



Revisiting the Morung Tradition: A Study of the Indigenous Educational System of the Zeme Naga Tribe

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Abstract: *The Zeme Nagas, one of the three kindred tribes of the Zeliangrong community and one of the major tribe of Nagaland, have a rich cultural heritage rooted in oral tradition, folklore, and unique institutions such as the Morung system. This paper explores the historical and cultural significance of the Morung culture of the Zeliangrong Nagas. Every Zeme Naga community maintained Morungs, a youth dormitories for both boys and girls in the village. It is an essential part of the village institution and serves as a vital indigenous educational institution. Emphasizing on experiential learning and community values, the Morungs served as a platform for vocational training, cultural education and moral development of the young boys and girls. With the advent of Christianity, formal education, and modernization, this institution has lost its importance and much of its functional relevance. However, its cultural legacy continues to inspire values of discipline, cooperation, and community service. This paper argues for a reevaluation of its traditional systems like the Morung and their integration into contemporary cultural and educational paradigms for their preservation.*

Key Words: *Zeme Naga, Morung, indigenous education, dormitory system, youth training, cultural heritage, traditional values*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Zeme Nagas, a sub-group of the broader Zeliangrong community, are predominantly found in the valley around the Barail mountain ranges spread across present-day Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam. Though the region has been geographically divided due to colonial administrative policies into different states, the Zeme people have been able to maintain a strong and unified cultural identity distinct from the rest of the world. The people follows patriarchal pattern, with customs and traditions passed down through generations via oral narratives, folklore, and a vibrant array of festivals, dances, and music. A cornerstone of Zeme Naga cultural life is the Morung system—a Naga traditional youth dormitory that functioned as an institution of indigenous learning. This Morung culture is not uncommon in the Naga culture. Different Naga tribe has their own respective Morungs, characterized by their unique and distinct culture and tradition. These dormitories were not merely living spaces or recreational place but served as a platform for the transmission of tribal knowledge, social norms, and vocational skills. In short, Morung serve as a place where a child attains socio-cultural knowledge. In the Zeme Naga culture, both boys and girls had separate dormitories, where they were groomed in their respective roles in the society. The Morung thus serve as a social institution and plays a crucial role in shaping the social fabric, discipline, and identity of the Zeme Nagas. The Morung, a boys and girls dormitory, traditionally known as "Hangseuki" for boys and "Leuseuki" for girls in Zeme Naga dialect, was a central institution in every Zeme village. Functioning much like a boarding school, the Morung served as a place where adolescents learned about practical life skills, tribal customs and traditions, and communal responsibilities. Each Morung had designated caretakers known as Hezeipeu for Hangseuki and Hezeipui for Leuseuki, who were responsible for the management and mentorship of the youth. Elders played a vital role in transmitting tribal history, values, myths, and legends, thereby acting as informal educators. The Hangseuki was often the most elaborately built structure in the village, adorned with round wooden beams and centrally located to signify its importance. It housed benches, a fireplace, and traditional weapons for emergencies—serving also as an armory. Seating arrangements reflected social hierarchy, and guests were warmly received. This paper delves into the functions, structure, and educational value of the Morung in Zeme Naga society. Drawing from oral traditions and ethnographic accounts, it documents the decline of this institution due to



religious conversion and modernization, while advocating for a revival of its core values. This paper is based on both primary and second source of data. Primary data were collected through oral interviews from few village elders of Peren and Jalukie village. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal and village council souvenirs.

1.1. The Morung Institution in Zeme Society

In each Zeme Naga villages, two Morungs for boys known as Nreikia (Upper Dormitory) and Nkangkia (Lower Dormitory) and two for girls known as Nreikileuna and Nkangkileuna were maintained. Membership in the Morungs was not based on kinship or clan affiliation but decided by elder members of the Morungs. The traditional system fostered a spirit of competition and cooperation among the dormitories. The daily activities or the so called curriculum in the Morung was experiential and holistic in nature. For boys, common activities or duties included like hunting, fishing, wrestling, firewood collection, and protection of the village besides learning traditional values and knowledge from the village elders. They also received lessons on discipline, responsibility, and communal service. Girls were left with the responsibility of learning and to be train in domestic and vocational skills such as weaving, pottery, cooking, and spinning yarn. They also received informal education on menstruation, sex education and marriage life, and social conduct from elderly women and mentors.

2. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The Morung culture of the community held deep cultural significance among the Zeme Nagas, serving not just as a sleeping dormitory for boys and girls in their Morungs but also serve as a vital center for the transmission of indigenous knowledge, discipline, and communal values. For boys, the Morung was a hub of activity, functioning as an educational platform, recreational center, and even a judicial forum where youngsters learn about village meetings and dispute resolutions whenever took place. Boys were trained in both theory and practice about skills such as hunting, warfare, craftsmanship, and moral conduct. It is an important institution for a boy or a girl where they spent most of their time there, returning home only for meals or when unwell. The structure symbolized a rite of passage into responsible adulthood, fostering values like cooperation, bravery and social service.

In contrast, girls' Morungs, though more modest in structure, played an equally important role in shaping the lives of young girls. Supervised by an elderly couple, these spaces focused on teaching domestic skills such as weaving, cooking, childcare, and social etiquette. They also offered guidance on sensitive topics like menstruation and courtship. While girls had fewer public roles, these dormitories cultivated the essence of womanhood and family life. However, traditional gender roles imposed limitations—women were excluded from public decision-making and could not enter the boys' dormitory except during specific festivals, reflecting a patriarchal societal structure. The practice of learning by doing things or this experiential learning method was a commendable aspect of the Morung system. It was in the Morung that the experienced elderly wise men propagated the practical education to the younger generations.

3. DECLINE OF THE MORUNG SYSTEM:

With the advent of Christianity and the subsequent introduction of formal education systems during the colonial and post-colonial periods, the traditional Morung system began to lose its significance in every Naga society. Christian missionaries, while trying to promote western schooling and moral teachings, often viewed indigenous institutions as incompatible with their religious and educational objectives. As a result, the significance of the Morungs gradually diminished. Modern schooling systems, which emphasized literacy and academic achievement, replaced the communal and experiential learning environment that the Morung once offered. Today, only few Morungs function in their original capacity as youth dormitories and cultural training centers. In most villages, Morungs are now used primarily as community halls for meetings or as guesthouses for visitors during festivals and important events. Despite this paradigm shift in its function, the foundational values cultivated through the Morungs such as discipline, cooperation, self-reliance and respect for elders, and service to the community continue to hold deep relevance. These virtues, once embedded in the daily lives and upbringing of the youths, are now at risk of being forgotten and loss amidst rapid modernization and cultural dilution and changes.

Therefore, there is a growing need to revisit and integrate these traditional values into contemporary educational frameworks and community-based learning initiatives. By doing so, the traditional institutional values and strengths can complement modern education, fostering a more holistic development of young people that blends academic knowledge with cultural identity, moral responsibility, and a sense of communal belonging. These initiatives would also serve as a powerful tool for cultural preservation, helping the young generations to reconnect with their traditional and cultural roots while navigating the challenges of modern life.



4. CONCLUSION:

The Morung system of the Zeme Nagas was serving as a vital center for indigenous education, where cultural values, life skills, and social responsibilities were imparted through communal teaching and mentorship. Morungs played a crucial role in shaping social responsibility, self-reliant, and disciplined individuals. Though the influx of foreign culture has largely affected and gradually wipe out the role of Morungs, the core values it embodied remain relevant even today. Reintroducing important aspects of the Morung system such as experiential learning, moral education, and communal responsibility and integrating the same into contemporary educational system can strengthen cultural identity, nurture well-rounded character development, and promote unity and cooperation among the youths of the present generation. It would also serve as a powerful tool to preserve the traditional values and cultural ethos.

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