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Mirroring Colonialism through Sümi Folksongs

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ABSTRACT

Music has always been an integral part of the Naga culture and tradition. Prior to the advent of Christianity folksongs played significant role in their day to day life. The folksongs of the Nagas are mostly about their social, religious, cultural, and everyday life. The Sümi Nagas in particular have varieties of folksongs which include agricultural songs, love songs, war songs, hunting songs, lullabies, orphan's songs etc. With the coming of the Britishers the traditional folksongs were replaced by western Christian music and gospel songs. The Naga traditional musical instruments like the Bamboo Mouth-Organ, the Cup Violin, the Bamboo Flute, and the Trumpet were replaced by western musical instruments like Piano, Guitar, and Violin etc. In this paper, an attempt has been made to critically analyse how history has been represented in one of the Sümi folksongs that embodies colonialism. This paper aims to understand the self-representation and rereading of history from the perspective of the Sümi Nagas in the light of colonialism.

Keywords: *Folksong, Sümi Nagas, History, Identity, Colonialism, Post-colonialism, Culture*

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1. Introduction

“What is history? An echo of the past in the future; a reflex from the future on the past”

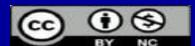
-Victor Hugo

The Sümi tribes belong to one of the major tribes from Nagaland, India. They mostly inhabit the central and southern regions of Nagaland. Like other Naga tribes the Sümis have a very rich and distinct oral tradition which includes their melodious folksongs called *apu asu le* or *lejole*. The Sümi Nagas have varieties of folksongs which can be distinguished into different categories. Hesheto Y. Chishi in his book *Introduction to Sütsa (Sümi Language)* writes, “the term *Sümi lejole* (folksongs) covers a vast array of musical styles and tunes. Some of the prominent folksongs can be classified into three similar but distinct categories i.e., seasonal agricultural work folksong, general work folksong, common or community folksong” (Chishi, 2019, p. 55). The Sümi folksongs include agricultural songs, love songs, war songs, dance songs, children's game songs, nature songs, lullabies, orphan's songs etc. Singing and composing seem to have come naturally to

them as they had songs for almost every occasion.

“The term folk music is often loosely applied to cover all traditional or orally transmitted music, music that is passed on by ears and performed by memory rather than by written or printed musical score” (Dorson, 1972, p. 363). Music has always been a part of the Sümi culture and tradition. Prior to the advent of Christianity folksongs were part of their day to day life. Their distinct songs and music were a part of their identity and culture until colonization came and distorted this very identity and culture. With the coming of the Britishers the traditional folksongs were replaced by western Christian music and gospel songs. Thus, this is also one of the reasons why the Sümi folksongs are occasionally sung today unlike in the past.

John Blacking in the book *The Performing Arts: Music and Dance* says that “music is a mediator between nature and culture, between feelings and form, a link between the innate, generalized automatic complexity of the body and the particular cultural arrangements of bodies that have been achieved through the medium of social



interaction” (Blacking, 1979, p. 4-5). The folksongs of the Sümi Nagas thus can be considered as an “ideal field” wherein the reflection of the history of its people can be seen. According to Pramod K. Nayar, “colonialism can be described as the process of settlement by Europeans in Asian, African and South American territories. Colonization found its climatic moments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was an exploitative mechanism”. (Nayar, 2010, p. 154)

2. Rereading History through Sümi Folksong

Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines the word rereading as, “an act of reading something again especially from a different perspective” (Merriam Webster’s Dictionary, n.d.). This paper thus aims towards rereading history and understanding of the once colonized Nagas from their own perspective which is vividly portrayed in one of the Sümi folksongs entitled ‘*She Aqhi Kuthu Azughilo Cheye!*’ (Oh Three Months in the Ocean we Travelled). This folksong was sung and composed by the Shena Old Labour Corps in France during the First World War when the Nagas were under British imperialism. It was during this time that British recruited thousands of labour corps from the different parts of the colony for assistance in the war:

When there was a call to go to war theatre in France, it was unimaginable that two thousand Nagas responded, out of these two thousand Nagas, Semas responded by 1,000 men, Lothas 400, Aos 200, Regnmas 200 and Changs with other frontier tribes 200. One could imagine that among many Naga tribes, only five tribes responded to go to war theatre in France” (A Memorabilia of the Sema Nagas' Participation in the First World War [AMSNPFWW], 2018, 10).

The group marched out of Naga Hills on April 21st 1917. It was a totally new experience for the Nagas as they were never exposed to the outside world before. The enthusiasm for adventure might have kept their energy intact throughout the voyage until they were introduced to the ‘perilous trials’ of the war. The Nagas were warriors, but this was a war different from the wars they had fought before. On reaching France they were divided into groups. Their colonial masters made them swing their daos and spears in the air and vent out their typical Naga war cry. The Britishers keenly took pictures of this splendor and later on these pictures were circulated into the German territories which made the foe’s believe that the Britishers had brought an extraordinary race of people known as

Nagas from the north eastern side of Indian sub-continent to fight against the Germans. (AMSNPFWW, 2018, 12)

Below is the “song of the forgotten legends”, a folksong sung by the Sümi labour corps in France. A sincere attempt has been made to translate the song into English for the assistance of the nonnative speakers.

She Aqhi Kuthu Azughilo Cheye! (Oh Three Months in the Ocean we Travelled)

Hoi she holo holono ililiholo huuu huuu huuoi

Hoi she alo alono ililialo huuu huuu huuoi

(The above lines act as an introduction to the folksong.)

Hoi she Nagami France ghulalo cheye huuu huuu huuoi

Oh Naga people on the way to the war in France

Hoi she aqhi kuthu azughilo cheye huuu huuu huuoi

Oh three months in the ocean we travelled

Hoi she aqhi kuthu yeghi ithumla huuu huuu huuoi

Oh three months land I did not see

Hoi she aqhi kuthu ami ithumla huuu huuu huuoi

Oh three months fire I did not see

Hoi she aqhi kuthu ipu ithumla huuu huuu huuoi

Oh three months my father I did not see

Hoi she aqhi kuthu iza ithumla huuu huuu huuoi

Oh three months my mother I did not see

Hoi she aqhi kuthu lomi ithumla huuu huuu huuoi

Oh three months my sweetheart I did not see

Hoi she ni ghuha tono kilo wocheni huuu huuu huuoi

Oh the war I have won and homeward I go

Hoi she ni idewo niyeghi toluye huuu huuu huuoi

Oh to my land I have reached

Hoi she ni idewo niluzalo cheye huuu huuu huuoi

Oh in my field I walk

Hoi she avi noghi niveshelo igha huuu huuu huuoi

Oh mithun you cry near my field

Hoi she igha kuathino nilosuye huuu huuu huuoi

Oh when you cry my heart aches

Hoi she awuduno nikitsulo igha huuu huuu huuoi

Oh the rooster crows above my house

Hoi she igha kuathino nilosuye huuu huuu huuoi

Oh when you crow my heart aches

Hoi she atsulino nilashelo igha huuu huuu huuoi

Oh the dog in my pathway cries

Hoi she igha kuathino nilosuye huuu huuu huuoi

Oh when you cry my heart aches

Hoi she aqhi noghi nilashelo yesu huuu huuu huuoi

Oh moon, even you gleam by my pathway

Hoi she yesu kuathino nilosuye huuu huuu huuoi

Oh when you gleam my heart aches

Hoi she wolono ileno wolo huuu huuu huuoi

Hoi she zulo zulo no ilino zulo huuu huuu huuoi

(The last two lines indicate the conclusion of the folksong)

The above folksong composed and sung by the Sümi labour corps in France is an important historical testimonial of colonization. This song takes the listeners back to the time of colonization where the Sümis led by their British masters took part in the First World War. This folksong is a representative of the anguish and desolation of the Sümi Nagas who went to the battle field to fight alongside their colonial masters during colonization.

This folksong can be divided into four parts; in the first part of the song the singers sing of the Nagas going to the war in France. This is denoted by the third line of the song, “oh Naga people on the way to the war in France”. The second part is about the process of the journey in the ocean. This part of the song expresses the grief of the Sümi labour corps in France who sings of their anguish of journeying in the sea for months without seeing the land. They sing of how they miss their land, home, and family. In the third part, the singers sing about returning home after the victory in the war. This is also denoted by a single line in the song as they sing, “Oh the war I have won and homeward I go”. The fourth part of the song is about homecoming; the satisfaction and happiness of reaching their homeland. They sing of the joy of being back to the land they have been born into and the land they belong to. Their emotions are so deeply connected to their land that even the cry of the rooster makes their heart ache and even the moon that shines upon their pathway seem to be heartbreaking. They sing of how everything about/in their homeland makes them sad after their return from the war. This represents the emotional and spiritual connection of the Sümi Nagas with their beloved land. A sense of patriotism towards their motherland is thus reflected in this folksong. In order to express themselves they have beautifully woven their emotions into a song which will forever live in the hearts of their people. It is not surprising that the song does not focus on the “victory” of the war, the war which they had fought for their colonial masters. They do not sing of the joy of winning the war. In fact, more than the victory of the war they are overjoyed with the homecoming. The fact that the process of going to the war and also about the end of war is denoted only through one line each in the song depicts the insignificance of the war. The primary focus is on their feelings and emotions rather than the ‘war’. The ‘war’ seems secondary to them. This may be because they feel less connected with the great ‘Other’. In Lacan’s theory, the ‘other’ with small ‘o’ designates the colonized and the ‘Other’ with capital ‘O’ has been called the *grande-autre* or the great other. The ‘Other’ has always been alien to the Sümi Nagas and even the war they had fought was not their own war but “their” war. Thus this is also representative of the disconnectedness of the ‘other’ as the colonized Sümi Nagas did not identify

themselves in any way with the ‘Other’ (Nayar, 2008).

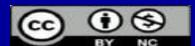
Den Ben Amos in his essay “Towards a Definition of Folklore in Context” says, “in its cultural context, folklore is not an aggregate of things, but a process—a communicative process” (Amos, 1971, p. 9). As a “communicative process” this folksong is an attempt to communicate about the long forgotten history of the Sümi brethrens who gave away their lives for the sake of their colonial masters. Thus, they leave behind their mark in a postcolonial world with their song as the story of their anguish and misery; a song which will be passed down as a historical account of their experiences. Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* writes, “the oppressor, in his own sphere, starts the process, a process of domination, of exploitation and of pillage, and in the other sphere the coiled, plundered creature which is the native provided fodder for the process as best he can” (Fanon, 1967, p. 39). A reflection of colonial domination and exploitation can be seen in this folksong. The tribal men who had known no other world than his own small world confined to his village and clan are being taken to fight in a battle where ‘strange’ kind of arms were used. The only weapons he was skilled at using were the daos and the spears which were inefficient in comparison to the armaments that were being used in the battlefield. Thus, leaving him only with these ‘inefficient’ weapons to protect himself in the Great War. In this regard J. H. Hutton in his book *The Sema Nagas* writes, “as in the other western Naga tribes, the principal offensive weapons of the Sema are the spear and the dao; the crossbow, originally perhaps borrowed from tribes further east, is also used. The only defensive weapon is the shield, unless we may include “panjis”. No defensive armor is used by the Semas, not even a cane helmet” (Hutton, 1921, p. 18). This folksong is a self-representation of history from the perspective of the colonized people, a firsthand narration of their experiences. Thus, a significant documentation of rereading history.

3. Conclusion

“Folksongs express the dreams and prayers and hopes of the working class”

-Hank Williams

Folksongs, apart from being creative are very expressive in nature. The Sümi Nagas who were a part of the First World War took their folksong as a means to document and express their experiences of



the war. They have written history through their song as their song is a source of information of the real account of their experiences and struggles under British Empire. It is also representative of the relationship between the native and the 'settler' which is ruled by hegemony. It is reflective of the fact that the native is always bound to 'obey' the 'settler'. However, the native is someone who is "overpowered but not tamed; he is treated as an inferior but he is not convinced of his inferiority" (Fanon, 1967, p. 41). Therefore, he chose to represent himself and sing about his own experiences. The history of the colonized men has always been presented to the world from the eyes of the colonizers. However, here is a song that represents the long forgotten history of the native men from his own language and the language he chooses to write his own history is the language of music, the thing that he is best at.

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