

**EXPLORING THE SPACE OF  
GENDER IN AO NAGA FOLKLORE  
OF NAGALAND**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Folklore contains diversified embodiments sustained through an insightful oral tradition. Ao Naga folklore encompasses different realities and fantasies circling around themes ranging from day-to-day activities, odd and anomalous tacit occurrences, and even to modes of escapism that have been prohibited by societal norms or are limited physiologically. The trick of playing 'literal versus metaphorical' in folklore often represents Ao Naga women in multiple roles: as helpmates in agricultural work, as refined ladies responding to men's sweet callings, as those involved in the socialisation process, and as cunningly manipulative matriarchs saving lives in the settlement. Some are also seen as an aggressive maleficence in the form of unkind stepmothers or spirits. All these roles overlap.

Secondly, there is an inter-relationship between historical events and folkloristic fantasy as an 'autobiographical ethnography'. Ao Naga

society is patriarchal in nature, so patriarchal customs and values are redirected or revealed differently for both the sexes. Hence, predominant roles in leadership, moral authority, and social privileges are attributed differently to men and women even in folklore.

This study discusses the amount of space allotted to women in Ao Naga folklore and tries to answer how the negotiating manner has continued for women according to folklore.

## 2. BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Folklore means folk learning. It includes all the knowledge that is transmitted by word of mouth and all crafts and techniques that are learnt by imitation or example (Reddy 1989). The word 'folklore' was coined in 1846 by William Thoms (1803-85) in a letter published in the London journal, *The Athenaeum*. Thoms was a British antiquarian who wanted a simple term to replace the various phrases floating around at that time to discuss the same concept. The phrases being used included 'popular antiquities', 'the lore of the people', and the many observances, superstitious, ballads, and proverbs of the olden times.

In the words of Dundes (1980), folklore 'has been created, passed on, and enjoyed for considerable time long before the analyst arrives on the scene.' He continues, 'folklore as autobiographical ethnography, as a mirror of culture, is a natural projective test... devised by the people themselves.' According to Gaster (1969), folklore is the part of people's culture that is preserved consciously or unconsciously in beliefs and practices, customs and observances of general currency, in myths, legends, and tales of common acceptance, and in arts and crafts that express the temper and genius of a group rather than an individual. Folklore, thus presented by Gaster, is implied to be an outlet, a medium of expression that is collective and not an individual's expression. This outlet can either be in terms of verbal art like folk tales, legends, myths,

proverbs, riddles, and poetry; or it can be in terms of non-verbal art like crafts, tools, costumes, beliefs, and ethno-medicines.

Historically, one of the earlier approaches to studying folklore is the Finnish method, otherwise called the historical-geographical method of studying folklore. This was followed by the most common approach, especially in linguistics, that takes into account the type and motif index called the Arne-Thompson-Uther Folktale Index. Another notable approach that one can ascertain historically is the Vladimir Propp (2014) approach to the morphology of folk tales in which the basic plot components of Russian folk tales are used to 'identify their simplest irreducible narrative elements'. There is another approach by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1965) where the *märchen* (the fairy tale or folklore) and the *sagen* (known as legend) are distinguished (Lyngdoh 2020).

Feminist folklorists in the West have looked at women's experiences in different contexts and have examined their expressions in various forms and various cultural settings. They have explored gaps previously overlooked by male fieldworkers and folklorists, thus developing new theoretical perspectives and methods. Deconstructing folklore, therefore, needs a revisit because 'men's experiences were normative, as if being human meant being male.' Lorber (1997) conceptualises gender as an institution that defines actions as a key organising principle in human social life by defining a structured set of relations, statuses, and norms of behaviour, thus incorporating process, stratification, and structure. Recent discourses on folk narratives recognise the gender factor in folk narratives giving importance to women's performance and the female voice in culture. The appropriation in understanding traditional folklore ought to be expanded from one particular group of people to multi-layered cross-cultures, classes, sex and gender.

Ao Naga women are grouped into two categories: *aningnoza* (the children of the sky) and *tetsü tanu* (women and minor children or subjugated phrases that are uttered unconsciously filled with inequality). Unequal representation or prohibitions are found even

with regard to the beating of the log drum and also in participation in the administrative system. This paper explores the scope for women in folklore from cosmological viewpoints like 'The Origin of Man' (Sentinaro & Chandra 2010) and answers how it may have continued over the years in an unconscious manner, ingrained as a means of a cultural binding process despite peripheral alterations.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Women in Ao Naga folklore are generally seen represented metaphorically in two forms. First, as helpmates in agricultural work who encourage men for a successful hunt for trophies and praise them on their return to the village. Second, as refined ladies who serve the man with local brew, dances, and respond to the men's sweet callings through songs and socialising the children. Both can be seen overlapping in Ao Naga women. References to beautiful flowers that adorn the garden and the village are also made with regard to women.

This paper tries to understand and answer the following research questions:

1. How much space is given to women in folklore?
2. Who are the portrayed women?
3. How are they portrayed?
4. Are women really subjugated?
5. Despite the peripheral alterations (religion, modernisation, cultural diffusion, and emulation), what does folklore say about the unconscious conditioning of women as it continues? How has this continued?
6. Is there any oppressor who curtails or suppresses women in achieving the status quo? Who is the oppressor?

## 4. METHODOLOGY

The tools and techniques used in the study are:

1. Secondary data from newspapers, village records, journals, and websites.
2. Unstructured interviews, especially with the elderly, with the help of checklists during the researcher's fieldwork for M.Phil (2013) and Ph.D (2015) in Longkong and Longmisa villages. Certain research gaps were filled and cross-checking of data was done during a brief field visit in November 2020.
3. Audio recordings, transcriptions, and translations of folk narratives, folk songs, and oral histories.

**The framework:** There might be a contestation on how folklore is positioned conceptually, simply taken as the lore that is popularly taken as something that is of the past as a traditional practice or trait common to a particular culture in a community. There is a distinction between tradition and folklore, the former commonly mistaken as the polar opposite of modernity, whereas folklore is confined to the oral tradition as a part of an oral traditional culture in totality.

Folklore talks about a continual trait, a creative process that exists alongside 'modernity', which has transcended time and space. In this paper, folklore thus refers to this inherent accumulated material as a process of transmission.

**Limitations:** Despite efforts and maximum attention to fulfilling its objectives, the paper has some limitations. All the folk songs among the Ao are in the Mongsen dialect, which the researcher is not familiar with. Another limitation of the study is the transcription and translation of folklore into English; the elderly in the villages follow and speak mostly the old or archaic Jungli dialect, which the researcher is not exposed to. Also, the researcher is not trained in translation studies, and because of the numerous steps involved—Mongsen to Jungli to English—some lore may have lost its value in the process or may have been inadequately translated. No narratives have a written

record among the Ao Nagas, thus the authenticity of certain folklore or the variant of a particular folklore becomes questionable. However, maximum care was taken to cross-check the data provided.

## 5. WOMEN AND/IN FOLKLORE

Ao Naga women in folklore occupy different spaces and are portrayed in different forms.

### 5.1: *The First Three Matriarchs*

One of the preliminary folklore among the Ao Nagas is on the origin. However, since this is an arguable consensus, it has led to a debate on the ‘the origin of man’ versus ‘the origin of humans’. When we look at the myth of ‘The Origin of Man’ (Sentinaro & Chandra 2010), the Ao believe that men emerged out of *Longterok*, or ‘the six stones’. The myth further says that six humans burst out of the six stones (*long*-stone and *terok*-six). Therefore, the place of the origin is known as Longterok. Of the six stones, three were male: Longpok, Tongpok, and Longjakrep, and three female: Longkapokla, Yongmenala, and Elongse. It is a common belief among the Ao that these first patriarchs established the first Ao village called Jungliyimti, where all laws and social norms were established.

Another version of this lore is given by Aier and Jamir (2009), ‘They emerged from the stones along with their sisters whose names were *Langkupokla/Lendina*, *Yongmenala* and *Elongshe*.’ Tongpok (Pongen clan) married Elongshe, Longpok (Longkumer clan) married Longkupokla/Lendina, and Longjakrup (Jamir clan) married Yongmenala, thereby establishing the clan exogamy.



### 5.2: *The Supernatural Woman or the Common Grandmother – Longkongla’s Myth*

This is a tale of a woman’s supernatural prowess that led to the origination of a clan. The origin of Lemdonger is traced to Jungliyimti, and then to Tongpok, meaning to spring up or to protrude out. It is said that he had three siblings, two brothers and a sister. His sister was named Longkongla and was apparently an expert in weaving. One day when she was weaving a passing hornbill dropped one of its feathers (*tenem-ben*), which she got and kept inside the storing jar, *tsüsü*<sup>1</sup> in Longterok in Mangkoterong.<sup>2</sup> It is believed that the feather transformed into a boy child who was crying inconsolably. All the women in Jungliyimti carried the child and tried to console him but to no avail. When consoled by Longkongla, the boy stopped crying and thus ended up at her place to be brought up by her. He was named Pongdangda, meaning one that is carried on the back by everyone to console. He grew up to be a handsome man, of impressive height and strength; he was then called by the Jungliyimtir (people of Jungliyimti) as Asongmaket, meaning one without anything to complain about in terms of physical appearance and principles. One day, the whole village went for the village festival, Tsüyokba.<sup>3</sup> Because of his good physical features, he was eyed with jealousy by village members. This jealousy resulted in his murder at Peli Zü, Dikhu River. He was killed in a conical basket used for keeping bamboo shoot called *sobha*. When he did not return from the Tsüyokba, his mother asked the other villagers who had gone for the festival about him. Her question was answered by Pongdangba’s kan<sup>4</sup> when he replied ‘*ku kan to agi ya kumogo*’ (‘my friend has become this’), handing a fingertip to Pongdangpa’s mother.

When Longkongla came to know the facts about the incident from her closest friend, she started plotting revenge against the villagers. Pongdangpa’s mother organised a feast for the village’s children by slaughtering a pig. After the feast, she called all the children inside her

house. After gathering all the children inside, she latched the door from outside and set it on fire, thus killing all of them. Angered by her actions, the villagers secretly plotted to kill her too. But she knew of their plans, so she spread 30 millet mats around her, sat in the middle, and started weaving. When the Jungliyimti warriors attacked her with *daos* and spears, they slipped on the millet, and as they struggled, Longkongla killed them with her weaving stick. Longkongla was attacked by the villagers continuously, but her supernatural allies always came to her rescue. One day as she was being pulled up to heaven with the help of a thread by her god Anengtsungba, she was prohibited from looking downwards, but she did when she could not ignore the cries of her animals. On the way to heaven, she shouted to her hens, cows, and goats, ‘*an jagi orak oshie kumangni, ku nashi jagi shitsü mesü kumangni, napong jagi jangsha nunger kumangni*’ (‘let the hens become wild birds, let my cow and goat become wild animals’). It is said that the rope from heaven snapped, and she fell down on a tree called *Kabu süng*. The tree has red-blood like sap in the middle as well as in its branches.

**Observation:** The tale exemplifies a woman’s adored or lionised role. An illustration of such a role by itself, significantly, it also explains the environment on how certain trees have red, blood-like sap. Longkongla’s tale mechanises itself at two levels. One, as an extraordinary relationship between certain individuals, the living/mortal world and the supernatural world, and extraordinary capabilities. Second, as a tale that deifies a woman’s role moving from the ‘norm’ because of her tactical abilities and her strength and valour.

### 5.3: *The Two Orphans: Yarla and Her Sister*

As the oral tradition says, long ago there was a father and two sisters in a village. They belonged to a poor family where the father worked in the fields of the rich in the village. One day when the father asked his daughters to sing a song for him, Yarla, the older one, sang,

	<b>Translation:</b>
<i>Obao! Obao! pei tangar lu nung</i>	Father! Father! In others' field
<i>Nok tembang ka amer,</i>	Holding the <i>dao</i> ,
<i>Nu tembang ka amer,</i>	Holding the spear,
<i>Nupangso ka chimangsang.</i>	The person who finished a curry made of <i>taro</i> .

Her father got angry and asked his younger daughter to sing. She sang,

	<b>Translation:</b>
<i>Obao! Obao! pei tangar lu nung</i>	Father! Father! In others' field
<i>Nok tembang ka amer,</i>	Holding the <i>dao</i> ,
<i>Nu tembang ka amer,</i>	Holding the spear,
<i>Merang nunsang.</i>	The hardworking one.

The next day the father took Yarla to plant bananas in the field. He asked her to dig the earth to plant the banana sprouts. He kept on asking her to dig deeper and deeper. When it was deep enough, he asked Yarla to go inside the hole. She obeyed her father, and he covered the hole with a huge boulder and returned to the village alone leaving Yarla.

When the younger sister asked about Yarla, her father responded that she had returned early to the village. After a long wait, the younger sister went to the field in search of Yarla. When she called her name '*Oya Yarla, Oya Yarla*', a low response came from Yarla. The younger sister could not lift the boulder, so she took help from a group of people who were pounding rice in the nearby field.

After that incident, they ran away to another village, where they met some children playing in a small hut made of twigs and small branches. They exchanged that hut for some figs that they had collected in the forest. The village they then lived in, according to lore, is called Alishibu, as the younger sister dug the earth to search for Yarla.

Lijaba taking a human form came to visit the village where the sisters were living. Lijaba, considered as the Supreme Being among the Ao Nagas, was looking for a place to stay for a few days in the village. He started asking, knocking on every door in the village. *Anempong* or *genna* is a period marked by total abstinence from all manual work and it lasts from one to six days or even more depending on the intensity. It was an obligatory holiday, and he got the same response from all the villagers that they were observing this period. Reasons for observing *anempong* varied from the birth of piglets to chicken to calves in the house. All the houses in the village were *anemponger* (in the process) and did not let Lijaba take refuge in the houses. According to oral tradition among the Ao Nagas, entertaining guests during this period not only disturbs the ritual but also brings ill-doings from the spirit and the gods to the house.

Yarla and her sister were residing at the end of the village in a *süngtok* hut made of small twigs and small branches, mostly ferns. Since they were ashamed to entertain guests in their house as they could hardly fend for themselves, they refused him saying that they did not have anything. Lichaba consoled them saying not to worry as he has brought everything they needed.

They let Lichaba enter. When it was time to cook food, and the rice pot was kept above the hearth, he scratched his head and produced a rice grain and put the single rice grain in the pot for cooking. As it was cooking, the pot became full with good rice till the neck. When the time came for cooking the curry, he scratched out a piece of flesh from his knees and put it in the curry pot for cooking, and they had meat cooked till the top of the pot.

That night, after dinner when they went to bed, the sisters could hear a sound like the twisting of the locally produced rope from bamboo grass. In the morning, the sisters were surprised by the new house Lijaba has made, he had made an *atem ki*, a house made with patched bamboo.

After their morning meal, they sat looking towards the fields near the village, and Lijaba started asking them about the owners of

the fields. Lijaba started cursing (*atakatem*) the fields owned by the people who did not let him in in their houses by saying ‘*tsükjang ka ta meruzükja*’ (‘not a single rice grain will be harvested from that land’). After a while, near the end of the cultivated land was a small plot of land that was covered with *peru*, locally used winnowing tool that is used for separating grain from husk. He asked whose field it was, and the sisters were ashamed to tell him that it was their field. The younger one cunningly dropped a comb from the *majang*, and as Yarla went down to collect it, the younger sister told him that it was their field. Lijaba responded ‘*rua ka merumatsüa; rua wali rua aruli ta asütsüa; saka kodang laktir anem<sup>s</sup> ka alangdangang*’ (‘you will not be able to complete harvesting or reaping the field; you will go on reaping and will again reap. When you get tired of reaping the grain, cut an *anem*.’)

The sisters not only reaped the rice grains for themselves but also supported all the other villagers, who could not reap a single grain on their fields.

**Observation:** This folklore is classic in itself as it shows how women have always stood by each other, as each other’s companions. Of course, the tale revolves around a consanguine sisterhood. Nevertheless, this pattern has also been observed elsewhere and is reflective of the pragmatic world in oral history. However, the folklore also functions in details beneath the obvious. It asserts the societal traits of its rich cultural practices, the *genna* practices and their rigid beliefs, and also the duality of Lijaba’s character as a benevolent and malevolent being. Secondly, the blessings of hospitality and the part women are expected to play in this.

#### 5.4: Women and Dance

There are numerous folk dances for several festivals performed by both men and women, and sometimes by women alone. One of the dances performed by women alone is *renjaklar*, where eight women in two teams (four each) dance on corresponding sides to a tune produced by men. When a team hops forward, the other team takes a step back and

vice versa. This folk dance is seen during *Moatsü* and *Tsüngremong* along the streets in the settlements from the bottom of the village to the place where they hang their trophies (at *mangkoterong*).

### ***5.5: The Tragic Juliet***

One of the most well-known love stories in Ao Naga folklore is that of Jina and Itiben. The story is of two contrasting families, as Itiben belongs to the richest household in the village of Mopungchuket, while Jina is a poor man's son. Despite being deeply in love, her father marries her off to a rich man, Tenyur. As Ao (2019) narrates,

But the lovers could not be separated so easily and they managed to meet secretly. The ballad which celebrates their love story recounts the times and places of their meetings which covers wide ranges of hills and valleys, thus indicating the depression and urgency of their unrequited love. There is a famous stone slab near a village called Mongchen where Jina and Itiben are supposed to have finally consummated their illicit love. But soon after their activities became known and the lovers were separated forever. Jina was badly beaten by the husband's agents as a result of which he died. Soon after Itiben too, took to bed in her anguish and died. Itiben who was famed for her great beauty, is now an idiom in the Ao language for rare beauty in a woman.

**Observation:** One of the spaces allotted to women in folklore is of great beauty, an epitome of great attractiveness sought after by many. The ballad of Itiben and Jina not only expresses a good collection of folk songs but also gives explanations of peculiar environmental creations centring the tragic lovers.

### ***5.6: The Lesbian Couple: Ongongla and Nokdongla***

Once in a village lived a couple, Ongongla and Nokdongla. They allegedly killed a boy called Pongdang due to jealousy. In the evening when they were cutting dry fish (*menemshi*), probably stolen since they

were financially poor, the younger one said, ‘*Hai! Oya pei angshialir lasa alangang*’ (‘Do it quietly, others might hear us’). The elder sister replied, ‘Even pounding a whole person couldn’t be heard, this is nothing in comparison.’ The victim’s father, who was looking for his son’s murderer, overheard this and made a clarion call, ‘No one should go to the field tomorrow, we have something to discuss.’

On hearing the clarion call, the couple bolted the door from inside. A basket carrying ropes (*anem*) was tied on the wood above. With one facing the door and the other facing the other end towards the *majang/sünglang*, they committed suicide.

Before their death, they were heard pounding their traditional ornaments singing:

	<b>Translation:</b>
<i>Warra yaongyimti süngtsüng</i>	Sheltering by trees, Yaongyimti,
<i>Mepong yaka mesensemer</i>	The wind would not blow
<i>Tanepi nungjang sangwaka ali</i>	The dawn is bright but not my
<i>mesangwakani</i>	heart
<i>Tanu alitatema.</i>	The life ends today.

There is another song sung by the ill-fated couple in remorse for their unrequited and unrecognised love:

	<b>Translation:</b>
<i>Ana oyang longtongyu nung moya</i>	Our romance resembles that of
<i>Tsujena tsujen metoa</i>	taro
	Like droplets bounce and roll off
	its leaves.

**Observation:** Ongongla and Nokdongla’s tale is a rare lore that needs attention. It reflects maintaining conformity or conventionality and control in Ao Naga society. Lesbian relationships have always



been regarded as an abstruse or hushed deviant. A divergence from the considered or accepted 'normal'. Perhaps the tale is also illustrative of education imparted as to what happens to such irregularities.

### 5.7: *The Malevolent Female Beings*

There is a strong tendency among the Ao Nagas to believe in supernatural phenomena. Something beyond the 'natural' or beyond the 'normal' is attributed to 'out of control' experiences that are mostly the ill-doings of supernatural beings. Appeasement of the spirits, therefore, is necessary for bountiful blessings in fields, good health, and prosperous lives in both the settlements and the fields. Ill-doings or misfortunes are believed to be an outcome of unsystematic ritual rites or invoking malevolent deities.

#### 5.7.1 *The Uni-Breasted Nokdentsüla*

**The habitat:** It is a common belief among the Ao Nagas that many spirits live everywhere, especially in *pangshis*. Pangshis are places where water bodies are created or have their origins. The meeting point is called *tsüsenpang* (*tsü* means water and *senpang* means the mouth or the meeting point or the place where there is a lot of water).

Pangshis are usually places where oxen, wild boar, and deer drink water and feed themselves and jump over the water body while climbing the mountain (*pong dang* means to jump over). Pangshis usually exist in a valley just beneath a mountain known as *ong dang*, which is a habitat for many animals and birds. These places are also called *azü nukjang* (the eye of the dog), since they have a lot of water during summer.

One respondent remarked, 'Akumrenla, my sister Sakumongla's mother came searching for their piglets to a pangshi. She had an infant of three months. She lost the piglets in the wild and after arrival fell sick and died.'



Places believed to be inhabited by malevolent spirits are called *jaka tesü* (unscrupulous places), *aits* (waterfalls where birds and animals drink water), *tsüta rongkas* (small water bodies or places with rich iron content), and *jaka samesas* (fraudulent places). The presence of spirits is felt through *tsükenpoya* which can be as slight as the shuffling of leaves or marching footsteps, or thunderous pronouncements of breaking branches, and even figures appearing in front of a person.

These places are worshipped with *süngpok rongtentsü tabensa* (correct ingredients), which include a hen, some ginger, and *pongse* (a curry cooked in bamboo) made with rice and rice beer. The ritual involves uttering ‘*Yi ya jemangni*’ (drink this beer) while simultaneously spreading the rice—for example, in worship of spirits of smaller mounts—inside the hole on the foot of the mount, which is mostly covered in spider webs.

Other areas of discussion include places where *utrica dioica sp* (stinging nettle or common nettle) are found. A place believed to be inhabited by a *nokdentsüla*, a uni-breasted malicious spirit. She is also known as *nokdentsüla pangshila*, an embodiment of the nature she inhabits and controls.

#### 5.7.2: *Aonglemla, the Petite Jungle Being with Feet Facing Backwards*

A jungle ghost called *aonglemla* is a dwarf creature with hair long enough to reach the ground, who goes about chuckling (Mills, 1926). Ao (1999) also writes about this dwarf-like female creature, whose hair reached the ground and feet pointed backwards, who ate fruits, vegetables, and small animals like crabs, prawns, and fish. Claimed to be known for her ferocious laughter, sometimes giggling like a young girl, the creature maliciously shakes the trees and mountains around it, and any meeting with her is considered a bad omen. However, Longchar (2018) opines that there is a more ‘ambiguous entity’ ‘that straddles the liminal spaces between human and non-human, physical and spiritual, myth and factuality.’

**Observation:** In the spirit world, the space allocated to female spirit(s) is always intense, powerful, and malicious and seldom benign, a phenomenon different from male spirits or beings. Malicious beings are often associated or seen in folklore as a bad omen bringing ill fortune to an individual with their ferocious laughter, frightening and chilly appearances, and thumping presence. It is advised to avoid them.

### 5.8: *The Sorceress*

Almost all the places and their surroundings are believed to possess a spirit, and all the places are regarded as dangerous or enigmatic. The place where one has displeased the spirit is calculated by *sangpongpi* (the sorcerer), whose insights are decisive. *Sangpongpi* is the one who makes statements like ‘*nisung ka, ana, asem kum metempangtsüa*’ (‘one, two, three people will not complete the year’) and ‘*tasü mang ka bener arudar*’ (‘a dead body will arrive in the village’). One respondent remarked, ‘It did come true.’ *Sangpongpi*’s role is not restricted to men, as we also see mentions of a ‘prophetess’, as a section of researchers call her by the name *Ongangla* or ‘the mediator between the supreme being and the people’. Another section refers to her as, ‘Away to *Ongangla*, the sorceress. Went to by tearing leaves; to worship the pond’ (Sentinaro & Chandra 2010).

**Observation:** *Sangpongpi* (the sorcerer) or *arr-asen* (sorcery) is a profession considered or allocated to males. It is often prescribed by birth and expertise. However, the trailblazing sorceress *Ongangla* is a worthy deviant successfully proving that whatever skills a man can learn or acquire, a woman can as well.

### 5.9: *The Transformation of Women to Bird Form*

There are multiple folk tales that revolve around this theme. We highlight the following:

### 5.9.1: *The Story of Two Daughters Who Became Birds*

This lore is written in Ao (2019):

‘Once upon a time there were two daughters in a farmer’s family. The younger one was a happy, content and frank child, and had a cheerful and obedient disposition and always had a smiling face. The elder daughter on the other hand was selfish, always grumpy and discontented and was of a reserved nature. As in the custom in all farming families, they worked together drawing water from the well, fetching firewood from the jungle, husking rice and cooking the meal for their family.

‘On a hot summer’s day, the two sisters went to a far-flung section of the jungle to get their firewood. On returning home the younger sister felt very hungry and as soon as they reached home asked her sister to give her some food. But the elder sister refused to give her any food and asked her to fetch some water from the well instead.

‘The younger one at once picked up the bamboo cylinders in which the villagers carry water and ran to the well, which was at a distance from the house, to do her elder sister’s bidding. Then she asked her sister for food, but the elder one asked her to husk the paddy instead.

‘Though she was very hungry, being an obedient child, she took a basket of paddy and husked it clean in no time at all. The eldest sister then asked her to cook the rice, though there was cooked rice in the house left by their parents for the mid-day meal.

‘The younger sister obeyed her sister and began to cook the newly husked rice. As she was cooking she began to lick the few grains of the half-cooked rice that stuck to the ladle with which she was stirring the rice in the pot. When the elder sister saw this, she got very angry and snatching the ladle from the younger one’s hands began to beat her with it mercilessly, all the while calling her greedy, lazy and good for nothing. The younger one, out of the extreme hunger and pain inflicted by her sister fainted and lost consciousness for quite some time. When she regained consciousness, she no longer wanted to be in the company of her sister and wanted to go very far away from home.

So, she tore her body shawl into three strips. She tied one each to her hand and let the third strip hang from the waist like a tail. She then tried to imitate a bird, hopping on her legs and flapping her arms like a bird's wings. Thus, she went out of their house towards the jungle facing the courtyard, singing the following song:

Firewood I have fetched sister,  
And plenty of water too  
Husked the rice and cooked it  
All on your order, sister.  
But when I asked for a meal  
You hit me instead,  
And in return for the love and obedience I gave,  
You give me hurt and words so cruel.  
So, I'd much rather be a bird, than be with one  
Who is no real sister.

'As soon as she left her courtyard, she was transformed into a bird and flew away.

'When the parents returned home in the evening and asked for the younger one, the eldest sister only covered her face with her hands and began to cry. Just at that moment, the little bird hopped on to a tree near the house and began to sing the same song. The parents then came to know of the cruel treatment of the sister towards her younger sister.

'The parents began to plead with the little one to give up her bird form and come back to the family. Even the elder sister now began to entreat with her, asking her forgiveness for what she had done. But the younger sister refused to listen to anyone of them.

'The elder one became so desperate and remorseful that she began to weep uncontrollably. She began to call out to her younger sister from the courtyard and when she went out of the courtyard towards her sister, she too was transformed into a bird. She sat on the same tree with her sister but in such a way as to appear suppliant, as though asking for her little sister's forgiveness. The helpless parents could do nothing but weep and mourn for the loss of their daughters. The birds

often came to the tree outside their home and seemed quite happy together.’

### 5.9.2: *Transformation Into a Bird*

There is another story that dwells on the transformation of a woman into a cuckoo. This sad lore talks of the untimely demise of her husband owing to a heavy heart because he has lost his wife. A belief stems from this tale that women descended from Tsunangpong’s son inherit cannibalism. ‘They say that men who marry them die young, the innuendo being that such women sort of “devour” their men in this way’ (Ao 1999).

**Observation:** Conceivably, these tales best describe the chores allotted to women in the homestead or the roles that are demanded of them. The first is a pedagogic device enforcing morals and values for women. These tales fulfil an important function of maintaining conformity with accepted patterns of behaviour, articulating social pressures and also exercising social control bringing ‘an internalised check on behaviour’.

### 5.10: *The Wise Women*

Certain forms of folklore such as ‘praise names’ and songs of praise are specifically intended and tales on wise women exemplify this:

#### 5.10.1:

As narrated by Ao (2019),

...The legend of Akangla is about a protracted state of warfare between Longkhum and another village called Nokrang which was famous for its fierce warriors, which, at one time, enjoyed a reputation of being invincible. In this case the villagers of Longkhum were the aggressors. But the distance between the two villages was great and therefore the attackers sought a midway base in a friendly village called Waromong.

‘Akangla belonged to this village and her house was one of those houses which was selected as temporary lodges for the assault party.

‘Though the villagers of Longkhum were excellent warriors, they were constantly beaten back by the Nokrangers because they had a pack of fierce hunting dogs who fought alongside their masters and created havoc among the attackers. These warriors began to despair and turned to this woman called Akangla for advice. She told them that there was a very simple device by which the dogs could be taken care of, so she assumed charge of the operation to overcome the dogs.

‘Akangla asked all her village women to wash their hair on the same day and asked them to collect all the hair that fell off their heads while bathing and bring the same to her. She then had huge pot of a special rice cooked. This rice is so rich in starch that it sticks together and is gummy to touch. She instructed that the rice be rolled into many fistfuls, in each of which a few strands of the women’s hair gathered earlier be mixed, she distributed these balls of rice to the Longkhum warriors during their next assault against the Nokrangers with the instruction that as soon as the dogs came near them, these were to be thrown to them.

‘The next day the warrior did as she had instructed them and, as the battle progressed, the dog were so busy untangling the hairs and sticky rice from their mouths that they could be killed easily by the attackers.

‘Thus, on that particular day the villagers of Longkhum overcame the Nokrangers and took many heads as trophies. Owing their victory to the clever device designed by Akangla the villagers of Longhuhm acknowledged her as a wise woman and their benefactress and immortalised her in many a ballad and folksong.’

#### *5.10.2: The Cunning Woman*

The inherent cunning of women is exemplified by yet another tale where a woman damages her husband’s best dao in his absence and cleverly waits for the right moment to confess to what she has done. The lore talks about how she cooked his favourite curry and tried to please him in a conjugal act in the midst of which she blurted out

her crime. A tale that explains how a man can ‘chuckle to himself in chagrin’ and do nothing, thus cunningly escaping the wrath and anger for her misdoings (See Ao 2019).

### *5.11: Folk Songs That Transcend Time and Space*

When calamity struck two lovers and the boy was taken away, the girl and her kin visited a sorcerer (sangpongpi) and communicated with the dead by singing (See Ao 2019, ‘Marriage in the Land of the Dead’).

#### **The Girl:**

Many moons have passed,  
 Since you left me  
 To go beyond the river,  
 And I am growing old  
 Waiting for your return.  
 But now there is a new feeling,  
 New leaves on trees,  
 New rains in the skies  
 And a new man  
 Offering new comfort.  
 If you can come back,  
 Tell me  
 And I will wait for you,  
 But otherwise  
 Send me a message,  
 So that I can cease  
 Mourning and waiting.

#### **Response of the Boy:**

Many moons have passed indeed,  
 Since I travelled  
 Beyond the river and I sojourn now  
 Among my kind,  
 For, between us  
 The river intervenes  
 But now,  
 The fairest among the living  
 Cannot be left waiting  
 For she cannot be mine.  
 Tell her to seek another,  
 As I am building a new home  
 For my bride of this land.

### *5.12: Women in Supernatural Circumstances*

There are several tales that exemplify certain characteristics one of which is that of a girl who was loved by a tree spirit. The spirit visited



the female dormitory *tsüki* every night in the form of a handsome man. This anti-climactic lore details how the cutting down of the tree meant that the girl was taken away by a mysterious person claiming to be her lover by taking her mortal life with a splinter of the tree striking her eye.

Another lore that explains these physiognomies is of a girl who was destined to die of snakebite. A dream in the form of a warning came to her father before she was born. Despite protective love by her parents and her husband, the lore mentions the prediction being fulfilled at last and her death by snakebite.

In the Ao Naga folklore, we find yet another lore of a woman in possession of supernatural powers, Yajangla. Her magical prowess can transform her into a tigress, and she can even muster enough spells to weed off her paddy field. It is a tale of her leading a normal life with a husband and son till an incident when her power could not be controlled and led to her killing and eating her husband.

### ***5.13: The Anomaly of Role Reversal: Bride Price and Damsels as Suitors***

Another interesting facet of women and folklore is the persuasive skills they show. One such story is narrated in this folk song:

*Ozü Yongpang sanger  
 Tapuani yimlushier  
 Wara jangpi konglen  
 Bengdangtsüing sangrushir  
 Azü relantenia lempodang-niali.  
 Lolang nena,  
 Ki yangger-er yala  
 Nipi nasur tsülen  
 Noklang sami noklang yangger  
 Yimpang longmi metongjemtshiko  
 Piyong sünga nangdentsukoni.*

#### **Summary:**

After Aotsüyok gained his wife, Lendongla of Dibuya village, they lived in Yimpang Longmisa. The song is sung by him in response to successfully placing *jabilees* (the traditional coin) on the length of a bamboo species called longmi, and thereby acquiring the hand of his wife in marriage. Her father had set a trial to test the wealth of the suitors.



Although there is no proof of the practice of bride price in Ao Naga culture, *Aotsüyük's* folk songs are among the few that are an inconsistency in our male-dominated role narratives. A similar episode is found in the ballad of Etiben and Jina when her father set a trial to marry her off to a person who can tie an ox to each post of the *majang/sünglang*. In the narrative, Etiben gives her necklace to Jina to purchase them from Assam.

Aotsüyük and Lendongla lead a happy married life on the high land, blessed with a child. While the wife is away in the field and her husband is looking after the baby, a role reversal happens when two female suitors (damsels) approach him with rice beer filled in a *meso* jar. After cautioning by the villagers about the persuasions of the two damsels, the wife decides to stay back. Pretending that she is going to the field, she climbs the roof of the house, *tsünpang*, waiting for the damsels by spinning yarn. The damsels visit him as expected with rice beer and sing to him,

*Waza rongnüing*  
*Onger kentempong waya*  
*Jongpo mashiyimba*  
*Niangangpala meyim.*

**Translation**

Among the birds  
 The bird of *onger kentempong*  
 The bird said to be unmarried  
 I'll also marry you.

**Response by Aotsüyük:**

*Nangla süngpha benangni*  
*Yijemerjo sungti sungro jongani*  
*Aotemi ya nung*  
*Jangya nanu kü nüik shijungmashi*  
*Bendatsur-ang kunuk dangi arua.*

**Translation**

You carry the hand staff  
 Server of the beer, you beauties.  
 In the whole Ao country,  
 There is no one that blesses my  
 eyes  
 The one from the other village,  
 only does.

### 5.14: *Some Folk Songs*

#### 5.14.1: *A Song of Lovers*

<b>Tebur:</b> <i>Tayip zoni chokakü</i> <i>Süngtipangko yajonger,</i> <i>Kümongjen wadang aingjanoa,</i>	<b>Translation:</b>
<b>Tetsür:</b> <i>Naro nüla zoni meti</i> <i>Tonglongpangko jentakoshi</i> <i>Ningmen yusha nüla teya,</i> <i>Nila menjenlaoa.</i>	<b>Male:</b> This morning the sun has risen, Covered over the tree groves, My farmyard looks deserted. <b>Female:</b> Flowers cannot resist the sun, Should adorn the earlobe Do not hear rumours I will never decay.

#### 5.14.2: *Song of Tug and War*

<b>Female:</b> <i>Oh! Arr atsütep</i> <i>Oh! Ongpanger atsütepti ni</i> <i>Ozü zünga pur molosungzü</i>	<b>Translation:</b>
<b>Male:</b> <i>Oh! Ar atsütep</i> <i>Oh! Ongpanger atsütepti ni</i> <i>Ozü zünga tsür</i> <i>Atsü teyong molü narö.</i>	<b>Female:</b> Oh! Let's play tug of war Oh! People from high sunlight area Lion of our same age set. <b>Male:</b> Oh! Let's play tug of war Oh! People from high sunlight area Females of my age set Flower bloomed in the middle of the garden.

## 6. DISCUSSION

'The values of equality, sharing, friendship and hospitality have a universalizing dimension. Certain practices in Naga culture had diverse isolating effects among different village communities'

(Lotha 2016). Diverse segregating effects and variations are found among different tribes and villages especially in folklore. The origin of humans in Ao Naga folklore, habitually spoken of as ‘the origin of man’ is a reflection of the liaison between how the folklore positions women. This cosmological (read as genesis) lore exemplifies the status given to women as a cohort, companions for men, gently following in a subservient manner after the names of the three clan patriarchs. She is a subservient companion, and she simply completes the man mostly in reproductive and socialisation processes. This beginning clearly fits all the arguments that follow since it is simply ‘the origin of man’ and not ‘the origin of humans’.

The space allocated to women is wide ranging. Nevertheless, from the narratives it can be seen that one needed to lead an extraordinarily peculiar life, something out of the box to be seen by successive generations as folklore. We are aware of the etymological meaning of the word tradition, ‘*tradere*’ (Latin) meaning to give, to deliver, or to hand down. So, does a lore require certain attributes for it be ‘handed down’? From all the tales discussed here and knowing how folklore functions, there is a sense of unconscious control on the part of the teller as well as the listener to remember, or fail to recall or mutate any aspects, unconsciously heralding narratives that are peculiar or uncharacteristic mainly because they are odd or because they fulfil certain latent functions. The discussion that follows will possibly answer why certain tales are more popular than others.

There is no doubt that the universality of certain tales encompasses a wider audience with an attached sentiment both of identity and of belongingness. Like the myth of the human origin, probably one of the most well-known narratives is the one in which a sense of ‘oddness’ is involved and humans ‘spring up’ from stone or earth. However, we gather that to remember or to pass down certain tales they have to be, firstly, something that is out of order, for example, the tale of Ongangla, a woman of remarkable character and the female suitors. ‘Normal’ day-to-day activities or practices were perhaps handed down in the form of traditions or knowledge. Or perhaps, what is

considered 'normal' or the 'norm' is taken lightly and not often talked about loudly as compared to what is peculiar or what is strange or 'abnormal'. Secondly, to sustain the cruel hand of time, certain tales function differently in society. Numerous scholars have worked out this aspect, including Bascom's (1954) four functions, Adams' (1973) and Dundes' (1965) ideas of validation, maintaining conformity, and integration, and Reddy's (1989) social functions. Conceivably, tales that fulfil and act strongly for a particular function consciously or unconsciously tend to live longer or tend to be more popular than the others.

In Naga society, which is a patriarchal society, public spaces for women are prominently a subject of politics, and women do not receive support from society to participate in politics indicating the existence of biases against women especially in certain activities (electoral) (Amer 2018). According to Aier, 'Our social structure has a clear division of gender roles, while the menfolk were historically engaged in protecting our villages and clans, women were confined to the family and kitchen (cited in Longchar 2016).

'Freedom' as an integral concept of equality is another contestation. 'A society based on dogmatic tradition is not helping women, who have been deprived of their rights.... Naga society can claim to be democratic in nature but real democracy can only prevail when a system is devoid of unfairness based on gender, class or intellect. Tradition should not be the sole reason to hinder the women to participate effectively' (Jamir 2018). Presuming that the statement is a blow to the participation of women in politics, what does folklore say about this? Or what does folklore say about gender and prescribed roles?

Women or daughters are regarded as subordinate since they neither become co-owners and nor do they inherit property (land). Women are associated with the private sphere or different gender roles or gender specific onuses exist. 'The Customary laws are still biased towards men. If one had to look into the status of women, it is nothing

but indirectly seeking the status of women.... Women cannot fully blame and criticize men folk for its dominance as she (herself) is also partially responsible.... Community and village affairs were left to men (an extension of) conformist attitude towards tradition and customs (Jamir 2018).

‘The tradition suggests the women (wives) not compete with men (husbands) in life as both are complementary in their role behaviour. The (patriarchal) society warns the women that they receive more bites from men than privilege.... The society expects that the men should always be ready with his *dao* to die for the cause of his community (protecting and bringing laurels). Every woman wishes that her husband or son should emerge as a head-hunter and prove his virility and prowess as a member of Ao-Naga society’ (Longchar 2016). Echoing these sentiments, Ao (2019) writes, ‘Her role is important, it is always subservient to that of a man in certain respects.’ The system is a patriarchal one where ‘a woman plays a secondary role,’ where inheritance of ancestral property is considered ‘an exclusive male prerogative.’ She further says, ‘this has never been viewed as giving the woman an “inferior” status in society... (but rather) a well-defined and well protected role.’ In the tale of the two sisters who became birds, their duties were: ‘they worked together drawing water from the well, fetching firewood from the jungle, husking rice and cooking the meal for their family.’

Ao Naga folklore typifies allocated roles for men and women. Manual labour is shared in keeping with physical stamina in both the homestead and on the fields. However, personal dignity and rights as an individual are respected and never denied. The women are protected, ‘as flowers in the garden’ that beautify men’s pride, an adornment of beauty and admiration, a satisfactory companion for a glorified man who is duly given care and protection both as a consanguine and an affine kin.

The origin of species in the animal kingdom in the Ao Naga folklore points towards two beliefs. The first is the formation of *Zütsü angö*, a

species of a striped fish found in Dikhu river, said to have originated from a woman and bearing the markings of tattoos. Subsequently, this transformed into a belief that women are not allowed to consume this species. The next folklore is that water animals like frogs, crabs, shrimp, and little fish have peculiar body shapes owing to hysteria that follows seeing a crab's sacrifice by cooking herself while cooking for themselves in the field. Perhaps, the lore functions as an explanation for women's abilities and their procreation prowess, and is an exemplification of the association of the 'nature-nurture' discussions.

Ao Naga community has undergone multiple changes owing to numerous cultural processes of transformations in religion after the coming of Christianity, modernisation, diffusion of cultural traits, and emulation resulting in changes both in the periphery as well as in the cultural temperament of the community, the matrix.

Folklore stems from culture and tradition. It is verbal cleverness in one of its most expressive forms. The sheer intelligence of certain roles is in the power play or the status quo with each other and is a mirror image in an unconsciousness art form. Although certain folklore preaches morality for a woman, some other lore speaks of her breaking the shackles and her ground-breaking airborne moment(s). While some talk of her insignificance as just a mere companion, others talk of her as immortal, as one who saves an entire village or who founded an entire clan. Certain traits, though, relate her to a destitute confined to household chores while others describe the audacity with which she can transcend time and space, at certain times mirroring reality and at other times functioning as escapism from both mortal physiology and societal norms. Women in Ao Naga folklore have multiple characters.

The Ao Naga gender concepts and characterization in folklore as derivative of societal values is an implausible exercise due to the fluid nature of varied-complex gender roles. This multi-layered complexity echoes tales of both reality and fantasy that necessitates extensive inquiries which can shed newlight on our past lives, ancestry and cultural heritage.

## NOTES

1. *Tsüsü* is an ingeniously made hollow cylindrical structure made of bamboo and used for fetching water from nearby rivers or streams.
2. Mangkoterong is the place where the hunted heads of the enemies are kept in the village; it is located near the place where the log drums are kept. It is here that festivities and merry making are centred.
3. *Tsüyokba* or community fishing is when the whole village goes to a river nearby to catch fish. Mostly two or three or even more surrounding villages participate in the activity.
4. *Kan* is kinship between two or more clan members of the same age group or age set (called *zünga* and derived from the word *azüing* meaning to count); sometimes it is replaced by *tempa* or *mulungtok*. This applies to one in whom one can place one's trust. This term is used only between two or more clan members or only between different clan members.
5. *Anem* is the rope used over the head to carry a basket like the *ji* and *ku*; it is made of both bamboo and cane.

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