

## Poetic Mongsen: History, Culture and Language

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### 1. Introduction

The Ao language group is formed of three spoken languages: Mongsen, Chungli, and Changki. They are spoken by the Ao people, who mostly reside in the Mokokchung district of Nagaland in northeastern India. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman language subgroup within the Sino-Tibetan family. They are classified under the northern Naga sub-group, together with other Naga languages like *Lotha*, *Sangtam*, *Chang* and *Yimchunger* (Benedict, 1972). Within the Ao language group, the majority speak either *Chungli* or *Mongsen*. Changki is spoken primarily in the Changkikong range in Mokokchung district. All these languages follow an SOV word order and are almost mutually unintelligible.

This paper will focus primarily on a language that we have termed *Poetic Mongsen*, which is not a spoken but a sung language. It should, however, be noted that culturally, the Ao people refer to the ‘song language’ as just Mongsen and do not make a distinction between Mongsen and Poetic Mongsen. However, since this ongoing research aims to document the ‘song language’ and also to determine the differences between the spoken and the sung variants, the term Poetic Mongsen is a useful adaptation for this study. This is to make a clear distinction between the two.

It is still unclear if Poetic Mongsen is an archaic form of Mongsen or a language that existed parallelly with the current spoken forms. It was used by speakers of all three spoken languages to sing their traditional songs, ballads, and folk narratives. However, Poetic Mongsen fell into disuse over the last two to three generations. As such, the present generation of native speakers of Mongsen, Chungli, or Changki can no longer comprehend most of the language or its complexities. Though called Mongsen traditionally, Poetic Mongsen has also been influenced by Chungli over centuries. This is due to the adoption of Poetic Mongsen by Chungli speakers for their own oral traditions. At present, only a handful of people from the

older generations still possess knowledge of these songs and their underlying meanings. Therefore, this language is clearly moribund and near extinction.

Poetic Mongsen, today, as a language is unique because it is only sung and not spoken by anyone. As a song language, its uniqueness can be compared to that of the languages known as "whistled languages", which are primarily or exclusively used for communication through whistling rather than spoken words. One well-known example of such a language is Silbo Gomero, used on the Spanish island of La Gomera in the Canary Islands. Silbo Gomero is a whistled form of Spanish that was traditionally used by the island's inhabitants to communicate across the island's deep ravines and steep valleys. Another example is the Hmong whistled language, which is used by the Hmong people in Southeast Asia, particularly in parts of Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and southern China. This whistled language is used for communication across long distances and mountainous terrain. However, the similarities with Poetic Mongsen end here. While these languages are primarily sung or whistled, they often have a spoken counterpart, and the whistled form typically mirrors the spoken language's grammar and vocabulary (Meyer, 2015). The same cannot be said for Poetic Mongsen, for whether it was ever also a spoken language remains a mystery unresolved.

The current study attempts to contribute to a greater understanding of *Poetic Mongsen* as a language, how it was used by the Ao people, and its ties to their history, tradition, and identity. It will also take a look at some of the linguistic features of the language, including the differences in the phonology and word formation processes compared to spoken *Mongsen* and *Chungli*, especially considering its poetic nature.

The poetic form of a language differs from its spoken form primarily in terms of structure, style, and sometimes vocabulary. Poetic language often follows specific forms, such as sonnets, haikus, or ballads, which have their own rules for meter, rhyme, and stanza organisation. These structural elements are less rigid in spoken language. Poetry frequently incorporates rhythmic patterns and rhyme schemes that may not be present in everyday speech. These elements contribute to the musicality and aesthetic appeal of poetry but are not necessarily found in spoken language.

Poetic language frequently employs figurative devices such as metaphor, simile, personification, and symbolism to convey deeper meanings and evoke emotions. While figurative language can also appear in spoken discourse, it is more common and often more

elaborate in poetry. Poetic language may include more formal or archaic vocabulary compared to everyday speech. Poets often use words for their sound, connotations, or historical associations to enhance the imagery and impact of their work.

Poetic language tends to be more concise and carefully crafted than spoken language. Poets often strive to convey complex ideas or emotions with economy of words, using precise language and vivid imagery to create powerful effects. Poets have the freedom to manipulate language in creative ways, bending grammar rules, playing with syntax, and inventing new words or expressions to achieve their desired effects. While spoken language is bound by conventions of clarity and communication, poetic language allows for greater experimentation and expression.

Overall, while spoken language serves primarily as a means of communication, poetic language serves both as a vehicle for communication and as an art form, valued for its aesthetic qualities and expressive power (Laurence, 1969). It is this poetic nature of the language under study that makes it both fascinating and challenging as we discuss in the forthcoming sections.

The paper is divided into five sections, with the introduction as the first. The second section provides a comprehensive account of the cultural ties of the Ao people to *Poetic Mongsen* and the history and lore related to the usage of the language. The third section will examine the cultural significance of *Poetic Mongsen* with some examples of Ao traditional songs sung in *Poetic Mongsen*. The fourth section consists of a discussion on the current domains of use, and the fifth section puts forth a summary and a conclusion.

## 2. History

Oral tradition is generally understood as the re-telling of myths, legends, tales, and traditional values that are passed on from one generation to another through word of mouth for the purpose of continuity and preservation. As an expression, it encapsulates a myriad of elements, be it folklore, songs, poems, traditional doctrine, etc. According to Temsula Ao, in the Ao-Naga context, oral traditions reflect and include new dimensions of collective history, belief systems, and governing principles (1999). Universally, oral traditions serve as dynamic and inclusive mechanisms for reflecting, transmitting, and interpreting collective history within a community (Finnegan, 2003). Oral traditions contribute to cultural continuity and resilience by connecting past, present, and future generations within the community. By transmitting historical knowledge, values, and cultural practices through oral means, communities maintain

a sense of identity and cohesion across time, even in the face of external pressures or disruptions.

Oral traditions can serve as a means of preserving and transmitting marginalised or underrepresented histories within a community. Through storytelling, songs, or rituals, oral traditions may highlight the experiences and contributions of marginalised groups, ensuring that their stories are not forgotten and providing a more inclusive portrayal of the community's history. These narratives are fluid and adaptable, allowing for the incorporation of new events, experiences, and perspectives into the community's narrative over time.

As new historical events unfold or societal changes occur, oral traditions can evolve to reflect these developments, ensuring that the community's collective history remains relevant and up to date. Oral traditions also facilitate ongoing interpretation and meaning-making of historical events within the community. Through storytelling, communal performances, or ritual practices, community members engage in dialogue and reflection on the significance of past events, shaping the collective understanding of history and its relevance to contemporary identity and values.

## **2.1. Historical Narrative**

According to Ao tradition, the Ao people had a written script at one point in time when they were settled in the historical village of Chungliyimti. However, according to lore, the script was written on animal hide and hung on a wall; a dog dragged it down and ate it up when the people were away in their fields (Ao, 1999). Since then, the Ao people have been committing all knowledge to memory and passing it on to succeeding generations orally. This is similar to folklores in some Native American folklore (Dundes, 1965), where there are stories about sacred scrolls or documents being lost or destroyed due to animals such as wolves or birds consuming them. These stories often emphasise the need for reverence and protection of sacred knowledge and highlight the interconnectedness of humans with the natural world. They serve as symbolic narratives that convey moral or philosophical lessons about the fragility of written records and the importance of oral transmission and cultural memory.

Some intriguing questions regarding the historical aspects of Poetic Mongsen do not have a straightforward answer. Given that there are currently three spoken languages among the Ao tribe, why was Mongsen the language of choice for songs? Could it be that when the songs were initially sung in Mongsen, which was the only language of the Ao people, and while

the spoken language changed and diversified with time, the song language remained ‘frozen’ in its poetic form? Or did the poetic language exist as another variety, co-terminus with the spoken varieties?

Among the Ao people, the origin of Poetic Mongsen and its use by Mongsen and Chungli speakers is still an unsettled debate. When interviewed, some speakers stated that all Ao traditions, including that of singing traditional songs, were established in Chungliyimti. Chungliyimti is the village where all Ao people are first said to have settled before migrating to the current geographical areas occupied by the tribe. Others shared that it was the Chungli speakers who first settled in Chungliyimti and that the Mongsen people migrated later and brought the songs with them. While this may suggest that the ‘songs’ originally belonged only to the Mongsen people and hence the name, it is not something that they have an exclusive claim on now.

Oral narratives report multiple accounts of conflict between the Chungli and Mongsen people. However, it is a commonly accepted fact among the Ao people that a common tradition and way of life was established while they were settled in Chungliyimti. Moreover, according to Ao history, the two groups also left Chungliyimti together and thereafter adopted the collective identity of being the ‘Ao’. The meaning of the word ‘Ao’ in English is ‘to leave.’ The name of the group/tribe hence translates to ‘the people who left.’ Since then, the collective identity of ‘Ao’ has been greater and given more importance by speakers of both languages, as opposed to their separate identities of being either Chungli or Mongsen and later also Changki.

Considering that the Changki speakers have been missing in the narrative above, it is widely accepted that the Changki people never settled in Chungliyimti. Though another migratory group closely related to the Mongsen people, the Changki speakers are said to have bypassed Chungliyimti to settle directly in the current Ao settlement before both the Mongsen and Chungli people arrived. Hence, when the three groups were united due to their close cultural ties, assimilation happened quite naturally.

However, folklores and legends tell a different story of how the Ao people learned to sing, marking the beginning of Poetic Mongsen.

## **2.2. How Did the Ao Start Singing? – The Story**

According to legend, there was a beautiful woman named Lemsemtsüla from the Lemtur clan in Chungliyimti. In accordance with Ao customs, once she comes of age and reaches puberty, like all young women she spends her nights in the girls’ dormitory. One day,

she goes to the river bank to wash her hands and feet. As she cleans herself, she keeps repeating the words, “tsüsenjoker, tsüsenjoker...” to herself, struggling to form a phrase. There was a huge tree by the river bank. There, a tree spirit dwelt. The tree spirit, on hearing her struggling, completes the phrase for her by singing this song, praising her beauty.

*Tsüsenjoker laza süremsüpong moker*

*Yongyimtemla loyong atsü yimshir medem*

*Chongzüiyimtilar meiya temsenaka matsüingzukla*

*Kongro yimtiyongyala*

*tsusən-tfuk-ər lazá su-rəm su-pàŋ muk-ər*  
bath-PFV-SEQ maiden cloth-dye cloth-edge wear-SEQ  
“After bathing and wearing her clothes, the maiden”

*junjüm-təm-lá lú-jòŋ atsú jəm-fír mətəm*  
stand-do-NF field-river water flow-PRS.CONT like  
“standing there, like the water flowing in the stream”

*çʰòŋzùjimtí-la-ər mi:já təmsən-aká ma-tsúŋzək-là*  
Chungliyimti-F-ANOM thousand exodus-still NEG-attain.NEG.PST  
“Even the coming of a thousand Chungliyimti women cannot exceed”

*Kuŋrú jəm-tjúŋ-ja-lá*  
young.woman village-center-illuminate-F  
“the young woman (who is) the star of the village”

Hearing this, a very shocked Lemsemtsüla leaves the riverbank, returns to the dormitory, and narrates everything to the caretaker of the dormitory. The caretaker warns her to be careful, explaining that the tree is a tree spirit. Since then, when the men from the male dormitory came to court the women in the evenings, a very handsome man would come to court her daily. No one knew who this man was or where he came from. Considering that she had also never seen the man before, Lemsemtsüla again informs the caretaker about what was happening. Alarmed, the caretaker advises her to gift the man a waistband with a machete the next time he comes to visit her. As advised, that evening, when the man comes to visit her, Lemsemtsüla gives him the waistband

with the machete before he leaves. The next day, she goes to check the tree by the riverside and is astonished to find the waistband tied around the tree. She comes back and informs the caretaker, who then informs the men of Chungliyimti village, asking them to cut down the tree.

On the day they decide to cut down the tree, they lock Lemsemtsüla in her house, asking her not to venture out at all for her safety's sake. Then, all the young men from each clan in Chungliyimti take turns to cut down the tree. However, no matter how much they try, they fail to cut down the tree. Then comes the Lemtur clan's turn to try cutting down the tree. Lemsemtsüla could not help herself. Out of curiosity, she climbs up and peeks at the tree by pulling apart the straw on the roof. Just as she pries open the straw and looks out, a chip of wood from the tree flies towards her and hits her, killing her then and there. At that very moment, the tree, as well, with a big groan, falls to the ground.

This is the story most closely associated with how the Ao people learned to sing. However, as is common with many oral narrations, there are multiple interpretations of the story. One of the most widely accepted versions is that the act of the tree singing to Lemsemtsüla is what taught the Ao people how to sing. Another interpretation says that the tree which fell was a very tall tree, and when it fell, it made many different sounds. The groan of the trunk, the creaking of the branches, and the rustle of the leaves were heard all at once in harmony with each other, inspiring the Ao people to start singing. However, there is another dimension to the story that is quite different from the two mentioned above. This speaks of how the Lemtur clan came to be known as the *Lemtur kentonglener* clan since it was the Lemtur clan that felled the tree. The literal meaning of the word *kentonglener* is “feller of the song tree”. However, even here, the etymology of the name *kentonglener* harkens to the two narratives above.

Oral narrations play a significant role in many societies where orality has primacy over literacy. Scott (1999) discusses the relationship between oral culture (orality) and literacy within the context of the upland societies of Zomia. Zomia includes regions from seven different countries in South and Southeast Asia, including Nagaland and other surrounding areas from India.

Scott argues that these societies, characterised by their stateless and decentralised nature, have historically relied more on oral traditions than written records for communication, knowledge transmission, and cultural preservation. Scott also highlights the resilience and



adaptability of oral traditions in these regions. Despite the absence of widespread literacy, upland societies have developed sophisticated oral cultures characterised by storytelling, myth, song, and ritual. These oral traditions serve as repositories of historical knowledge, cultural values, and communal identity. Oral communication allows for greater flexibility and accessibility compared to written language. In societies where people are highly mobile and dispersed across rugged terrain, oral traditions facilitate the transmission of knowledge and information among diverse ethnic groups and communities. Oral communication also enables immediate interaction and feedback, fostering social cohesion and solidarity.

Scott argues that the prevalence of oral traditions in upland societies has contributed to their resistance to state control and domination. Unlike written records, which can be seized, censored, or controlled by centralised authorities, oral knowledge is decentralised and difficult to regulate. As a result, upland communities have been able to maintain autonomy and cultural distinctiveness despite attempts by states to impose their authority. Oral traditions play a central role in shaping cultural identity and fostering solidarity within upland communities. Through storytelling, songs, and rituals, people in these regions reaffirm their shared history, values, and beliefs, strengthening social bonds and collective resilience in the face of external pressures.

Thus, the stories narrated in Poetic Mongsen are part of a rich oral tradition among communities that had chosen to give primacy to their oral tradition over written language. They have lived on in people's memories, notwithstanding major changes in the political, cultural and religious landscape of the Naga/Ao people. They unite different groups under the same banner due to a shared historical heritage.

### **2.3. Variation in Poetic Mongsen**

Since settling in the current geographical area that comprises the present-day Mokokchung district of Nagaland, the Ao people settled in different villages, comprising mainly of either only Chungli, Mongsen or Changki speakers. There are only a handful of villages, including Mopungchuket and Longkhum, where both Chungli and Mongsen speakers live together. With time, as people continued to migrate and create new settlements, Poetic Mongsen and folk songs also continued to grow. While in Chungliyimti, the songs sung were common to all the Ao people. With dispersion, each settlement and village composed their own songs, unique to each village, that encapsulated their specific history and stories. With this,



Poetic Mongsen also begins changing from village to village in terms of pronunciation (phonology) as well as lexicon (morphology). While getting into an in-depth analysis of this is out of the scope of this paper, given below are some examples of the phonological and morphological changes found in some variants of Poetic Mongsen.

### 2.3.1. Phonological Examples

Following are examples of some phonological changes in Poetic Mongsen as compared to spoken Mongsen and Chungli.

- Change of /l/ to /r/ in *yangru* (in Poetic Mongsen sung in Longjang, Longkhum, and Mopungchuket)

	Poetic Mongsen	Mongsen	Chungli	Gloss
1.	<i>janrú</i>	<i>zanlú</i>	<i>janlú</i>	“make”

Change of /s/ to /ʃ/ in Poetic Mongsen sung in Ungma village

	Ungma Poetic Mongsen	Longjang Mongsen	Standard Chungli	Gloss
1.	<i>ʃarí</i>	<i>sarí</i>	<i>sarí</i>	“head hunting”
2.	<i>ʃáŋ</i>	<i>sáŋ</i>	<i>ʃiáŋ</i>	“tell”
3.	<i>ʃakupáná</i>	<i>sakupáná</i>	<i>sakupáná</i>	“to battle”

In example (2) above, though the phoneme /ʃ/ is the same for Ungma Poetic Mongsen and Standard Chungli, it is a deviation from the expected pattern since the songs are sung in Poetic Mongsen. It is important to highlight here that given that Poetic Mongsen is only sung and no spoken variant of the language exists, the pronunciation of the songs is largely determined by the spoken variant of the singer, as well as the individual pronunciation of the singers themselves. As such, it would be acceptable to conclude that the sound change in Ungma Poetic Mongsen is largely determined by the Chungli variant spoken in Ungma.

Similar changes have also been observed through other phonological processes like schwa deletion, vowel assimilation, glide assimilation, and vowel deletion.

### 2.3.2. Morphological Changes

Listed below are some examples of morphological changes attested to in Poetic Mongsen.

## Derivation

As an agglutinative language, derivation is a very prominent word-formation process in spoken Mongsen (cf: Coupe, 2007; Walling, 2017). Poetic Mongsen also exhibits traits of an agglutinative language. Let us examine some examples of derivation found in Poetic Mongsen and compare them with their Mongsen and Chungli counterparts.

	<b>Poetic Mongsen</b>	<b>Longjang Mongsen</b>	<b>Standard Chungli</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
1.	<i>tsapá-zām-ba</i> old-SUP-NMZ.MASC	<i>tsəmpá-ti-ba</i> old-SUP-NMZ.MASC	<i>təmpú-saŋ</i> old.SUP-NMZ.MASC	“oldest brother”

Here, in both Poetic Mongsen and Longjang Mongsen, the superlative is a particle affixed to the stem “old”. However, in Chungli, the superlative is not distinctly marked but fused with the stem. Additionally, the masculine nominaliser is also different in Chungli, as compared to Poetic Mongsen and Longjang Mongsen.

	<b>Poetic Mongsen</b>	<b>Longjang Mongsen</b>	<b>Standard Chungli</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
2.	<i>a-jú-yáŋ-ár</i> NRL-word-make-ANOM	<i>a-jú záŋlú-ár</i> NRL-word make-ANOM	<i>ú: púlu-ár</i> word spin-ANOM	“the one who spins tales”

In this example, the word for “the one who spins tales” is a compound in Poetic Mongsen but not so in the spoken variants.

## Compounding

Another very productive process of word formation in Mongsen and Poetic Mongsen is compounding. Due to the poetic nature of the language, metaphors are extensively used. This has resulted in the formation of numerous exocentric compounds that are unique to Poetic Mongsen and are not commonly used in spoken Mongsen and Chungli. Some examples can be seen below.

	<b>Poetic Mongsen</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
1.	<i>watsə-wasáŋ</i> woman-bamboo.tip	“fine woman”

2. *sə-pùk-narú* “child”  
cloth-under-flower
3. *məlúŋ-lám-jú* “love confession”  
heart-warm-word

Interestingly, while some of these compounds seem semantically opaque to non-native speakers, they are not so to native speakers. For instance, the word *watsə-wasáy*: the compound is made up of the word for ‘woman,’ and ‘bamboo’. Bamboo is culturally very common, with tender bamboo considered a delicacy. The word *watsə-wasáy* for ‘fine woman’ will most likely be endocentric for native speakers.

### 3. Cultural Significance

As highlighted earlier, oral narrations play a significant role culturally in groups where oral traditions have primacy over written traditions (Scott, 1999). For the diverse Naga tribes inhabiting the highlands of Northeast India, oral tradition serves as the bedrock of their cultural identity, shaping their social norms, historical understanding, and spiritual beliefs. In the absence of widespread written records, narratives passed down through generations – through songs, stories, chants, and proverbs – have become the repository of collective wisdom and memory. All the Naga tribes of Nagaland have been chronicling their history, memoirs, ethnology, and lives through the annals of oral lore. This is no different for the Ao people. As such, Poetic Mongsen is of great cultural significance because, there being no written script, the fundamentals of oral tradition and Ao cultural norms are inseparable from the language. This section will explore the multifaceted significance of oral traditions in Ao society and highlight their multi-dimensional roles.

#### 3.1. Transmission of History and Identity

There have been cultural groups in various parts of the world for whom headhunting was an integral part of their past identity, including the Nagas. Headhunting, the practice of taking and collecting human heads as trophies, has been documented in different cultures throughout history and is often associated with rituals, warfare, and social status. Headhunting was often associated with warfare, honour, and the acquisition of spiritual power. Various Naga tribes inhabiting the mountainous regions of Northeast India and Myanmar historically

engaged in headhunting as part of their inter-tribal conflicts and rituals. It is also important to note that while headhunting was a significant aspect of the cultural identity of these groups in the past, many of them have transitioned away from the practice in modern times due to various factors, including colonialism, missionary activity, and changes in societal norms.

Oral narratives recount the tribes' ancestral journeys, explaining their settlement in the region and solidifying their sense of belonging. These narratives often intertwine myth and reality, providing a unique lens through which the Ao people understand their place in the world. For example, the following song talks about how the Ao people started the practice of headhunting. It tells the tale of how, in time immemorial, before god and man separated, man saw an ant and a scorpion fighting. The fight ended with the ant and the scorpion cutting off each other's heads to gain victory over the other. This inspired man to imitate their actions and practice this method of battle in his own conflicts.

*Menang alivoker tsüngrem kha meimtsar na methithangyim*

*Fungza mervi kha sangkhen na arshasu teli*

*Mervin na sangkhenlem tanger waokona*

*Sangkhenka mervilem tanga waoko*

*Atsu chilu tso ener eisa nisungsanglai leptep tsüngtep tencheto*

*mánàŋ alí-vuk-ár                      tsùŋrəm kʰá míəm-tsàr                      nà mə-tʰítʰàŋ-jəm*  
First earth-emerge-PST.PRF god and love-child (man) two NEG-divide-time  
“In the beginning, before god and man separated”

*fúŋzá mərvi kʰá sánkən nà artʰasú-təlí*  
mervi ant and scorpion two battle-PRS.CONT  
“The mervi ant and the scorpion are battling”

*mərvi-ná sánkən-ləm tàŋər wa-ukú-na*  
mervi-AGT scorpion-head cut-SEQ go-ANT-EMP  
“The mervi ant cut the scorpion's head and left”

*sánkən-na ká mərvi-ləm tàŋà wa-ukú*

scorpion-AGT also mervi-head cut go-ANT

“The scorpion also cut the mervi’s head and left”

*a-tsuú tʃilú-tsu anár i:sā nisúŋsaŋ-la-lí láptáp-tsuŋtāp təncʰət-u?*

NRL-that imitate-DIST carry 1.PL man-TOP-AGT cut-punch start-DEC

“Imitating that, man also started head hunting.”

### 3.2. Education and Moral Instruction

In societies where written records are limited or absent, oral narratives serve as repositories of cultural memory and continuity. Through the preservation and transmission of stories, songs, and rituals, tribes ensure that their cultural heritage remains alive and relevant across generations, even in the absence of written documentation.

Oral traditions play a crucial role in imparting education and moral instructions to the Ao people. They serve as a primary medium for transmitting cultural values, history, and traditions from generation to generation. The traditional tales, proverbs, and songs are embedded with ethical lessons. They teach young generations about bravery, hospitality, respect for elders, and other core values. These narratives are essential for making sense of the world in which they lived and are considered a vital source of information to explain their existence and societal norms (Imchasenla, 2020). *Morung*, a traditional institution of learning in the Ao society, served as a centre for socialisation and life-long education. *Morung* is also what has been referred to as the male dormitory in the story mentioned above. All men, after reaching puberty, were expected to sleep in the *Morung* so that they could learn about survival, endurance, respect for nature, and societal roles through stories and legends from the village elders. Through oral traditions like folksongs, the Ao people have preserved and transmitted their culture for generations, encapsulating immense traditional knowledge and wisdom.

### 3.3. Chronicling Intertribal Relations and Conflicts

Often, tales of past alliances, wars, and peace-making agreements are immortalised in songs among the Ao tribe. They serve as a moral compass, reminding communities of their obligations and fostering unity within the larger Ao identity. The following song speaks of the bravery and valour of Nokyusangba, a warrior head hunter who avenges the death in the village of Longjang by the people of Longrakmen village. He led the warriors of Longjang village to

completely destroy the village of Longrakmen. He did that so successfully that the village of Longrakmen was never re-settled again.

*Longrakmen na ritawa*

*Ningjang pina ratamedem*

*Patsü ningjang pina nunga*

*Ningtsa-tsiungba Nokyusangba jangjen*

*Imtingangnener-ona*

*loŋrǎkmǎn-na          rita                  wa*  
Longrakmen-ALL    head.hunting    go.PST  
“Went head-hunting to Longrakmen”

*nìŋcàŋ    p<sup>h</sup>ina    ràtǎ                  mǎtǎm*  
horizon    ABL    come.PST.CONT    like  
“Like they were coming from the horizon”

*pa-tsə    nìŋcàŋ    pi-na    nuŋ-a*  
3SG-DIS    horizon    ABL    not-EMP  
“He is not from the horizon”

*niŋ=tsá-tsəŋ-pa          nukjusaŋpa    cǎŋcǎn    jimti-ŋaŋnǎn-ər          o-na*  
name=call-have-NMZ    nokyusangba    trample    large.village-destroy-ANOM    EMP  
“Like his given name Nokyusangba, he trampled and destroyed the village”

Oral traditions often provide a multifaceted and nuanced perspective on intertribal relations and conflicts, offering insights into the complex dynamics of interaction, negotiation, and conflict resolution between different communities over time.

### 3.4. Shaping Tribal Customs and Laws

Traditional stories often embody legal principles and social norms, providing a framework for resolving disputes and maintaining order within the community. By preserving

and transmitting their cultural practices through oral traditions like folksongs, the Ao tribe has ensured the continuity of their customs and beliefs for future generations. The oral traditions have not only defined the Naga identity but also helped maintain their unique practices and beliefs over time. In the absence of written laws, customary laws are often encoded in oral narrations, and songs passed down through the generations. For example, some songs document disputes within the community related to customary laws. As such, if one were to set forth their argument or case, the law that supports their case has to be attested to in a song. If there does not exist a song that supports their argument, the case stands invalidated.

Some songs, like the one below, talk about customary dresses and how different tribes or clans got their specific patterns and shades. The song talks about the distribution of different clothing for each recognised clan present at that time in Chungliyimti. This is an important cultural knowledge for the Ao because, in the Ao culture, each clan has their own clan-specific clothing with assigned patterns and designs. Members of other clans are not permitted to wear the colours or patterns of another clan.

The cultural significance of the clan-specific clothing can be understood in the context of a married Ao woman. When an Ao woman marries, she is not allowed to marry within her clan. Despite the Ao society being largely patriarchal, marrying a man from another clan does not change her clothing from the colours or patterns of her own clan to that of her husband's. She is expected to wear the colours of the clan that she was born into for her entire life, even after marriage. As such, the song below about the distribution of clothes among the clans holds greater significance than just assigning clan-specific designs. It is a symbol of the entire ethos of Ao traditions and cultural norms being established and agreed upon by all the clans.

*Long terokko poker, Tongpok, Longpo, Longjakrep*

*Yim teyongna sentenang*

*Chungliyimti kongko sentong riju yangerchetoko*

*Mijang temang sentenang*

*Arsalang pangko sübu tatong lemsaoko*

*lùŋ tərúk-ku puk-ár tùŋpuk lùŋpuk lùŋc<sup>h</sup>ákrəp*  
 stone six-LOC emerge-PST.PRF Tongpok Longpok Longchakrep  
 “Emerged from long terok, Tongpok, Longpok, Longjakrep”



*jām tə-jùŋ-na səntán-āŋ*  
village NRL-center-ALL gather-IMP  
“Gather in the village center”

*cʰùŋlijímtí kùŋ-ku səntúŋ-ritfú jáŋə̀r-tʃət-uku*  
Chungliyimti range-LOC sentong-morung establish-ABIL-PST.PRF  
“The Chungliyimti range sentong morung has been established”

*mìtʃàŋ támaŋ səntánāŋ*  
People all gather-IMP  
“All people gather”

*ár-salaŋ páŋ-ku súpù tátúŋ ləmsa-uku*  
warrior-gathering.place mouth-LOC clothing befitting assign-PAST.PRF  
“The (traditional) clothing befitting (each clan) has been distributed at the *arsalang*.”

### 3.5. Spiritual Expression and Religious Practices

Oral traditions recount the origins of the universe, the role of supernatural beings, and the interactions between the spiritual and physical realms. The following song is about the origin mythology of the Ao people. It sings of how the Ao people emerged from *longterok*, or six stones that represent the three forefathers, *Tongpok*, *Longpok*, *Longjakrep*, and their three wives. This origin myth is not common to just the Aos but also among other tribes like the Sangtam and Phom tribes (Aier, 2018). However, it should be noted that not all clans within the Ao tribe trace their origins to longterok (Ao, 1999). For instance, many of the Mongsen clans, such as the Longchar and the Imchen, have tales of migrating to Chungliyimti from other places. The following song narrates the story of those who emerged from longterok.

*Oh Longterok ku oker Jungli Mongsen lima*  
*Tongpok, Longpok, Longjakreper watsü*  
*Lata yunü metem, lima sünga sotetogo*  
*Aning tsünger tsüngrem tamarenba*

*Nesayangna watsüi wasang soka Longja peti medem*

*Lima yimkong sangwaogo.*

*O      lõṅtərók    ku      ok-âr              c<sup>h</sup>uṅlì    muṅsén    lima*  
O-DISC longterok in-LOC emerge-PST.PRF jungli mongsen land  
“Oh in Longterok we emerged on Jungli and Mongsen land”

*tòṅpòk    lõṅpòk    loṅc<sup>h</sup>ákrəp-ər    watsə*  
tongpok longpok longjakrep-POSS woman.PL  
“Tongok, Longpok, Longjakreper (and) women”

*lata      juná    mətám    lima    səṅ-a      sutet-úko*  
Moon    sun    like      land    full-VBZ    born-PST.PRF  
“Like the moon and sun we filled the land (through procreation)”

*ániṅ-tsəṅ-ər    tsəṅ-rəm    tama-rən-pa*  
sky-SUP-POSS    god            high-accumulate-MASC (the highest/mighty)  
“The mightiest (revered) god of the skies”

*nə              sájáṅ-na              watsə-wasáṅ              su:-kā              lõṅdza-pəti*  
2SG.POSS    work.PL-AGT            woman-tip of bamboo            born-CONJ            north-star  
*mətám    lima                      jim-kūṅ              saṅwa-úko*  
Like      land                      village-through.LOC            shine-PST.PRF

“Because of your works, wise (accomplished) people were born and like the north star they shone throughout the land”

Oral traditions and origin mythologies are intimately intertwined, shaping, and sustaining cultural identity, transmitting knowledge, and providing insights into the origins and nature of existence within traditional societies. Origin mythologies play a central role in shaping cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging within the community. By recounting stories of creation, migration, and ancestral heroes, these mythologies affirm the shared heritage and collective identity of the group, reinforcing bonds of kinship, solidarity, and mutual obligation among its members. Origin mythologies provide a framework for

understanding one's place within the community and the larger cosmos, offering a sense of continuity and purpose amidst the complexities of existence.

#### 4. Current Domains of Use

As traditional societies encounter modernity and global influences, there is a risk of cultural erosion and loss of traditional values, languages, and practices. Younger generations are increasingly drawn to urban lifestyles and consumer culture, leading to a decline in the transmission and preservation of oral traditions and cultural knowledge. Traditional societies often rely on close-knit social networks, kinship ties, and communal bonds to maintain social cohesion and mutual support. However, rapid social change and economic development can disrupt these traditional social structures, leading to fragmentation, social stratification, and the breakdown of community solidarity. Traditional societies are struggling to adapt to the pressures of globalization while maintaining their cultural integrity and autonomy.

Oral traditions are often closely tied to specific languages, dialects, and linguistic communities. However, many indigenous and minority languages are endangered due to language shift, language loss, and the dominance of global languages such as English. The loss of indigenous languages threatens to erode oral traditions, cultural knowledge, and cultural identity within traditional societies.

At present, while efforts are being made to preserve folksongs and perpetuate the learning of oral narratives and songs among the youth, Poetic Mongsen as a language is on the verge of extinction. It has not been in communal use for the past three generations, leading to the deterioration of the language in the past hundred years. With the dawn of Christianity and the adoption of Western education, the practice of the traditional Morung education system has slowly faded away. This has had far-reaching consequences on the propagation of cultural practices and norms among the Ao people. Impartation of knowledge is now focused on Western education and Christian values, not traditional practices and beliefs. Churches, in turn, do not encourage sharing and propagating cultural practices and knowledge, deeming many of them to be un-Christian or sinful. Additionally, influences of Western culture and modern belief systems have caused some native people to undervalue their own culture, leading to a lack of understanding of its value (Imchasenla, 2020). As such, the pressure of modernity, diminishing sense of belongingness, and the loss of cultural identity pose significant challenges

to preserving oral traditions. And with Poetic Mongsen being so closely intertwined with the discourse of traditional customary beliefs and practices, it is now facing an inevitable death.

Hence, intergenerational transmission and the role of younger generations are crucial in keeping the language alive. In this regard, some steps are now being taken by the government of India as well as the tribal bodies in Nagaland. The Indian government has introduced the Guru Shishya Parampara Scheme in the northeast through the North East Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC). This scheme aims to preserve and promote rare and vanishing art forms under an eminent ‘Guru.’ This scheme has been implemented in many of the Ao villages. The Gurus not only teach the youth but are also involved in performing folksongs and giving talks on cultural norms and practices during community gatherings and functions (“*Schemes under North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur,*” n.d.).

Apart from this, the *Ao Kaketshir Mungdang* (AKM) or the Ao Student Union has started a programme in 2022 called the Arju Center, under the aegis of the Nagaland Education Mission Society, Samagra Shiksha, Nagaland (Mokokchung Times, 2023). This programme, introduced in ten villages in the Mokokchung district, aims to impart holistic knowledge among children. It follows the traditions of the Morung school, where children are taught traditional knowledge, practices, arts and crafts after school hours.

While these measures taken are also contributing to the promotion and preservation of traditional songs in their pure form in Nagaland, the folk tunes are also being incorporated into contemporary music by Naga artists such as Guru Rewben Mashangva, who was made a Guru under the Guru Shishya Parampara Scheme, and Abiogenesis in what is being termed as ‘folk fusion’ music (Kenye, 2021).

Due to changing lifestyles and influence of external cultures, the transmission of oral traditions faces several challenges. Conscious efforts are slowly being made to document and revitalise these traditions. The importance of community-based initiatives in re-establishing these practices in collaboration with community elders, storytellers, and educators is crucial to ensuring the continued relevance and vibrancy of Ao and Naga oral traditions.

## 5. Conclusion

Oral narratives have played a significant role in shaping tribal customs and laws in not just Ao society but the larger Naga society by transmitting cultural values, history, and

traditions from generation to generation. The Naga cultural identity, often obscured by stereotypes and lack of written records, is preserved and passed down through oral storytelling. These narratives are crucial for maintaining cohesion among tribes and preserving customs, rituals, beliefs, and the Ao way of life. However, the dwindling practice of storytelling among present-day Aos and Nagas highlights the importance of documenting these oral traditions to ensure their preservation for future generations. Additionally, oral traditions have influenced customary laws in Naga society, where disputes are settled in village councils and through customary law courts. While efforts have been made to record and preserve the rich cultural heritage of the Naga tribes through works like Ao (1999) and Aier (2018), there is still a lot to be done. These narratives not only reflect the past but also contribute to shaping the evolving cultural identity of the Nagas over time. In this context, the role of languages like *Poetic Mongsen*, as carriers of knowledge systems and medium of knowledge impartation cannot be ignored.

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