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Cultural Significance of Tools and Weapons: A Case Study of Sümi Nagas of Nagaland

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study about the traditional tools and weapons associated with the Sümi Nagas. Since pre-historic times, the tools and weapons used by mankind have been significant to their progress. Historians have largely attributed the advancement of the human race to the types and kinds of tools they made and used for various purposes. The invention and usage of tools is considered one of the most important discoveries in the evolvement of mankind. Therefore, the study of tools can provide an important knowledge bank to the type of society at that particular time and era. Sümi Nagas, in particular, have varied tools used for different purposes. As they are an agrarian community, the use of various agricultural tools is notable and weapons are used both during the hunting activity and the head-hunting process. So it can serve as one vital source which is indispensable for the Sümi Naga Society which practices oral tradition in the absence of written records.

Keywords: Tools, weapons, implements, culture, technique.

Introduction

This paper attempts to study about the traditional tools and weapons which is associated with the Sümi Nagas. Sümis are the most widespread tribe in terms of settlement. Their headquarter is Zunheboto, which is located in the central part of Nagaland and surrounded by all the other tribes of Nagaland. According to the 2011 census of India, the population of the Sümi Nagas is around 300,000. Sümis inhabits different districts of Nagaland such as Dimapur, Kohima, Wokha, Mokokchung, Tuensang, Kiphire and Shamator and seven other villages in Tinsukia District of Assam.

Since pre-historic times, tools and weapons used by mankind have been significant to their progress. Historians have largely attributed the advancement of human race to the types and kinds of tools they made and used for various purposes. The survival of mankind in the harsh environment depended largely on their ability to evolve, adapt and invent the best tactic for survival. The invention and usage of tools is considered as one of the most important discoveries in the evolution of mankind from food-gathering to hunters too. Since archaeologists started to follow the story of tools, men have changed not only their tools but also their livelihood (their economy), and consequently the way in which society was organized for co-operation (Childe, 1944).

Therefore, in the study of the progress of a community, the study of tools provides an important knowledge bank to the type of society of a particular time and era. Humans are greatly shaped and defined by the use of tools and implements. One cannot ignore the fact that in the process of development of any society, the usage of tools and weapons are an indispensable part of the changes. Over the passage of time, tools, implements and weapons have undergone change according to the needs and development of mankind. It serves as an evidence of cultural information. These tools are vital to gather information on the people associated with it. Tools and weapons are like a storehouse of knowledge when no written records are available. Any tool is a social

product; the rules for making and using it are preserved and handed on by a social tradition (Childe, 1944). So it can serve as one vital source which is indispensable for the Naga oral Society.

Nagas are described as expert makers of different types of *daos*, spears, scrapers etc. Sümis, specifically, produces handmade dresses, weapons pots, baskets, metal works and musical instruments (Periera, Ltu, Husca, Yepthomi, 2019). Sümi Nagas, in particular, have varied tools which are used for different purposes. As Sümi Nagas are largely an agrarian community, the use of various agricultural tools is notable. They practice both traditional Jhum or Shifting cultivation and paddy or wet cultivation. According to the needs of the type of agricultural activity, appropriate tools are used to suit the needs such as for clearing jungles, cultivation etc. likewise, weapons are used both during the hunting activity as well as during the head-hunting process which was in vogue during the ancient times.

Though the rest of the world had achieved tremendous progress in the field of tools, implements and weapons during the different eras, these items remained the same for the Sümi Nagas. This can also be understood from the very nature of how Naga history developed. When still living in their old traditional mode of life, the British contact with the Nagas along with the coming of Christian missionaries changed the Naga way of life. The British with a highly advanced civilization had gone through the Industrial Revolution while the Nagas were still using simple tools. So, on one hand contact of the East with the West has put a halt to the progress of Nagas on its own in various aspects. On the other hand, it led to the introduction of advanced tools and weapons of the West. These circumstances led to the decline of many traditional and cultural practices of the Sümi Nagas too. To cite a few examples-headhunting was discouraged and attending Christian schools was encouraged. Spades were replaced with pens. Traditional songs and dances were replaced with Christian songs and hymns. For women, Western skirts replaced traditional wraparounds and for men their traditional shawls were replaced with red shawls distributed by the British Government. This adversely led to the decline of craft production associated with these items.

Therefore, it can be understood that with the changes in the lifestyle, the decline in the cultural and traditional practices of the Nagas has adversely affected the usage of traditional tools, implements and weapons. Nowadays, due to the availability of other tools such as hack-saw and machines, the task of cutting down trees and clearing the land is easier, and tools have been substituted. Many tools and weapons are kept as decorations or showpieces at home and have lost their purpose of use and importance. The loss of purpose led to the decline of making these traditional crafts and implements and adversely affected the transmission of skills and technique of tool making too.

Sümi Naga society has a rich cultural history. Many of their cultural practices, traditions, customs and manners are embedded in the memories of the older generation. To understand a society, we need to know its cultural roots for which tools and weapons can fill in the gap. Though many scholars are making efforts to decode the origins and history of migration, these are still shrouded in myths and mystery. However, the attempts are not in vain because they are bringing out to light the rich heritage and cultural practices of Sümi Nagas.

Taboos attached to tools and weaponry

Sümis are a tribe from two clans i.e. 'Swü' and 'Tükü' (Chophy, 2019). It is believed that they were brothers. 'Tükü' was the elder son and 'Swü' was the younger son. Their mother taught all the norms known in Sümi as 'Chine-Chini' to the younger son which is why the ritual practices of the 'Swü' was very complex whereas, of the 'Tükü's was found simpler. This also could be one reason which led to the variations of rituals and norms among the Sümis. There are variations in regard to usage of tools and weapons as well as the beliefs associated with them. Differences in village rituals and practices signify cultural contacts with neighbouring villages. In the ancient past, the Sümi Nagas practised indigenous religion which is also termed as animism. Thus, their ways of life are associated with beliefs in taboos of dos and don'ts, though much of it has declined with the coming of Christianity. Therefore, quite a number of these beliefs are richly associated with the tools and weapons among the Sümi tribe.

In the context of rituals associated with tools and implements, there are a number of restrictions on women who are not allowed to touch or make contact with the war weapons of the men. It is said that it will bring misfortune to the menfolk during hunting or war activity. For example, if a woman touches the weapons which men take for hunting, it was considered a harbinger of ill luck, and no game could be killed as a consequence.

Concerning the matter of development and progress of tools and weapons, not much has been made. Even the economy of the Naga society, in general, remained pre-dominantly agricultural in nature and Sümi Nagas are no exception. Despite the advancement in society, the tools and weapons remained primitive. There is not much difference with the pre-colonial era and post-colonial. The only change can be in matters where new tools and weapons were introduced by the foreigners.

In the case of production, the nature of society has a direct influence on the production of these tools and weapons. Every village was independent and self-sufficient. They lived a very simple life which resulted in less demand for articles. Their tools and weapons are confined to domestic, agriculture, hunting-fishing and head-hunting activities. Therefore, their requirement for tools, implements and weapons are limited to these needs. And since their life routine is circled around these activities, almost every male member of the family is expected to know and learn how to make tools and implements. Likewise, women are also taught and expected to weave and are responsible for all the household chores.

The morung played a vital role in the case of artisan and craftwork. Morungs are known as dormitories and informal institution of learning for both boys and girls. *Apuki* is the term for boys' dormitory and *'Illiki'* for girls' dormitory. In every village, both boys and girls who have attained the age of adolescence would spend time and sleep in their respective morungs until they are married. During their stay, they are taught all the manners, customs and skills. All important skills such as making art and crafts are taught and learnt from this place. Therefore, in the past the knowledge and skills are passed on from generation to generation through this morung. Yet, with the passage of time the

introduction of schools by the Christian missionaries had led to the decline of this institution resulting in the loss of the practice of teaching and learning the art and skills of making artisan goods. This very reason can also be attributed to the decline of the art of making tools and weapons and its production.

Ashi aghu phikimthe (Rituals observed for war/headhunting)

Ashi aghu phikimthe was a ritual observed for cleansing of war weapons among the menfolk. During the ancient past, this ritual was performed by every able male member of the village at the beginning of every year before the felling of trees for firewood. Every able man used to carry a rooster, went to the campsite in the jungle and prepared the rooster for a meal. All men ate the cooked rooster along with beer made of Job's tears. After this, they cleansed their bodies along with all their weapons like spears, *daos* (machetes), and clothing. During this time, women are to consume any unclean food, they are forbidden from weaving or touching threads, they will not touch the chicken coop, etc. They are forbidden to do any kind of work and expected to observe the days in a solemn manner. Though this ritual is not observed uniformly in the present context, yet, the cleansing of weapons is carried out individually by male members of the family. Traditional weapons are replaced by modern weapons like guns and bullets. So cleansing of these weapons are performed in the form of prayer based on Christian belief (Najekhu, 1985).

Types of tools, implements and weapons

There are a good number of tools, implements and weapons used by the Sümi Nagas. Below are a few of the essential articles commonly used by them. It has to be noted that there are variations in regard to the types of articles used, terms and purposes. In the past, the materials used for making tools, implements and weapons were mostly wood, bamboo and metal. There are a good number of tools and implements for household and agriculture but very limited in regard to weapons. The traditional tools, implements and weapons of the Sümi Nagas can be classified into different groups:

a. Domestic tools
b. Agricultural tools
c. Weapons

Domestic tools

***Azuta* (machete)**

The machete is one of the most essential tools which is found in every household. It is used for various purposes both for household and agricultural works like cutting meat, slashing of woods, clearing the jungles and for head-hunting too. It has different shapes and sizes. The handle portion is made of wood and iron metal is attached to it. A man keeps his personal *azuta* for chopping meat and for head-hunting separately. They are expected to keep their *azuta* sharpened at all times. The father of the family owns his personal *azuta* which is restricted to others and used by him alone. Women are prohibited from touching the personal belonging of a man as there is a belief that it will cause misfortune to the owner.

***Aphukhuki* (mortar) and *Akhumu* (pestle)**

In the past, all grinding was done manually. *Aphukhuki* is used for pounding and grinding rice, chilly, maize and other related crops. It is usually carved from sturdy trees that are locally available. The mortar is carved cylindrical in shape, of different sizes. This is mostly used for making pounded rice, sesame, chilies etc. This article is commonly found in every household.

***Aboshu* (mortar for pounding grain)**

Aboshu is used for grinding paddy and other food in larger quantities. It is made out of the whole trunk of a tree. Odd numbers are preferred to carve the holes which consist of 3-7 in numbers. The number of holes is carved based on the number of Mithuns killed during the *'feast of Merit'*. It is sometimes used as a bed to sleep on. This item is found mostly in a rich man's house and in the morungs.

***Asukhu* (wooden plate)**

The Sümi families are known for their practice of eating together on the same wooden plate. *Asukhu* is a wooden plate that is commonly

found in every household. Husband and wife eat together from the same plate likewise children also eat together on it. Parents usually eat on their own plate and that sanctity is maintained as a sign of respect in the household. It is the duty of the mother to serve her husband and children. Sometimes the youngest daughter does the errands during the mealtime. Female members are also expected to serve water for washing hands to the male members along with other duties. This practice is still followed, though not uniformly.

***Amuto* (basket for carrying wood)**

Wood is the main source of fuel for burning. Woods are collected from the forest and are carried in basket called *amuto* by both men and women. It is also used for carrying vegetables from the field. It is made of bamboo and it has a square bottom (Hutton, 2007). When the whole family is going to the field this basket is stacked together and is carried by the youngest female member. Men do not carry them while going to the field but carry the filled *amuto* (basket) on their return from the field.

***Akho* (basket for paddy)**

After the harvest, the paddy is carried on the head in a basket called *akho*. It is also woven out of bamboo. It is closely knitted to prevent spillage of paddy. It has a tapered and pointed edge at the base and a large opening at the top which is circular in shape.

Agricultural tools and implements

***Aphukhu* (wooden hoe)**

Aphukhu is one of the most important agricultural tools for the Sümi Nagas. It is used for works like cleaning weeds, tilling soil, digging for sowing etc. It is found in different shapes and sizes. The handle is made of wood attached with metal at the lower end for scrapping and tilling the soil.

***Akuwa* (scraper)**

According to the source of Najekhü in his work *'Sümi Lhoayezha'*, it has been narrated that *akuwa* is the first tool used by the forefathers of the Sümi Nagas. The origin of this particular tool is associated with

the Naga Myth of the *'Man, Tiger and Spirit'* folktale. According to the story, after the separation of Man, Tiger and Spirit, the man and the spirit had their own field sharing the boundary. The field of the spirit was very clean while the field of the Man was full of weeds. Therefore, one particular day, the Man went to meet the Spirit to enquire about the matter. Therefore, the Spirit decided to help the Man. The Spirit went to the Man's field and instructed the Man to turn his face the other side while he was working. As the Man turned his face, the Spirit cleaned and removed all the weeds and hid it under the huge boulder and told the Man not to lift up the boulder and look under it. But the Man became impatient and lifted the boulder after which the field of the Man was filled with weeds again. So the Spirit again instructed the Man to look up at the particular tree and find the tool kept by the Spirit. So the Man went in search of the tree and he found the *Akuwa* (scraper) hanging on the branch. Thereafter, the Man understood its purpose and began to use this tool for cleaning the weeds in the field. This tool is smaller in size and is used for cleaning the weeds when the crops are sprouting. It is used in place of the hoe as it might cut off the crops that are growing. This particular tool is used till date for cleaning the weeds in the garden and in the field.

War weapons

The weapons used by the Sümi tribe are limited. Their weapons were quite primitive. They are known to have used weapons like *Angu* (Spear), *Azuto* (shield), *Asukhi* (Machete holder), *asuxu/asulika* (Crossbow) and *Ashu* (Panjis).

***Angu* (spear)**

In the ancient past, the Sümi Nagas practiced head-hunting. *Angu* was one of the most important weapons used during the war. They threw their spear at the enemy and after killing them the heads were chopped off with *Azuta* (machete).

***Asukhi* (machete holder)**

This item is used by every man when they go out for any work. It is tied around their waist and the *Azuta* hung on it. Some decorate it with the

hair of women. Legend says that if the hair of persons who are alive is used then that particular person will suffer from headache or dizziness. This also indicates that usually the hair of the deceased is used. In some cases, the hair of the head taken from an enemy's village is used for this purpose.

***Azuto* (shield)**

Azuto is a type of shield that is used for protection during war. It is woven out of bamboo and buffalo skin. Men use this in times of war for shielding from their enemies. This armor is carried on the left hand while the spear on the right hand.

***Asuzu/likasu* (crossbow)**

Crossbow is not commonly used by all the Sümi Nagas. The easternmost part of Sümis may have learnt the use of crossbow from other tribes whom they came in contact with like Yimkhiungs, Sangtams, etc. This weapon was used mostly for hunting. It is found of various shapes and sizes.

***Ashu* (Panjis)**

Panjis is a spiked tool made of wood or bamboo. It is usually planted on the ground as a trap for enemies and used as a defense mechanism planted around the village vicinity (Hutton, 2007). This is one of the only defense mechanism known and used by the Sümi Nagas.

Conclusion

With so much of progress and development of tools and technologies all around the world, it will be indeed a great challenge to remain rooted in our culture and traditions. But what people must understand is that along with the changes we can still preserve our past cultural traditions and practices by embracing its value. If we take the case of world leading countries in technology production definitely the names like Japan, the USA, South Korea, China, etc. make the list. These countries also boast the most powerful economies in the world with millions of employments rendered to their people. What about us Nagas? What can we do? Surely, we cannot stand with these highly advanced countries

but we can use and promote our innovative skills and promote arts and crafts, create employment and preserve our traditional skills of tools and weapons. Just a simple example of the traditional knife of the Khasis in Meghalaya, which is commonly sold in the market especially in Shillong. Many who visit buy it as a gift. A number of traditional tools and articles are commonly used in every Naga household and there is preference in using these traditional articles. Traditional hand pounded rice is preferred to make Sümi sticky rice biscuit, *Ajiu Sho*. Many use grinders but the texture is different from the traditional one which is manually pounded in *'aphukhuki'* (pounding mortar). Sümis' use of *'Asukhu'* is another unique feature. The British took some Sümi Nagas along with other Nagas to the present Tinsukia district of Assam to clear the jungles because of their expertise in handling the machetes which were larger in size and suitable for cutting down huge logs and trees. These Sümi Nagas stayed back in those regions and still inhabit those areas. Therefore, it can be understood that our cultural traditions and practices are closely associated with the use of traditional tools and implements which are vital in understanding the deeper knowledge associated with them.

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2. Dr. A. Husca, Assistant Professor, Japfu Christian College (interview), dated 5th February, 2023.