

# The Mao Naga Youth Dormitories A Traditional Educational System

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## ABSTRACT

The traditional “youth dormitories” popularly called “*Morung*” among the Naga ethnic tribes of North-East India, has aroused the interest of not only the anthropologists but also the educators with greater intensity today. The article examines the traditional system of education imparted through the common dormitory system among the Mao Naga tribe known as *Khruchozü* (Bachelors’ dormitory) and *Lochozü* (Virgins’ dormitory). Amazingly this institution imparts an integral formation to the youth through simple but potential dynamics of a tribal community. It slowly gave way to new structures with the advent of the Christian missionaries and the introduction of the modern educational system. A re-discovery of the traditional cultural values has become a contemporary need in search of dynamics for youth formation now and in the years to come.

**Keywords:** *Youth dormitory, Youth formation, Pre-literate traditional system of education*

## INTRODUCTION

The Mao Naga [hereafter, Mao] tribal community is one of the many sub-tribes of the generic ethnic group called the Nagas (classified as Tibeto-Mongoloid race), who are mainly located in the federal states of Manipur and Nagaland in North-East India and spread over other states, including the northwestern region of Myanmar. The Maos are surrounded by their neighboring Naga sub-tribes of Angami, Maram, Poumai, Rengma, Zeliang, Zeme, Tangkhul, Thangals, and Chakhesang (Salew, 2007); and two other major communities of Kuki-Chins and Meiteis not in the fold of Naga tribes.

This article re-visits the pre-literate traditional system of education, the Youth Dormitory System of the Mao Naga community, as a possible source from which to cull essential elements which can serve as beacons for the formation of Mao youth today. In the absence of a well-structured educational system of modern methods, the traditional youth dormitories played the role

of imparting integral education to the younger members of the society. It was in the youth dormitories that young people learned the social, cultural, and moral values, shaping and molding of characters. In other words, the young people were given integral formation in youth dormitories. Accompanying the youth in becoming full-fledged and responsible adult members of the society were done in youth dormitories. The traditional youth dormitory system strikingly portrays many insights which are relevant to the contemporary pattern of education.

## METHODOLOGY

To do qualitative research based on the traditional practices and beliefs of the Mao Naga tribe in upholding the youth dormitory system, the study involves a qualitative, interpretative approach (Kvale, 1996), to re-discover this long-standing tradition which was essentially an educational institution of the pre-modern or pre-Christian era.

In our study, we have used both the primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected through personal interviews during the fieldwork; and the secondary data were collected through books, journals, articles, and internet sources.

The interview schedule was prepared for village elders, community leaders, educated adults, both male and female representatives. The rationale behind interviewing these groups was that they had experienced the socio-cultural changes taking place in their personal life and that of their societies; moreover, within the community, they are responsible leaders, know the society and its people, and are willing to take part in the survey process.

After having assured confidentiality for the profiles and responses of the interviewees, the authors conducted personal interviews with forty village elders (20 men and 20 women) who lived the youth dormitory system and are acquainted with the modern educational system. The interviews were carried out with some prepared questions which were open-ended. It had a sequence of themes to be covered, but at the same time, there was the flexibility of approach to impromptu questions required by the flow of dialog and narratives of folklore and amazing stories spontaneously shared by the interviewees.

### **The Name Mao Naga**

The word 'Mao' is believed to have derived from the corrupted synchrony of two words "Emeo" (indicative of the Mao tribe) and "Omei" (people), as the Maos call themselves "Ememei" (people of Emeo); and, eventually the state officially christened them with the nomenclature "Mao" evolving from *Momei* or *Maomei* (Ashuli, 1981). Today, Mao language is officially recognized as *Maola*.

The history relating to the Nagas in general and the Maos, in particular, is steeped in both oral tradition and legends (Lokho, 2004). In the absence of written

documents of the past, the origin of the Naga race (Tibetan-Mongoloid) in general and the Mao sub-tribe, in particular, has been constructed mostly on the basis of folk songs, folk tales, legends, and myths. Embedded in them are the hidden treasures of their cultural values, philosophy of life, social and moral ethos which were passed on from one generation to another through oral narrations (Mary, 2004).

Fortunately, today, due to the keen initiatives of some social leaders and scholars, the Mao community has developed its language (dialect) and integrated it into academic literature so that it is recognized as a major language in the state of Manipur, India. The language is offered as a subject of learning for the students up to graduate degree level at Manipur University.

### **Youth Dormitory: An Educational Institution in Mao Naga Culture**

The Mao traditional youth dormitories for the boys are known as "*Khruchozi*" (Bachelors' Dormitory) and for the girls "*Lochozi*" (Virgins' Dormitory). It is to be noted here that the Youth Dormitory is a social practice common to almost all the Naga Tribes. Each Naga sub-tribe names it in its dialect. For example, *Kichuki* (Angami tribe), *Ban* (Konyaks), *Arju* (Ao), *Chumpo* (Lothas), *Apuki* (Semas), *Chethechie* (Chakeshangs), *Herangki* (Zeliangs), *Rahangki* (Marams), etc. The youth dormitory is now popularly known as the "*Morung*," widely used in today's literature. Hence, because of its popularity and common parlance, this paper on Mao community will also apply interchangeably: Youth Dormitory and "*Morung*."

There can be as many youth dormitories as needed, depending on the number of young people in the village, and each group normally consists of 8 to 10 persons. Usually, the peer groups located in the vicinity (especially within the respective clans) form the group.

The boys' dormitories are normally built as a separate house within the village, which

also serves as a multi-purpose common hall. The girls find a hosting family, which provides a separate section of the house to maintain their privacy. Girls' dormitories are usually annexed to private houses (seldom separate buildings), and they are guarded by private families. Some well-to-do and respected families, including the Village Chief, would set aside a suitable part of the house as a dormitory for the young girls. At appropriate hours, it used to be the approved meeting place between boys and girls in mixed groups. This is mainly to encourage them to find their life-partners for inter-marriage between clans or even with the neighboring villages. Young boys and girls start frequenting the *morung* from the age of puberty until they are married. Fürer-Heimendorf, in the early 20th century, remarked that children over a certain age should not sleep under the parental roof, with his statement not being confined to boys alone but is for both genders (Für-Heimendorff, 1950).

The boys inaugurate their entry into the dormitory on the first day of the month when the village observes a ritual ceremony called *Phehrumani* (a day of sanctification and self-purification). As for the girls, there is no particular ceremony, and except that, on the appointed day, an elderly person would invoke God's blessings for their safety and security (Nepuni, 2010). By entering the dormitory, a young boy or girl gains admission into the society of adult men and women.

The members come there to sleep after the day's work and after having had their meals. There can be cases when someone from a low-income family might not have had a proper meal, or someone who had eaten well at home might feel thirsty at night, in which case the neighbouring families would be gracious in catering to their needs.

### **Youth Dormitory Educational System**

According to the interview respondents, the youth dormitories were considered a

forum for education. The Mao community was basically an agrarian society, and everyone was engaged in cultivation in the fields. In the absence of well-structured schools, the youth dormitory played the role of imparting social, cultural, religious and moral values, shaping and molding the character of the younger members of the society. In other words, an integral formation was given to them in the youth dormitories, by accompanying them to become full-fledged and responsible adult members of the society. Some of the particular areas of learning at this stage, while they remained members of the youth dormitory are highlighted below:

**a) Education for Healthy Social Integration:** In the evening or during the festivals and holidays, the youngsters would gather in the youth dormitory, sharing news, and work experiences, learning folksongs and folklore from the elders, and listening to war stories of the days of yore. It was during this time that the youngsters learned about moral values, their social roles, and responsibilities.

Sincerity, honesty, truthfulness, courage and hard work were the trademarks of social life among the Maos. The cases of premarital sex, eloping and children born out of wedlock were unheard of. Marriages were always arranged by parents and guardians; infidelities of spouses and divorces were rare. The moral disciplines and standards of social life in the village community were integrally taught by parents at home, and by elders in the youth dormitories.

An interesting aspect of inter-gender relationship promoted by youth dormitory system is the culture of a singing contest between young men and women. According to the respondents, they would sit up late in the night, conveying their wits and sentiments through folksongs: thus, hinting at the beauty, shyness, humility and boldness, shortness of life, expressing the desired qualities of their life partners, etc. During

such gatherings, the girls would sit on one side with their leader and the boys on the opposite side; they would woo each other, study the characters of those present. If a boy discovered a suitable partner, he would propose to his parents to arrange for a match.

**b) Good Self-Governance:** The youth dormitory is also an avenue for men of the village to gather together and hold conferences. The adults make use of the hall to deliberate their issues, while the youngsters watch attentively and learn the happenings of their society and follow the streams of a discourse of the elders. The youngsters learn to express their views and to respect the opinions of others. The decisions of the clans or the village are taken after hearing one and all in an open debate. The transparency and fullness of participation make the gathering of people an indigenous institution for self-governance. Each age-group (from puberty onwards) discharges different prescribed duties and enjoys certain social recognition and privileges. It becomes the fulcrum of village democracy. The *Morung* plays a vital role in preparing younger generations in the village council. The *Morung* is the club, the public school, the military training centre, the hostel for boys and meeting place for village elders. It is also the centre for social, cultural, religious and political activities (Yanthan, 2016).

**c) Physical Formation:** The *Morung* offers the young people opportunities to learn social manners, war tactics, use of weaponry, skills in inter-village diplomacy, adult responsibilities, and family values (Shikhu, 2007). The young and energetic youth become ready volunteers ever for any emergency service in the village. For example, to help in times of a house on fire, to go in search of a farmer held up in the field because of sickness or accidental misfortunes, and to be vigilant squads in the village from the invasion of enemies.

Disciplined by the code of conduct in the youth dormitories and influenced by the

experienced wisdom of the elders, the young people grow up as responsible and integral members of society. They would volunteer their services and make a sacrifice of their personal interests for the welfare of the village community. They are always ready to sacrifice their lives in defence of their village and its people. When wars and raids from the neighbouring villages were frequent, the institutions like Youth Dormitories were very vital and essential for the security of the village-state. The youth would keep vigil by turn throughout the night, guarding the village against the enemies. The female members would be at their best to do their logistic service in preparing food provisions, clothing, caring for the young children, fetching water from spring sources at the indicated hours of safety.

**d) Art and Culture:** While the boys learn the art of life and other useful instructions for a fruitful and dignified life from their Abode (Khruchozü), their counterparts in "Virgins' Abode" (Lochozü) learn various arts and skills like cotton spinning, knitting, and weaving.

The girls would bring to the dormitory weaving materials such as indigenous spinning wheels, raw cotton, threads, and finished cloths for stitching together and designing the hems. The young girls learn social manners, obedience, and numerous other qualities of being women recognized and esteemed by the community. One of the most important roles of the dormitories was the molding of personal character in view of matching one's life partner and becoming a woman of substance. This can be culled from the testimonies of the respondents.

**e) The dignity of Labor and Self-Employment:** The members of the common dormitory are encouraged to do manual works and to cultivate some fields as joint enterprises (paddy, cash crops, contract ploughing, or cutting firewood, etc.). As the interview respondents testified, while working in teams, individuals learn not only

the art of cultivation, but also cultural songs associated with it, thus, blending their manual works into a deep philosophy of life engrained with moral and spiritual values. They also learn to relate with the land and natural environments as co-partners in their common home (tribal land). The aspect of eco-spirituality and sustainable prosperity were the core values taught in their relationship with mother earth.

According to the testimony of the respondents, the youngsters neither depend on their parents nor do they consume the parents' income. They earn and govern themselves within their limits as independent clubs. Their social code is also orally well-defined and observed with respect to the regulations of the elders. They are taught to face the hardships of life and be responsible to support themselves and to integrate well in society with economic independence, subsistence economy from the produce of their fields.

**f) Traditional Medicinal Education:** The tribal youths are well exposed to natural environments: land, forests, fields, rivers, and mountains rich in natural resources. The youth dormitory offers them a suitable platform to exchange knowledge about natural medicines traditionally handed down by their forefathers. They are herbal plants, roots, insects as well as other items. Tradition has handed down many medicinal plants and related natural resources found in Mao Naga areas and which are now being explored by modern scientists (Lokho & Narasimhan, 2013). The rich medicinal heritage preserved by Mao Naga tradition owes much to the institution of the youth dormitory.

### **The transition of Youth Dormitory to Modernity**

With the advent of modern education alongside Christianity in the 1920s in the Mao region, the institution of the youth dormitory slowly began to vanish from the Mao community. We might say that the erstwhile powerhouse of human resources

gave way to new waves of learning introduced by modern education and Christian community life. Soon the traditional community began to experience a rapid transition and separation from the old to the new pattern of learning and human formation. Consequently, the yawning gap between the illiterate and the literate members of the community grew in greater intensity. From the testimony of the respondents, the Mao community could hardly distinguish between Christianity and modern education as they arrived in one package and got embedded in the heart of Mao Naga culture.

Through the testimonies of some interviewees, we came to learn that, even after the arrival of Christianity, the dormitory system continued to function for some time in some villages. Modified and rejuvenated by the new arrivals, the functions of the youth dormitory were significantly shifted from traditional education to systematic institutions. Sitting up late in the evening the youth would gather (a socially valued culture) in the small halls and churches learning the Bible, singing and practicing Christian hymns and engaging heart and soul in prayer and worship. In this way, young men and women continue to experience a transformed style of the dormitory system of education. Thus, although the material structure of the youth dormitory had disappeared, the spiritual and moral aspects of youth formation continued unabated, and, therefore, the social coherence of the tribal culture persistently remains even today to some extent.

### **The Pedagogy of Youth Dormitory for Contemporary Youth Formation**

In the early days, the youth dormitory (Khruchozü and Lochozü) stood as a traditional monument of the educational institution among the Mao Naga tribe of North-East India. Their so-called ingenious method, which worked in the absence of a systematic method of education has a resonant relevance in our present time. Just

as in early days boys and girls who had not been inserted into the youth dormitory system demonstrated a marked difference in his or her social manners and personal traits, the young men and women who have not been too systematic educational schools demonstrate the same pattern in the present time.

The traditional cultural heritage of the Mao Naga tribe has not disappeared in its entirety even today. Certain fundamental principles and values do not change or lose their vitality and validity with the passage of time. Therefore, a critical review of youth dormitories is commendable to add flavour and culture to the post-modern paradigm of youth accompaniment and formation, especially the young people emerging from their culture to integrate with the global community. The phenomenon of blending the traditional culture with the contemporary cultures necessitates that the educationalists engage in wider research and deeper reflection to forge a way forward for younger generations to find relevance and meaning.

The dynamics of youth formation in the traditional youth dormitories are focused on the integral development of the individual. The youth dormitories, both for boys and girls, serve as a guard house, recreation club, centre of education, art, discipline and have their importance for ceremonial purposes. Young men and women are taught the community work and co-operation especially to live an upright and virtuous life. They are taught to become responsible men and women citizens of the village and the society. In such dormitories, they learn all kinds of practical and soft skills. In other words, we could say that the youth dormitory training contained most of the elements of the modern understanding of integral education as they aim to enable young people to assume competence in all aspects of life.

## DISCUSSION

This study emphasizes that the qualities of the youth dormitories of the past can inspire alternative learning systems such as today's educational centres, youth hub, youth observatory centres, a youth centre with social and recreational activities. They can cull the values from the traditional youth dormitory system of education and integrate it in the present form of education making it more relevant and youth-friendly. For example, human relationships through appropriate and healthy interactions are a must in the traditional educational system, which is also one of the aims of today's modern educational system.

In the traditional youth dormitories, there are neither prescribed curriculums nor a specific method of teaching. It is nothing more than the basic principle of life, the human and divine relationships, etiquette for social and community life and assumes responsibility to earn their livelihood in a dignified manner.

Hence the aim and focus of today's additional programmes, like the life skill training in youth hubs, youth observatory centres, can be the meeting point for all young people. It can be a dynamic forum for sharing of ideas, to know the needs, the problems and desires of the youth of today and to develop proper channels, creating an ambient where young people can find a common platform to explore their talents and make use of them for self and the society. Youth centres can become the powerhouse to convey to all young people the divine and good human values which are relevant and have significance for all societies of all ages.

Today, educational institutions can help and encourage young people to venture outdoors with several innovative programmes such as annual and weekend-getaway with tenting in wild woods, like survival camping, where an individual can learn the skills required to survive in any outdoor situation. Social camping

enhances the bonds between peers, members of the same family, and between different families; an experience of living together in close affinity with nature and with each other has both social and spiritual benefits for individuals and the community as a whole.

For the traditional community of the Maos, the whole cosmos was established in a cooperative spirit, and the survival of one of its elements was not to interfere with that of another, as testified by the respondents. Eco-spirituality of the Maos is built on the sacred relationship between human beings and the whole cosmos. Ecological sensitivity has been one of the hallmarks of the Mao Naga culture (Mathibo, 2008). The Maos believe that human beings are to be caretakers of the Earth and stewards of God's creation. The co-existence between human beings and the cosmos is their religion, i.e., their way of life.

More than ever, today's educational institutions need to inculcate environmental sensitivity in young minds. A modern package, seasoned with good traditional, human and cultural values has great significance and relevance for young people in today's educational system. This would indeed help and prepare young people to face the challenges of their daily life. Youth Centres can be set up with modern equipment and savvy professionals, amalgamating good traditional values, and in this way enabling the individuals to live their life with dignity and responsibility, using modern means and making them more youth-friendly, useful, pertinent and attractive.

## CONCLUSION

A tribal proverb states, "When an old man dies, a good library is buried." It is true of the tribal communities whose source of knowledge lies in the oral tradition transmitted by the elders. The Mao living traditions and their cultural values of the pre-Christian era are not to be found in their pure form; however, the time immemorial cultural heritage of the Mao Naga tribe has not disappeared in its entirety even today. Certain fundamental principles and

values do not change or lose their vitality and validity with the passage of time. Our study has shown that in the renowned institution of the Mao Naga culture the "Youth Dormitory" is a viable paradigm for a contemporary pattern of education, provided it is intelligibly articulated and integrated into today's cultural context.

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