

Chapter 3

CONSTRUCTING THE MAO NAGAS' IDENTITY THROUGH THEIR FOLK NARRATIVES

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on how the collective folk narratives of the ancient Mao Nagas are remembered and how they help to construct their identity. These narratives were handed down orally from generation to generation since there was no written record of the past; hence they relied on human memory. Hence, these narratives are the tools that we shall use to construct the Mao Naga identity.

For people without a written language, their historical identity is based on oral traditions (Vansina 1), which are the main source of information about them. They are the oral documents about the past that enable people to connect to the past and construct their identity, and this is valid for such communities. Their past is passed on through generations through oral narrations of different genres such as folktales and narratives. These accounts of the history of the people are cultural memories. They tell of people who lived in the distant past, their origin and migration (Khangte 3). These narratives are believed to be true accounts of the past by the community that possessed them. In them is found the identity of the people.

But the past is not remembered as it was; it is constructed (Assmann 26). Halbwachs who made a serious study on the social frameworks of memory in the 1920s argued that memory is constructed by social groups. Though it is the individuals who remember, it is the social groups to which an individual belongs that decide what is to be remembered and how it is to be remembered. Individuals identify themselves with the public events of the group indirectly since they have not personally experienced them (Burke 44). Forty years mark the end of a generation; yet it is a very important period, for it represents a significant incursion into a collective memory and the survivors are transported from the biographical to the cultural

memory. Every group has an image of itself. The group is formed by individuals who share common values and practices and their past. Rightly has Aristotle defined man as ‘zoon politikon’ or a social animal that lives in groups or communities within a political system (Assmann 190,114). We have our modern version of this: ‘No man is an island’.

The past is remembered to redefine the present. Muhammad Husayn Haykal, an Egyptian writer, rightly said that “a nation only lives by reviving the past” (qtd in Assmann 114). The group has its past which is brought to the present through the narratives. The imagined community is based on an imagined continuity that reaches back into the depths of time. It is in this manner that the identity of the Mao Nagas is constructed by reviving the narratives of the past. In them are enshrined the values and practices of the past. The past is significant in the construction of identity. This identity is a social construct and so it is cultural (Assmann 3, 113-114). Identity is formed by connecting the memories of the members of the past to the present through narratives; and so, the past lives on in the present.

The first step to identity formation is the awareness of belonging to a group. Individuals in any group and society are bound together by feelings of oneness, shared common beliefs, culture, knowledge and practices having specific geographical boundaries, and animated by common laws and regulations.

There are visible aspects that distinguish one group from the others such as language, physical location, ways of behaviour, thinking, norms and values. These groups also share a strong sense of belonging and shared culture, knowledge and memory. The views and opinions of others in the group, especially of the elders, concerning governance are taken into consideration. The legacies of the ancestors are found in the rich ethics, values, morals and traditions. These are preserved in memory and they bind the members together and help to form their identity and its continuity with the past. We are what we remember and what we belong to. The wisdom of the elders, stored in folktales, folksongs and proverbs, has survived

through the good and the not-so-good times because it carries the moral values of the society and is being passed on from generation to generation through oral rendition. Thus, oral narratives play an important role in the process of building up the structure that is necessary for the maintenance of values. Oral transmission differs from written transmission (Lanurenla 4). It transmits and communicates the values of the past in an illiterate society and fosters the continuity of the life of the society by repeating and interpreting them to ensure the continuity of the group. In this way, the past is kept alive through collective memory through transmission by parents, elders, and other older members to the younger children (Halbwachs 25, 48). This is also very true of the Mao Naga community where the rich culture and traditions of the past are handed down in the varied forms of narratives.

3.2 Unveiling the Sacred Sites Linked to the Mao Nagas

Culture, understood as a set of shared attitudes, values and practices of a group (Bommas vii, 3), is disseminated with the help of memory in the form of narratives. They act as a link between the past and the present. They are narrated not only to recall the past but to shape the present while embodying the past. They serve as a document of the present which is based on memory as an active recreation of what once was. They shape the future in the light of experience (Longkumer 67). Narratives are vehicles by which the memory of the past, stored in the mind, is brought to the present. Narration is a social act because without an audience narratives cannot be told. Stories are typically told to someone. They are constructed because narration told to different people at a given time changes over time. Storytelling creates a sense of belonging, of identity. The memory of the past becomes cultural when it is constructed and passed on to generations over a long period. Assmann called it a long-term memory. Cultural memory acts as a means to disclose and identify the contemporary presence of the past within ancient societies (Assmann i).

The Mao Nagas, like the other Naga tribes, depended on oral traditions which are preserved in memory and disseminated orally in the form of tales, songs, myths and other forms of expression, as well as through artefacts. The grandfather would relate to the grandchildren the heroic deeds of the great-grandparents and great personalities in the form of fairy tales. They, in turn, would tell these stories to the younger generations depending on the strength of their memory and understanding (Nepuni 25). The traditional set-up like the youth dormitories for boys and girls, the customary laws, etc., were not things preserved in writing. The people preserved them in their memories and handed them down orally as and when the occasion arose. Stories communicated through language in the form of proverbs, life stories, memories, etc., survive and are being kept alive through oral renditions and community memories from generation to generation (Marak 1). The tradition of the 'unwritten' sources was embedded in a form suitable for oral transmission, and their preservation depended on the powers of memory as they were passed on from one generation to the next (Vansina 1). The power of the memory of the forefathers is to be appreciated. The forefathers are the unsung heroes and heroines, scientists, physicians, engineers, doctors, administrators, etc., of a social group. They described the past with the help of language and artefacts.

The Mao Nagas form part of the preliterate society without a written script of their own. Therefore, the wealth of their culture and traditions was passed on orally from generation to generation, and that too collectively. So, they are not without a history. Their history, though, is shrouded; much of it must have been lost and what remains of the traditions and culture is reflected in the available narratives (Thompson 276). These accounts form cultural memories that are handed down through the tales and songs, wise sayings, rituals, and ceremonies of the community. Their folk tales and folksongs tell of their ancestors who lived in the distant past, how they came into being, their migration and the land they now occupy. Since the early narratives are not recorded, they are not historical proof in the literal sense of the word. It is a

people's knowledge or views about their past, about their forefathers, and is culturally shared and believed by all of them. These common beliefs form an identity, a sense of belonging to each other, with a shared past. Thus, memory is a force that can shape their cultural identity (Assmann i).

Oral narratives are localized within the geographical boundary of the place that they occupy (Orik 79). The Mao Nagas, though they share a common history with a few other Naga tribes, have a distinct identity with their own geographical location, language, culture and dress. These provide a strong sense of identity among the members even though they may not know each other personally or even meet each other physically but see themselves as being part of a "political community" with shared origins and a deep sense of commonness and oneness as Anderson suggests. In this sense, communities are socially constructed and they are different from the others in the way they are imagined, having their boundaries, limits and sovereignty (Anderson 6-7).

The identity of the Nagas, in particular of the Mao Nagas, is based on the available oral sources since there was no written record in the past (Hutton 12). If a truth is to be settled in the memory of a group, it needs to be presented in concrete forms of events, personalities or a locality (Assmann 24; Halbwachs 200). The Mao Naga narratives speak of Makhel, a historical place that is currently situated in the district of Senapati, in the state of Manipur, as the place of their origin and migration



Fig. 4. View of present Makhel village, Manipur (photographed during the field study, 12.10. 2024)

Though the original home of the Teniyimi¹ Nagas, in particular of the Mao Nagas, cannot be ascertained historically, they are believed to have lived at Makhel and migrated from there to different places. This place is known by different names among the different Naga tribes. The Angami Nagas called it *Mekrora*² while the Zeliangrong Nagas called it *Mahou*. It is 5 kms away from National Highway No.39 (Singh and Maheo 21) and AH 1. The ancestors probably lived in this historical place for a long period before dispersing to their present habitats. Two popular Mao folk songs that support this idea of Makhel as the place of origin:

1. *Hriiprae ezho Ochii kosoyi ohrii kari hriiprae*

(Life started at a place where there is a tall stone- *Ochiikosoyi*)

Hriiprae lohe makhrefiino vu shujiio tasii

(They departed from Makhel).

2. *Howa imei hi adie chii kona hrii prae?*

(Oh! Where did mankind originate?)

Howa imei hi makhrefii no fii shotae.

(Oh! Mankind dispersed from Makhel?) (Nepuni 26)

The first song says that life originated at *Ochii Kosoyi* (tall stone) which is found in one of the villages in Nagaland close to Makhel. In the opinion of N. Saleo, as quoted by Nepuni in *Socio-cultural History of Shiipfomei Naga Tribe*, their forefathers seemed to have migrated from “North West” and settled down at *Kheso* (a place in Nagaland; the Mao Nagas called this place *otsu koso*- tall rock). Another version is that the forefathers must have come from the “South East”. It is difficult to trace the exact names of places and directions due to a lack of written records and the only available source being oral traditions.

J.H. Hutton in *The Angami Nagas* writes that the history of the Nagas rests on vague traditions which are dimly obscure but provide enough to give some indication of the course that the migration took. The Angami ancestors came out from the bowels of the earth, not in the Angami country, but somewhere from the south (Makhel is towards the south of Angami country). The presence of the stone monoliths and sacred trees seems to authenticate the narrations.

It is most likely that they came from some faraway country to the present Makhel village and settled there for a long period and so they consider it as the place of their origin and migration. Whatever the theory of their origin and migration be, the narrative tells of the Makhel village as an important historical place for the Mao Nagas and those who have migrated from here. A few Naga tribes point to Makhel as their homeland, as their place of origin and migration (Hodson 13; Ashuli 54; Sengupta 185; Kumar 56). The Tangkhul (Rizvi 26), and the Maram Nagas also have their legend of Makhel as their place of origin (Tiba 31). They offer the banyan tree at Makhel village and the wild pear trees (*Chiitebu Kajii*) at Shajouba village (Charangho) as proof of their common belief. The Angamis called it *Mekhoromia* (a place of departure), the Tangkhul called it *Maikel Tunggam* and the Maos called it *Makhrai Mai* (Rizvi 26).

However, their narratives also relate that their forefathers seem to have come from different directions; that the people moved en masse, making stops at intervals during the exodus till they reached the present Makhel village. They halted at a place where there is a tall rock (*Otsu Koso*), and also at Kheso (both places are in the present state of Nagaland not far from Makhel village). They are believed to have moved from there following the course of the *Chiiherii* (river) that has its source at Makhel and flows into the Doyang river in Nagaland). All through this journey, they carried with them *Mokhuliriibu*



Fig.5. *Mokhuliriibu* (The Sacred Throne) at Khriibu, Pudunamei village Manipur

(Photographed during the field study, 9.01. 2022)

(sacred throne) and crossed the Kedima and Pfosemei (Pudunamei) villages. Their tradition says that as the people began to move forward from there towards Pfosemei village, the throne refused to be shifted. Therefore, the people erected it at a place called *Khriibu* (Mopfu Zhu, Pudunamei). To this day it stands there unmoved and remains a living legend. Thereafter, following the course of the *Chiiherii* river and crossing the ranges and hills, they reached Makhel village (Nepuni 35-36; Mao 43).

Their identity is also found in the legend/myth of *Dziiliamosiia* (*Dziilia*- clear water; *amosiia*- pure), the great-grandmother of the community. After having conceived by the

foreshadowing of the white cloud(*kahekakra*) while sleeping under the peepal tree, she gave birth to three sons: *Okhe* (tiger), *Ora* (god), and *Omei*(man) (Singh and Maheo 22; Kricho 1).

She had other descendants too: *AshiipfoAlapha* the father of Kolame (non-tribal), *Chiituwo* the father of the Meities, and *Khephio* the father of the Nagas. In the beginning, they lived together; but as their numbers increased, they had to disperse to different parts of the region as we find them today (Ashuli 54).

Alapha departed to the west, Chiituwo to the east and the Khephio settled in the centre of the earth. Three monoliths were erected to commemorate their departure. Khehipfo Khephio had numerous offspring. They became the custodians of the flat wondrous stone; they believed in the use of potent, handy accurate weapons, with the rituals of the reined calf, and lived in observance of the law in the strict sense of the word. They worked hard on the soil and became wealthy. The place they lived in came to be called *tonifii* (the land of wealth) and the people Tonimei (wealthy people). The people gathered around the *Chiitebu* (wild pear tree) at *Charangho* (Shajouba), and dispersed to different places as we find them today promising to uphold each other. Shajouba (*Charangho*) is a village close to Makhel and is a historical and tourist centre. The famous wild pear tree, which is believed to have been planted before the descendants of Alewo and Khephiwo dispersed due to an increase in population to different places, is also found at this spot (Nepuni 28-29, 53).

Another version, “The legend of creation”, speaks of the Mao Naga belief in the existence of the creator who is the source of all things. The creator created Dziiliamosiia and placed her in *Makhriifii* village. She lived in harmony with the Creator and possessed the extraordinary power of understanding the divine. Her three sons are the forefathers of the “Assamis”, “Meetei” and “Naga”. The youngest son of Khephio was Memeo who became the forefather who occupied the original home, Makhel. Shiipfow was the youngest son of Memeo. Due to the increase in population, the people migrated/shifted to Shiinafii village (present Kaibi

village within the vicinity of Makhel village) and from there to Tobufii and different villages as we find them today (Mao5-10).

The Angamis too traced their origin to Makhel. It is said that the priests of the Angamis would wait for the priests of Mao and Makhel to make declarations before fixing important days for the celebration of festivals (Hutton7). Even their languages bear a certain similarity. None of the Naga tribes who share common ancestors with the Mao Nagas will deny that Makhel is the place where their forefathers lived. Arnold Krupat states that for “traditional people, history is a culturally and socially agreeable account of the past”. When these accounts are unfathomable, we label them as myths and their significance dismissed as a “pernicious notion”, misunderstood and bland. Yet, these accounts are mystical and deep. In them is history in its native essence(xi).

Yet in another version, it is believed that the forefathers of the Nagas came through Myanmar through the river Hourie (a tributary of Chindwin in Myanmar). It is said that during the construction of the Great Wall of China, the king forced his subjects to work on the wall. However, one group escaped from this harsh labour. It is narrated that these people are the forefathers of the Nagas who came to live in secret at *Makhrefii* (secret place) or Makhel. They fabricated a story to hide themselves from the king and told him that life began at Makhel with *okhe*(tiger) and *ora* (god) (Singh and Maheo 24).

Makhel village holds a very significant place as the place origin and migration. All the versions of the origin and migrations discussed above point to the present-day Makhel village as an important place in the formation of the identity of the Mao Nagas as well as other tribes who, in their legends, trace to Makhel their place of origin and departure. This is further proved by the existence of important historical monuments and objects found in and around it as well as the mention of some names of places, rivers, etc., within the vicinity of Makhel village.

The Mao Nagas lived within a specific geographical area. This area is mountainous and it constitutes the northernmost part of the state of Manipur (Singh and Maheo 29) in the district of Senapati. They are the original inhabitants of the land they now occupy. It is found in their prose and poetry. In other words, they are the indigenous people, the natives of the soil. Though the majority of the population is concentrated in this place, we find scattered communities of Mao Nagas in other parts of the state, in the neighbouring state of Nagaland, and elsewhere.

3.3 Narratives and Language

Men, by nature, depend on others for survival. As a result, there is a need for men to live in society. What differentiates men from other living animals is the power of speech and understandable communication. Human beings have language, which is an “outstanding tool for the formation of groups”. It is the basis for communication that binds people of the same social group together (Assmann 119). Through the medium of language, individuals in groups or societies are bound together by a feeling of oneness, sharing common beliefs, culture, knowledge and practices, having specific geographical boundaries, and being animated by common laws and regulations. They rely on stories and other narratives of the past to construct their identity. On the occasion of the 54th World Communication 2020, the Holy Father argues that stories influence our lives. It helps us build up the society; and rediscover one’s roots and identity. It weaves and connects us with other individuals and groups. The narratives of the past shape our convictions and help us understand who we are. Narratives leave their mark on us, shaping “our convictions and behaviour”. The stories or narrations have a common loom that binds us together (Franciscus 1).

Stories are told by storytellers who pass on the knowledge of the people orally from generation to generation. They are called memory keepers. These keepers preserve their rich traditions, customs and knowledge through their stories. With the introduction of the print media, some elements were lost when converting oral narratives to print. However, writing on

myths, Claude Levi-Strauss states: “Some things have been lost, and we should try to perhaps regain them...” (qtd in Ralte 225).

The continuity and the mode of transmission of cultural memory depend on the human language (Sancley 59). Language or the spoken word is the vehicle for conveying a meaningful message. It is a means of communication and an important medium for expressing one’s identity. It is through the use of language that the past is brought to the present. Language occupies an exalted position among the traits shared by all human groups. Through various ways, forms and genres, people shared the narratives and interpretations of events and experiences, important and mundane, public and private. Narrative is one of the most important forms of communication employing prose and poetry and is primarily sustained in the oral tradition. Other actions are conversations, theatre, celebrations, etc. These events reflect histories, occupations, cuisines and cultural experiences (Kharmawphlang 54). Language also identifies one group as being different from the others. It is through language that the customs, culture, and history of the community are preserved and passed on. In other words, history, mythology, lore, legends, religious teachings, narrations, songs, etc., are all passed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth through the use of spoken words till the written form came into existence.

Historically, the Mao Nagas, like many other tribes, did not have a written script of their own, though a legend speaks of the loss of the script in their songs and stories. The traditions speak of the loss of the script by one of the sons of Dziila-motsiuro (Kricho 1-5). There is also a version that says that the sons of *Shiipfowo* were responsible for this loss. Before the three sons departed, each was given a script. It was engraved on the hide of animals. The two elder brothers preserved their script while the last son *Khephio*, who was the ancestor of the Nagas, tucked it on the wall and, in the course of time, the rats ate it up. Another version says that it was the dog that ate it (Nepuni 18-19). Another author speaks of the Nagas as not having

a written script of their own (Bendanganshi 2-3). A popular folk song narrates the loss of the written script.

(...)Mapra oshu kola pфона osiingho vakhe larii siise modo pikhe sii

Esii oshu mikrii pфона kovoke vakhi larii siise modo pikhe sii

Esii oshu kola pфона sii o sii hi loe sii

Esii oshu mikrii pфона sii o nihi loe sii

Esii oshu eme pфона o sii modoe no

Ano ,ezho ozii lovu koeyi pfone she kotjuo tesii oso hai sii

Esii okhe ozhe kono chokhro

Chokhro okhe ozhe kono she marao tesii osohai sii³

(A free translation of the song in a gist: The script of Kolamei was written on the leaves, the Manipuri on the bamboo leaves, while the Mao was written on the skin of the animal which was destroyed/eaten by a mouse.)

Since then, they have been without a script. Whatever may be the versions of the loss of the script, no one will deny the fact that writing came to the Nagas after the arrival of the British. Currently, the official language of the Mao Nagas is known as *Maola* and is recognized by the Board of Secondary Education, Manipur, as a subject to be taught up to Higher Secondary.

In the “Languages of North-Eastern India, A Survey Vol.2” by George A Grierson, the Mao Naga language (Sopvoma) is spoken of as belonging to the Tibeto-Burman Family and is placed under the Naga-Kuki Sub-Group (498). Singh and Maheo quote Grierson to say that the Mao Naga language displays some linguistic features of the Kuki languages. However, the features of the Mao Naga language show that it belongs to the Naga group of Tibeto-Burman languages and not to the Kuki languages (49). The Mao Naga language is closely connected with the Angami language, especially with Kezhama (Hodson 4). William Nepuni, a native

scholar, spelt ‘Sopvoma’ as Shiipfomei (comprising of the Mao Nagas and the Paomai Nagas) (Nepuni 3). In their native language, the language of their ancestors is called *pfopela* (the language of the forefathers).

The language was preserved and orally handed down through narratives in its varied forms like ballads, folksongs, adages, folktales, folklore, dirges, prose and poetry since the written form in the Roman script started only in the late 1920s (Singh and Maheo 50; Nepuni 16). One of the first books to be translated into the Mao language was the Holy Bible in 1927 (Singh and Maheo 49). There has been no turning back since then.

At present efforts are being made by the Mao Academic Society to revive, preserve, and teach the younger generation their native language. The Mao language, which came to be a written language, was recognised by the Board of Secondary Education, Manipur (BOSEM) and the Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur (COHSEM) Government of Manipur as a subject to be taught from classes I to IX from the year 2006 and Class X from 2007 session 2015-2016. The official language for official and academic purposes is called *Maola* (Nepuni 44-45).

The Manipur University, Canchipur, Imphal, under Office Order No/523, dated the 20th September 2022, has included *Mao Tribal Dance* as one of the courses in the syllabus and the course structure of Value Addition Courses (VAC) under the post-graduate programme under NEP-2020. These are milestone achievements for the tribe.

In this way, the language and traditions of the Mao Nagas will continue to survive, live, and thrive because of the progress, in life and philosophy of modern times. That is why Singh and Maheo argued that their language is fast developing, having a literature of its own (Singh and Maheo 290).

There are variations in the spoken language from village to village, and of varying degrees. This is because there was no written script in the past. Yet, the differences in dialect are not a block to constructing a common identity; rather it enhances the spirit of brotherhood since they all claim common ancestors. Oral language variations cannot be avoided. This is because there are no natural living languages that remain forever (Bommas 18). This is evident from the younger generation of the Mao Nagas who find it difficult to understand the classical language of the forefathers.

3.4 Narratives and the Socio-Cultural Life of the Mao Nagas

The Oxford Dictionary defines culture as the way of life, customs, traditions, heritage, habits, values, mores, etc., of the people. It is a way of the life of the people- a set of shared attitudes, values and practices that characterize a group or a society, modern or ancient (Bommas vii). It is this commonality of life, customs, traditions, heritage, habits, values, and mores that bind together people belonging to the same social groups. Culture is not separated from religion, society, politics and economy; instead, it is influenced by them. It is seen as a way to unite diverse groups under a common identity. This identity includes various regional, linguistic, tribal and caste-specific practices, even though there might be some differences. Culture is a complex and evolving concept that is closely connected to all aspects of human life (Vijayan 2).

Man is a social being and as such depends on other social beings that live in groups having laws and regulations that govern them. This has been applied to the Naga tribes for a long, and the Mao Nagas tribes in particular. They lived in self-sufficient villages which were set up atop hills to protect themselves from the attack of the enemies. With time, many changes have taken place in the customs and traditions of the society because they did not appear to be any longer relevant to the succeeding generations (Nepuni 67, 69). By delving into the past through the narratives, we unearth some of the rich values and traditions of the tribe. The

narratives serve as documents of the socio-cultural life of the people. In short, the traditional wisdom of the Mao Nagas is preserved in the narratives.

The Mao Nagas follow the patriarchal system, wherein descent is traced through the father; even the landed property is passed on through the male offspring. This means that the Mao society is male-dominated. All customary laws and regulations are enforced without consulting the women (Nepuni 186). All the people in the villages have landed property, houses, paddy fields, domesticated animals, paddy for the whole year, forests, and farms (Mao 11). Villagers used to own some forests and lands. This we see in the narrative about Kateini, how on the day when all the young boys and girls went to the forest to carry firewood during Saleni, Kateini who was left behind, due to work at home, went to cut firewood from the family-owned forest. The narrative also states that Kateini's father was bewildered when he heard the sound of someone cutting wood from his forest land (Kricho 61; Mao 55; Salao 1-9). The narrative makes it clear that common and private ownership of property was the norm. Wealth was not measured in terms of money but in terms of property and domesticated animals. There existed a barter system in the olden days, e.g., in *Shiikache Ko*, Chani bought Shiikache in exchange for *otu padei* (four cows) (Salao 53).

Administratively, the Nagas live in villages; each belonging to a clan or Khel (Pou 52). Like the other Naga tribes, in the Mao traditional village, the members were governed by the chief along with his council representing the different clans in the village. They have their laws that regulate the life of the members and settle their disputes (Mao 11-13). Being an oral society, all laws and regulations were unwritten. They are ingrained in the hearts and minds of the people. This is clear from the story of Kapeini. When Kapeini brought the head of the enemy back to her village, her youngest brother came to the village gate to take the enemy's head into the village since it was the custom that women were not to take the war trophy into the village (Salao 32). The performance of certain rituals and rites enables the people to put on

a special dress only after the fulfilment of these requirements. It was the brother of Kapeini who, along with the elders, performed war rites and rituals. In this way, he was entitled to put on the warrior dress during the community functions (Mao 24). Similarly, couples who performed rites and rituals for the celebration of the feast of merit were also entitled to put on *Zhososa*.

Most of the societies across the globe set aside some time for celebrations. These celebrations are significant to the group that celebrates them yearly. It is a time of transition from one season to another, from one activity to another. The celebration of these festivals and their yearly repetition ensure the continuity of knowledge of the past and give meaning to the group's identity. The festivals were also occasions for people to relax and rest after days of hard work. They also had cultural expressions. Plato in his work 'Laws' described how the gods felt pity on the humans and ordained the change of holidays, a time of rest from labour (Assmann 42). The Naga festivals aim at reviving, protecting and sustaining their rich cultural heritage and traditions (Tiba 218), regaining strength and energy from agricultural fatigue, and learning from the elders and the older members of the community traditional skills like folklore, folktales, dances, yells, etc. It also offers opportunities to showcase their traditional ceremonial colourful dresses and costumes (Nepuni 108). In brief, the yearly celebration of the festivals ensures the communication and continuance of knowledge and practices that give the group its identity (Assmann 42).

There are several festivals that the Mao Nagas celebrate. These celebrate the success of the people after the completion of social activities. Thus, *Chiithuni* is celebrated after the harvest. The word *Chiithuni* means 'feast of dawn'. *Chiithu* in high tone means morning and *ni* means feast. It is the most loved and awaited feast because of the pleasant climate, and availability of food and drink (Nepuni 111). The story of *Kajini and Katini* (Kricho 1-5), as narrated by Eloni Kricho, takes place in the context of *Chiithuni*. *Chiithuni* is celebrated for

five or six days between December and January depending on the lunar calendar of the Mao Nagas. This festival is also called the harvesting or New Year festival since it is celebrated soon after the harvest on the first day of the New Year or the sowing seed festival since the sowing of seeds begins after this festival. The people have great reverence for the Creator. Before starting any activity, they always turn to the Creator to implore his blessings and to thank him. On occasions like festivals, religious rituals precede the celebrations. We have already seen how the first day begins for the men folk with their purification at the pond/river. Then men of good repute are chosen from the group to bear the sacred poles for the ritual offerings by the elders. The elders touch their hands, bless them, and foretell future events. When the ceremony was over, they would return to the village *ohu sopfowo* (yelling in a voiced rhythm). It is a month of celebrations; no one is to go to the paddy field; all would happily celebrate the feast together, play games, listen to stories, sing songs, and so on (Ashukho 3-4).

The celebrations of the community feasts are always preceded by the observation of *gennas*. There are different types of *genna* observed during the year. One such is *phre mani*. On this day the people ask God for good health. It is a sacred day; the people abstain from work and prepare themselves for the feast. All the men folk would go to the village pond for ritual washing and the cleansing of body and soul. It is a symbol of purification, of washing away the impurities of the past year and to implore God's blessings for the New Year. All the material items that they carry with them are also sprinkled with water. If a boy is too small to go to the pond, the father or the elders would bring water from the pond to wash and clean him symbolically. After the ceremony at the pond is over, the people would move slowly towards the village with traditional yells of *emehu* and *pasiihu*. The best traditional attire is also worn during these days. For example, in the early morning of the third day of the feast, all the menfolk, young and old, would go to the jungle to catch birds. The men would put on their best attire like "*tosii mani*", headgear, spears, guns, creeping grass, flowers, and trophies, and move

towards the village with traditional yells (Nepuni 112-116, 138-139). Not all the oral folk expressions are verbal (Dorson 2). The yells that we find among the Mao Nagas have their traditional character based on non-lexical sounds. It is presumed that during the peace treaty feast in *Kholia Ko* and *Shiikache Ko*, the men in their best traditional attires, decorated shields, spears, and animal horns (Mao 4-5) went to take part in the feast with traditional yells as they would have done during the celebration of community feasts like the day set aside the catch birds, climbing the hills, or evening social gatherings.

On the first day of any feast, a small portion of wine is offered to god. The elders from the family or the neighbours are offered the drink before the others, and they would bless the family. When the food is served and given to the individual, he/she would touch the food with the middle finger, which is then brought to the forehead and the chest as a sign of remembering and offering it to God before consuming it. This is seen in the narrative about Shiikache.

*“Shiikache siino opri okhe sii pfolowo kotsiimei zhi thisii fiiwo hayi kongeiwo ye
khetu khevu se masiwo wo pfokhru pfo kopfu molii (forehead and heart) sewo wo opri
okhe sii pfo michusi to butie”* (Salao 58-59).

(Taking the cup of wine and plate of meat, Shiikache like the ancestors sprinkled a few drops of wine on the ground. Pinching a few pieces of meat, he touched his forehead and heart).

When Shiikache was offered food and wine by his aunt, as was the customary religious practice, he sprinkled little drops of wine and small pieces of rice and meat as an offering to God before eating (Mao 6).

Saleni is another important festival. It is celebrated in July for five days after the paddy plantation. It is named after the month of *Sale* (Singh and Maheo 184). This feast is important for the male members. It is a feast of purification, a sacred feast. The menfolk are to abstain from staying with females or eating dog meat. The rite of purification consists of bringing water

from the spring in the early hours of the morning, making a separate fireplace, and making a new hearth; all the utensils too have to be new. An unblemished cock is cooked and the feathers are put on the *erii* (spear) of the boy (Saleo 50). The second day of the feast is called *Nijii* (big feast). On this day, cows are slaughtered and the meat is distributed. In the evening, they make offerings to God to ask for his blessings. In this feast, like in the festival of *Chiithuni*, the married daughters are gifted with wine and *sonii* (the best part of the meat) from their family to take to their husband's home. There is significance in giving *sonii* to married sisters by their brothers to encourage sisters to live happily, to foster the bond of friendship among relations and to instill respect especially for the sisters by husbands. It was in the context of *Saleni* that the story and song of Asha took place. Asha had gone along with her companions to collect local shampoo.

Arunamei Saleni koso manio ngholo

Ngholo akhramei olo longho chusii olo longho

(Free translation: After the village community celebrated the feast of *Saleni*, Asha and her friends went to collect a kind of plant. Its fibre was used to make dresses in the olden days).

During this and the preceding months, the people have no time for socializing since they are all busy in their fields planting paddy.

Kape pfozii khrono ruho no shiie shiie ko

Kotu rahu runi chathi showo lota meidelole

Kotu ruho rei achathi mow lota mei delole.

Chiihro ko ne okhro chiitoe ahra zhii pra lei khi

Maki macho shobo mocho leshii chii kakrii le okhra mei sii⁴.

(Free translation: In the month of *Pfozii* (June), the birds and the cuckoo begin to sing, signalling the plantation of paddy. Since people are busy in the field, they cannot see and meet

each other. Once the plantation was over, the days passed, comes the month of Chiikhro after the month of Saleni (July). Since the heavy work of the plantation is over, the people are more relaxed, they will begin to spend time together and talk of love with friends).

The story of the two sisters, Kateini and Kajiini, is a very popular folktale among the Mao and the Paomai Nagas. The story is the reflection of the life of society in the era in which the story originated. Like any other folktale, the author is unknown. Kateini was a beautiful girl. Her worth is seen in her spirit of service, gentleness and beauty. Her mother died early and so her father married a second time. The second wife bore him a girl named Kajiini. The stepmother could not tolerate the beauty of Kateini. She did whatever she could to ill-treat her (Rosalind 196). She ill-treated her by making her do all the housework. She even deprived her of her social life with her friends. The father's role is significant though he is silent almost all through the story. He displayed his affection for Kateini when he prepared firewood for her when she could not catch up with her friends to go to the forest on the occasion of *Saleni*. On the sixth day of the feast, young men and women would go to *eveli* (forest) to carry the firewood cut by the men folk during the winter season. There used to be a competition as to whose basket was the best. Rich clothes (*katisa lerisa*) were worn on this day. In the story, Kateini could not join her friends in the forest since her stepmother had given her plenty of work to finish while her stepsister went with the others. When Kateini had finished all the work, she went into the woods nearby to cut firewood. When the father heard the noise of chopping, he wondered about who could be cutting wood when everyone had left for the forest. He shouted, *theno izho ashiikhu leino osii dewe?* (Who could be cutting the firewood?). Kateini could not respond. When the father saw her, he felt sorry for her and prepared for her a basket with the finest wood (Saleo 6).

Strangely enough, Kateini outdid all the others in that she had the best basket of firewood. Her stepmother was angry and unhappy at this. She thought that Kajiini, her

daughter, who was richly dressed in *katisa lerisa* (traditional shawl and lungi), would be chosen. Instead, Kateini, poorly dressed in *okhrilosa*, was chosen (Saleo 7).

The story goes on to narrate about the social gathering that young boys and girls would have in the *morung*. The *morungs* were owned by rich families in the villages. It was a place for young men and women to learn art and social customs. There are separate *morung -Khrucho ye Locho Kozii* for boys and girls respectively. The boys would go and collect maize from the farm and in the evening the young boys and girls would spend their time cooking the maize. At other times, the girls would brew wine and the boys would bring cooked meat from their homes. This was one of the ways the young boys and girls enjoyed life (Nepuni 16-17). Kateini and her sister Kajiini too went to the *morung*. Their mother prepared their cups and plates. The cruel mother filled Kateini's cup with *oza* (water after washing the rice) and her plates with dry cow dung and bones (Saleo 8).

So, the next morning Kateini ran away to her aunt who lived in Viswema (now a village in Nagaland). Her silent fight against injustice was rewarded when she got married to a very rich man and enjoyed equal rights with her husband in the decision-making of the house (Rosalind 196). Kateini and her husband celebrated the feast of merit. Despite the hardship she had to undergo while living under her father's roof, she invited her father to the feast to be hosted by her family. After repeated requests, he accepted the invitation. After the feast, Kateini and her husband gifted him the best cow to take home. With the arrival of the cow, the family began to prosper.



Fig.6. View of present Viswema Village in Nagaland (photographed during the field study, 12.10.2024)

The '*Saleni*' feast is very significant both from spiritual and material perspectives. It celebrates the completion of planting paddy, thanking God, and resting after the tedious labour in the fields (Nepuni 118). On this day all males would put on their best traditional attire. It was on this occasion (*Saleni*) that Chakepfo Kahreo put on his best traditional attire (Mao 16).

One of the most revealing truths of the festivals is that the traditional feasts continue to flourish and be celebrated in creative and innovative ways long after their original meanings seem to have been forgotten by the younger generations. They continue to be celebrated because of the enduring values that are enshrined in them. The traditional celebration of community feasts is enriched with new competitions like singing, football and other modern means of entertainment.

The Mao Nagas live a simple life and work hard on the land. They spin and weave clothes, and make bamboo and cane products (Maheo 18). The people work hard (Rosalind 188) on the soil and nature in turn blesses them with sufficient food for the whole year. This is proven by the fact that almost all narratives speak about the agricultural life of the people or that the events narrated took place in this context. Every grain of rice is earned with the sweat

of man's brow and so it was treasured and care was taken not to let any grain fall to the ground and be lost.

The Mao Naga people have been an agrarian tribe since time immemorial. Their livelihood depended on agriculture (*Tata shiirii kocho*). They were and are a hard-working community. The area they occupy is comparatively smaller than that of many others; they make use of every available piece of land to sustain themselves. Every child in the family has to learn how to hold a spade and other tools used for cultivation. The agricultural tools/implements that they use tell how laborious and industrious the people were. They spend a maximum amount of time on the soil, be it wet cultivation for paddy or in the *pfole* (Jhum). The main crops that they cultivate are paddy, maize, millet, potatoes, tomato, cabbage and vegetables of various kinds (Nepuni 103). The narratives deal with human lives and their activities. In the myth *Dziliamosiia*, her three children are described as being engaged in their daily agrarian work (Kricho 1) and living in harmony with each other.

Every household was an industrial centre. It was a small-scale industry where they manufactured their goods like knives, spades, seats, plates, cups, spoons and baskets. Every woman knew how to weave and mend clothes. They would get raw materials like cotton from the neighbouring tribes, the Marams, and the Rengmas, through the barter system. Baskets of cotton were exchanged for paddy and chicken⁵. They are expert artisans, craftsmen, and designers. One can see their art on their housetops, on the youth dormitories, and on the village gate, namely, the wooden sculptures of animals, birds, or men.

In *Shiikache Ko* (Salao 52-71) we hear of Shiikache replying to the query about the mark on his forehead. He told his aunt that when he was young, one day his mother asked him to do some work while she was weaving, but he refused. At this, the mother struck his forehead with her weaving stick,

ino nolu kocho lei soshiie sii, apfii no osa dekowow chiino ovo ko molu hiwo aino sobo

tilie apfii no oraro lowo dokre ne dewo tie siina izhu siino izhocd-e (sic izhod-e) butie to pette (Saleo 59). (When I was young, I was naughty; so, one day when my mother asked me to do some work while she was weaving, I refused. She got angry and hit me with the weaving stick).

They are experts in handicrafts and cane work. They make baskets of different varieties; *oro* (bamboo basket for carrying firewood), *pitsii* (small round bamboo basket for paddy), *phoro* (bamboo sheave), etc.

Their livelihood depended on the fruits of the soil. In most of the narratives, we find the characters engaged in agricultural activities for their livelihood. In *Moranato kahei ko* (two orphans) (Saleo 18-22), two young children were left orphaned after the death of their parents. The young inexperienced children were left alone to fend for themselves. And they struggled hard in their field, though without much effect. The other narratives that speak of their agricultural lives are *Orameipfii mono kolo ko*, *Kateini Ko*, *Choro Ko*, *Thoduo Ko*, *Kholia Ko*, *Chozuina Kali Ko*, *Kholiru Ko* and *Hriio Ko*. The people have the practice of helping each other, in turn, in their fields; this is referred to as *ava kocho* in the Mao Naga language. It was on one of these occasions that Hriio's daughter was taken away by the gods while returning from the field with her friends. *Ona-pei sii ilopra lie, kaniko sii kasamei yi akuo avanghoe* (Saleo 54-55) (when the daughter grew up, one day she went with her friends to the field – *avanghoe*- going to each other's field in rotation). The activities spoken of in the stories are the normal ones that are expected of both genders and are more or less practiced even to this day.

Like any other Naga tribe, the Mao Nagas practice jhum (*pfole*) cultivation. The sites were carefully chosen after surveying the whole area so that the forest was not fully destroyed. This chosen area was cut down and burned. The burned ashes served as manure to some extent for the plants. It must be remembered that in the earlier days all these were done for domestic consumption and not on a commercial basis.

Hunting of animals for consumption was famous in the olden days. Narratives that have supernatural elements as in *Orameipfii mono kolo ko* (Saleo 44) narrate how the people in the other world went hunting.

The Biblical exhortation “So that you can tell your son and grandson” (Exodus 10:2) underlined the importance of memory in communications. There is no future without being rooted in history. For the Mao Nagas, their traditions are communicated to the younger generations by the elders and parents orally. Jacques Le Goff would call these and other carriers of traditions ‘memory men, the memory of the society’ (56).

The Naga youth dormitory was an important social institution where the traditions and culture of a society were communicated. T.C. Hodson speaks of it as Bachelor Club or Men’s House (42). Shiipfomei, the classical language, is taught to the younger generation in the *morung* (youth dormitory) in the form of songs, tales, etc. (Nepuni 16). Shiipfomei also refers to the Mao and the Poumai Naga tribes which shared a common identity and name earlier. Youth dormitories are found in many regions and communities. Quoting Peal, Kumar writes... *these barracks for the unmarried are sufficiently suggestive; ... first as evidence of former racial affinity; second as an important factor in social evaluation* (Kumar 85). Youth dormitories were a kind of educational institution where character formation and other occupational skills were imparted (Kire 64). Besides the youth dormitory, there were the family hearths and fields, where the parents or elders would narrate stories or teach songs. William Nepuni writes that the classical language is popularised through festivals and workplaces where the language was spoken and learned in conversation among peer groups (Nepuni 16). It was also a place where in the evening the young girls and boys would come together to feast with drinks (*opri*) and food (bowl with meat) brought from their own homes. Such a tradition is seen in the story of Kateini and Kajiini when they went to the youth dormitory, *Ikhru ilo moso sii alia chiihe no avei lowo opri ye tukhe pfo mokru bulei vuloe...Kateini ye Kajiini sii locho bulei*

vulo cho-khri loe (Salao 5). (All young men and women went to the youth dormitory carrying their cups of wine and cooked meat. Kateini and Kajini too went).

There were separate dormitories for boys and girls. They were not only the platform for socializing and a place for learning skills, but a place for learning social values and the spirit of oneness, a place where values like sincerity, discipline, honesty and responsibility towards the community were taught. The members of these dormitories learned different types of folksongs, folktales, proverbs and so on (Kricho 75-76). It was also a place where arts and crafts were learned by the younger generation.

They learned how to weave baskets and mats and make wood carvings, spears, spades, knives, etc. They also learned the art of cultivation. In the evening after supper, the young boys and girls would gather in the youth dormitory and discuss varied topics: village news, stories, business, love, etc. They were the moments when they shared fun and laughter. The boys could visit the girls' dormitory but the girls could not visit the boys' dormitory. They would discuss various topics. There used to be a competition for the folksongs. The boys and girls would compete facing each other. The first category of song was *Odo Lo* followed by *Lochu Lo* (Kricho 76-77).

The *Morung* (youth dormitory) played an important role in shaping the character of the individuals. It was a boarding house, an educational institution, a character formation centre, and a vocational training centre for young boys and girls. Here the young are taught the basic principles of life, human relationships, good manners, folktales and folksongs, community work, and team spirit (Nepuni 129). Arts and crafts which could be equivalent to modern vocational learning were taught in these centres, besides in their homes. The doctors, nurses, professors, scientists, engineers, administrators, musicians, orators, and leaders of the society of the time were all trained in these centres. It also prepared adults for married life. The young girls learned how to live life. The boys and girls would sometimes brew wine and share it.

During such times, the boys and girls would sit facing each other, and through the songs, they would woo each other as their life partners. One important aspect of the youth dormitory is that the young men were prepared to guard the village in times of *oso oru* (war) (Nepuni 130,131).

Since the youth dormitory is very much part of their life, it is included even in narratives that deal with the supernatural and the dead. In *The Diligent Couple* (Kricho 9-10) the boy who went to the world of the dead was persistent that he be allowed to go to the youth dormitory with his parents.

*Opfii opfo no onato yisii sawo kathi lozhu kokro zho sii pfotamei avei lolie onato yi
siino ni nikasamei hrulei vu ziile ti-e hipeimei zhi no otakriie, siiduno anghei he
ziibeio to petie. Ana onato siino chanimoe kasamei hrulei vu ziile ye hipeimei zhi-e
kolile to petilie eh ana dziikapa sii mosole to kasamei hrulei savu thopie* (Saleo 20).

(On the day when the boy with his dead parents reached the world of the dead, after supper, he was asked not to go with his friends since the world of the dead is different from the world of the living. But the boy requested his dead parents to allow him to go and know how people live in this world. To please their son, the parents allowed him to go and stay with his friends in the youth dormitory).

We may thus conclude that the youth dormitory was an integral centre that prepared young men and women for life. The syllabus of the youth dormitory included a variety of matters that concerned day-to-day living. These institutions are equivalent to present-day schools. The young people were taught stories, values and ancient knowledge.

In the olden days, when a village or community fought with their enemy and brought heads as spoils of war or were defeated and their heads were taken by the enemy, the intermediaries (*rupemei*), usually women, were sent to bring back their heads to give them a decent burial back in their village. No one would attack the *rupemei*. At other times when a compromise was reached between the two warring groups, *asoto* (a feast treaty) was celebrated

where the exchange of water and washing of each other's hands was done. The meaning of this was that from that day onwards they would be friends; there would be no more fights and war between those groups. The groups could invite guests to take part in the celebration. Weapons such as guns, shields and knives are also exchanged between the warring groups. An agreement is made between them. An interviewee remembered the *asoto* which took place in his village. The dispute was settled with a peace treaty. *Asoto* was celebrated not only for peace between the warring groups but also to strengthen the bond of love and unity among the people.

This is narrated in the story of Shiikache. The feast of the peace treaty was organized between Chani's village and the original village of Shiikache. All the men folk were to wear the traditional attire. Chani prepared the best attire for her brother to the envy of the villagers. On the shield of Shiikache were two hummingbirds and a beautiful wild animal horn making it shine like a new moon in the western skies (Mao 4).

Chani rumei ye Shiikache (sic Shiikache) pfiipfo rumei sii Asoto leto bue. Chani rumei ona sokhralo chuno monghisa ye achu mazhiho achu mashiisa to ona achuiowo chiidze kaka asiifii lei siino pra koli koli we (Salao 55).

(The villages of Chani and Shiikache decided to have a peace treaty. The people started preparing the best attire for this occasion).

Kholia Ko, (the story of Kholia) also deals with *Asokoto*⁶ (peace treaty) (Note that irregular use of spellings is given in the same stories). Kholia had married the son of an old man, and they had everything they needed and lived a happy life. Her husband was an influential man in the village. One day she requested him to host *asoto*. The husband was delighted and went to discuss the matter with other men in the village. The day was fixed.

Kholia chow sii choho kosiimei meihrulei kapramei kalei. Phonghei hi choho nishowo chovoso hriiwo kobu chiihelei mei kali sowo butie. Siiduno inuleimei thopfii se Kholia chow yi sii itsii mokhro shupfo buwe Kholia siino pfo pfo rumei yi sii asotole she to

pfo chow hesii pemane tie. Ochow se asoto koru sii odzii prashutie. Siiduno Kholia chow siino tapra Inulei mei khruyi sawo kophro hilie mei khruise eh to Kholia pfo inulei mei hesii Asoto leto kakruwo tie (Salao 35).

(Kholia's husband was an influential man in the village, and the villagers respected him. They became very rich and had everything. One day she requested him to host a feast of friendship between her village and that of her father's village (*asoto*). The husband was delighted and went to discuss the matter with other men in the village. The day was fixed).

The feast of Asokoto enabled the warring groups to make peace and cement the bond of union and communion among themselves. *Asoto*, as in *Shiikache Ko* (Mao 3,4) and *Kholia Ko* (Mao 44; Salao 35), was celebrated to make peace with the warring village and foster healthy rapport between them.

Another feast is the traditional feast of merit *Zhoso mozii*,⁷ the feast of the rich sharing their wealth with others. If a family had more wealth than what they required, they were not supposed to sell their surplus, but throw a feast, referred to as the feast of merit, for the whole village. Nepuni describes in detail this feast wherein the couple who host the feast attain a certain status in the society. A special dress, the *Zhososa* shawl, is worn by them after the feast. People honour and respect them in society. A monolith is also erected to perpetuate their names and memories for generations to come (Nepuni 122). When one goes around the villages of Mao, one will find several monoliths erected in memory of individuals. Some monoliths are erected in remembrance of one's beloved father/mother; others are of those who hosted the feast of merit. In the tale of *Kateini Ko*, it is narrated that she was fortunate to be married to a wealthy husband. Kateini and her husband celebrated the "feast of merit" (Zhoso). *Pfonghei adzii kolo thisii choho nishupra lowo omozii ye ozhoso to orumei yi pi pe zhutatie* (after their marriage they grew rich and decided to feed the whole village) (Salao 8). They did this twice, indicating that they were wealthy.

In the story of *Thoduo ko* (Mao 81), it is narrated that Thoduo grew up as a servant in his sister's house. Later, when his sister recognized him as her brother, she began to treat him well. He grew to maturity and got married. He worked hard along with his wife and they were blessed with wealth and riches. As was the custom of the wealthy of the time, he celebrated the feast of merit. In the narrative *Morona Ye Oramei Pfi* (Neli 48-50), there is no direct mention of the feast being celebrated. But some indications tell the audience that the couple must have celebrated the feast of merit. When the wife said rice, and there was rice; meat and there was meat; wine and there was wine. She then sent him to invite all neighbours to their house for a meal. One of the villagers was made to shout (*tokhu shareo*). Morona's wife *du sii hrule*, (go to the field of Morona's wife); all were invited. Some made fun of them asking what they would give them to eat and drink and so refused to go. But those who had come had their fill.

These were important occasions celebrated by the community in those years. These opportunities helped them to cement the bond of unity and communion among the members and the villages. The feast also highlights that there is no class division in society. Everyone is equal. If they became rich by dint of hard work, they found an occasion to share their riches with the less privileged ones. The number of monoliths erected in and around the villages reveals that the forefathers were wealthy and generous people.

The feast of merit was also the occasion for the people to be reconciled with the others and to live in peace with one another. It was not done to show off one's wealth but to share with others what one had. Wealth was measured not in terms of money but in terms of paddy, cattle, land, etc. (Nepuni 129).

The Mao Naga tribe believed in the existence of the Supreme God. They also believed that God has many agents or spirits who are believed to be present in places such as rivers, mountains, cliffs, stones, wells, bamboo groves and pits. They believed in the existence of good and evil spirits. The good spirits help and assist man while the bad spirits bring destruction.

People do not visit certain places because they are believed to be the abode of evil spirits (Singh and Maheo 171). Therefore, the elders and the parents would advise the children not to go alone to these places lest they be attacked by the spirits; they should not even take the cattle to those places to feed them, since the spirits of those spots would curse the cattle too and they would die. We quote below a folk rhyme that warns the cowherds about not visiting places that are considered to be the abode of evil spirits.

<u>Maola</u>	<u>Free Translation in English</u>
<i>Nolu kochuli otu khu kochuli</i>	when young and tending the cow
<i>Ojii kahre he li hoprasho</i>	do not go to the unholy land
<i>Ojii no kithale⁸</i>	the land will curse them to death

The religious practices are numerous. *Gennas* are also observed.

Gennas generally mean the observance of customary laws, prohibition, a respite from normal activities with a fear of supernatural penalties, a kind of Sabbath. If these *gennas* are not properly observed misfortunes are likely to set in. Due to such long-standing belief they observed *gennas* by abstaining from normal activities (Singh and Maheo 177).

They observed yearly ritual *gennas*. The celebration of the community feasts is preceded by the observation of *gennas*. There are several *gennas* the tribe observes during the year. One such is *phre mani*, which has been described in an earlier section of this chapter. (Nepuni 112-116, 138-139).

The narratives also lead us to conclude that there were inter-tribal and intra-tribal feuds in the past. The villages had to be fortified and gates were constructed to restrict the entry of strangers (Singh and Maheo 29). *Oru Koho Ko* (war) (Saleo 27-29) narrates a sad story about a group of people who went to war, dressed in traditional war attires and carried with them warring spear (*orii ingho*) and other types of weapons for war. On their return, one of them got

lost. This man survived on the wild animals and other edible grass in the forest. After many years, he was able to reach his village and home but nobody was able to recognize him.

Further, the story of *Kozhow Ko* (Saleo 30-34) speaks of a young warrior Kozhow who was known for his skills and valour in war. He took revenge on his enemies who had killed his beloved. Taking all his war dresses and weapons he left home to avenge the death of his girlfriend. For fear of being recognized, he disguised himself and carried out his plan of executing revenge on the enemies. When the enemy was celebrating their victory in capturing Kozhow's girlfriend, and had gone off to sleep, Kozhow killed them all with the knife. He searched for his beloved's head took it and went back and presented it to her brothers who were happy that he had avenged the death of their sister.

3.5 The material cultural elements in the narratives as part of the Mao Naga identity

The folk costume is the outward badge of folk group identity. The dress identifies them as being different from the others:

Identity was determined geographically and the local costume expressed locality, region, or province...the costume is distinct and identifiable; it identifies the weaver to the outside world as well as to his community; it is prescribed by the community and its form is dictated by the community's tradition (Yoder 297).

Folk costume refers to the dresses, ordinary as also festive dresses, that the people normally wear. Folk costume is the form of a specific dress and it symbolises the identity of a community and also manifests an individual's relationship with the community. Dress is still very much the badge of group identity (Yoder 296-297).

The Mao people had a glorious past which is seen in their way of life and culture. The traditional crafts, colourful designs, signs, and symbols are all engraved on their dress, ornaments, weapons, traditional houses, and folksongs. These too contribute to maintaining and promoting their identity (Kolakhe i). The traditional dress of the Mao Naga is not

complicated. The Nagas, in general, wore very colourful dresses which distinguished them from others in their colours and designs. The men wore short black cotton shawls decorated with three rows of white cowries of buttons. The dress of the girls was simple. Special clothes were worn by those who had performed the feast of merit. It may be worth mentioning here that they weave their clothes with the raw materials obtained through a barter system from the neighbouring tribes like the Marams and the Rengmas (Hodson 24).

There are different types of dresses worn by the Mao Nagas: *Shingolosa*, *okhrilosa*, *madelosa*, *khriilosa*, (made from local jute and hibiscus plants) *kokrosa*, *kateimani*, *birsamani*, *sanghisa*, *lerisa*, *kateisa*, *zhososa* and *chopapi kadesa* (Saleo 35-38). *Okhrilosa* was an ordinary dress used by common people, while *katisa lerisa* was used by the wealthy.

Both the men and the women wore necklaces of cornelian beads, bones of deer carefully whitened with blue beads in between (Hodson 33). The women usually wore bangles of brass. The necklaces and ornaments were from shells indicating that, at one point of time, their ancestors must have lived close to the sea or passed through coastal areas. Young girls adorned themselves with colourful attires and ornaments. We read that Asha adorned herself with bangles which later fell into the lake. Kateini “*pfokongo lei oto tofu (Necklace)*” leaves the youth dormitory for her aunt’s village at Viswema; she leaves behind her necklace for Kajiini, her sister (Salao 5). The young and men would adorn themselves with traditional ornaments and attires, especially on feast days.

Kholiru Ko (Asha) or *Mari Ashiihra* (Mao 88) refers to the same person. On the first day after the Saleni, the villagers were going to collect *olo* (a kind of special slippery shampoo plant). Kholiru could not join the others since she had not finished all her chores. By the time she finished the work, the villagers were far off. When she finally went, she did not find the best *olo*. She cut for herself what was left behind by the others by the side of the pond. The indication here is that in the olden days, fibre was used to weave dresses.

The designs and symbols used by the Mao Nagas play an important role in the education and communication of their unique identity. Their dresses were made from four types of plants whose name was given to the dress. They are as follows:

- (a) *Shiingolosa*: This cloth is woven from the bark of *Shiingolobu*. It is also called *Shiimolo-sa*. It is made from the local wild jute plant. (Kolakhe 8)
- (b) *Okhrilosa*: This cloth is woven from the bark of *Okhrivubu*.
- (c) *Madelosa*: This cloth is woven from the bark of *Madesiibii*.
- (d) *Khriilosa*: This cloth is woven from the bark of *Kokhriibu*.

This is the first type of cloth that the Maos made. All the girls were to possess one *Khriilosa* at the time of their marriage. Those who did not have one would borrow it from others and then return it after the marriage was over (Saleo 35). *Khri-sa* is another name for this type of cloth. It is made from a locally grown hibiscus plant (Kolakhe 9). The bark from the tree is peeled off and then boiled together with ash. After boiling, it is beaten to remove the weak parts. After that, the thread is spun, and the thread is then ready for use.

- (e) *Mokrosa*: This cloth was woven with the thread that they got from the Maram, the Rengmas and the Manipuris through the barter system. This type of cloth is called *Mokrosa*, and is meant for women.

Besides the above, there are also other dresses worn on different occasions by both men and women. *Sanghi-sa* was worn by the poorer women and by elderly women. *Chiina-mani/Kina-mani*, as the name indicates, was worn by women during the rituals. *Khepi-Kadesa* bore the designs of animals like elephants, peacocks, etc. It was worn by people who had constructed traditional houses. *Zhoso-sa* was worn by both males and females of the richer section of the society, those who had celebrated the feast of merit. One of the most common kinds of cloth worn by both males and females is *Katisa*, while *Sachu-sa* is worn only by men folk. Different kinds of dresses are worn on different occasions.

Kati sa ye lerii sae ochakayikodi

Kodi pfotho opfii sorumei tachii li tho

Litho choho kakrii chiihru ba chiikhro no choe dah

Ada lo hei orumei moso ruli koso nisii

Dahru ba dahrano dani ikhru⁹.

(Free translation: fold the finely woven *katisa-e* and *leriisa*. Keep them inside the *takhi* (container made from bamboo for the women to keep their dresses). Take them out only on special occasions and not on casual days, when during the village festivals all put on their best. Wear them during those days, my friends)

The above verse is an invitation to keep the finely woven shawl inside the box. It further advises all to take and wear them only on special occasions.

The people wear different kinds of clothes on different occasions- ordinary and festive days. We find this in the narrative of *Kateini Ko*: It was a custom to judge whose *Oro* (basket from bamboo) was the best during the Saleni. When they were nearing the village, everyone came out to see whose basket was the best. Kateini and Kajiini's mother also came out to see. The news spread that Kateini's basket was the best. She had outdone all the others. Her stepmother was very unhappy and angry because her daughter, Kajiini, who was richly clad in *katisa lerisa* (the traditional lungi and shawl), had not won the contest. Kateini, on the other hand, even though poorly dressed in *Okhrilosa* (Salao 1-9), was the winner in the contest.

Nahra is a male dress. It is a kind of traditionally coloured and designed sash that men wear on special occasions. *Shiipfow Kois* is a story of two lovers who could not get married in their earthly life. We have already narrated this story. What remains is to stress what happened when Pforeni woke up and realized that Shiipfow was gone. She prepared to run after Shiipfow. She took with her his *nahra* (a kind of sash) and some food and ran after him. When she saw him from a distance, she shouted to him to wait and to take the *nahra* and food along with him.

But Shiipfow knew full well that if he turned back, he would not be able to proceed on his journey. So, he did not turn back to talk to Pforeni. She felt very sad and went back home with *nahra* and the food. She had mixed feelings of anger and sadness. Before reaching her village, she threw the *nahra* into the muddy water. That night she neither ate nor slept because of sorrow. This story mentions many times the *nahra* worn by men.

During the ‘peace treaty feast’ between the villages of Shiikacke and Chani, Shiikache had the best attire. His shield was decorated with hummingbird figures and a wild animal horn; a bundle of flowers was tied up in the middle of the shield and a war horn was fixed on his headgear (Mao 4-5). In another version *Shiikache Ko* (Salao 52-71), it is narrated that it was the customary practice of the people to organize peace treaties with other warring villages. The villages of Chani and Shiikache held one such feast. The villagers began to prepare dresses for this feast. All the male folk would dress in their best traditional attire. Chani had woven the best dress for Shiikache. When the villagers came to the open ground for practice, they became envious of Shiikache because he was prominent among them with his beautiful attire; besides, his shield was decorated with two hummingbirds *rikriiridzii* (a male and female bird). Not only that; Chani had also attached attractive wild animal horns onto his shield. Shiikache’s dress was the best. The young men did not want him to join them to go for the peace treaty feast. They said that they would wait for the bird of Shiikache to die; only after that, they would go. The birds would not die easily because Chani was feeding them at home. One day, without informing Shiikache, they put on their best dress and went for the peace treaty feast. That same day when Shiikache returned from a nearby pond he realized that all the men folk had gone for the feast. He asked Chani where they might have gone. Chani told him that all the male folk had gone to the feast. On hearing this Shiikache wanted to go and asked his sister to get ready his dresses. Chani played a prank on him saying that since he could not go, the villagers had come and asked for his dress and that she had given it to them. He felt sad on hearing this.

Later, when she told him the truth, he got ready and went after the men folk who had already left for the host village of the feast of merit.

Not all the narratives were orally handed down. There were some which were inscribed on the dresses and other equipment that the people used. Dress is one of the important features of any group that differentiates them from the others. A glance at the dresses of different tribes of the Northeast or even of the different Naga tribes shows us a wide variety of designs and colours that each tribe possesses. Each tribe has its designs and symbols that speak of their uniqueness. The Mao Nagas are experts in traditional crafts, designs, signs and symbols. Their narratives speak of the glorious past. The women were expert weavers (Mao 1). In this sense, each household was a small-scale industry.

Their dresses are decorated with beautiful designs of various kinds, especially on *Khepi-Kadesa*, each having a particular meaning.

- (a) *Elephant*: The elephant is one of the biggest animals. Therefore, the elephant on their dresses symbolizes that they want to live like this big animal, standing mighty among the others.
- (b) *The head of the buffalo*: This signifies that they want to live like a big animal. Those who have celebrated the feast of merit put this on top of their houses.
- (c) *The cock*: The cock is all decorated by itself. It is complete in itself. The Mao Nagas want to live like the cock to be self-sufficient and not to be dependent on the others.
- (d) *Erii (the spear)*: The spear signifies that they want to live in peace with all¹⁰.

Dresses identify any community as being different from others. The Mao Nagas have their own identifying dresses. For an outsider, some of the dresses and their designs bear resemblance to those of the Paomai and the Angami. This is because they are believed to have common ancestors. However, each has a distinct sign that marks them as being different from the others.

3.6 The Mao Naga narratives and ecological pointers

In this section, an attempt is made to show how nature acted as a mother and provider to the Nagas. It will throw light on the concept of nature from the Mao Naga perspective as depicted in some of their narratives. The indigenous people excel in their interpersonal relations and understanding of the natural and cultural world around them. They have strong bonds with their ancestors and with the land. They preserve an original sense of admiration, love, reverence and respect for nature. In their myths, songs, stories and other literary genres there is an element of the unseen forces in nature that are intimately connected to them (Menamparambil 89).

There is a close relationship between man and nature. As long as they lived respecting nature, there was prosperity and progress; however, man's ambition and greed affected and destroyed certain elements of nature. The first of such narratives is about a stone that became the reason for enmity and ill-will among the people (Kozminky 12); this is the legend about the miraculous stones at *Tobufii* and *Khezakeno*. The clearing of the jungle for cultivation certainly caused certain destruction of the forests and the loss of the animals and birds therein. However, this did not affect much the environment, since the population was small.

In the myths and legends of the Mao Nagas, we find an exploration of the universe. In the myth of *Dziiliamosiia*, we encounter the supernatural realm. It may look like a fantasy and the imagination of people. The creation myth of the Mao Nagas gives us an account of how the three worlds, namely, human (*omei*), animal (*okhe*), and spirit (*ora*) worlds originated. This myth of *Dziiliamosiia* has become the foundational theme among the southern Naga tribes. It is well known among the Angami, Chakhesang, Rengma, and Sumi Nagas in Nagaland and the Mao, Maram, and Poumai Nagas in Manipur (Aier 59-60). The myth could indicate that the tribe was an agrarian community whose survival depended solely on the land. The earth is referred to as the mother that provides sustenance. It also speaks of man's relationship with nature, creation and other living beings.

The myth of *Dziiliamosiia* speaks about the origin of the human race through the intervention of supernatural power in nature. A close analysis of the myth reveals that there is a close relationship between human beings and nature. It is a reflection of the world view of the people on nature. It also represents their thoughts on creation and the socio-cultural background and history of the people (Kricho vii). The Mao Nagas believed in the co-existence of the three worlds- spirits, animals and human beings. This belief is not confined only to the Mao Nagas but also to other Naga tribes. Naga folk belief is that man, tiger and spirit once lived as brothers, having a common mother. With the death of the mother, things turned different. There arose disunity among the brothers which finally led them to depart for different places. Though separated, they considered the tiger as the elder brother (Kire 69). There has been a close bond between humans and nature since time immemorial. The sky is addressed as father and the earth as mother. This concept is found among the Angami Nagas (Kire70; Wijunamai 29).

The narratives unconsciously promote an understanding of the environment. The first woman *Dziiliamosiia* rested under the banyan tree. The tree provided comfort. There is a strong bond between the trees and human beings. *Dziiliamosiia* is the personification of the mother who gives birth and nourishes the life of her children. She is the creative force while the white cloud signifies the season of spring that brings new life and solace. Since the people were all agriculturalists, they knew that clouds bring rain to quench the thirsty parched land and give new life and freshness to the earth (Nepuni 46). They lived in harmony with their mother and went about doing their daily duties of agrarian work (Kricho 1).

The hearth and fire in the myth indicate life, warmth, unity and family bond. As the story continues, Omei was the most sensible son who cared for and nurtured their sick mother; he followed her instructions to the letter. As instructed by the mother, he buried her mortal remains under the hearth. After the death of the mother, the sons departed, each to his destiny:

the spirit to the jungle, the tiger to the forest, and man to the ancestral land. Even to this day among the Mao Nagas, the youngest son inherits the ancestral home. With the increase in population, the human race spread to other places. To commemorate their departure, they erected monuments that continue to live on in the memory of the people (Nepuni 51).

The people are very practical and knowledgeable about ethno-medicinal plants that bring healing to the sick. When the mother, in the myth of Dziiliamosiia, was sick, the *man* looked after her; he prepared her spicy king chilly soup (Kricho 2) (*khedzii kohru*) which made her feel better. *Khedzii kohru* is a pungent food prepared from a mixture of bitter gourd leaves, garlic, spring onion, hibiscus, tree tomato, ginger and chillies along with or without fermented beans (Singh and Maheo 94-95). Leaves like *Obuvii* (Polygonaceae), *Kanjapro* (Cannabaceae), *Shiipapro* (Polytrichaceae), *Pondal* (passion fruit), and *Japan pro* leaves (literally means Japanese plant) are used in curing sickness and wounds. It speeds up blood clotting. *Tobowo* is another medicinal plant that treats people suffering from dysentery (*ochiikashii*). It is usually cooked with rice and given to patients from time to time. Thus, we see that various element of nature act as healing agents, bringing solace, comfort and healing to the people. Since the people live amidst the rich natural vegetation, knowledge about healing plants is passed down orally. It is interesting to know that many herbs that have medicinal values are kept hidden from the public view for they believe that once it is put into the public domain, their efficacy to heal decreases (Singh and Maheo 96, 103).

Native woven dresses were made from available local jute and hibiscus plants like *Okhrrio*, *Shiimo*, and a few other plants. The dresses protect them. In the narrative about Kholia, we read that nature provided shelter, protection, and refuge, *Mavesiibu...kajii kali philei sii abeipfo chotie* (A big tree gave her shelter) to Kholia and she was able to rest well during the night when her father had left her in the forest. In her dream, she was instructed on what to do when morning came (Salao 34). The concept of wilderness in this tale and in

many others is viewed as a place of solace. In the song on Mari Ashia, the girl swallowed by the lake, nature in the narrative became a soothing balm to end her mistreatment by her stepmother (Kricho 64).

In all cultures across the world, the earth is one of the most important and meaningful cosmic elements. It suggests images that are characteristic of the formation journey: the effort of sowing and the joy of harvesting, fruitfulness or aridity, the struggle to cultivate the land, and the joy of a rediscovered homeland (Colombo 9). The Mao Nagas, from time immemorial, lived in a close relationship with nature. The earth is considered a mother. The clear sky is called, *Orachi madai Apfu* and the landscape *ojimashe apfii* (Daniel 56)

T.C. Hodson writes:

...Mao Nagas believed that the world was once a waste of water with neither hills, nor trees and that the deity imprisoned below made such huge efforts to escape that hills emerged. To this some of the Mao Naga villagers add the belief that the sky is the male principle and the earth the female, and that an earthquake is as it were their conjugal embrace, whence all fertility, all growth on the earth, has its origin (56).

Dziiliamosiia can be compared to Mother Earth which nourishes and gives life. The myth narrates that a white cloud overshadowed her while she was sleeping under the banyan tree. The white cloud signifies the season of spring bringing new life and freshness (Nepuni 48; Hodson 127). It was the white cloud, or in some views, it was '*kateikoziwo*' which is associated with the male gender. It stands for the reproductive and generative agent that gives life (Nepuni 44).

Nature, through its forests, provides them with edible green plants and fruits from time to time. In the creation myth, the brother animal left bunches of wild edible vegetables for brother man (Kricho 5). Everyone, both male and female, contributes towards the sustenance

of the family. All able-bodied persons work hard to earn their livelihood. It may be interesting to know that there is no discrimination in society. Since agriculture was the only occupation, everyone, including the chief/king (*Movuo*), worked like the others in the field. There was no distinction between the rich and the poor. Whether rich or poor, they had to work hard for their livelihood. If one became wealthy, it did not give him /her privilege in society. As such there was not much corruption, cheating, or other vices in society.

Wealth was not measured in terms of money but in “the number of cattle, paddy fields, sons, firewood land, amount of paddy, etc one owns” (Nepuni 122). An important virtue of sharing by the wealthy was seen in the celebration of the feast of merit. Today its traces are seen in the number of monoliths erected in memory of people who have celebrated the feast of merit.

In the beginning, the Mao Nagas did not possess iron or any other advanced materials for agricultural and house-building purposes. Bones of cows were used for agricultural purposes. *Ozii* (bed), and *pimokhu* (pillow) were made from *osii*(wood). There were no *oli* (pot), *okhe* (plate) and *oprei*(cup) made from iron, but there were earthen pots, cups and plates made from *ohre*(gourds) (Saleo 34). Most of the narratives have agricultural activities as the central theme. The life of the people revolved around agriculture and its related activities.

Thus, it was nature that provided them in the so-called primitive period when the use of iron, steel, etc., was not known. The forest provided them with wood for their houses and firewood for their hearth. Wood, grass and mud in the form of logs, thatch grass (*shiini*), and rope were used to build their houses, to plaster the walls, (Maheo 23), etc., to be their shelter and to protect them from the heat and the attack of wild animals and even from their enemies. In *Mr. Morona ye Movu-o* story orphan got married to a young beautiful girl. After his marriage, as was the custom, he started preparing a separate house for himself and his wife. “To construct the new house they started collecting building materials such as wooden posts

and harvesting the thatch etc” (Mao 37). The forest trees were respected, revered, and feared by the Mao Nagas. When a person needed to cut trees to make a large mortar for pounding paddy or to make a bed, a request would be made, by an elder of the clan, to the tree that was to be cut. *The tree has to be owned and possessed by him and shall be cut because he needs it and shall be converted to the thing he desires (to be mentioned) and make his personal belongings.* Only after this request is the tree cut down (Puni 26). This mentality is similar to that of the Pueblo Indians who ask pardon of the deer before eating it, and the Hopi and the Totonac Indians who ask permission of the tree or any plant that they want to cut before felling it. Such are some of the attitudes of reverence and respect that the tribals have for nature. This contributes to preserving and promoting ecological balance (Menamparambil 89) on this planet which is our common home. We find this aspect also in the works of Easterine Kire, a Naga writer from Nagaland, as observed by Achingliu Kamei, “In her works, nature had played the ultimate role of a provider, protector, nurturer, and giver of life. Mother Nature sustains and provides for humans” (206)

We see in the narratives how nature’s wrath harmed the lives of people. While exalting the positive ecological practices of the Mao Nagas, elements of negative consequences are also mentioned. In the myth of Dziiliamosiia, the years that *Omei* and *Okhe* lived apart from each other could be viewed from the perspective of ecological disturbances, and the reconciliation between them presents a sense of strengthening one’s commitment to preserving nature and a close affinity cemented after a breakup. The man went to meet brother animal (Kricho 5) in the jungle which was a sign of the close affinity between them. The folk narrative of *Chakepfo Kahrio Ko* is a fine example of this. According to the folktale, he was ritualistic, strong, and capable, but over-confident. He challenged the sun, the rain, and the landslide. He defeated the sun and the rain, but the landslide ripped his body apart. He was proud of his feat with the sun and the rain which he won due to the blessings of God. But in the last competition with the

landslide, he neglected to perform the rituals and this displeased the gods (Kricho 15-16; Salao 16-27; Mao 13-17). Human beings have to maintain the cosmic balance. It calls for respect for ecology (Menamparambil 90). In the story of Kholia, there is a strong sense of fear and anxiety (*Kholia sii olemazhi kochoko kolimo kapriiko kolimo to krapfo...*) (Salao 34). Darkness engulfed her and she began to shiver with fear. She began to hear the cries of all kinds of wild animals and the chirping of birds and insects. She wished that it were all a nightmare (Salao 68). In the story of the girl swallowed by the lake (Kricho 64), the lake was cruel for it had taken the life of *Ashia*.

Since the people lived close to nature they prayed to God for protection and blessings. They observed certain *gennas* during the year to ask God to bless them with wealth and health, protection from hail storms, fire, earthquake, drought, and the attack of wild animals, etc. (Nepuni 159-162; Singh and Maheo 177-179; Mao 166-170).

3.7 The Mao Naga Narratives' Focus on Gender Issues

Like the other Naga tribes, the Mao Naga tribe has a patriarchal social structure in which the ultimate power and authority are vested in men. Without doubt, the property was handed through the male children in the family. If a couple fails to have male issues, the property is inherited by the nearest male kin of the father and not by the daughters. In this way, the property of the forefathers is passed on to the younger generations through the male children in the family (Singh and Maheo 126). Since such a structure is taken as a natural order, it goes unchallenged and is accepted by the members of society, including women. In some cases, women themselves are preservers of patriarchy because they have been groomed into accepting this social norm.

Gender roles were defined. The responsibility to safeguard and protect the village lay in the hands of the men while the women were confined to household activities. It was the duty of the men to govern, to make policies and to defend the village (Kire 68).

The Mao society was more of a social control system rather than one which lowered the status of women. Yet certain social functions were performed only by men. Head-hunting was done by men and not by women, though they did so on rare occasions as in the case of Kapeini (Daniel 60-61). Whatever the perspective of the worldview of the space for women in society in the past, a close reading and analysis of the stories enables one to point out the different roles played by women at different and important moments in the stories. Their roles cannot be ignored. This section tries to examine the role of women in the Mao Naga folk narratives. For any society to progress and develop there has to be a complementary role played both by the men and womenfolk.

Goswami underlines the role of women which cannot be ignored. They played an important role in contributing to the development and preservation of culture and traditions (1). Women played an active role in the narratives. “Women are now at the heart of acts of remembrance...women as well as men now construct the story, disseminate it and consume it” (qtd in Pou 7). Some important themes are women as liberators and rescuers, courageous and daring, courageous and compassionate, women as lovers, and women as cruel stepmothers.

The results and findings of women’s role in the Mao Naga oral narratives will reveal women’s contribution to the family and society. It will also invite readers to revisit and reflect on the moral values enshrined in the stories, appreciate them and pass them on to younger generations. The word ‘liberator’ is used here to describe women who liberate, comfort, and save others from destruction and misery. There are some women whose character and actions cannot be ignored in bringing the narratives to their successful completion.

In *Akajii Ye Ariijii Ko* (Saleo 27-32), Kapeini is the central figure. The story depicts the attitude of society towards women even when they perform heroic deeds like the story in *Akajii* and *Ariijii*. Kapeini is a female protagonist who, in a way, defies the law of the land (Ngone 160) and in doing so ventures out to hunt the head of *Akajii*, a feared warrior. Her bravery

today would have earned her an award, jubilation, accolade and celebration, but that was not so in those olden days when the people were governed by the strict laws and traditions of society. The story takes us back to those years when people practiced headhunting. Headhunting in the olden days was carried out within a strict universe of 'dos' and 'don'ts'. It did not disturb the harmony of the village community. Women did not participate formally but did so on rare occasions (Daniel 161). With strong determination and focus, Kapeini became a shining example of what a woman is capable of achieving in life, an example of a stable and courageous mind (Rosalind 195).

One can arguably say that the story of Akajii and Ariijii is the story of Kapeini who takes justice into her own hands. She is shrewd and crafty. She evinces mental fitness as opposed to the brute physicality of the men of her time. Kapeini demonstrates that a woman can be as powerful as a man and cleverer when the need arose. She does something that most men fear to do. The story narrates how a woman can go out of her way to become the embodiment of intelligence and power when she decides to be so. Kapeini displays her courage in a society where bravery is confined to the domain of the men folk.

In the story of *Kateini Ko* (Salao 1-9), the aunt became her rescuer. When all hope seemed to be gone for Kateini in her paternal home due to ill-treatment by her stepmother, she went to her aunt who was living in another village. She ran away from the youth dormitory in the early hours of the morning during *Saleni*. The aunt, on seeing her niece in tattered clothes, divested her of her old clothes and clothed her in new clothes (...*osa mani kothu khrusii hrupa lowo Kateini ye ba nopie*) (Salao 7). She gave her a new identity and a new life. It was here that Kateini got back her lost dignity. She was then married to a wealthy neighbour of her aunt. Mr. Nite. Kateini, who underwent miseries at her home, led a happy life in her new home. The story goes on to narrate that Kateini and her husband kept the feast of merit more than once

(*Ana konovu ozho koso vusiwo lolio to mapekhei...*) (Salao 8). They invited Kateini's father for the second time and gifted him with the best cow after the celebration.

Even in the stories of the cruel stepmothers, other women are portrayed as being full of compassion, sympathy and love. Prominent among such women is Kateini. In the tale *Kateini Ko* (Salao 1-9) we see the true nature of Kateini: she was a warm-hearted and benevolent girl. Her love for her step-sister did not diminish because of the unjust treatment from the latter's mother. The bond that existed between the sisters is awe-inspiring. Kateini bore all the hardships and cruelty of her stepmother with great fortitude, and she never entertained ill feelings towards her sister because of it. A second woman is Kajiini, the step-sister of Kateini, who has much love and compassion for her. During Saleni, the two sisters had gone to the feast. However, the cruel mother had filled Kateini's cups with 'ozha' (unclean water from washing the rice) and her plates with dried cow dung and bones. When everyone had gathered for the feast, Kateini hid from them because of this. Kajiini felt sorry for her and offered Kateini her share.

Two others are Charani and Kapeini who are portrayed as compassionate sympathizers in *Choro Ko*. When they realized what their mother did to Choro in *Choro Ko* (Salao 10-13; Mao 73-75) and his food they felt sad and invited him to come and share their food. It also portrays their helplessness about their brother.

Kholia in *Kholia Ko* (Salao 33-37) is projected as a good, compassionate and forgiving lady who, though abandoned by her father in the forest, did not entertain any grudge against him. Instead, later in life she and her family became prosperous, and they hosted the Feast of Merit. Her father also came along with the villagers. When no one hosted her father, Kholia invited him to her house, revealed who she was, and treated him well with drink and food.

Similarly, in *Kholiru Ko*, a daughter's love for her father's safety is shown when she requests her father to go back home as early as possible lest the enemy come and attack him.

Thoduo Ko reflects the transformational power of blood relationships in human interactions. Though it does not reflect well on the character of Cholidania, compassion for her blood relation at the knowledge of their kinship conquers her hitherto unkind predisposition (Salao 13-15; Mao 79-81).

The tale of a cruel stepmother in the narratives is a common theme in almost all cultures across the world (Williams 255; Thompson 127). She is the cause of suffering in the persecuted heroine tales like *Cinderella* (ATU 709) or *Snow White* (ATU 709). In this section, we aim to explore how women are projected as wicked through narratives that are often patriarchal. In the folktales of most cultures, women are depicted as temptresses or cruel stepmothers who lure presumably 'ignorant' men to their doom. This section focuses on the cruel stepmothers in Mao folktales and how the tales are indicative of society's biased notion of women and motherhood.

The Mao Nagas narratives of stepmothers are *Kateini Ko*, *Kholiru Ko*, *Choro Ko*, and *Kholia Ko*. As in the 'Cinderella' stories, all four tales centres on a heroine (or hero in the case of Choro). Apart from this basic motif, the Mao stories under discussion vary from the Cinderella stories in certain aspects like the absence of a magical guardian who helps the heroine triumph at the end or the absence of an epiphany that reveals her true worth. What is quite significant in the Mao tales is the closure. Unlike the Cinderella story of Charles Perrault (which is the most popular version of the Cinderella story), all four Mao tales end in punishment.

The stepmother is the archetypal wicked woman who does not possess a shred of compassion (Dainton 94; Williams 255). The stepmother in the Mao tales too is projected to be wicked and cruel. The settings are familiar places like the forest, paddy field, lake, or village. This sense of familiarity lends authenticity to the tales. The Mao society assigns unwritten responsibilities to both genders. Women's roles are limited to the homestead and they do not

have important roles to play in the political arena, which is dominated by men. Women, as a rule, have not been encouraged to articulate their thoughts because the power of articulation rests with men. This is because women have not considered themselves entitled to tell their side of the story. Thus, articulations of their desires, needs, and concerns are silenced. According to recent feminist views (MacKinnon, 1989; Cixous, 1976), the language of prevailing discourse is essentially 'male' and therefore the masculine is the norm by which the world is viewed. The power of articulation belongs to men and even in the case of oral narratives, the stories are told by men from a male viewpoint. It is therefore not very surprising that stepfather tales are uncommon, for in the patriarchal worldview men can do no wrong whereas women are the cause of all evil. In this way, the tales highlight only the faults of women so that they continue to be dominated and discriminated against. Although there are many real instances of drunken men who perpetrate violence against their wives and children, tales about the cruelty of men in the Mao Nagas folk narratives are remarkably absent. Drinking has always been part and parcel of Mao culture just as many other cultures in the world. In many folk tales including in *Kateini Ko* and *Kholia Ko*, there is mention of drinking but what ensues after the drinking is left out in the narratives.

3.8 Elements of cultural heritage in the narratives and the Mao Naga identity

Koichiro Matsuura states that the term 'cultural heritage' usually calls to mind monuments, museums, material culture, works of art, and so on. Thus, 'tangible heritage', which may be defined as the collective creations of a cultural community, rooted in its traditions, is every bit as much a fundamental part of the heritage of humankind (qtd in Kire 60-61).

The significance and importance of material objects are passed on from generation to generation; specific memories are attached to them; besides, being tangible and visible heritage, they facilitate the remembrance of the past which, therefore, remains better engraved

in the memories of the people. These monuments and historical objects are the representation of the past and a specific awareness of history (Assmann160).

The world is filled with objects that are believed to possess supernatural powers and seem to go against the laws of nature. In all cultures, some traditions speak of miraculous powers, even of some inanimate objects. In the tale Type 518, the magic objects help people to acquire wealth.

In the past, the Mao Naga villages could be distinguished by the presence of stone henges - flat stones, upright stones, and narrow village gates located between rows of upright stones (Singh and Maheo 29-30). The Nagas are historically, socially and culturally different from the rest of the Indians. They were an oral community since they had no written records of the past. All that we know of their past is based on the legends and other forms of narratives collectively shared and passed on from generation to generation. Objects reflect the society. It reminds one of who they were and is, and of the past, of their forebears, and so on (Assmann 6). Thus, we see that memory was not transmitted only in stories but also through monuments and objects of importance (Ernaux 29).

Among the Mao Nagas, there are monuments and stones found in and around their habitation which speaks of their past. They serve as a source of knowledge and wisdom of the past. In the myth of *Dziiliamosiia*, her three sons erected three stones: a “spirit stone, tiger stone, and man stone” as a memorial to remember their life together before they separated and left for different locations (Kricho 4). These stones are found at *Chazhe Lophi*, three kilometres from Makhel village (Nepuni 52). Each of the three sons wanted to occupy the land. Finally, they agreed to have a competition to see who would occupy the land. The day was set and the target was a *prodzii* (grass rolled into the shape of a ball). Whoever touched the target first was to inherit the land. The mother, *Dziiliamosiia*, was the judge. She had a soft corner for man. In the first round of the competition, man did not win so she re-ordered the race. She had instructed

the man to keep ready the bow and arrow so that with it he could shoot before the two brothers reached the target. It was in this way that man won the race by shooting at the target with the bow and arrow as soon as the race began. The two elder brothers agreed to let their younger brother, the man, inherit the house (Kricho 1; Nepuni 51). To this day, the youngest son in the Mao Nagas tribe tradition inherits the parental home.

The great banyan tree in the myth of *Dziiliamosiia* is considered to be sacred and special by the people. According to the myth, one day while *Dziiliamosiia* was resting under this tree, a cluster of white *kahe* (cloud) passed by the blue sky and she conceived mysteriously and gave birth to three sons: spirit, tiger, and man (Kricho 1; Nepuni 2010). The banyan tree in the Mao Naga language is called *Marabu* which means “Mara” spread across and “bu” stands for tree. The tree in question is still standing tall at Makhel village. The roots of the tree go deep into the soil and spread its roots far and wide. The tree stands as a symbol of stability, strength, power and protection for the Tenyimi. It also brings out the primordial male principle of life. The female principal is *Dziiliamosiia*. It was while resting under the tree that she was believed to have conceived and later gave birth to her three sons (Nepuni 53).

Another version of the traditional myth narrates that *Dziiliamosiia* gave birth to three sons; Asiipfo Alapha (non-Naga), Chiituwo (Meitei) Manipuri, and Alewo (Naga). Khephio was the son of Alewo who was the father Shiipfowo. Shiipfowo had three sons namely Kapewo, Toliwo and Memiwo. The youngest son of Shiipfowo, Memiwo, inherited the original home. The Mao Nagas traced their descent through Memiwo (Nepuni 46). On this stone, some unidentified symbols have eroded with time. This stone is found in the village of Makhel to this day as part of the cultural memory of the people.

Chiitebu (wild pear tree) is found at Charangho (Shajouba) village in the district of Senapati, Manipur. This tree is said to have been planted before the ancestors of the Teniyimeis departed to different places for new settlement. An oral tradition speaks of the increase in

population. The descendants of Alewo (youngest son of Dziiliamosiia) had to move out in search of new settlements. This tree is believed to have been planted before they departed to commemorate their departure and stand for solidarity and brotherhood among the people (Nepuni 53).

The Mao Nagas have been living in proximity to nature and have had a close association with objects around them. Stones and rocks have been powerful means of comfort, prosperity and protection for humankind. The early men took shelter in caves of stones; they generated fire by rubbing one stone against another stone - *milakosii* in the Mao language (Mao 6). The Mao Nagas believed their ancestors to possess miraculous stones that would bring them wealth, good health, and the well-being of their live stock. In the narrative of *Hriio* among the Mao Nagas, we find mention of the *chovo kosii* (*chovo* meaning happy and *kosii* meaning three) miraculous stones that brought wealth to the family (Saleo 59). Mao, in his “The Custom and Tradition of the Mao Naga”, writes of the polished stones, namely, *Omaiva* (living stone for human life), *Otouva* (living stone for cattle), *Otova* (living stone for wealth), *Oruva* (living stone for wars) and *Mokulirii* (living stone for the noble seat). The people were prohibited from touching them, or even looking at them. However, the story around them continues to live on (Mao 8).

The legend of *Tupha Tu* (see Fig.7), (meaning a flat stone) speaks about the story of three brothers and a miraculous stone at Tobufii village, presently in the state of Manipur, that was believed to possess powers which brought wealth and prosperity to the Mao ancestors in ancient times. Though the stone was a source of wealth, it also became a source of disunity among the brothers over time. According to the legend, if a basketful of paddy was spread on this stone, it would double by the end of the day. With such miraculous powers, the stone became the object of contention among the brothers since each brother wanted to spread his own harvest there. To settle her sons’ dispute, one day the mother chose to dispossess the stone

its of miraculous power. It is believed since that day, the stone no longer possessed miraculous power. But now it remains as part of the Mao cultural memory.



Fig. 7. *Tupha Tu* at Tobufii village, Manipur
(photographed during the field study, 9.01.2022)

There are different versions of the story among the Mao Nagas. One version narrates how two women fought for the stone because each wanted to dry her paddy on it. In anger, one of them took out her dress (*mani*) wrapped downwards from the hip, hit the stone and destroyed its miraculous power (Nepuni 55). In another version, it says that a dispute arose among people who depended on this stone for their survival. Sensing danger, an old grandmother struck the stone with her loin cloth and destroyed it (Mao 46).

An identical story of a stone with magical power is found among the people of *Khezakeno* village (now in Nagaland), except for how the stone lost its power. The legend of *Tsotawo* appears to be a foundational narrative regarding the migration of the Chakhesang, Rengma, Lotha, Sumi, and Angami tribes. The legend had its roots in Khezakeno, a Chakhesang village in the present-day Nagaland state. It narrates about a magical stone that

would double the grain that was put on it to dry. The legend links to Koza, who is believed to be the ancestor of the above-mentioned tribes who passed through Chaho (Shajuba), Manipur, a village within the vicinity of Tobufii village (Aier 44-45), and Makhel village. While waiting for a sign through a swallow as to where he and his people should settle down, he saw a frog carrying a bunch of paddy and climbing onto a flat stone. There he witnessed something he had never seen before, namely that the paddy doubled in quantity. The legend further narrates that the sons of *Koza* would take turns to dry their paddy on the stone; however, it was not long before they began to fight among themselves. Jealousy and human greed took the upper hand and their relationship became bitter. Seeing this, the grandmother collected some soya beans and sesame seeds, put them under the 'Spirit stone', and set fire to it, thus destroying the stone. It is said that the stone exploded with a loud noise and a dove-like bird came out from the stone and ascended towards heaven (Aier 45-46; Zehol 56-57). In another version, the stone slab which possessed magical properties became the contention among the three sons of a couple at *Khezakenoma*. Fearing the worst, the couple set the stone on fire. The spirit left the stone and, thereafter, the stone lost its miraculous power (Lotsiir 6).

To a logical thinker, such powers seem to work against the laws of nature, for it may seem impossible to understand and explain how this could happen. There may be no logical ways to prove whether the events connected with the *Tupha Tu* have taken place or not since all that we know are stories or legends that have been handed down through oral traditions. In folk narratives, no one seems to question their authenticity; their existence and power are taken for granted (Thompson 78). Localizing the legend and connecting it to *Tobufii* makes one perceive it as true. Thompson argues that it is probable that there must be some truth connected to it since the legend relates to an object of belief (271), and the stone is still preserved at *Tobufii* village.

Stones hold much cultural significance among the Mao. Without written records, megaliths and monoliths play important roles in the construction of history for the people. Many stories are connected to stones. In the reconstruction of the past, the importance of stones cannot be underestimated. In Makhel village, whose cultural importance has already been mentioned in the previous chapters, several stones are found preserved within the vicinity. Some of these stones are *Napfuto Kokrii Tu*, *Okho Mate Tu*, *Oratoboh Tu*, *Oto Khukosii tu*, and *Otu Nobi*.

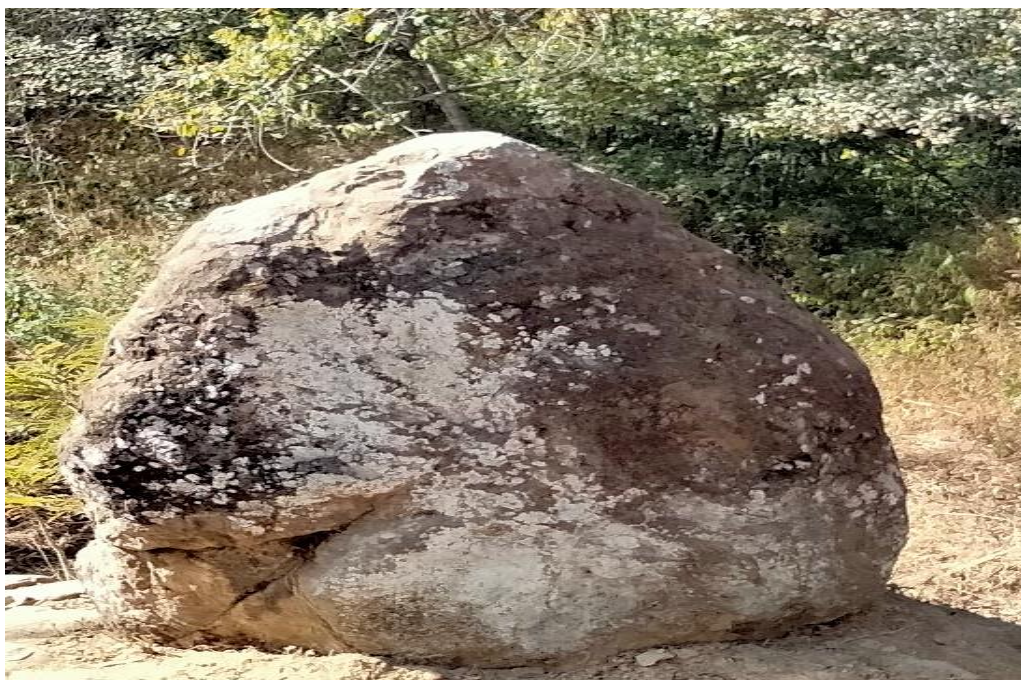


Fig. 8. *Napfotu Kohriitu* at Chazhelophi, Makhel village, Manipur (photographed during the field study, 9.01. 2022)

Napfuto Kokrii Tu means *Na-* child, *pfuto-* male child, *kokrii-* bearing, *tu-* stone. As the name indicates, the legend in question seems to possess divine powers that would enable a man to have male children. Thus, it was believed that when a man was able to climb the pinnacle of the stone without the support of his hand, he would be blessed with seven sons. It was also considered a sport for any male member residing in the village, with great prestige attached to it.

As indicated above, the belief in the power of miraculous stones was deeply engraved in the people. The Mao Naga society being a patriarchal society, highlights the importance of the family lineage through the male child. The stone which once stood as a symbol of fertility and influenced gender selection now remains an object of cultural memory to narrate the past.



Fig. 9. Okho Mate Tu at Chazhelophi, Makhel village, Manipur (photographed during the field study, 9.01. 2022)

The literal meaning of *Okho Mate Tu* is ‘fish stone’ (*okho* means fish, and *mate* means stick and *tu-* stone). Community fishing was common and practised by the people in the rivers, streams and paddy fields. Each member would actively and joyfully participate in the fishing. After a hectic day, each would get an equal share of the catch without any the discrimination-based gender or age. Once the fishing is over, on their way homeward, they would place the whole catch on a smooth flat stone. It was said that when the day’s catch was distributed on this slab, each member would go home with their containers miraculously filled with fish.

The multiplication of fish through the miraculous stone is seen as a divine intervention that provides sustainability to all. It highlights people’s generosity to the less fortunate. It also seems to indicate the fact that once upon a time, the community was engaged in fishing; and

that water was abundant in the area. There was no one in need as the members would share everything with one another.



Fig.10. Oratoboh Tu at Makhel village, Manipur (photographed during the field study, 9.01.2022)

Oratoboh Tu (bull binding stone) was believed to be placed at the centre or navel of the earth. ‘*Ora Toboh Tu*’ can be translated as *Ora*- God, *toboh*- bull binding, *Tu*- stone. The ritual which was applicable for the whole year was performed in the month of ‘*ORU*’ (August-September) on the 28th day of the month. It was usually done after the transplantation of paddy by tying an unblemished calf (bull) to this stone. This rite was exclusively performed by the Chief of *Makhrui Rabu* (Makhel) village and no other village would perform this rite. It was also mandatory for all other people hailing from this village to observe and follow as directed by the chief.

The stone in the story has religious significance. It connects the physical world and the spiritual world through rituals and ceremonies. The stone in question was a symbol that connected the human and the divine world. It symbolised strength and permanence and could

represent resilience and a spirit of endurance in times of adversity. The best is offered to God as well and the relationship between the human and the divine is permanent.

The connection between the human and the divine is performed by the chief of Makhel, the human leader who has the absolute and only right to offer unspoiled gifts to offer the ritual. It also underlines the privilege of the chief as a temporal and spiritual leader. Offerings of unblemished gifts reflect the people's desire to possess something pure and holy.



Fig. 11. *Oto Khukosii tu* at Chazhelophi, Makhel village Manipur (photographed during the field study, 9.01. 2022)

Otu Khukosii Tu is another important object that is preserved to this day. *Otu* means cows. The *tu* (stone) in question is used as a measuring rod for male children to determine the time of looking after the cows. When a male child reaches a particular height of a stone it is believed that he would be considered fit enough to look after the cows. Since these animals are domesticated, they were generally monitored in the forest.

Otu Khukosii Tu reflects the readiness of the people to perform certain duties. The stone indicates a person's willingness or readiness to assume new responsibility. The stone now

remains a cultural memory for people to become wise through the experiences of the past, a mnemonic device, that narrates people's readiness to own responsibility.



Fig. 12. Otu Nobi at Chazhelophi, Makhel village, Manipur (photographed during the field study, 9.01.2022)

Otu means food and *nobi* means ear. It is a special stone believed to have supernatural power that would bring rain in a drought when a piece is broken, people enjoyed the timely monsoon and consequent good harvest. But on rare occasions when drought occurred in the village, the villagers would break a small piece of this *Otu Nobi*, and it was said that rain would invariably pour down after.

The beliefs and traditional practices of the stones have not been scientifically proven, yet the idea and belief that stone could bring rain found in the folklore of Maos cannot be ignored. This can be considered as a divine intervention. The stone provided them sustenance through its timely intervention in times of drought. The people view the natural surroundings, such as stone in this narrative, as part of cultural memory.

3.9 Conclusion

The collective experiences of the ancestors of the Mao Nagas were passed on in varied forms of narratives and objects. These experiences become collective when they are shared, told and retold over the years by members of the group. The narratives of the Mao Nagas tell

the people of their ancestors' lives, origin, migration, and habitation. These narratives contained the places and ways of life of the people that are considered significant to constructing their identity. When narratives are set in familiar places, the stories tend to have more credence to the listeners (Vatuk and Vatuk 26). It is the geographical and cultural familiarity that lends that element of truth that invigorates the tales with life, making them more potent to instruct. The happenings in the narratives represent the reality of the life of the people of the past. Since the tales are about themselves, their lives and their activities, they are reflective of the people's worldview.

The oral narratives speak of the geographical location of the people, their social and cultural life, their beliefs, and their festivals. Most of the festivals are still celebrated today. The bulk of the population continues to live in the same geographical location as mentioned in the narratives. The remnant of the past is seen in the dresses, monuments and historical objects, and these help the present generation to connect to the past and enhance the continuity of their identity. Stones that bear historical importance serve as a form of cultural memory by passing down the stories of the ancestors, the activities and beliefs, customs and traditions from generation to generation. They are important for constructing the identity of the people.

Notes

1. Tenyimi is also spelt Tenyimia, Tenyimei. It refers to a few Naga tribes who shared common ancestors and are believed to have migrated from Makhel Angami, Chakhesang, Rengma, Pochury, Mao, Poumai, Maram, Thangal, and Zeliangrong.
2. Makhel is also spelt as Mekhroma, Mekhoromia, Makhrai mai and Mahou by different tribes and writers.
3. The song is contributed by Khalu Adaha and Lohe Ozha, Punanamei village
4. The song is contributed by late Mrs Pfokho Kapesa, Punanamei village
5. Ashikho, A. *Interview* by Rose Mary Kazhiia, 18 Mar. 2020.
6. *Asokoto* and *Asoto* refer to the Peace Treaty.
7. There are variations in spellings like zhosomozii, ozhokoso, zhoso but all refers to the Feast of Merit.
8. The song is contributed by late Mrs Pfokho Kapesa
- 9.. Ibid.
10. Kholi, A. *Interview* by Rose Mary Kazhiia, 3 Jan. 2022.