

Folklore as Big History

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Folklore in Indigenous and Tribal societies are storehouses of knowledge. Origin myths, stories about nature, flora, fauna, narratives about ancestors and histories about moments in time and places – they all coalesce to provide a people with a sense of place in this world, conferring identities and inculcating customs relating to their community and world. Drawing on folktales from the rich canon of Naga folklore, this paper looks at ways folklore offers an alternative arc for Big History. My presentation will take the form of storytelling, where I will share a few folktales to demonstrate how the timelessness of folklore serves to inform us of our place in time – a time where past, present and future fold into each other.

I am a woman from Nagaland, a state in the Indian North East that shares its frontier with its sister states of Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh, and borders the nation-state of Myanmar. It is home to over 16 distinct Naga tribes, each with their own language and culture. From my father's side, I am Angami and from my mother's side, I am Sümi. Being from two different Naga tribes, I have had the privilege of receiving indigenous knowledge from both. Since we are a predominantly oral culture, transmission of knowledge, folklore and culture largely occurs through communal as well as personal acts of narration and storytelling, in formal and informal settings. Most of the myths I recount in this article were told to me by my parents. Those I have cited from other tribes have been so indicated.

In a myth about our origins, told to me by my father, it is said that in the land where our ancestors came from, a person was born on one day, crawled on the second, and walked on the third. S/he grew from a child on the fourth day to be young on the fifth, married on the sixth, became parents on the seventh, and old and bent over on the eighth day.

Upon first hearing this story, a listener imagines a mythical utopia that defies modern conceptions of time and biology. So, we place this in the realm of past fantasy or future science fiction. But when some Nagas travelled to Scandinavia in recent times, they returned with a fresh interpretation of this age-old origin myth. In this north country – 'land of the midnight sun' – the day and the night stretched for many months, as the Earth's axis tilted through the seasons.

This seasonal Earth movement allowed for a child to be born one day, during the 24-hour day of an Arctic summer. Then, after months of winter darkness – 'night,' the sun would rise again in the spring, and the child was old enough to crawl. Looking through this new lens of a wider geography and science, we could now sit around our hearths in Nagaland and imagine that our ancestors came from the Arctic ... and suddenly mythical history could be traced on a real map across the globe to a time and place that really was and still is today!

Folklore does not sharply distinguish between the stuff of matter – solid, liquid, gas, earth, water, fire, wind. Human

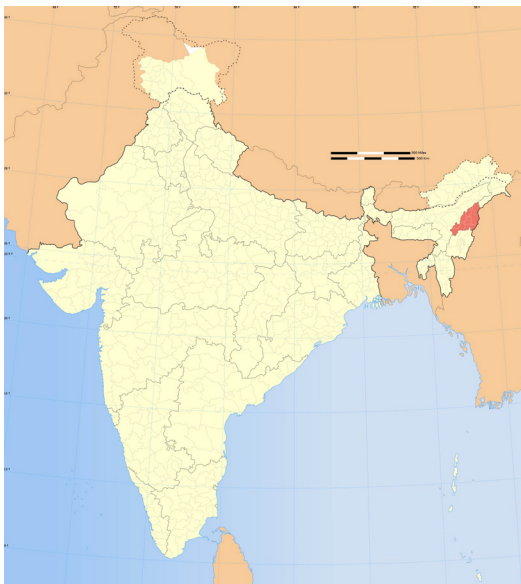
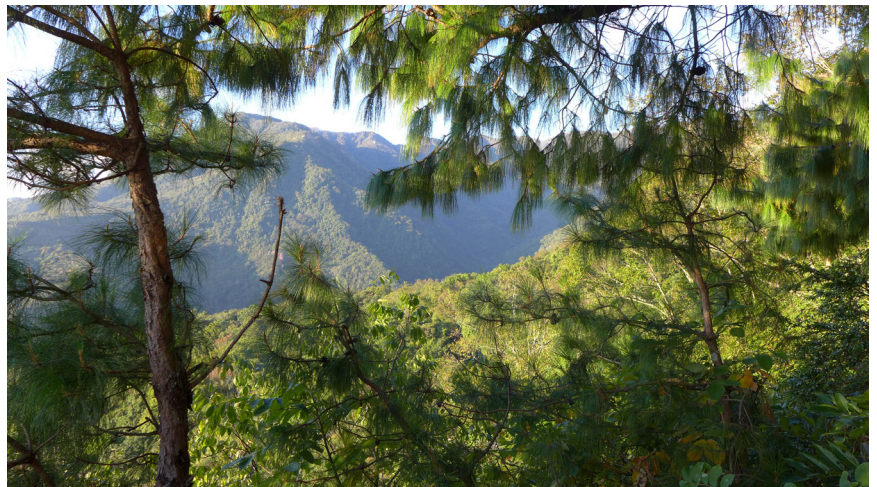


Image 1: Left – Map of Nagaland (red) and India. Courtesy of *Wikimedia Commons*. Below – Forest trail into the Dzüko Valley, Nagaland / Manipur, December 2016. Photograph by Barry Rodrigue.



flesh is just another iteration of the substances of Nature. This informed our interactions with mountains, forests, rocks, and water, which are all believed to be imbued with life-force, animated or possessed by spirits, capable of thought, feeling, and emotion. Poet Robert Frost writes:

We dance round in a ring and suppose /
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

We can say folklore has known secrets that science can only glimpse, as it dances around in a ring. The Ao people, along with other Naga tribes, trace their origins to a place called *Lungterok*, which translates as 'six stones.' This is where three women and three men burst out of stone and became the ancestors of these tribes. Other tribes believe they emerged from caves deep in the mountain, others from water.

One of the most important and prevalent ways we communicated with Nature was through dreams. In dreams, the natural world spoke to us of their desires, consenting, negotiating and directing us as to how we should conduct ourselves with them. This is why our ancestors asked permission from mountains and trees before cutting them, why it was considered a bad omen to disrupt the course of rivers, why certain stones were sacred, and when, even after conversion Christianity, those who desecrated them experienced real illness, misfortune, and even madness.

If Big History weaves all disciplines together to create a lifeline for humanity and this Earth's crises, then it follows in the tradition of folklore, which conceived of the world as an integrated entirety. To know one part, one had to know everything else. This synthesis was appreciated by big-historian Barry Wood, who developed an interdisciplinary study called *Cosmic Narratives*.

I take ancient myths seriously, unlike those who dismiss them as just stories rendered obsolete by science. ... [C]osmic narratives are presented as a form of narrative that dominates storytelling from the earliest tribal cultures to the most recent issues of Nature and Science. ... One notices, for instance, a general principle of clumping at work in galaxies, planetary systems, schools of fish, bands of primates, modern cities, and highway traffic jams. Gravity and social bonding provide scientific frameworks for such clumping as well as for emergent complexity of systems. In literary terms, such repeating patterns suggest metaphorical linkages, where each may become a symbol of the others. A scientific mind sees re-

semblance between whirlpools, hurricanes and spiral galaxies as illustrations of the self-patterning of energy flow; the poetic mind sees these as repeating themes that unify narratives of cosmic history.

Folklore teaches us about our ties to flora and fauna. In fact, folktales of most tribes trace the ancestry of Tiger and Man to their having the same mother; they were brothers who parted ways when their third and eldest brother, Spirit, favoured Man in a contest, enabling him to win. Angered by this betrayal, Tiger leaves for the Forest and warns Man of the dangers that await if he leaves the safety of the Village. Despite this enmity, which explains why one must kill the other if they meet, all tribes considered it taboo to eat the meat of a tiger and, when a man killed his brother tiger, he had to mourn him and observe death rituals usually reserved for humans.

The Sümi Naga folktale of *Khwonhyetsü*, who killed tiger cubs while the tiger mother was away, explains why a person who has killed a tiger can no longer eat certain herbs as long as s/he lives – as penance. Another Sümi folktale about a war between Birds and Reptiles helps to explain why some indigenous birds look the way they do and provided an oral taxonomy for ancient bird watchers. After the Eagle defeated the King Cobra, all the birds divided the flesh. The crow rubbed himself in the gall and became black. The Scarlet Minivet rubbed itself in the blood and became red. The Ruby-Throat arrived late, so it took the last remaining blood and smeared it on its chin, which is why it has a red throat.

The Nagas have an oral culture, one where knowledge is passed from one generation to another through dormitory-based institutions organised along the lines of gender and age. Folktales like these were the means by which every new generation learnt about why plants and animals look the way they do, as well as the hierarchies and conventions that governed interactions and relations between and amongst humans, plants, and animals. This was a precursor of natural science and history; and it still provides alternative explanations for adaptation and species interactions.

Naga folklore marks a time when Birds, Animals, and Humans shared the same language. When Dog befriended Man, he divulged all the secrets of the Animals. This allowed Man to kill almost all the Animals in the forest. Fearing they would become extinct, the Creator pulled out Dog's tongue to keep him from talking to Man. Dog lost the ability to speak, so the other Animals could live. This is why dogs hang their tongues out of their mouths. Shared language is also seen as a way Animals taught Humans to find precious resources and plants for food, medicine, and poison.

The Sangtam Nagas share a folktale with other tribes about how water was found. Before there was clear water, people harvested it from the hollows of cane. This water was tinted red and coloured the food that was cooked in it. Semphirong was working in the fields with his brother, Yemsüphirong, when he heard a *Kiphilung* (Red Vented Bulbul) call out to them: ‘Yemsüphirong, Semphirong, there is water in the rocks.’ The brothers followed the bird, who led them to a rock marked with small holes all over its surface. In these small holes, the brothers found clear water. They kept this a secret from other villagers, using it to drink, cook, and wash only for themselves.

One day, during community work, when the men broke for lunch and opened their food packs, the others saw that the rice of the brothers was white, while their rice was red. They followed the brothers the next day and found the rock with pools of clear water on it. Because the brothers belong to the Rütithongrü clan, whenever the villagers do community work, this clan is not allowed to cook rice or meat, serve food, or even sit in the kitchen. They are given only rice and meat, without a drop of gravy, because it is believed that if they eat with gravy, it would rain too heavily and destroy the crops.

In this way, a folktale about finding clear water with the help of a bird becomes a manual for kinship, social structure, and customs. Folktales provide an alternative trajec-

ry to scientific, empirical methods and present unconventional metaphysical answers for why we are the way we are. Folklore imagines the world as an interconnected community where harmony and balance are vital to survival.

This is not to say that all structures that folklore reinforces are just or unbiased – definitely not, especially in those that further the cause of patriarchy. But learning about these networks allows us to understand our current circumstance and rethink notions of what constitutes harmony or balance. Folklore’s ontologies direct us toward social action based on empathy and an awareness that all actions have consequences beyond the individual and even beyond the human. In this same way, I share two of my poems – ‘Whore’ and ‘Hibiscus’ – from my first book of poems, *Sopfünuo*.

The book takes its title from an Angami folktale about a woman named Sopfünuo, who is said to have left her husband’s home because she was unhappy in her marriage. She left in the night with her infant child and made her way back to her village, Rüsoma, with a fire-torch for light. As her villagers watched the fire-torch make its way in through the forest, its light was put out. In the morning, some of her village people went to investigate and found two stones lying next to each other, one adult-sized and the other infant-sized. They understood that mother and child had been transformed into stone. They pulled them into the vil-

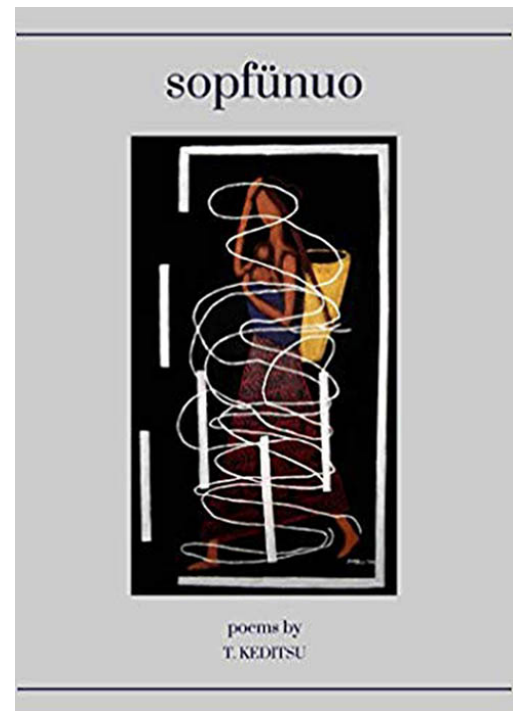


Image 2: Left – Stones of Sopfünuo and her child outside Rüsoma village, Nagaland. Centre – Theyiesinuo Kreditsu. Right - Dr. Kreditsu’s book of poetry, *Sopfünuo*

lage where they stand, enshrined, to this day. Rüsoma is the village of my paternal grandmother's mother and I grew up being told this folktale by my father, who always reassured me that, if I were ever unhappy in my marriage, I had a home to which to return.

As an adult and married mother, this folktale and the context in which it was passed to me grew in significance. It speaks to how women navigate the patriarchal institution of marriage, and it exposes patriarchy as a multifaceted, nuanced structure specific to time, context, and culture. It allows one to see resistance and subversion within the narrative – whether it is Söpfünüo or the people of her village – and, on a metatextual level, it shows how a patriarch (my father) used a story from his mother's heritage to provide his daughter with an escape from patriarchal oppression. Using this folktale as a backbone, I wrote a collection of poems that explored the way Naga women – as girls, women, wives and mothers – negotiate self and power within patriarchy. The two poems I contribute belong to the book's last section, dedicated to ways we reject and confront patriarchy.

The first poem, 'Whore,' is an ecofeminist piece that addresses the way our land has been treated in the name of development. I imagined what it would be like if our land were a woman who could tell us about her past and current condition – about how her relationship with us, the indigenous people who have lived on, with, and through her, has changed. The second poem, 'Hibiscus,' takes the form of a sestina – a 39-line poem of Italian style that I have taken a liking to because it brings to mind the structure and motion of our indigenous backstrap loom, with its recurring cycle of end words. When I work on sestinas, I try to recreate the sensation of 'weaving' my words.

Thematically, 'Hibiscus' tells a story from the perspective of a flowering shrub indigenous to our part of the world. It is a hardy plant that can survive drought, extreme heat, and cold, and is used in traditional medicine to treat high blood pressure, burns, and many ailments afflicting today's population. In the poem, I juxtapose tensions between traditional and modern patriarchy, spirituality, culture, and customs. Both poems embody big-history concerns about the interconnectedness of past and present as well as manifestations of knowledge – by indigenous ways of knowing or modern ways, as well as the way we record / represent what we know.

Colonisation and western academic discourse have relegated folklore to the realm of the creative, often going further to strip these narratives of their political stimulus, positing them as mere 'primitive' entertainment. I propose that folklore needs to be brought back into the sphere of the political and be reinstated as a frame of reference through which we can engage contemporary challenges.

References

- Frost, Robert; 'The Secret Sits,' in *A Witness Tree*, New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1942.
- Keditsu, Theyiesinuo; *Söpfünüo*, Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2018, 2020 [Kindle].
- Wood, Barry; 'Big Science, Big History, and Cosmic Narratives: Variant Approaches to the Big Story,' in *From the Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, vol. II, *Education and Understanding: Big History around the World*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2016: 81–90.

Endnotes

1. Frost 1942: 71.
2. Wood 2016: 84–85.

The following poems, "Hibiscus" and "Whore", were included in T. Keditsu, *Söpfünüo*, Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2018 (Kindle edition, 2020). A 'dao' is a traditional Naga cutting implement - a cross between a knife and a hatchet.

Hibiscus (sestina)

T. Kreditsu

Oh no, we don't do things as barbaric and heartless as burning brides for money or killing
Fetuses because they are female. No, we grow and temper our women to bend
Without breaking, or if they must break to break without a fuss, silently
In stealth, in secret, in solitude – a woman's pain should not be a spectacle for
Others to see and pity. No, we teach our women resilience so they can survive
Without succour and bloom without months of rain like the hibiscus.

Solitary tongues of night wing must have seen Sopfünuo that night, helpless. Had the hibiscus
Stood watch, her tale may not have ended with stone – a chronicler's subtle way of killing
But told of how the red-tongued flower turned terrifying goddess and helped her survive,
Slaying her tormentor and brought back his head severed and bleeding on a bamboo bending
From the weight of the silence custom demands from women cursed to suffer
Acts that have no words or place in chronicles men tell their sons but are passed on silently

Like our stones and monoliths outliving generations of men, speaking silently
Of things that cannot be told but must be known, like the many forked tongue of the hibiscus
A voiceless Babel hissing at the way men congress to discuss matters or fight for
Their honour wearing cloths dyed by women with madder that bid enemies to kill
And take the heads of the dyers; aged women who give the last of their strength to bend
Over vats of red or those whose hands stained blue or black so the stories of women can survive

As patterns on cloth branding our sons who will grow to forget their mothers survived
The tyranny of men and become tyrants who shun the counsel of women, demand silence
And absence from spaces of power and take pride in compelling their wives and daughters to bend
To their will. In the shadows of pink cherry blossoms briefly bursting on our hills, the sturdy hibiscus
Blooms in blood. But, as blood only seethes red while it flows and turns to rust after the killing,
So too the red of the hibiscus menstruates and browns into the colours of dead earth before

It fades like the deeds of our mothers we recall through muted sepia, reaching and grasping for
Memories pulled into the quicksand of forgetting. (or is it apathy?) While so many women survive
Now, still, because the light in their children's eyes sustain them through times when life is killing
Their spirits, parting woman from woman by servitude to fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, silently
Eating into the times mothers spent sharing their dreams with their daughters at dawn while hibiscus
Woke from wandering the realm of sleep where our men wearing newly woven clothes bent

Over rivers and prepared to cut them into new roads for their sons and brazenly called the hills to bend
And bow to them. Prophecy from an old dying religion that men cleansed in new blood do not suffer
Blind to the life that yet lives in our forests and the blood that throbs in the hibiscus
Which was used by ancients to cure the very ailments men now fight to survive
Even as their women inter the shame of their men into unmarked graves of silence.
And so, while their men learnt warfare and ventured out to avenge a killing

Our foremothers learnt to teach their daughters they must bend to survive
Suffer silently
For daos of men and not droughts kill the hard-wearing hibiscus

Whore

Who asks how I want to be taken?
Who asks me if I am ready?
Where I love to be touched
And which parts are out of bounds?

Here I lie sprawled wide open
In the aftermath of repeated assault
Once mighty mountains macerated
Into muddy tears mourning the ravages of rain
My rivers torn from their riverbeds
And cast out to run rampant through frightened forests
Fleeing into frenzied incoherence.

I had lovers once
Who reverently slipped tender saplings
Into the trembling wet of my terrace fields
Hills pregnant with the scent and sweet of Zünhe nectar
In that epoch of trust, taro thrust up towards the sun
Spreading the bodies of their leaves for lovers
In search for their navels, red, black, brown, silver

I had lovers once
Who knew me, my hills, my creatures, my waters, my jungles
Laying with my trees and sleeping by my streams
Forging paths with the flesh of their naked feet
Lovers desiring my trees returned to their beds
To ask my consent in the realm of dreams

I have no lovers now
Only assailants who do as they wish and take what they want
Unloved, unknown I fade and fall apart
Weak and waiting for someone to ask me
How I want to go? For someone to hear me say
I would like to stay and wait for one last lover

T. Kreditsu