

## Chapter 2

### NARRATIVES AS CULTURAL MEMORY

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the theory of cultural memory will be used to examine how varied narratives mediate the Mao Nagas' collective memory. The chapter will explore how the narratives of the Mao Nagas serve as repositories of the collective experiences, knowledge and values of the community over generations. Narratives weave together the collective experiences of members into meaningful stories. They act as a bridge that connects the past and the present, and enable the members to reconstruct their identity, fostering a sense of belongingness in the present. An analysis of how these narratives have been handed down, adapted and transformed with time will throw light on how cultural memory has evolved over the years in the Mao Naga society contributing to the formation of their identity.

#### 2.2 The Concept of Collective Memory

Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), a French sociologist and a student of Emile Durkheim, was influenced by Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness which provided him with a solid ground to interpret memory as a social phenomenon. Halbwachs' central thesis was on the social conditioning of memory. The memory of an individual is formed and shaped when he/she socializes with the other members of a group. Thus, memory is collective. This collective nature of memory stresses the importance of individuals who contribute to its formation. In other words, it is individuals in groups who remember and share (Halbwachs 5, 19, 22; Assmann 21- 22).

Though the term collective memory had earlier been coined by Hugo Homfmannsthal in 1902 (Bosch 3), it was Halbwachs who developed this concept in his three books which were published at different times. *Les cadres sociaux de la memoire* (the social frameworks of memory) in 1925 is his attempt to establish that memory is social, that it depends on social

structures. His work *La topographie legendaire des evangiles enterre sainte* (The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land), published in 1941, emphasized the sites and functions of memory using the Holy Land as a specific example. In *La memoire collective* (1950), he discusses memory as a mutual among members of “groups” (Erll 304; Erll 8; Assmann 21; Halbwachs 22).

The ideas of Halbwachs were a ground-breaking contribution to memory studies with an emphasis on the social construction of memory which earned him an important place in the history of sociology (Goff 53; Halbwachs 21).

Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory attempts to establish that memory depends on social structures (Halbwachs 37; Tota and Hagen 1; Erll 304) and is collective. We are not alone because it is through others that one remembers, and so one’s ideas and thinking are influenced by the group to which one belongs. The concept of the narrations must be known to all and shared by the members (Halbwachs 23-24, 31).

Every human experience is located in a social context; therefore, it can also be said that human memory is rooted in a social context and structure. Memory functions within a collective context because an individual’s memory is connected to several collective memories in society (Halbwachs 22 – 23, 40; Luiselli 110; Erll 5).

According to Halbwachs, collective memory goes beyond the utterance of words. There are objects and geographical sites or locations dating back thousands of years and beyond the horizons of living memory, and these also serve as collective memory, e.g., *La topographie legendaire*, and the chapters on aristocracy and memories of religious communities in *Les sociaux de la memoire* (Erll 307).

Collective memory “does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of the material traces, rites, texts and traditions left behind by the past, and with the aid moreover of recent psychological and social data, that is to say, with the present” (Assmann 116; Halbwachs

38, 40). This is because a society or a group always exhibits a certain degree of creativity (Halbwachs 25).

Halbwachs added to the thought of Durkheim, his master, that the past is a social construction if not wholly shaped by the concerns of the present. Later, he argues that the beliefs, interests and aspirations of the present shape the various views of the past. He departs from the Durkheimian approach by using the presentist approach to collective memory, which states that social constructions of memory are influenced by the needs of the present (Halbwachs 25).

Halbwachs focussed on the social conditioning of memory (Assmann 21), referring to the concept of collective memory and the social frames of memory (Wawrzyniak and Pakier 258-259). One cannot think of past events without discoursing upon them. Memory lives and thrives through meaningful communication because one can communicate only what one remembers (Halbwachs 53; Assmann 23).

*Les cadres sociaux de la memoire* deals with the collective elements of individual memory with the help of language. It is through interaction, sharing and communication with others that we learn things. Our ways of thinking and acting are shaped by the environment around us. The family is the first and foremost social framework for an individual. It is in the family that an individual learns to communicate. "Our kins communicate to us our first notions about people and things" (Halbwachs 61). "There exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection" (Halbwachs 38). "... one may affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories" (40). For Halbwachs, there is an individual memory and this memory is collective.

Physical objects such as statues, monuments, places, symbols, etc., all help to unearth the past. With time, the past does not remain as it was. It changes and transforms. "The very

place it occupies no longer remains the same since everything around it is in the process of transformation” (Halbwachs 204). Yet the core of the message remains. Thus, the term collective indicates a group’s identity constructed from available narratives: stories, monuments, songs and other means that bind the members together, creating a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood among the members.

An important marker of collective memory is cultural heritage, big and small, tangible and intangible. Examples of tangible markers are museums or villages, paintings, sculptures, and archaeological artefacts. According to UNESCO, ‘intangible heritage is defined as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skill, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage’. ‘People use both tangible heritage and intangible practices as tools that help to shape collective memories and to provide the narratives that explain and accompany them’ (Barthel-Bouchier 221).

The collective memory of people without a script of their own is termed ‘ethnic memory’ by Leroi-Gourham. In most cultures without scripts, the accumulation of memory is a part of everyday life. Collective memory provides a historical foundation for the existence of families or groups (Goff 55) and so collective memory can also be referred to as social memory.

H. Blumenberg states that there are “no pure facts of memory” (Assmann 26). The remembrance of the past may not give a correct replica of the past, for the past is not preserved in its original form (37). The degree of one’s recollections of the past depends on how an individual’s thoughts place themselves in the social frameworks (Halbwachs 38).

“The mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society” (Halbwachs 34, 51). The greatest memory comes back to us when our parents, friends and others recall them to us. It is others who spur us on; they help us to recollect and answer the questions in life. Therefore, we need not look for the memories elsewhere but in the people with whom we live

and share our lives. In this sense, there exists collective memory as also the social framework for memory (38, 40).

Social frameworks are the means used by collective memory to construct an image of the past at a particular period. The memories of each period in one's life are preserved and reproduced, thus creating a connection between the past and the present, which helps to perpetuate identity. The reconstructive nature is seen in how the believers remember Jesus by the Way of the Cross and his Resurrection. Jerusalem became the centre of commemorative places that gave it spatial links through the churches, chapels and other holy sites (Assmann 27).

Collective memory is found in various disciplines such as anthropology, cognitive science, computer science, folklore, oral history, linguistics, literary analysis, management studies, and sociology. Collective memory is also known as "group memory", or "memory of the nation" (Linde 5; Assmann 22).

The theory of collective memory reflects the dependence of individual memory on social frameworks and on different communities. Individual and collective memories are tools through which social groups establish identity. "The concept of collective rests upon the assumption that every social group develops a memory of its past which allows it to preserve and pass along its self-image" (Bosch 3). It is a socio-political construct, a version of the past defined and negotiated through changing socio-political power and communicated through the use of language (Halbwachs 22-24,50).

### **2.3 The concept of cultural memory**

Cultural memory, as observed by Erll Astrid and Ann Rigney, *has recently emerged as a useful umbrella term to describe the complex ways in which societies remember their past. This Cultural Memory has evolved from 'Collective Memory* which is concerned with identifying the sites of memory, involving those memories shared by generations as a result of

public acts of remembrance using media like stories, images, museums and monuments. Literature is one such element that contributes to how societies remember their past (111). Halbwachs' theory 'on collective memory' (1950) laid the conceptual foundation for 'cultural memory' (Bommas vii). Thus, we can say that cultural memory refers to the way in which a group constructs its identity and history through texts, monuments, objects and traditions.

The concept of cultural memory is originally derived from archaeological studies. It was first introduced in the work of Jan Assmann's and Jan Aleida's *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis* (*Cultural Memory*) in the 1980s. Assmann's work concentrates mainly on the early written cultures of the Middle East and the Mediterranean while Aleida focuses on the forms and functions of cultural memory from ancient to the post-modern age (Assmann viii-ix).

Assmann continued to make significant contributions to the study of memory, especially the concept of cultural memory in *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen-* (*Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination*) was published in 1992. The book made a ground-breaking theoretical analysis of memory, culture and identity. Culture is remembered with the help of human memory. Memory is the force that can shape cultural identity and allow it to respond creatively to the changing times. Cultural memory is the result of a long-term memory and practices, and can span for over 3,000 years.

According to Assmann, cultural memory is a recollection of the past that helps to form an identity by linking the past and the present with the help of images and tales of the remote past into the background of the onward-moving present, bringing hopes and continuity (Assmann 2). For Assmann, cultural memory encompasses the collective memory of a society in forms such as texts, monuments, rituals, etc.

The concept and study of cultural memory, which began as a small seed, has grown into a big tree covering several disciplines such as archaeology and comparative literature;

branches of cultural studies as well as history, arts, archaeology, comparative literature and politics (Assmann xi). Thus, cultural memory has become a discipline that describes the complex ways in which societies remember the past and share it from generation to generation in various ways: stories, images and monuments. It is a tool that can preserve culture and traditions down the years through regular repetition and the celebration of festivals and rituals as also through narratives, objects and monuments. These are all different forms of folklore and most narratives are folklore (Olrik 1; Erll 111; Sanelly 58; Assmann 3, 17, 42). The memory of the past is brought to the present with the help of the human memory through narratives. That is why Rubin states that the preservation of culture and traditions depend solely on human memory which acts as storage and disseminates it in the forms of songs, stories and other forms of genres from one generation to the next (3).

Assmann's concept of cultural memory raises a fundamental difference between the collective memories based on everyday life (communicative memory) and the collective memory that is more institutionalized (cultural memory); one leads to the other. From everyday communication, we move to the area of objective culture. The move is so fundamental that "memoire" (memory) is transformed into "histoire" (history). So, there is a connection between everyday memory and objectivised culture. According to Sturken "Cultural memory as a term implies not only that memories are often produced and reproduced through cultural forms, but also the kind of circulation that exists between personal memories and cultural memories" (qtd in Bosch 4; Erll 308; Assmann 8, 72). Communicative memory becomes cultural memory when the information gathered from narratives remains stable, and when the experiences become a means and are developed into a canon of stories and images that help to create the identity of a group (Schwartz 13; Rigney 66).

Cultural memory and communicative memory are two important elements of collective memory. Communicative memory is everyday interactions and is limited to 80-100 years. It

has no special carriers and everyone is involved in remembering and interpreting the past. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is a memory that is fixed to material objectifications. Unlike communicative memory, it is preserved and interpreted by trained specialists (Assmann 34). Its objects are mythical events from the distant past which are considered to be foundational to the community. It is based on stored media which allow members to repeatedly access information which can be told and retold (Bommas 4; Erll 311). Communicative memory then is “living memory” because memories of the past events are shared and passed on through direct communication. On the other hand, cultural memory consists of memories that go beyond the living memory; it is a memory that is preserved and transmitted through cultural practices, narratives, monuments and artifacts.

According to anthropologist Vansina, there is a gap between communicative memory which spans three generations, and cultural memory which spans 3,000 years and more. He named it as the “Floating gap” and it refers to memory that continues to be communicated and that which has already been sediment into culture (Assmann 34; Olick 46, 47).

Cultural memory is fixed. It exists in texts, images and also in contemporary contexts which put the objectivised meaning into its perspective making it relevant according to the times. Its formation can be seen through the angle of images, rituals and linguistics. As far as language is concerned, its formation takes place much before the arrival of writing, and so writing is not the same as cultural memory. It provides knowledge of the past to its members. This is done through texts, monuments and symbols. Preservation of knowledge has two aspects: formative and normative: formative means that it educates, civilizes and humanizes; normative means that it provides rules of conduct. It also explains, distinguishes, reinterprets, criticizes and controls. Finally, it is a reflection or image of the people themselves. Cultural memory interprets common practices through different genres like proverbs, maxims, etc. Thus, cultural memory comprises reusable texts, images and rituals that are specific to each



society in each era. Similarly, each group bases its awareness on unity and particularity (Assmann 37-72).

## **2.4 Carriers of Cultural Memory**

How is the past transmitted? In the absence of writing, in an oral community, human memory was the only means of storing and preserving knowledge of the past that helped to consolidate the identity of a group. It functioned principally through storage, retrieval and communication – mostly in the oral form. In an illiterate society, occasions are created through festivals for everyone to have access to cultural memory. The yearly commemoration of important events in the life of the society ensures the communication and continuation of the knowledge that gives identity to the group (Assmann 41). In this way, this past is transmitted from one generation to the next.

In pre-literate societies, there were specialists called memory “genealogists, guardians of the royal law books, historians of the court, traditionists”, whose duty it was to hand down the traditions to the next generation. Balandier called them “the memory of the society”. Besides them, there are the heads of the families, bards and priests, according to Leroi-Gourham (Goff 56). In the pre-literate society, the “amateurs living among pre-literate peoples collect oral traditions and, although not in the least interested in the theoretical aspect of the question, used them to reconstruct the past of these people” (Vansina7).

In primitive tribes, the old people were the guardians of traditions (Kumar 48). In the early written cultures, the bearers and guardians of traditions were the administrators, interpreters, diviners, prophets and healers. They were the people who received or gave orders within the civil structure. Their task was to ensure that the established traditions were interpreted well and their meaning preserved. In such cultures, cultural memory is organized around the texts to interpret, imitate, learn and criticize them (Assmann 80, 86). For example, among the Yup’ik Eskimo traditions, the elders play an important role in transmitting the

traditions of the past. The elders don't spell things out for you or theorize. Usually, they will tell you a story that illustrates what they are teaching you. It is not their story. It was passed on to them. They claim no authority about what they tell you. More importantly, they are telling you what a great responsibility it is to be able to learn from others, cherish that knowledge, and pass it on carefully. They seem to feel the enormity of this situation, and often they have no way to pass on their sense of responsibility and their knowledge to the rest of the people (Mather 17). Thus, in almost all societies, it is the elders and senior members of the community who transmit the knowledge of the past to the younger generations.

Cultural memory has special carriers that transmit the past, the primary among which are special human carriers who disseminate the rich traditions. They are the interpreters and mediate between the texts and the listeners/the readers; e.g., the Israelite *sofer*, the Jewish *rabbi*, the Hellenistic *philologos*, the Islamic *sheikh or mullah*, the "*shamans, bards, griots, priests, teachers, artists, scribes, scholars, mandarin*" and others. In Africa, it was the duty of the griots or extempore singers to preserve and handover through their varied professions as poets, actors, dancers and mime artists, while in India it was the Brahmin who belonged to the highest caste in the society. In Rwanda, there are learned persons who passed down word for word the traditions of the society. These specialists are ranked as the highest dignitaries in the land "Interpretation became the expression of memory, and the interpreter the remembrance of a forgotten truth" (Assmann 39-40, 79-80).

Besides the human carriers, some material objects and channels act as carriers of cultural memory such as texts, images and monuments. In short, mnemonic devices help people to remember and preserve the past. For example, in Peru, in the *quipa* of the Inca Empire (mentioned already in the introduction), who also used iconographic material to preserve their traditions (Vansina 37).

Among the Mao Nagas, the carriers of cultural memory are the elders from the community. They are the local guardians of traditions. Nepuni, writing on the classical language, argued that language is preserved and handed down orally for generations using folksongs, folktales, dirges, prose and poetry, wise sayings, proverbs, etc. Social institutions like youth dormitories (*Khrucho* and *Locho*) play a vital role in bringing the language alive besides social feasts and gatherings, workplaces, etc. (16). It is not only the classical language that is taught; in these morungs,

young men and women are taught the folksongs, folktales, community work and co-operation especially to live upright and virtuous life. The real background as to why bachelor dormitory existed was that these young men might become responsible citizens of the village and the society (Nepuni 130).

Moral values and a sense of solidarity were also imparted in the morungs:

...in olden days when there was epidemic in the village, the people feared to go out even at night, but young bachelors roamed and indulged in traditional yells in the village to bring consolation and encouragement to frightened families. During the village war (*osooru*) these young men guard the village from the enemy day and night. When there is an urgent and necessary work, they will be the first to help out (Nepuni 130).

The wealth of the oral traditions and culture is preserved and brought to the present in this manner. The owner of the *morungs* is considered to be a good and upright person in training the young men. It can be compared to a formal educational institute for young people. The old people in the Mao Naga society are usually loved and esteemed for their wisdom and knowledge. They have much experience and memories to pass on to the younger generations. Thus, in the Mao Naga society, the elders, the owners of the *morung* and the heads of the families were responsible for transmitting knowledge of the past to the younger generations.

In this way, the new generation is enabled to learn about the life of their ancestors through storytelling, songs, rituals, celebrations of important events, and through everyday interactions.

As is the case in every society, objects, monuments and sacred sites also play the role of tangible carriers of cultural memory; so too, the Mao Nagas have historical sites, objects, and monuments. The village of Makhel and its vicinity which falls within the geographical location in the state of Manipur is the place they claim to have occupied since time immemorial. It is mentioned in their narratives and songs. It bears historical importance as the place of origin and migration not only for the Mao Nagas but also for a few other Naga tribes as discussed in the myth of Dziiliamosiia. The objects and the monuments in and around the habitat, especially within and without Makhel village, act as mnemonic devices that tell of the past of the Mao Nagas. Worthy of mention are the monoliths commemorating the departure of the three brothers, the banyan tree, the wild pear tree, and the megalith stones (*TuphaTu*). These and more have been discussed in great detail in chapter 3 and chapter 4 of this research study. Cultural memory plays a significant role in transmitting the values of the past to the present generations. The folk narratives contain values and are disseminated across generations. Folk narratives entertain as well as serve as an educational tool that enhances society's identity and imparts values. A detailed discussion about this is presented in the next chapter.

## **2.5 Connective structures in cultural memory**

Connective structure refers to the ways and means in which the memories of shared experiences of the past are linked to the present and to different groups through different media.

...it also links yesterday with today by giving form and presence to influential experiences and memories, incorporating images and tales from another time into the background of the onward moving present, and bringing with it hope and continuity (Assmann 2).

These structures include rituals, narrative texts, images, monuments and commemorations. Through these elements, the memories of the past are transmitted, preserved and reconstructed over time. Repetition is the basic principle behind all connective structures. It plays an important role in shaping collective memory. Assmann argued that rituals play an important role in cultural memory through repetition or re-enactment of significant events. The Jewish Seder, their ceremonial feast of the Passover meal, is a perfect example of repetition (keep and remember), a connective structure that continues to weave stories and tell who they are, by creating a link with the past. The Passover night is not only the repetition of the past but also re-presents or presentifies an event from the remote past and expresses it through the Haggadah (collection of blessings, songs, anecdotes, and homilies on the escape of the Israelites to Egypt), which is also an interpretation of text. In this way, the memory of the past is brought to the present through the explanation of traditions (Assmann 3).

It is through repetition that ideas, stories and rituals are perpetuated across generations in a society without the written script, and ensure their survival and relevance. That is why Assmann suggests that repetition is a structural necessity. It fosters continuity and, at the same time, the preservation of cultural memory and the formation of identity (82).

For the Mao Nagas, the connective structures are the tales, songs, yearly commemorations and celebration of community feasts, observation of *gennas*<sup>1</sup>, monuments and objects which bear historical importance.

Repetition in pre-literate societies was an important structure since almost everything was handed down verbally. But in this process, the original form is lost and the narrator uses his creative imagination to fill in the gap to catch the attention of the audience in a form suitable for transmission. According to Vansina, Bauer speaks of two types of oral traditions. The first consists of all sources, whether intact or distorted while transmitting, and can be traced back to the individual or public and handed on with a purpose. The second refers to those sources which

have no personal authorship, and it is to this group that rumours, myths, sagas, legends, anecdotes, proverbs and folk songs belong. These are being shared spontaneously from person to person, from generation to generation, and during the process of transmitting, the original forms are lost and the content becomes blurred and fluctuating (Vansina 4-5).

How the essence of the narratives remained unchanged is a problem. This is explained in the following manner. When an incident took place, the people who witnessed it would not have kept silent, and those who narrated the events may not have told the same story. Memory can only preserve the recollections of the past, for with time many things disappear and so only the recollections remain (Assmann 26). Many of the narratives reflect the mindset of the people. It narrates the lives or events that existed in times past. But at the same time, the narrators reshape persons, exaggerate their characters and mix fiction with real events.

## **2.6 Changes, transformation and innovation in cultural memory**

With the introduction of the written script, scholars and writers began to preserve the past rich heritage in writing. This is made more possible because of the invention of the press and the advancement of new technologies in the field of learning and documentation (Assmann vii).

Scholars like Olick, Erll and others examine how cultural memory undergoes changes depending on the needs of the times. Cultural memory evolves in keeping with the present needs of the society. In this way, Olick argued that collective memory is not only preserving the past but also shaping the present and the future. Cultural memory records and documents events of different experiences in life like the trauma of war victims in the Holocaust in Germany, the Civil War in America, and the survival of natural calamities or conflicts. Major social issues like protests or disasters are documented and widely circulated across the globe, shaping the collective memory of diverse audiences (46), or delving deeper into the life of a group of people.

The rise of new technologies and inventions has made the world a global village where an event taking place in one part of the world is spread to the whole world. The interconnectedness among countries fosters transnational memory where collective memories go beyond region, state and national boundaries. At the same time, this resulted in the rise of a cultural transition, where the old traditions, beliefs, and customs have been, to a certain extent, forgotten or done away with like the community living, sense of sharing, and traditional religion. After the post-colonial period, the people accepted modernization and adapted themselves to the new style of life. Surprisingly, it also gave rise to resurgence of the old traditions, culture, and beliefs and constructed in the renewal and fresh understanding of their identity.

Ever since the loss of their script, as told in the legend of the Nagas and the Mao Nagas in particular, the cultural memory of the ancestors has been handed down through the narratives in varied forms, yet maintaining the core of the content. The variations that we find as discussed in this chapter are because memory is never static, but a dynamic reality that changes according to the needs of the times, as also to suit the audience. In this way, many original versions changed, much so in an oral community, where handing down the past depended solely on human memory.

With the introduction of the Roman script (see details in Chapter 3), the documentation of the past has begun. The introduction of the Roman script is credited to the Christian missionaries and the colonizers. The coming of advanced technologies has made access to cultural memory easy for the younger generations, unlike the period before the invention of print media and other means of documentation where the only channel of handing down cultural heritage was done orally.

The traditional folk narratives of the Mao Nagas are now preserved in the written form, ensuring proper documentation which is crucial to prevent loss due to the oral nature of

forgetting or lack of proper dissemination. Further advances in the field of media and technology have made a great impact on the Mao Naga folk narratives. They can be preserved through written records, YouTube and other media platforms and transmitted not only to the Mao Nagas but to a wider audience beyond their geographical boundaries across the world. Exposing their narratives in this manner will certainly foster in them a sense of pride and identity. The easy access to the folk narratives through these means will help the younger generations who are familiar with modern gadgets to revitalize themselves and ensure their continuity. These platforms will allow them even to check misrepresentations of their folk narratives.

In this way, the memory of past events, stories and traditions continue to take place in the social framework yet not without construction. The changes and the transformations that are brought about through advanced technologies will help to preserve and revitalize their cultural identity. The folk narratives which, to a large extent, are a reflection of the lives of their ancestors will continue to thrive in this digital epoch.

While exalting the positive impact of new technologies that modernization has brought, about, one cannot deny the fact that post - colonial period witnessed a cultural transition among the Mao Nagas. Many age-old traditions, customs, beliefs, and values have been forgotten as discussed in 2.7. At the same time, there is a revival of the values and traditions of the ancestors by the present generations and the desire to collect and preserve them.

## **2.7 Memory dynamics**

Memory is never static, and so the past is not remembered as it was. Halbwachs argued that,

...precisely because these memories are repetitions, because they are successively engaged in very different systems of notions, at different periods of our lives, they have



lost the form and the appearance they once had. It is not possible to reproduce all the details of events as it was (Halbwachs 47).

Memory cannot preserve the past in its original form and shape. It works through reconstruction. The past is continuously subjected to the process of organizing and reorganizing to fit the present. Though cultural memory focuses on fixed points in the past, the past is not preserved as it was. Memory is attached to some symbols; e.g., the stories of the Israelites and their exodus in the desert that are commemorated in festivals. In cultural memory what is important are not the facts but the remembered history (Assmann 37-38). To remember is not just to recollect the past but also to form meaningful narrative sequences through encoding, retrieval and communication. This is what cultural memory is about. Yet it is not possible to reproduce all the events of the past in vivid detail, nor accurately, because it is not an account of an eyewitness or of those who had heard it from them (Vansina 4; Halbwachs 46-47; Schwartz 19).

Transmitting something word for word is not possible in oral traditions. They are never passed on as they are heard. The narrative fluctuates since the exact words cannot be produced (Degh 59). Besides, as Halbwachs argued, each time the memories are repeated, they lose their original form and appearance (Halbwachs 47).

To remember a narrative or a piece of verse from oral traditions does not require recollections of exact words. This is partly because the narrator, while attempting to narrate, recollects only his scattered reminiscences and combines them in a new way (Olrik 65, 67; Rubin 6; Erll 306-307). Yet the essence remains the same or lies close to the original. What is transmitted are the stories about the past, its imagery and its themes.

That memory transmitted in society is not a 'word for word' memory is proved by the existence of variations of myths, for the exact reproduction of the past seems less important, useful or valuable. Collective memory seems to work by a 'generative reconstruction rather

than mechanistic memorization'. It thus grants the narrator more freedom and creativity (Goff 57). A vivid example of the reconstruction of memory is the Way of the Cross of the Christian community (Assmann 27).

The Mao Naga folk narratives show signs of reconstruction. However, studies show that the content of the narratives is the same in all the versions. Since the Mao Nagas shared common ancestors with the Poumai Naga, they shared the same myth but, as indicated, there are variations. Nepuni, a native scholar, also argued that the Shiipfomei myth (the present Mao Naga and the Poumai Naga groups) differs from village to village and from person to person, based on the wisdom of the narrators; yet the message in the narration is the same (Nepuni 42). The Angami Nagas are also believed to have originated from Makhel and share with them narratives such as *Dziiliamosiia*.

The Mao folk narratives are not static; they are dynamic and are constructed and reconstructed overtime. This is seen in the community festivals of the Mao Nagas. The Mao Naga feasts are centred on agriculture. The feasts are marked to celebrate the sowing of seeds, transplanting the shoots, harvesting, etc. The feasts have a spiritual aspect as well. Every feast is preceded by the observation of *gennas* to implore god's blessings upon the members. The feasts are always accompanied by merry-making, eating and drinking. It was during the occasion of one such community feast that Kateini and her sister Kajiini went to the girls' *morung* with wine and meat to feast with their peer group. The tales of Kateini, Asha and Chahreo (refer to chapters 1 and 3) are seen in the context of community festivals like *Chiithuni* (Harvest feast or New Year festival) and *Saleni* (post-plantation feast celebrated for five days). *Chiithuni* is celebrated in the first month of the year. *Saleni* is a sacred feast celebrated for five days in July (*Sale khro*). It is also called *Kapeni* (cultivation feast). In both feasts the custom of climbing the mountain known as *pfoki kapra* is observed. Therefore, it is at times confusing to say during which feast the story of Kateini took place. Over the years, the celebration of

the community feasts has changed, so much so that the traditional spirit of celebrating the feast has undergone reconstruction. In the olden days, drinking and eating, especially during the festivals, was very much part and parcel of their life, nay identity. They drank moderately and were disciplined. Today, drinking traditional wine has been replaced with modern beverages. Even the mood of the celebration has changed. People are becoming conscious of this despite the many advantages that modern technology has brought to society. Collective efforts are made by different groups such as the village councils, women's groups and student unions to retrieve and revive their rich traditions. The most recently organized celebration is the Saleni (post-plantation feast) from July 2-8, 2024 in almost all the Mao Naga villages to preserve the traditions of the forefathers which have been forgotten by the younger generations. Even *Chiithuni* is being organised at the village level to revive and preserve the rich past.



Fig. 3. *Chiithuni* celebration at Maopundung village, Manipur (Photographed during the field visit, 2.01.2022)

## 2.8 Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Mao Nagas

Collective memory is formed through the contribution of individual memories in the groups. These memories are communicated through objects and monuments, myths, legends, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history and tragedies that exist and are circulated among members. In this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, and in all

societies; indeed, narratives start with the very history of mankind; there is not, nor has there ever been anywhere, any people without narratives; all classes and all human groups have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds (Barthes 237).

Assmann and Aleida made a very significant contribution to understanding memory and its role in transmitting the traditions of the past to the younger generations through narrative media. They argued that narratives play an important role in the construction and transmission of cultural memory. It is through the narratives that the memory of the past is remembered and interpreted. These narratives are not only historical accounts of the group of a people but they carry values that shape the collective identity of a group.

Narratives are passed on collectively by members of a specific group to their younger generations orally. They have passed the test of time and have been handed down again and again. It is a view of the people about themselves. The term people refer to the folk which is defined as a group or tribe that have at least a common factor: religion, occupation, ethnicity, geographical location (Olorik 56), language and customs.

Memories are passed down in the form of narratives through members belonging to the community, enabling the passage and continuity of memories. These memories are related to events of the past related to significant events of natural phenomena (Kharmawphlang 42). One's life is shaped profoundly by the memory of the past. It is a record of past experiences or events and is disseminated later through the act of remembrance with the help of language to represent the past through the narratives (Linde 1).

Unwritten sources were embedded in a form suitable for oral transmission and their continuation depends on the power of the memory of the members of the community. Every community, even the most civilized community, has its beginning in oral traditions (Vansina1). In a society where there was no written script, the reconstruction of the past depended solely

on oral traditions. It is with the help of memory that we are connected to the past. This enables us to build a stronger bond with it and reconstruct our identity.

Since there were no writings in the olden days, the people memorized the narratives in the form of songs, stories, proverbs and wise sayings. Information and lessons were passed on and taught in the narrative form. Most of the narratives are about events and the people they knew and had seen in their natural environment. Narratives are therefore stories about themselves, their culture, needs and aspirations. The narratives also use symbols and actions to describe the people (Brown 123).

Till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century all that we know of the Mao Naga society have been handed down orally through their narratives. The Mao Naga narratives are collective memory because the folk narratives are disseminated orally from generation to generation. Halbwachs argued that narratives are the fruits of collective memory that have been passed down from generation to generation. There are differences in some narratives in the same group; yet, the kernel of the narratives remains the same. Narratives represent the recalling of a collection of memories held in common by a group (194).

The Mao Naga folk narratives contain some elements of history, cultural practices, beliefs, and values that are believed and valued by the people (as explained in the myth of *Dziliamosiia*). These narratives serve to connect the present with the past – their forefathers and their traditions. They are the primary sources of their history, as there are no historical records in an oral society in the past. They provide useful insight into their past. They also serve as a tool to educate and teach the younger generations the values of socializing, solidarity, living in harmony, and respect for one another and nature. It brings people together and, in this way, the shared folk narratives strengthen the bonds of unity and collective identity.

The folk narratives of the Mao Nagas reflect the shared experiences, values and beliefs within their society. They address the supernatural elements in the narratives, human

relationships, and various other themes that have been dealt with in Chapter One. The telling and retelling of such folk narratives reaffirm their shared understanding of their common worldview.

Among the Mao Nagas, the act of narrating and re-narrating takes place during the community feasts, besides around the family hearth, the *morung*, and workplaces. The Mao Naga festivals are centred on the agriculture-based lunar calendar. The year begins with the feast of *Chiithuni* celebrated for five days. It was in this context that the story *Kajini and Katini* takes place. On the last day of the festival, the young men and women, adorned in their best traditional attires, would climb the hill (at present, villages like Song Song and Kalinamei still practiced this). When they reach a specific spot, they play some traditional games. After the games, the young ladies will carry home the cut firewood (or *kapeni sii*) neatly arranged in their baskets (Singh and Maheo 182). In the tale, it is narrated that it was the custom to see whose basket was the best. The basket of Katini, the step-sister of Kajini, was declared as the best to the dismay of her stepmother. Further, even her poor-quality clothes that were woven with wild jute was chosen to be the best (people usually put on their best dress on such occasions). What she wore was the best clothes that she had; (her stepmother should have provided her with the best clothes possible). In the evening, it was also the custom of the young men and women to go to the *morung* with wine and food where they would spend the evening socializing with other members. Here they learned the traditions of the past through the tales and songs taught by the elders and the owners of the *morung*.

The *morung*, as discussed earlier, served as a place where the traditions of the past were taught including songs and tales. They were the platform for socialising and learning. One of the most significant functions of the *morung* was the imparting of folktales and folksongs. The inmates learn different types of folktales and folk songs, besides personality development and social etiquette. They learn proverbs, riddles and wisdom sayings. The boys learn the art of

agriculture and handicrafts such as weaving baskets, mats and wood carvings, making spears, spades for agricultural purposes, and making knives or daos (Kricho 75-76).

A girl after the evening meal goes to the dormitory where she spends a lot of her time among the peer groups. Here she learns to live a sincere life and hard work. She often brings her cotton yarn and spinning tools and works with the group. Her friends help her unfinished works. Here she learns how to weave shawls, cultivate the habit of hard work, helping others, learn music, folk dance, singing of folksongs, folktales and sharing ideas with different persons and thus, she learns how to live with life (Nepuni 131).

A. Ashikho rightly said that every Mao Naga was a small-scale industry<sup>2</sup>. Today, it is not so. With time, the past does not remain the same. It is transformed. “The very place it occupies no longer remains the same since everything around it is in the process of transformation” (Halbwachs 204). Yet the core of the message remains. The narratives can adapt themselves to any local and social climate. They seem old, yet are precious, for values are enshrined in them. Human values are never outdated in any place, age or situation. Every time narratives are told and retold, they are interpreted with new ideas by the narrators and carry a message for the audience.

The narratives vary from place to place, and from person to person. This is because there was no written record in the past and also because of the oral nature of its narration (Boro 26). It is most likely that repetition or a wrong pronunciation would result in correcting words or sentences. Another reason could also be the oratorical ability of the narrator. Thus, among the Mao Naga folk narratives which have all been oral, there are varying versions of the story such as *Chakepfo Kahrjo Ko* (Salao 16-27), *Chake Meipfo Chara: The man who challenged the Sun, the Rain and the Landslide* (Kricho 15-17), *Chaki Pfu Chahre* (Daniel 57-71), and *Mr. Chahre* [sic ‘s’] *Story* (Mao 33-36). Some versions are long while others are short; yet the nucleus

of the story is found in all the versions, namely, the story of what happens when men compete with nature.

The memory of the past lives on through constructed and reconstructed narratives. One reason for variations could be that the older generations are tired of their sophisticated and professional style of life and seek to relive the past. Another probable reason could be the disappearance of the old under the influence of the modernity of the younger generations. Old people who are interested in the past are fewer in number now. Halbwachs argues that the old people used to act as guardians of the traditions (47- 48). Since the past has been passed down orally across generations and has been retained long after the death of those who originally reported them, the memories were modified though the message remained the same. In the opinion of Leach, the more the versions of the same story, the more accurately is it narrated and remembered (Schwartz 13).

The purpose of the folk narratives changes as they travel with the narrator beyond a geographical boundary and from one century to another, and yet they serve the same purpose, that is, to minister to the same basic social and individual needs (Thompson 5). This is true as we saw in chapter one under Love and Romance, where the same narrative is titled differently by different tribes using familiar names and situations to appeal to the audience as in *Bunio ye Koshoni* among the Mao Nagas, whereas the Paomei Naga narrative is titled *The Coward Lover* and *A Tragic love* by the Liangmei. The main action of the narrative revolves around two young lovers whose love ended in tragedy. The tale of the stepmothers is another good example of how the tales change with time and place as in Cinderella and the Mao Naga tales we saw in chapter one under the section ‘Stepmothers in the Mao Folk Narratives’.

The term collective indicates a group’s identity constructed from available narratives: stories, monuments, songs and other means that bind the members together, creating a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood among the members. This is true of the Mao Nagas who live in



different villages within the same geographical area and share common narratives. As a result, the settings of the narratives are in familiar locations like villages, forests and community feasts. Experimental studies show evidence that the image as a picture or a movie is formed in the head in which the size, location, colours, shapes and distance all function as much as they perceive (Rubin 41).

The presence of monuments, objects and symbols in the Mao Naga narratives plays an important role in shaping the collective memory of the people. The common beliefs in the monuments and objects that bear historical and cultural significance bind them together, e.g., the *Mara bu* (banyan tree) believed to be in existence during the time of *Dziliamosia*, the first ancestress of the Nagas; the monuments of the three brothers' stone at Chazhelophi (within the vicinity of Makhel village) believed to have been erected before they departed; the *chiitebu* (wild pear tree situated at Shajouba village) also believed to be planted before the Nagas dispersed to different areas of settlements. There are some stones which bear cultural significance for the society. In this manner, the memory of the rich past of the Mao Nagas is preserved in monuments and objects which figure also in their folk narratives. They kept, preserved and remembered the past and handed it down to the next generations.

## **2.9 The Mao Naga Narratives as cultural memory**

Having seen the various aspects of cultural memory, we examine a few select Mao folk narratives that serve as cultural memory. The Mao Naga folk narratives are considered cultural memory because these narratives are believed to have been in existence beyond the "living memory", i.e., beyond 80-100 years. For Assmann, cultural memory is a recollection of the past that helps to form an identity by linking the past and the present with the help of images and tales of the remote past into the background of the onward-moving present, bringing hopes and continuity (Assmann 2-3). A few examples of the expressions of remoteness among the Mao Naga folk narratives are given below, with expressions such as

‘Long time ago in Makhel...’ in the tale in *Dziiliamosiia* (Kricho 1)

‘Long time ago, the Mao people believed...’ in *The Diligent Couple* (Kricho 9)

‘Long time ago, a man called ChakeMeipfoChara....’ in *ChakeMeipfoChara: The man who challenged the Sun, the Rain and the Landslide* (Kricho 15).

‘Long time ago, a boy named Shekache had seven uncles...’ in *Shekache: The boy who had seven uncles* (Kricho 19).

‘Once upon a time, a clever orphan boy enjoyed stealing...’ in *The clever Orphan boy* (Kricho 25).

‘Long time ago during the head- hunting days...’ in *The Revenge taken by Kapaini* (Kricho 28).

‘Once upon a time there were two step-sisters Kajini and Katini...’ in *Kajini and Katini* (Kricho 60).

‘Once upon a time there was a girl named Ashia...’ in *Ashia: The girl swallowed by a lake* (Kricho 64).

These expressions situate the events in different eras. The events or the tales took place in the distant past and have been passed down through oral rendition, and therefore they are both cultural and collective memory. The expressions are markers of the Mao Naga folk narratives that bind them together culturally and collectively. It also helps in the preservation of cultural identity and reflects the historical consciousness of the people.

The folk narratives of the Mao Nagas serve as a storehouse of cultural memory. The cultural significance of the Mao Naga folk narratives is that in them one finds the identity of the people. This is done through telling and retelling of the origin and migration of the people, the life of great men and women, customs, social life, practices, values, beliefs and their relations with nature and animals.

As stated in Chapter 1, the Mao Naga folk narratives play a key role in preserving the beliefs and traditions through oral telling. These folk narratives cover a wide range of themes from the mythical past like the myth of *Dziiliamosiia* to human relationships, man-nature relationships, as also supernatural, social, and moral values.

*Dziiliamosiia* is the foundational myth of the origin of the Mao Nagas and a few other tribes who shared this myth and is believed to be true by them; they considered *Dziiliamosiia* as the first ancestress. One of the earliest produced written versions of the original myth by N. Ashuli (1981) is produced below. The Nagas

are the descendants of a woman named “DzuliMostiro” who conceived in a mysterious way by the overshadowing of the spirit of God in the form of a cloud while she was sitting under a banyan tree at Makhel. She gave birth to three sons named Okhe (tiger), Ora (god), Omei (man). The other descendants of “DzuliMostiro” were Chutowo (father of the Meities). Alapha (the father of Kolamei or Mayang) and Khephio (the father of Nagas). In the beginning, they lived together in Makhel. But as their number increased they had to disperse to the different parts of the region as we find them today (54).

The myth is significant in understanding the Mao Naga’s origin and their relationship with other tribes. The myth can be considered a classic example of the cultural memory of the Mao Nagas; there is no written record to tell us when it originated. As is the nature of oral tradition, the author is unknown (Olrik 1) and there are no historical records available to verify it, but the people’s belief in the myth is so deep that they cannot but accept this as true. The myth reflects the worldview of the people, their beliefs and their origin. Each time it is being told or narrated; the people can reaffirm their cultural identity. Yet with time, the myth is being told and retold and has been re-interpreted with new insights according to the needs of the times. This is the presentist approach Halbwachs used in the *Legendary Topography of the*

*Gospels in the Holy Land*. Halbwachs argued that the “beliefs, interests, and aspirations of the present shape the various views of the past as they are manifested respectively in every historical epoch” (25). Thus, in societies without a script of their own, participation in cultural memory was done through repetition, celebrations and rituals. These ensured the continuity of the knowledge that gives the members a sense of identity (Assmann 42). The Mao Naga folk narratives shape their identity. They provide entertainment and, at the same time, educate the people. The narratives are rooted in the social life of the people.

The term ‘legend’ originally referred to the lives of saints. They are considered to be real (Cuddon 391), which is why Linda Degh in the article on “Folk Narrative” in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, states that “the legend walks, knocks at your door...” (72). Legends describe the heroic actions or extraordinary deeds of great personalities. The narratives that deal with legends exalt the heroic deeds of some personalities believed to have taken place in the history of humankind. The ancestors’ history figures in many legends. Legends narrate with conviction that some extraordinary events or happenings are believed to have taken place in the past at a particular time and place (Thompson 8).

Among the Mao Naga folk tales, Chahreo (Mao 33-36) is a legendary figure and the narrative celebrates his valour, resilience and determination. The tale of Chahreo could be classified under the extraordinary strength Tale Type (ATU 650) like Strong John (Thompson 85), not because the tales bear resemblance but because of the strength endowed on the protagonists in both the tales. The life of Chahreo can be divided into three parts: a) his birth, b) the days of his mayhem, and c) his downfall and death.

The Mao Naga tale on Chakhepfo Chahreo begins by exalting Chahreo, whose birth was signalled by many strange happenings on the earth and later his victories and his end.

From the four corners of the horizontal line, strong wind and tsunami started blowing over the sea and on the land in the area, uprooting the whole forest trees group by

group...Later on in the evening, the people come to know that Chahreo was born to his parents with the happening of mighty storms and mighty Tsunami... (Mao 33).

He lived a good life like any other member of his tribe, observing all the traditional practices of the time (Mao 33; Kricho 15). He was a gifted man, endowed with extraordinary strength and power. He knew himself well, but was overconfident; this slowly led to his downfall.

In the second part of the narrative, he challenges everyone and everything around him. Since he knew that there was no one on earth to challenge him, he began to challenge nature and animals. It was said that before every challenge, he would perform rituals and make offerings to god. God was pleased with him and blessed him. He defeated the sun, the rain, the flood and the deer. Everyone admired him and stood in awe of his indomitable courage and strength.

In the third part, he accepted the challenge of the landslide (*omidova*). He was so overconfident in his strength that he forgot to perform rituals and offer sacrifices to God on the day of the competition. When the race began, he seemed to be winning, but he was finally killed by the landslide. He lost the race; his body was ripped apart and only his right arm was left hanging on the branch of a fig tree (Kricho 15-16). Though he met with a tragic death in this world, being a hero, he had his privileges even in the world of the dead.

According to the Mao Naga beliefs, when a person dies, his belongings such as the war shield, spear, sling, bamboo basket, and a small gourd in which are kept some seeds so that the dead person can use them in the world of the dead, (Nepuni 94) are kept on the tomb. After death, the soul of the person would journey to the world of the dead. Chahreo went down to the world of the dead, and there he waited for someone to carry his belongings (in the narrative it is a spade or gourd). Many girls passed by but all refused to carry his belongings. All the dead would have to bite a red worm before entering into the world of the dead but not Chahreo.

He felt lonely and so requested a cuckoo to bring his sister *Echeni* to the world of the dead. She was brought and both crossed the gate of the world of the dead without biting the red worm.

The tale embodies the spirit of self-endurance, determination and the quest for identity. Myth and reality are woven together into the everyday life of the people, making the past come alive, thus bridging the past and the present, at the same time preserving the community's collective memory.

Thus, the Mao Naga folk narratives function as a cultural memory that preserves and transmits the history, values and identity of their society.

## **2.10 Conclusion**

We have discussed, in this chapter, the origin, concept, characteristics and significance of collective and cultural memory and the Mao Naga folk narratives as cultural memory. Folk narratives serve as powerful means of cultural memory, encapsulating histories, values, identities, legends, myths, objects and monuments. These folk narratives enable the society to preserve and shape its future, creating bonds of unity and continuity among its members. They serve as rich tapestries of collective human experiences over the years. The narratives can adapt to changes with time making the Mao Naga folk narrative collective memory relevant.

### Notes

1. *Genna* refers to the tradition of observing strictly non-working days during the year related to religious beliefs and practices.
2. Ashikho, A. *Interview*. Conducted by Rose Mary Kazhiia, 18 March 2020.