



Identity in the Oral History of Bujuur Naga

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Abstract

In this age of objective historical construction based on empirical evidence, the space of oral narrations is minimal and their reliability is doubtful. However, the importance of oral narrations cannot be altogether ignored as many communities' identity is embedded in them. The article explores and reconstructs the history of Bujuur Naga from oral sources, using analytical and discussion discourse, rather than completely relying on relative interpretation. For the Bujuur, such historical construction is crucial to uphold the being and identity in the ever changing modern period; and being one of the least known community and largely undocumented, the article provides a glimpse of the community, the oral history and other historical events that shaped the identity of the present.



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Introduction

Bujuur, also known as Moyon, is a small ethno community belonging to Naga Nation. They inhabit Bujuur-Paam, in the South-Eastern part of Naga Hills- Chandel District, Manipur (India) and Tamu Township, Sagaing Division (Myanmar). The total population of Bujuur is approximately 2,600, out of which 2516¹ are in India and about a hundred in Myanmar. In spite of small population, Bujuur are scattered all around in 18 villages due to unavoidable social-political-economic reasons. Historically, that is till the early twentieth Century, there were only four Bujuur Villages in Bujuur-Paam: 'Khungjuur, Matung, Bujuur Khuwfhuw' and Mengkang-Laeven. Khungjuur, Matung and Bujuur Khuwfhuw are

located in India while Mengkang-Laeven is stranded on the India-Myanmar International Boundary. Thus, the Bujuur inhabit both India and Myanmar, and are recognised as distinct Naga community in both the countries.

The paper is an outcome of research, exploration and associated debates on the oral history of Bujuur. It employs discussions and interviews, including addition of few available literatures, cross analysis and deduction of the narrations. The oral accounts, from which the history is constructed is divided into two parts: the origin and the migration. The origin narrations provide the events that culminate to the formation/development of the identity, space,

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Bujuur, and the foundation that makes them unique. The migration events provide glimpses to the journey, events, between the origin, the birth, and to the contemporary. The paper aims to recreate the history of the Bujuur Naga in the development and evolution of identity to the present contemporary identity crisis. The oral narrations are brought to the mainstream to understand the shadows of history; at the same time, they are challenged through debates and discussions with the purpose of producing a non-subjective account which might be more realistic than the mythical accounts. It however does not belittle the oral narrations as myths and fables, rather the myths are analysed as metaphors embedded with hidden meanings and symbols which needs to be researched and presented in a synthetic manner. In the case of the Bujuur Naga, the myth of origin is pointed to a source

call '*Khur*' located somewhere in a far east. But there are questions pertaining to the myth: for example, what is this *khur*? A cave? An earthhole? An escape tunnel? Another question raised being: if *khur* was the beginning, what was there before *khur*? When these questions are posed, the study of *Khur* myth sheds light to the history of Bujuur Naga and the meanings of the identity- Bujuur; and that, why the nomenclature Bujuur is not just a nomenclature but a very significant identifier and elements that distinguish the Bujuur from other communities.

Methodology

The paper is a result of a qualitative exploratory research with subjective approach. It involves an on-site study, as an insider, with elements of ethnographic techniques including interviews and

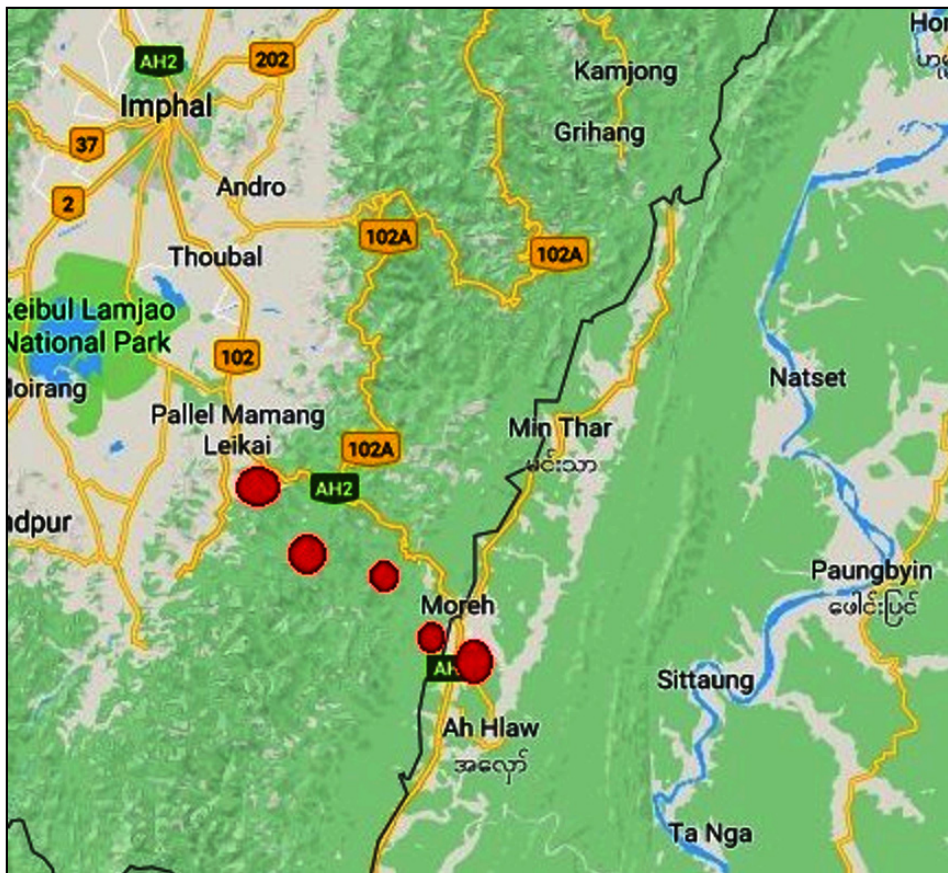


Fig.1: Bujuur Naga Inhabited Areas In Red Circles (Google Maps, 2018)²

narrations, discussions and demonstrations. The subject of the study is based on the Bujuur, a minor ethnic community, belonging to the Naga group. For the purpose of the study, resourceful individuals with knowledge on oral history were interviewed in depth, along with giving them the opportunity to narrate other details. The paper is focused on two main objectives:

1. To document the narrations on origin
2. To comprehend the changing discourse in identity

A comprehensive field work was done in April-June 2013, followed by additional follow ups in following subsequent years (2014-16). Being small in population, the entire community is taken as the field, with purposive participants based on cultural knowledge and experiences. In the same manner, the method of analysis and presentation follow a subjective pattern encompassing synthetic overview. For coming up with the synthetic presentation, the paper takes into consideration three factors of information: the narrations from the field, from discussion and subsequent deduction from analysis. Sources of information are largely primary on being a lesser researched and documented community, along with few additional references as supplementary.

Origin Of Bujuur: Questioning And Tracing

Bujuur, although a small ethnic community, has a rich history in the form of oral history, folk songs and tales, customs, tradition etc. Like every ethnic group/nation across the world, Bujuur also has its history of origin, migration and settlement. The following sections present the accounts of the origin and migration of the *Bujuurae* based on the oral traditions, semiology of oral traditions and cross comparison with oral traditions of other Nagas. The Nagas were believed to have migrated from ancient Mongolian Highlands³, thousands of years ago. Although most Nagas don't have clear memories of their origin and migration, *Bujuurmiae* memory on their origin is still fresh as is narrated today in the form of *Khuwng-Laa* (folk songs). When the elder folks talk of origin of the Bujuur, they narrated in the form of a song...

*'e...khur na kahungshuwpeh raen no e,
Shamangpa ningo ki manchung ninge achü,
Shamangpa ningo ki manchung ninge achü,
Atanü change Miklaang shapa ki manchung shinge
Kuri-ri-ri-ku-í
(e...when I come out of khur,
The man eater said he is the greatest,
The man eater claims he is the greatest,
But today the son of warrior finally conquers the greatest
Kuri-ri-ri-ku-í (loose translation)*

It is common knowledge among the Bujuur that the incident between the Man Eater and son of Miklaang took place at pre-historical-mythical place known as *Süjuur/Sijjuur*. The song was composed at the end of the victory against the man-eater, tiger, which was terrorising the people when they try to come of *khur*, translated to be cave/earth-hole. The *shamangpa-Miklaang shapa* (or the *khur*) remains the backbone of the Bujuur history, and considered as the beginning, birth, development and evolution of the Bujuur. It is not known where this '*Süjuur*' is located: some saying it was located in the far-east while others simply believed it 'somewhere in Mongolia'⁴; both the arguments need to be enquired further if at all objective linear narration needs to be reconstructed.

The analysis acknowledges the importance of the folk songs and what the elders had naively narrated of what they heard from their elders. Yet, at the same time, it takes few more steps by putting some questions: what is *khur*? Is it really a physical cave or a metaphorical description or a symbolic representation of a physical geography? What exactly is *shamangpa*? Common knowledge says *shamangpa* is 'tiger', but having put the benefit of doubt into this case, *shamangpa* doesn't really necessarily have to mean a literal tiger? Or was it a symbolic representation of ferocity, cruelty, valour, pride, vanity? *Miklaang shapa* as son of warrior do makes sense, but warriors will not jump to celebrate a victory against a tiger, so much so, the spot was named after the incident and the whole people are named after the spot! Some of these questions are interesting, at it allows one to look and dissect the folk songs and folk tales from different angles, rather than literally translating them to reality. These oral narrations contain messages, with symbols and

signs allowing the story to survive for thousands of years. There are different versions of the same story, but all the versions have common theme from which they cannot depart, i.e. *khur*, coming out, great *shamangpa*, rising *Miklaang shapa*, defeat of *shamangpa*.

As per discussion critique on Bujuur history, the pre-oral ancestors of Bujuur were warriors/soldiers clans. Due to some unknown socio-political circumstances, the warriors along with their families under the leadership of *Nguruw* (*Shimphuw*) and *Züngven* went into hiding to some unknown location in the western dry, perhaps the hypothesised 'Mongolian Highlands'.⁵ The place is known as *Kuurdong*, which means 'ends of earth', because it was a desolate hostile region not fit for humans to live. The society at *Kuurdong* consisted of two distinct groups each headed by the two leaders, *Nguruw* and *Züngven*: the names of the groups were designated as per the names of the leaders. Thus, a group consisted of several clans: the group with clans like *Nguruw*, *Laanglom*, *Charrü*, *Bungjir*, *Suwnlip* and *Serbum* were collectively known as *Nguruw* or *Shimphuw* and the remaining clans *Nungchim*, *Chineer*, *Ruwen*, *Vanglar*, *Khaartu* and *Hungam* were collectively known as *Züngven*. In later period, an oath (*saruwm*) was made among the various clans of each group to bond together forever and the different clans of the same group should be treated as 'one' single clan and family. Thus, *Nguruw* group became *Nguruw* Clan and *Züngven* group became *Züngven* clan: thereafter, the people began to identify themselves as belonging to *Nguruw* clan and *Züngven* clan.

A Bujuur elder narrated the *Kuurdong* episode. 'Life at hostile land; plagued by disease, famines, constant wars and threat of wars. The people felt that it was useless to live at *Kuurdong* forever as it hold no bright future; thus they decided to move to better land, a land where they can feel freedom instead of living in shadow of fear. A search party was sent out for exploring a better place, and upon finding a suitable place, the people packed and armed themselves to migrate. But, the route was not free from perils: both natural hazards and anthro-hazards. The people had to work hard like carving narrow footpaths on the walls of steep mountains, boring tunnels and the like, apart from

constant attacks from enemies; the enemies were easily overpowered. The most decisive attack on the *Kuurdongmi* took place when they were about to reached their destination, the fertile hospitable land. Tired over the long perilous journey, the people decided to take shelter in a deep valley and caves, not knowing that enemy groups were waiting for an opportunity to attack them. The enemies, as described in folk songs, were merciless blood thirsty and war-like violent people feared by every known human being in the region: their blood thirst made the *Kuurdongmi* to refer to them as '*Humfhuw Shamang*', meaning 'Blood Thirsty Man eating Tiger', as their enemy nature resembled a wild ferocious tiger prowling to kill any living being.⁶

Thus, based on the folk song (of *khur*) and inputs based on further interpretation, the event can be put together as follows. A decisive battle between *Kuurdongmi* and the enemies took place at a suitable sloppy area; the place was later renamed *Süjuur*. *Kuurdong-mi* under the leadership of eight brave warriors *Labur*, *Angsha*, *Thompung*, *Thangjaam*, *Mirang*, *Shekap*, *Miruwng* and *Minthü* defeated the invincible enemies, with the use of their latest technologies and war wisdoms. The warriors of *Kuurdong* had advantage as they used metal tipped arrows dipped in poison, unlike the primitive weapons used by others; moreover, their knowledge of herbs and chemicals made them invent poison. Apart from bow, arrows and swords, they also used animals as weapons of war; sparrows were trained to attack the enemies.

The battle, although won by *Kuurdongmi* warriors, was bloody with huge casualties on both sides. There were so much dead and bloodshed in the battle that the whole place was soaked in blood, it seem like there was river of blood running down the gentle slope. *Kuurdongmi* finally defeated their enemies and achieved their freedom; but with a heavy price, blood of warriors. The place was thus named *Süjuur*: *Sü/Tsü* meaning 'blood' and *Juur* meaning 'a beautiful gentle slope', especially in this case it means the 'the rippling sound of the blood flowing gently down the slope'.

As a mark of respect to the *Shimphuw* and *Züngven* warriors who died at *Süjuur*, the people named themselves as *Bujuur*. '*Buw*' means 'a particular

place which cannot be forgotten' and '*Juur*' means sloppy region of 'Süjuur'; in short, Bujuur means 'We will never forget Süjuur', and *Bujuur* means 'People of Süjuur'. Since 'Süjuur herald a new beginning in the history and future, identity and new socio-political era, we identify ourselves as 'Bujuur', and henceforth, all our oral history and folk songs indicate that 'Bujuur' originated from 'Süjuur', and our Bujuur history begins from Süjuur'.

From Kuurdong to Süjuur, from Nguwruw and Züngven to Kuurdongmi to Bujuur, Bujuurmi got a new distinct identity and were free from all worries; and once again, the warrior clans were free people. In recognition of the eight brave men during the Süjuur battle, they were nominated as the leaders of Bujuur.

Between the Bujuur to the Present

If the history of Bujuur began at Süjuur, which is believed to be located in the far-east, how did Bujuur came to settle at their present? Why did they migrate? Which way did they take? These questions are the challenges in trying to interpret the events of migration as there are limited oral accounts on those. Based on few oral accounts and supplemented with further interpretations, the events of migration can be put as follows.

Life at Süjuur was prosperous but short lived. Due to Süjuur being a battle ground, the people were reminded of the bloodshed and death of their loved ones. So, they migrated further to a new place which they named it Tungphuwjuur. At Tungphuwjuur, Thompuung was appointed as *Iruwng* (King), and certain customary practices began to formalise. Due to war threats, they moved from 'Tungphuwjuur to Tungphaejuur, where Thompuung passed away'.⁷ After Tungphaejuur, a new exodus of the Bujuur began again; unfortunately, the incidents and sequences of post-Tungphaejuur were not recorded in oral history. But it is believed that Bujuurmiae settled near the sea, which is based on the folk tale which mentioned of a 'large water body', and 'the cultural importance given to cornelian stones, sea shells, cowries and conch shells which are found near the sea'.⁸ Bujuur women wear necklaces made of cornelian stones which they called it '*Ruthü Isheeng*' meaning 'the original necklace' and every Bujuur women is expected to possess a conch

shell. The place where they lived always reflect their social and cultural identity: for instance, Bujuur was named after Süjuur so that they will always remember Süjuur; similarly, cornelian necklace was called '*Ruthü Isheeng*' so that the life near the sea will not be forgotten even if they moved away to far off places, and the like. After living near the sea, they moved inland passing 'through Indo-China and head towards the west, Burma (Myanmar)'.⁹

Continuing west, Bujuurmiae finally reached the banks of Chindwin River. The river is known to Bujuur as '*Ningthü/ningthii*' and the crossing of the river is very much mentioned in the oral historical narrations, and is an important point in the history of the Nagas as a whole. When Bujuurmi reached the banks of Chindwin, they met other groups of people. They made alliances with the people and plan to cross the river. Agreement was made that 'whoever crossed the river first shall wait at the opposite banks for the next group to cross, so that they all could journey together westwards'.¹⁰ Bujuur were one of the first groups to cross Chindwin River but due to fears and speculations, they did not wait for the other groups. So, without waiting for the next groups to cross the river, Bujuur-ae went ahead westward to the hills, at present the Naga Hills. They thought of entering the Imphal valley, but to due to flooding, they chose to settle in the hills. In the meantime, the groups who were left behind on the east bank of Chindwin river felt cheated when they found that the first groups violated their 'agreement' by not waiting for them; and vowed to take revenge. Since the later groups were late, they settled in Kabaw valley; since they valley was a dry land as compared to Imphal valley, it was referred to as Shakaang by Bujuur, which means 'dry land'.¹¹

Bujuur-ae settled in the Naga Hills, along with other people. In course of time, a war broke out in the region, 'Shakaang group of people attacked Bujuur and other people as revenge for breaking the 'agreement' and the hills were occupied by them. Tasting defeat in the hands of Shakaang people and displaced from their homeland, Bujuur-ae moved to the valley (Imphal valley) which was dry by that period. Shakaang people also moved northwards, or wherever. In later course of period, another group of people known as Leenpa, which means inhabitants of mountains, attacked Bujuur. Thereafter, Bujuur-

ae moved westward crossing the Imphal River and lived in the western hills overlooking Loktak Lake'.¹² Although at war, Bujuur people developed cultural, political and social relations with the Shakaang and Leenpa people. It is probable that these Shakaang and Leenpa people might have been the ancestors of the Tangkhul' based on certain cultural and phonetically similarities between Bujuur and certain Tangkhul villages .

Displaced by Shakaang and Leenpa people, Bujuur-ae crossed Imphal River and settled in the hills overlooking Loktak Lake. They further migrated to the valley, where they lived once again in prosperity. Their place was known as "*Ikamphae* or *Yngkampae*" which means 'Valley of *Ikam*', because of the numerous *Ikam* (Feast of Merit-Wealth) performed every season. The place was fertile and Bujuur-ae were rich once again, living a pomp and generous life'.¹³ Due to overpopulation, half of the people of *Ikamphae* moved to another hill known as *Taasuwbung*. But due to unnatural epidemic, half of *Taasuwbung*-ae died, and the village was abandoned; the remaining people migrated to east entering Naga Hills once again. They establish many villages, among them *Khungjuur* was the biggest with approximately four hundred households. The people at *Ikamphae*, who did not move to *Taasuwbung*, also crossed Imphal River moving to the east settling in many villages; the biggest among them was *Sambum* village, which also consisted of around 400 houses. At *Sambum*, there was a brave man by the name *Kuurkam* of the *Nguruw* clan. His bravery and elocution earn him respect and he was made *Iruwng* of *Sambum*; later, his brave acts were recognised by other villages and he was nominated as the leader of all the Bujuur villages.

Due to political instability and hostility with other communities, especially 'Moirang and Khuman principalities, *Kuurkam* shifted his capital to *Khungjuur*, which had a strategic location'. Bujuurmiae were prosperous, but short lived. Soon, a war broke out between Bujuur and Moirang-Khuman alliance; Bujuur, with little preparation were badly defeated while *Kuurkam* was killed in the battle, at *Phaenchong*. Bujuur were attacked mercilessly by the advancing Moirang-Khuman armies, burning villages, killing people

and looting. *Khungjuur*, being in strategic location, the people managed to escape in time before the enemy attack them'.¹⁴ The remaining Bujuurmiae who managed to escape the enemies were scattered all around. Some took refuge in Tangkhul territories in later course adopt Tangkhul Identity ;while some assimilate into Meitei society¹⁵; and 'another large group moved east to Burma, crossed the Chindwin River with a vow never to return again, they were lost forever'.¹⁶

Only a few handfuls of Bujuurs moved here and there in the Kabaw Valley, living among the Shan people; and these Bujuurmi, once again moved to the hills to resettle their old abandoned villages. Due to fear and unpleasant 'nostalgia', Bujuurmiae chose to settle in *Chüngkheer*, a mountain ridge. Bujuur were once again populous, at one time *Chüngkheer* had about a thousand households. Due to overpopulation, some people moved to the vacant *Khungjuur* hills to occupy again; and *Khungjuur* was repopulated again. 'Since the repopulation of *Khungjuur* was from *Chüngkheer*, it was decided that *Chüngkheer* should be known as 'Bujuur *Khuwfhaw*' meaning 'Mother village' and *Khungjuur* as '*Khuwthar*' meaning 'New village'.¹⁷ 'Due to economic reasons, some people from *Khungjuur* moved west to establish a new village '*Matung Khuw*'¹⁸, the village is around five hundred years old.¹⁹ 'Some people from Bujuur *Khuwfhaw* moved eastward, having established good social relationship with Shan people, the Bujuurs established a village in the lower hills bordering Kabaw valley '*Mengkang khuw*', and the region known as '*Laeven*'.²⁰ In this way, the four traditional Bujuur Villages viz. Bujuur *Khuwfhaw*, *Khungjuur*, *Matung* and *Mengkang* came into existence.

Thus, these were the accounts of origin, identity formation, migration and settlement of Bujuur. Important places clearly mentioned in the oral history from *Kuurdong* to *Khungjuur* can be roughly presented as:

Kuurdong → *Süjuur* → *Tungfhawjuur* → *Tungphaejuur* → *Ningthü*(Chindwin) →.....→ *Shakaang Laar* → *Leenpaa Laar*....→ *Ikamphae* → *Taasuwbung* / *Sambum* → *Khungjuur* → Bujuur-Moirang War (7th Century AD) → Dispersion → *Chüngkheer* / Bujuur*khuwfhaw* → *Khungjuur*..

The Contemporary Identity Game

Bujuur or Moyon

'Bujuur were known as *Moyon* by the Meities, and recorded as Mueeyol Nagas²¹ by British. The term Moyon/Mueeyol is not of Bujuur origin and the people did not know how they were identified as Moyon. It was believed that the term Moyon was coined by a Meitei nobleman by the name *Poireiton*. "Once Poireiton (around 33 AD) went to the hills, and was lost. Having no means to survive, he disguised as a trader and sold his spinning wheel to a Bujuur village to get some food. When he returned to his place, he recounted the incident and refer to the people he met in the hills as '*Moiyol*', which is short version of '*Moithap Yollam*' meaning '*Sold Moithap*'.²² Henceforward, Bujuurmiae were known as Moyol/Moyon to the Meiteis, and this term is exclusively used by the Meiteis. Therefore, Bujuur is the original name and how Bujuur-ae identify themselves, whereas Moyon is exclusively used by the Meiteis to refer to Bujuur: 'many culturally conscious Bujuur takes Moyon as very offensive stereotype term', and its usage is very much restricted in the daily life of Bujuur'.

Unfortunately, the British, as usual, did not do proper research by using the available term 'Moyon/Mueeyol/Moyol' to identify the Bujuur. For instances, "Mueeyol" and "...Mueeyol tribes of Nagas"²³, or even 'Anal tribe'.²⁴ However, those errors were the first mentions of Bujuur, as Moyon, in the modern western literature: the legacy of error continuing till date. Thus, Moyon instead of Bujuur was recorded officially, without Bujuur knowledge, and henceforth used. Regarding Bujuur or Mooyon debate, a prominent elder asserts, 'Even if officially Bujuur is known as Moyon, we Bujuur hope that one day the term 'Bujuur' will officially replace 'Moyon' and Bujuur will be once again proudly identify themselves as Bujuur, the descendants of Süjuur warriors.'²⁵

Conclusion

For a small community like Bujuur Naga, oral narrations play crucial role in preserving and continuity of their identity. When the people are aware, show interest, in oral narrations, it connects them to the past, and also critically able to analyse the historical discourses, even in the identity. It is quite a fashion among the present generation to feel proud of not knowing the accounts of their history

and origin, and this contributes to the dilution of the being and identity. It observed among the Bujuur that the knowledge and exposure to historical accounts shaped the opinion of the people regarding their identity, whether it should be Bujuur or Moyon. When the community is unaware of its history, it is lost in the maze of identity confusion, as well as the rich cultural practices being slowly dying. Bujuur can assert its identity only when it is able to present itself to the world, as well as able to define itself with meanings.

Many a time, the Bujuur is unable to give answers to its identity, although he/she may make general deductive statement on history, culture and identity. Oral narrations are not just data for historical construction, but a communication between the past, present and future, and it is the responsibility of the present to preserve, interpret and debate with it, and that is how the identity may also survive.

Thus, the oral narrations form elementary methodology of identity. Even if they are myths and fables, when one studies and analyses them in depth, the linear history can be traced, as demonstrated in the case of the Bujuur. However, it is unfortunate that oral narrations are slowly dying due to factors like: communication gap between the elder and younger generations, lack of interests among the younger generations, and most of all the haste for documentation. It is necessary for oral narrations to be documented before they are lost, but the documentation must not hamper the oral route that the oral becomes the written which nobody reads. It is quite a crucial and critical moment to ponder upon the sustainability of oral history, and find ways for its survival in this age of technology. It is more worrying for smaller community like Bujuur Naga which already suffers from small population concentrated with issues of modern development dilemma and the struggle to preserve the culture, identity and history against the rapidly advancing attractive external global cultures.

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