from outside the region were settled in the foothills. They were ignorant of the historical facts and the good traditional relationship that existed between the Nagas and Ahoms.

The post-colonial era in the Naga civilization saw a more perplexing situation under the new administrative arrangements of India and Myanmar. The Nagas were left in a precarious position virtually under the shadow of military rule from both India and Myanmar. Not only did the rights and privileges of the Nagas become uncertain, but their cultural and oral traditions were seriously altered and undermined by new Acts and laws imposed upon them. For instance, in the event of any dispute between persons/parties, traditionally, it was settled in the village court of law but the introduction of Indian Penal Code under the new legal system it gave opportunities to the losing parties to seek the legal court of justice. Besides substantial financial implications and manipulation by influential people, natural justice based on tradition and custom was denied. Not only that, such practices greatly undermined traditional forms of village government creating confusion and disunity among the people.

Today, the conflict situation at the border is exacerbated by the arrival of new settlers (migrants) from mainland India and Bangladesh whose sole intention is to occupy space disregarding traditional historical ownership. This situation is fueled by politicians with selfish interests who try to gain political mileage out of the conflict situation.

The on-going Indo-Naga political conflict can be attributed to the failure of modern diplomacy. After a continued conflict with India on one hand, and Myanmar on the other for more than half a century the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the government of India entered into a ceasefire agreement and are presently engaged in political dialogue for the past 11 years. Even after 65 rounds of talks and negotiations within the modern democratic framework, no substantial headway acceptable to both parties has been arrived at.

The unsettled political issues between the Nagas and Government of India not only hamper the development of the region but is also contributing to the instability of the entire North East region of India. The fact remains that all the economic packages and developmental programs have failed to resolve the long-standing conflicts. Looking at the present predicament and the manner in which it is dealt with, modern
diplomacies, accords, and agreements do not seem to offer any viable solution. What is needed is a process of confidence-building as a prelude to any conflict resolution. The oral tradition with its time-tested distinct values of transparency, honesty and truth may serve as an alternative to resolve the vexing problems of the North-East if resorted to with a belief in its efficacy of delivering justice. Adherence to commitments given through words in the pre-literate days seems to have worked better than sophisticated written undertakings which have failed to resolve conflicts resulting in senseless bloodshed and animosity. In all these maneuvers what seems to be lacking is spirit of commitment for just solutions to problems. Perhaps, present-day mediators have a lot to learn from the oral tradition - especially the human aspects of political negotiations in order that all men may live in peace with each other. The essence of any tradition is adaptable to our modern contexts and is therefore still relevant.

References

Endnotes
1 The Nagas are a distinct group of indigenous peoples, a Tibeto-Burman speaking mongoloid stock. The Nagas numbering over 3.5 million people inhabit a vast contiguous tract of about 120000 sq km. it occupy a strategic meeting point of China, India and Myanmar approximately between 24° to 28° N latitude and 93° to 97° E longitude, thereby making the region geopolitically a buffer region between the South and South East Asia. Under the present arrangements carried out by the British, about 40 percent of the Naga inhabited area falls under Burma (Myanmar) and the rest 60 percent falls within India. Further arbitrary division of the Naga people and land into the state of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur was carried out in post independence India by the Government of India. The Naga region today is considered as one of the most conflict prone region by the State of India and Myanmar for the history of Naga resistance and political movement for independence. Presently, the Naga insurgents and the government of India are engaged in ceasefire and political negotiations for the past 11 years.
3 Ao, M. Alemchiba; A brief historical account of Nagaland, Naga Institute of culture, Kohima, 1970, p.31.
4 Ibid, p.36.
5 Ibid, p.33
6 A brief historical sequence of Nagaland-Assam border affairs, compiled by Committee of Border affairs of Nagaland, Government of Nagaland, Kohima, p.4.