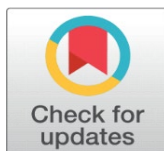


RITUALS, TRAINING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING: UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTIONS OF THE RENGMA NAGA MORUNG

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ABSTRACT

In the olden days, the most important institution was the morung or bachelor's dormitories. It is also called as "Rensika" by the Rengma Nagas. The morung served as a traditional institution which imparted various skills of art and warfare, transmitted the customs and laws from generation to generation and morung evolved to meet the needs and requirements of society. There are different names like men's club, men's hall, public school, youth house etc. Like most of the other Naga communities. The Rengma Naga morung acted as a key institution. Every village is divided into khel and each khel has its own morung, which occupies the central place. It has separate morung for both boys and girls. The objective of the study is to understand more deeply the significant role of morung in the social, economic and spiritual life of the people. It also aims to create awareness among the present generation on the roles and responsibilities of the youth in promoting value-based society as taught in the morung.

The nature of "Rensika" is to be understood more objectively to get a better understanding of society as a whole. Through ethnographic research and community engagement, this paper aims to preserve age old traditions fostering unity among the Rengma Naga people contributing to the resilience of the cultural heritage.

Keywords: Institution, Traditional, Rengma Naga, Rensika, Morung

1. INTRODUCTION

The Rengma Naga is a Tibeto-Burman group inhabiting the Northeast Indian states of Nagaland and Assam. The Rengma tribes are one of the main tribes in Nagaland with a total population of 62,527 according to the 2011 census. The head quarter of the Rengmas is at Tseminyu in Nagaland and at Phentsero in Assam. Tseminyu is 50 kilometer away from the state capital. It shares its boundary with Wokha district on the north, on the east with Zunheboto, on the west with Niuland and on the south with Kohima.

All the Rengma villages are independent of one another. They function as democratic units which is made possible because of the morung. Every Rengma village has well defined territory and agriculture is the main source of living and practice jhum as well as terrace cultivation. For the Rengma Naga tribe, the morung was not merely a dormitory but a multifunctional space that served as the backbone of societal organization.

2. LOCATION FOR BUILDING A MORUNG

Every Rengma Naga village is divided into khel and each khel has its own morung which occupied a central place in the village. The place for building a morung is located in the mile as well as strategic place in the village. The elders of the village locate the place for the morung to be built. The raw materials and furniture needed for the morung were to be the initiatives of all the khel members. A big wood known as "Pvu" were to be prepared by the khel members. The khel members would clear the road of the field for the particular year when the morung is going to be constructed. After the harvest is done, the particular khel members will collect grains from each house hold as a wage for clearing the way to the field. Collection of the grains signifies the construction of a morung.

For building it is usually in the month February ie a month when the farmers clear the forest for jhum cultivation as well as a month for construction of houses. For the construction of morung the young girls (Katsu) pound the grains for making rice beer. The men folk will help in pulling the big wood curvings (Pvu) for the main post of the morung. Bamboos and woods are used for the construction of morung. The morung was constructed with the best wood timber in the forest. A plant known as "Nshonkon" is used for decoration as well as bamboo handicrafts and war trophies. Renovation of the morungs was also the responsibility of the khel members. The shapes and size depends upon the village. The smaller village has small morung and big village has bigger morung. The condition of the morung reflects the condition of the village. A decaying morung indicate a decaying standard of a particular village, while a good building indicates a strong village community.

3. FUNCTIONS OF THE RENGMA NAGA MORUNG

In the past, when formal education systems were absent, the morung served as a traditional school, instilling discipline, skills, and cultural values in the youth. It held a place of pride in every village and was a key institution in shaping Rengma Naga society.

Cultural and Social Hub: Each communities have their own particular name for morung. Garos called it as Nokpante, Lushai dormitories as Zawbuk, Lothas as Champo, Aos as Ariju, Semas as Apuki and Angamis as Kichiiki and so on. Like most of the other communities, Rengma Naga morung acted as key institution. Though importance varied from village to village. In olden days, the most important institution was morung or bachelors domitory. Morung is known as 'Rensika'. It has different names like youth house, men's hall, public school etc. When evils and headhunting was common practice morung was used as guard house to protect the village.

For young girls, their version of the dormitory, known as "Katsu", played a similar role. They wove clothes, prepared cotton threads, and sang traditional songs. The girls' dormitory also became a space for them to bond and prepare for their roles as future homemakers.

Ritual and Spiritual Practices: The morung also functioned as a sacred space where tribal deities were worshiped and rituals were conducted to seek blessings for prosperity and protection. Specific sections of the morung were dedicated to these spiritual activities, which were led by elders or priests. During festivals like Ngada, the morung was adorned with traditional decorations, and rituals performed here marked the culmination of the harvest season. These ceremonies not only reinforced spiritual beliefs but also strengthened communal bonds.

Youth Development: Every young man was required to be a member of the morung until marriage. The morung provided training in 'Craftsmanship and Artistic Skills': Young boys learned carving techniques, bamboo crafts, and other practical skills. 'Cultural Practices': Elders imparted knowledge of traditional songs, dances, and folk narratives. 'Ethical and Moral Values': Lessons emphasized discipline, respect for elders, and communal harmony.

For young girls, they sleep in a rich man house known as Katsu until they get marry. Until marriage young girls are to keep oneself clean and not to mingle with boys. In the Katsu, young girls make yarn with cotton and in the month of February, they weave clothes while singing traditional songs.

Community Building: The morung was integral to fostering unity and communal responsibility. In the days of headhunting, the morung also doubled as a guardhouse, protecting the village from attacks. During conflicts, discussions about war strategies and enemy rituals were held in the morung, where weapons were always kept ready. During festivals, funerals, or emergencies, the morung acted as the central point for communication and coordination. According to the age groups, there are different works assigned. Juniors serve seniors. After the harvest is done, in the month of November, young boys will collect firewood and girls will carry it to the morung. Intermediate will help the poor and needy in the village. The seniors will carry out the administrative work as well as all the important activities of the morung. If there is any important festivals, funerals or danger then it is communicated in the morung. Notably, the morung also provided sanctuary to criminals, who were protected until their cases were resolved.

4. CHALLENGES TO THE MORUNG SYSTEM

Despite its historical significance, the morung system faces several challenges in contemporary times:

Decline in Practical Relevance: With the abolition of headhunting, the defensive role of the morung has become obsolete. Additionally, the rise of formal education has reduced the need for traditional learning spaces, as parents now prioritize modern schooling over cultural education in the morung.

Urbanization and Migration: The migration of youth to urban areas for education and employment has disrupted the traditional village-based lifestyle, further weakening the morung's influence.

5. REVITALIZING THE MORUNG

To preserve the cultural and historical significance of the morung, efforts should focus on integrating its values with modern needs:

Cultural Preservation Initiatives: The morung can be revitalized as a cultural center where traditional skills, crafts, and practices are taught to younger generations. Workshops, storytelling sessions, and festivals can draw attention to its importance.

Community Tourism: Promoting the morung as a cultural tourism destination can generate revenue for villages while raising awareness about its historical significance. Visitors can learn about the Rengma Naga's heritage through guided tours and interactive activities.

Incorporating Modern Education: By blending traditional teachings with formal education, the morung can remain relevant. For example, it can serve as a supplementary space for teaching history, ecology, and community values.

6. CONCLUSION

Morung continue to exist even today but its importance has been lost because of changing time. Head hunting is no more practice, so there is no need to sleep in the morung to protect the village and more over more emphasis is placed in the formal education that parents are not willing to send their children to sleep in the morung. Christianity also contributed to the decline of the morung as it is considered the practice of the athiest and against the religion. Traditional practices associated with the morung are often seen as incompatible with Christian values, leading to their gradual abandonment.

However, revitalizing the morung will help in transmitting the past culture and tradition to the next generation and save the culture and tradition from extinction. More emphasis should be put upon preserving the rich culture and glory of the past.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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