

Translating Orality: Documentation and Preservation of the Language of the Lotha Nagas with reference to Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree*

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Abstract

Documentation and preservation of endangered and vulnerable indigenous languages are imperative not only to protect linguistic diversity and stimulate theoretical research but also to preserve a rich indigenous worldview. However, documentation and preservation of these indigenous languages would not be complete without a translation venture. Translating orality often soars beyond mere linguistic transposition to involve a more meticulous navigation between preserving linguistic and cultural aspects of oral traditions and adapting them to a literary form. The Lotha Nagas, one of the major indigenous tribes of Nagaland, rely heavily on oral narratives transmitted across generations through their language, Lotha. But owing to the dearth of institutionalised support and a gap in the intergenerational transfer, Lotha faces the threat of extinction. Thus, Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton makes an attempt to document, translate, and preserve Lotha, through her book, *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree*. To fortify the language against being lost into oblivion, Patton collects Lotha Naga tales and retells them in English. However, cultural references ingrained in the source language might not always be smoothly translated into English without losing their innate properties. Patton thereby chooses to retain in the heart of the text some Lotha words that are culturally untranslatable. Drawing on key theoretical frameworks from Linguistic Anthropology and Translation Studies, this paper seeks to read select Lotha Naga tales and examine how documentation of the Lotha language not only serves as a means of cultural survival but also provides oral storytelling with an impetus. The paper shall also try to explore the problems and prospects of translating indigenous oral narratives into a literary text.

Keywords: Endangered, indigenous, language, Lotha, translation.

Introduction

If I forget my native speech,
And the songs that my people sing
What use are my eyes and ears?

What use is my mouth?
Alitet Nemtushkin, Evenki poet¹

Endangerment of indigenous languages constitutes a pivotal concern in both the domains of Linguistics and Anthropology, as it gestures towards not only a loss of a medium of communication but it also presages the erosion of a rich indigenous worldview, cultural identity, and collective memory. The loss becomes irremediable as each of these indigenous languages is a repository of distinct spiritual, cultural, and ecological knowledge, often transferred orally, which once silenced can never be fully recuperated. More so, the research on indigenous languages often extends to encompass the exploration of language varieties spoken by the speech communities. The nuances of the culture, history, and folklore of the communities are often articulated in the languages they make use of:

Culture implies ideas and the communication of ideas through language. Linguistic diversity, then, is at least the correlate of (though not the cause of) diversity of adaptational ideas...By this reasoning, any reduction of language diversity diminishes the adaptational strength of our species because it lowers the pool of knowledge from which we can draw. (Bernard 82)

This in turn proves that the multidimensional aspects of indigenous life and worldview are deeply encoded within the indigenous languages they use, making it absolutely imperative to document and preserve these languages to comprehend the multivocal identities of these communities. *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 3rd edition (2010) shows a fourfold taxonomy to indicate the degree of endangerment, between being safe and extinct. The typology begins with the category "Vulnerable", moving towards "Definitely endangered", "Severely endangered" and "Critically endangered" based on diverse factors like the extent of intergenerational transmission, institutionalised support, number of speakers, domains where the language is practised and the attitudes of speakers towards the language. The research that led to the formation of *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, reveals the exigent predicament suffered by over 2500 languages in the world. This report further elucidates that out of more than 6000 languages in the world,

482 languages are unsafe, 577 languages are Critically endangered, 537 languages are severely endangered, 640 languages are definitely endangered, 228 languages become extinct in the last three generations. According to this report (the Atlas from here on) India has the largest number of endangered languages in the world followed by United States of America (191) and Brazil (190) respectively. Currently 197 languages are endangered or on the way to extinction in India. (Gautam 85)

As per the *Atlas*, 81 languages have been given the status "Vulnerable", 62 fall under the category of "Definitely endangered", 7 can be classified as "Severely endangered", 42 are under the precarious category of "Critically endangered" while 5 have already become extinct in India (Gautam 85). After crossing the threshold of "Critically endangered" category, the language enters the phase where

it has no more speakers left thus becoming a “dead language”. Human history has witnessed a host of these languages getting lost into oblivion where globalisation, cultural homogenisation, and neocolonialism have veritably contributed to the accelerated “linguicide” in contemporary times. One of the ancient languages of the world, Bo, died out with the last speaker, Boa Sr. in 2010. Linguist Anvita Abbi’s enduring efforts to preserve the language made her spend some of the last days of Boa Sr.’s life with her. Abbi noted the words spoken by Boa Sr. and gave them a form through her book, *Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language*. Though the language has no more speakers left, Abbi’s documentation keeps alive the language within us.

The “vulnerable” status assigned to several languages in *UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* denotes an appellation that foreshadows an eventual yet inexorable movement towards obsolescence. The danger that these languages are in has been largely posed by the rapid rate of language shift where the younger generations are more likely to switch to a language of social and economic power, with the mother tongue getting relegated to the domestic spheres. While these languages are still alive, their fates teeter menacingly at the verge of decline, gradually submitting to dominant languages that hold greater social, economic, and political clout. Language shift is often precipitated by external causes like military, educational or cultural subjugation or triggered by internal forces in the form of negative attitudes of the speakers towards the language. The root of this attitude can however be traced down to the external forces that often halt and hinder intergenerational transfer of native tongues. Behind this linguistic imperialism is also hidden a deeply entrenched concept of cultural colonisation. The indigenous languages are archives of an indigenous knowledge system, and to lose it is to endure an epistemic amputation.

Nagaland houses seventeen major tribes, thereby exhibiting a melange of variegated dialects. *UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*, 3rd edition notes that owing to the linguistic diversity in Nagaland, it becomes a unique case study as “No single local language is spoken by a sufficiently large percentage of the population to make it acceptable as an official state language. As a result, English alone is the official language in Nagaland...” (Moseley 62). The Lotha Naga is one of the significant indigenous tribes of Nagaland, whose language, Lotha or Lhota has been assigned the category of “Vulnerable” in *UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*. In accordance with the 2001 census, Lotha or Lhota comes under the Sino-Tibetan language group, spoken by about 179,467 people in the Wokha district of Nagaland. But owing to the dearth of adequate institutionalised support and a gap in the intergenerational transfer, Lotha and its oral literature face a threat of endangerment. To fortify the language and its oral literature against getting lost into the depths of amnesia, Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton makes an attempt to preserve Lotha Naga language and culture through her book, *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree*. As Patton argues,

Most of our oral literature faces the threat of being lost to oblivion because it

neither enjoys institutionalized support nor it is preserved by inter-generational transfer anymore. Our stories are ebbing away and if whatever is left of them is not translated and documented, we will lose our identity.(12)

However, documentation and preservation of these indigenous languages would remain partial without a translation venture. In an epoch of comparative studies, where polyphonic literature has grown preponderant, translation endeavours to transcend the precincts of language while giving a new lease of life to the source text. However, it is also inevitable that the translator would come across some genuine predicaments in the process of translating an indigenous text into English, emanating out of cultural, contextual, and linguistic variations. The cultural registers and references ingrained in the source language might not always be smoothly translated into English without losing their essential properties. It often becomes onerous to preserve the sense of continuity and the harmony of a distinct local dialect in the target language. The process of translating indigenous texts also calls forth the discourse of ethical considerations as words play the role of principal signifiers which may run the peril of under-representing the reality. The translator has to meticulously navigate through these complexities to produce a proper facsimile of the source text.

India is a multilingual country and translation holds the key to the bridging of cultural divides as it makes the regional text accessible to a global readership. The prospect of translation does not only lie in the dialogue between the source text and the target text but also in the dialogue between the indigenous culture and the global culture that gives birth to an absolutely fresh text that suggests a two-way exchange of culture and ideas. Translation also attempts to tread the spaces where indigenous experiences are included within the curriculum with the view to facilitating indigenous inclusivity in a pluralistic way and to embracing domains of linguistic and intergenerational contexts. English translation of indigenous texts can also be promulgated as educational capital for students and scholars, which would further result in disseminating the knowledge of the “other” linguistic communities.

A scintillating bond can be produced between orality and literacy as the former serves as a blueprint to create written literature. Folklore is a potent form of oral narrative which possesses the power to define a community from its own perspective/s. Dundes (1969) says that as an “autobiographical ethnography of people’s own description of themselves” (471), folklore often serves as a discourse of resistance and protest. Thus, adopting semi-ethnographic research method involving intensive interviewing among other things as well as analytical research method incorporating textual analysis, comparative analysis, analysis of linguistic devices, etc., this paper seeks to read select Lotha Naga folktales and examine how documentation of the Lotha language not only serves as a medium of cultural revitalisation but also provides oral storytelling with a new lease of life. The paper also seeks to explore the problems and prospects of translating indigenous oral narratives into a literary text.

A Glimpse into Lotha Naga Culture: The Historical Context

Lotha Nagas, also called Kyongs, are native to the Wokha district of Nagaland. J. P. Mills' monograph on Lotha Nagas, *The Lhota Nagas* (1922) stands as one of the first writings on Lotha Nagas but the sale of the book was banned in Nagaland owing to a complaint from the Lothas. The basis of the complaint was misinformation about one of the Lotha clans in the book. With respect to the oral legacy, the Lothas are subdivided into three groups or *phratry*. They are known to live by the *phratry* division even today.

Lotha Nagas follow a strict social code with layers of indigenous knowledge associated with it. In her introduction, Patton speaks about some of the customs typical to the Lotha Nagas like *genna*, which is a public feast hosted for the entire village. She also talks about *lonhyaka*, which is a waiting period of one year or even a few years between a man asking for a woman's hand and the date of betrothal. According to the indigenous knowledge system, this period is vital to test the groom's fitness to be a son of the family. The groom is often entrusted with household duties till the bride's parents approve the match and give their consent for the wedding. There is no system of dowry among the Lothas; however, "a price of equilibrium called *hanlamvu*" (Patton 9) is taken. The *hanlamvu* is a gifting of pig's meat before the nuptial ceremony from the groom's side for the bride's clansmen. The nuptial bells ring mostly after *lirii* which means harvest and *Tokhu Emong* which is a Lotha harvest festival. Franz Boas (1911) states that to study and understand the manifold aspects of the culture of a given community, it is imperative to do it through the medium of the local language of the community. By choosing to retain the Lotha cultural signifiers, Patton's book thereby resists linguistic acculturation and homogenisation provoked by dominant languages in order to exterminate local ontologies. These Lotha words become a bulwark against language endangerment as well as pertinently contribute to linguistic and anthropological inquiry.

The Lothas led a very unembellished lifestyle until the advent of the British administration which came into direct contact with the Lothas in the middle of 19th century. The British Raj was accompanied with Christian missionaries who intervened with the indigenous ways of Lotha existence and brought about a drastic change in the cultural and linguistic landscape of the community. Along with religious conversion, the methods of the missionary involved having a linguistic foothold over the region through the introduction and institutionalisation of English. While speaking about the colonial representation of Lotha Naga culture, Patton laments the hegemonic portrayal of Lotha Nagas in Colonel Shakespear's (1914) account, "Uninteresting people with dirty persons and villages" (202) and a very inaccurate depiction by Lieutenant H. Bigge (1841), "Sullen race...are alike filthy in their persons and habits, and have a pompous mode of addressing one which might in some cases be interpreted as insolent" (228-229). The sweeping generalisations and colonial stereotypes remind us of an observation made by G.N. Devy in *Orality and Language* (2021):

The European colonial quest, the territorial and cultural invasion associated with it...brought a threat to the traditions that the indigenous had developed. The absence of desire on their part to accept and internalize the new paradigms made them stand out, be marked as “others,” interpreted as “primitive” and represented as “indigenous.” (3)

As Devy points out, the colonial attempt at suppression of indigenous worldview and the “savagisation” of the people who adhere to it, is veritably countered by the indigenous people themselves by keeping close to their language, traditions, and culture. Patton too believes that the first step towards contesting a colonial stereotype is to let the indigenous people speak for themselves which would account for a more authentic understanding of the tribe. Folklore that posits as self-narratives of the indigenous people proves to be a powerful medium to counter conventional history as Veio Pou (2015) opines, “Being of the oral tradition, the Nagas rely too heavily on the stories and poems/songs to trace their history... The old and fading generation transmits everything that has been preserved through memory to the next generation by storytelling” (173).

Documentation and Translation of Lotha Naga Tales: The Linguistic Concern

Linguistic Anthropology is a branch of Anthropology that stemmed from the endeavour to preserve endangered languages. This branch explores how language moulds communication, develops social identity, and forms cultural beliefs. Linguistic Anthropology persistently advances its research in documentation of languages, contextual study of languages, and exploration of identity through linguistics. The branch develops from the emergence of three paradigms—the first of which is “anthropological linguistics” that deals with the documentation of languages, the second paradigm being “Linguistic Anthropology” which focusses on theoretical approach to language and the third paradigm emerged from other subfields of Anthropology with linguistic concerns. The evolution of the term from “anthropological linguistics” to “Linguistic Anthropology” in the second paradigm hints at an anthropological approach to the study of languages. Linguistic Anthropology, a term preferred by Dell Hymes, reflects Hymes’ theory of language being studied in the context of an event and relative to the people speaking it. Endangered indigenous languages are a treasured source for relevant data for examining linguistic theories and contribute to a wider understanding of human cognition and communication. The documentation of endangered indigenous languages is thereby essential to protect linguistic diversity and to stimulate theoretical research in this field. Edward Sapir (1933) further illustrates the potentiality and productivity of language not merely as an instrument but as a means of cultural formations:

It is obvious that language has the power to analyze experience into theoretically dissociable elements and to create that world of the potential intergrading with the actual which enables human beings to transcend the immediately given in their individual experience and to join in a larger common understanding. This common understanding constitutes culture. (156-157)

Central to Sapir's argument is the notion that language is a symbolic phenomenon embedded within the cultural fabric of a particular community, thereby underlining the fact that each and every language is a possessor of distinct worldviews, ontologies, and epistemologies. For communities like Lotha Nagas, oral traditions encompass indigenous ethics, origin stories, ancestral memory, and folk wisdom—firmly entrenched within the language itself. Applying Sapir's theoretical model to Lotha, one can clearly portend that the vulnerability of the language is concomitant with the disintegration of the Lotha culture, making the revitalisation of the language a linguistic as well as a cultural concern.

Documentation and preservation of such vulnerable languages also call for a translation venture. G.N. Devy in his introduction to *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature* (2002), opines, "every written piece of literature contains numerous layers of orality" (xv). Language is the most important marker to trace the indigenous identity and the identity "of those communities whose speech traditions face the prospect of forced aphasia" (Devy x). Translators, in such a scenario, act as cultural mediators travelling from one text to another; from one language to another; from orality to written pieces. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (1999) point out that "the translator is an all-powerful reader and a free agent as a writer" (5) and translation allows for "a reciprocal process of exchange" (5) between the source and the target culture and language. The translation of folktales in *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* emanates out of a dire need to preserve the rich culture and language of Lotha Nagas from extinction. It is not only a journey that is made on the linguistic front but also an inner voyage within the author's own self. As Tilottoma Misra (2011) rightly suggests, "Collecting and printing the oral and the written literature of one's own community also become a part of the nationalistic agenda of identity assertion" (xv). The documentation and translation of Lotha Naga folktales, in a way, is Patton's rendezvous with her identity as a Lotha and her negotiation with a culture that stands at the verge of precarity.

Devy suggests that for communities that have lived outside the dominant literate cultures, oral tradition is not just a form of entertainment but a serious and solemn means of preserving their history, and their connection with the land, gods, and ancestors. It is through these oral traditions encoded within their language, Lotha, that the Lotha Nagas to maintain their sense of identity, preserving their culture. Oral traditions also define a way of life and a social code of conduct that the Lothas maintain to stay rooted to their culture. Violation of such traditions may result in bad fortune, as Patton has captured in the story, "The Strange Marriage of a Woman and a Momon" in which the bride's family does not conform to the *lonhyaka* tradition. The folktales present in Patton's collection recurrently emphasise the Lotha propensity for following the traditional social pattern and the cultural code of conduct. Shobhana L. Chelliah, while engaging with folktales of the Tibeto-Burman language Lamkang, observes:

The sharing of traditional myths, legends, and folktales made possible through language documentation helps boost language revitalization efforts. Such

documentation no doubt provides a wealth of vocabulary and examples of grammatical structures for language learners... Engaging with these stories, listeners collectively and readers individually are led to the recognition of shared culture, values, and world view. (9)

However, translating oral traditions into written text presented Patton with myriad challenges and negotiations. Oral traditions are deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts of the indigenous communities. Culture specific expressions often reflect unique indigenous worldviews, metaphors, and idioms which are difficult to capture in a different language. When oral traditions are translated into English, much of the cultural specificity runs the risk of losing the nuance and rhythm of the traditions. It is also an arduous job to retain the sense of continuity as oral traditions largely rely on intonation and gestures that are hard to reproduce in the literary text. Moreover, there are many indigenous terms which may not have direct English equivalents, making it absolutely indispensable to retain the actual indigenous term even in translation. The prospect of retaining indigenous terminology also fosters recognition and reverence to diverse languages and dialects intercepting their erasure and extinction. The essence of oral storytelling is fittingly accomplished in Patton's book as the cultural values, morals, and innate indigenous knowledge have been preserved, retaining the intonation and rhythm that an oral storytelling generally accommodates. Through folktales like "The Story of the Sun and the Moon" and "The Legend of how Men became Monkeys", Patton tries to find answers to many creation myths. In "The Story of the Sun and the Moon", Patton retells how the Sun dethrones the power-hungry Moon, smearing its face with dung. Lotha folks believe that the scar of that humiliation exists till today not only metaphorically but also physically as the Moon bears the black spots caused by the dung thrown at it. Similarly, in "The Legend of how Men became Monkeys", the Machiavellian manoeuvres of the stepmother made the children scramble for fruits and buds even high up on trees. When their father finally came to their rescue, they refused to come down as they now resembled monkeys. At the face of human machinations, the children took refuge in Nature and became one with it. Lotha Naga oral traditions are tenderly incorporated by Patton in the translation to protect the cultural and linguistic aspects while adapting them into literary form. Supernatural intervention looms large in stories like "The Story of Sukyingo and Ngazo" and "The Man who travelled to Echu Li". In "The Story of Sukyingo and Ngazo", *Sukyingo* represents good luck. The language, Lotha seems to incorporate answers to the cultural nuances of the community as in the folktale, an attack on *Sukyingo* leaves his neck irreparably twisted to one direction thereby explaining why fortune always looks in one direction. Similarly, the Lotha term *Echu Li*, in the tale "The Man who travelled to Echu Li" represents a land where man cannot tread, neither can he take back anything from there. In the tale, the man unintentionally discovered *Echu Li* and thought of filling his basket with the rich fruits that the land yielded. However, with his basket filled to the brim, he never reached his village. He appeared to be stuck in a loop where even after walking for hours, he found himself in the same

spot. It was only after he left all the good plucks in the place itself that he was able to reach his village. The Elders of the village reiterated the Lotha ancestral belief that no living man can possibly take back anything from there as “the living and the dead cannot partake of the same food” (Patton 109). The term provides a deep insight into the environmental ethics of the Lotha Nagas where the land is not just a patch of biodiversity but a venerable entity as well. The Lotha Naga term *Echu Li* stands to contest anthropocentric inclinations of capitalist extractivism and suggest alternative paradigms of living harmoniously with Nature. The prohibition of taking anything from *Echu Li* makes one recall the sacred forest of Mawphlang in Meghalaya where the Khasi community issues a similar ethical restraint. The retention of such terms proliferates the study of what Luisa Maffi called “biocultural diversity”— a theoretical framework that weaves linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity in a singular thread (5).

The tinge of classical literary traditions can also be witnessed in the folktales of the Lotha Nagas. Navigating through challenges involved in this project, Patton attempts to record a sense of parallelism between Homer’s Greeks and the Lotha Naga society. Epithets used to describe Achilles are similar to the ones used for Arilao in the eponymous story whereas Medea’s Menin and Ekdikesis find continuity in Arilao’s mother, Nongkhungru. The symbiotic correlation of humans and non-humans; the sights and sounds of the forests and the music of the wild are essential aspects of oral traditions which need to be reverberated in the written text. Folktales like “The Erstwhile Friendship between the Sepvu and the Otum” and “The Legend of Man and Wolf” bring the oral traditions to life by celebrating the eternal kinship between humans and their biophysical environment. Folk wisdom, indigenous experience, and collective knowledge system are all intrinsically affixed to the language of the Lothas and are inherently essential for an inclusive historical documentation. Patton has proven how oral traditions nourish written history and it is this harmonious interplay between oral narratives and written records which provides a significant framework for archiving oral traditions and indigenous languages.

Culturally Untranslatable Lotha Naga Words: The Lotha Vocabulary

Patton, identifying the importance of retaining indigenous terminology, chooses to include Lotha Naga terms in the heart of the text. In the course of her introduction, she has provided readers with a kaleidoscopic view of *Kyong Juli Motsu*² or the story of Lotha culture and even with words that are culturally untranslatable. She also goes to the extent of retaining the flavour of oral storytelling by incorporating the logic of the oral narrator even in her writing. The book, *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree*, serves the role of a cultural thesaurus for Lotha Naga words as the exhaustive notes provided by Patton at the end of each folktale introduce readers to a host of Lotha Naga words fundamentally connected to Lotha culture. Her book introduces the readers to an elaborate Lotha sartorial lexicon like *lorossi*³, *opvuram*⁴ and *siirum*⁵ worn by women and *phanrup*⁶ and *longpensu*⁷ worn by men. Language plays not merely the role of a medium through which communication can be made

but, as shown by Patton's book, language can, in fact, function as an epistemological directory of sartorial knowledge. The sartorial signifiers like *lorossi*, *opvuram*, *longpensu* for Lotha Nagas; *mekhala sador*⁸ for Assamese; *puan*⁹ for Mizos; *phanek*¹⁰ for Meiteis are implanted within the semantic structure of the community's language. They also come across as markers of identity, occupation, geography, encrypted within the community's historical memory. In case of languages like Lotha, which face a perennial threat of erosion, the sartorial lexicon also comes under serious vulnerability. Thus, the documentation of the Lotha sartorial vocabulary is not just an attempt at linguistic preservation but also calls for an exercise in cultural archiving.

While drawing on the agrarian lifestyle of the Lotha Nagas, the retelling of the legend of Arilao in the eponymous story consists of words that are essential to an understanding of the Lotha Naga worldview. The story "Arilao" also exhibits linguistic assimilation in the use of the word *baanti* cut which is not essentially a Lotha word, rather appropriated from Assamese *baati*, which means round-shaped bowl. Nagaland was part of Assam known as "Naga hills" till 1957, thus, Assamese influences on the Naga languages are inevitable. The *baanti* haircut was very prominent among young boys in those days. The use of the word *lepok* is also thought-provoking as it is a kind of machete which is manufactured only in Naga villages. It is shaped like a slightly curved "I". The word *otssan* used in the same story means hair in Lotha. The story also uses several Lotha words for familial relationships like *Ayo*, meaning "mother", *Ango*, which is an endearing word for "brother" or "son", and *Atyo*, meaning "grandmother". In "The Story of Sukyingo and Ngazo", a similar utterance is made in the form of *Akhum* which in Lotha dictionary means "a dear friend". The Lotha word *Akhumo*, meaning "dearest friend" recurs in the story "The Erstwhile Friendship between the Sepvu and the Otum". In the story "The Legend of how Men became Monkeys", the Lotha words *ango* and *kaka* have been used which may be translated as "dear son" and "dear daughter" or "dear sister" respectively. The same story also uses the Lotha word *apo* which means "father", "They recognized that figure as their apo" (Patton 99). In the folktale, "Shoshamo and Longkumvu", the word *amo* has been used to mean "maternal uncle". In a similar vein, the use of the word *amotsu* meaning "grandfather" in the story "The Legend of Man and Wolf" is a Lotha inclusion. The significance of relational terms, particularly denoting kinship and human relationships, in language documentation soars beyond lexical enumeration. The modelling of kinship in language elucidates how the speakers conceive the self in the nexus of others. Thus, the kinship terms are largely entrenched in the morphosyntactic structure of the language, serving the purpose of narrative anchors and generative nodes. These words, highly culture-specific, are not interchangeable and their erasure from the literary corpus may create an epistemic interstice in language documentation.

The presence of supernatural elements is a striking feature typical to oral narratives. Patton's retelling of "The Story of Sukyingo and Ngazo" uses Lotha

words for supernatural entities that play an important role in Lotha oral traditions. *Sukyingo* in Lotha lexicon is a kind of spirit that dwells inside men. In Lotha cultural understanding, a *sukyingo* symbolises good fortune and good luck. *Ngazo* is also a spirit in the Lotha lexicon, often used interchangeably with *sukyingo*. However, traditional Lothas consider it to be inferior to the *sukyingo*. In the story “Shoshamo and Longkumvu”, *longkumvu* in the Lotha language refers to a dwarf that has its origin in the Lotha mythologies. A similar reference is often made by Lotha folks about *Echu Li*, a place which has never been seen, but there are ample Lotha folktales regarding *Echu Li*, nestled far away on a mountain where men cannot reach.

In “The Legend of how Men became Monkeys”, Patton goes on to include several lines in Lotha language so that readers can get a glimpse of how Lotha Naga words are linguistically and grammatically placed and how they are adapted in a global language like English:

Kaka tinungrakhe.
Nchungo Ayo na ohan mhom ehanthukvu toh ruchoka,
kuma oso ehantukvu tsovka.
Mhona elhi tssotasi, etsoyi nshitavka yialo. (Patton 98)

Translation

Beloved sister, do not be sad,
I am sure dearest mother will send us good food.
I am hopeful that it will be meat today,
Let us toil hard so that we are hungry enough to enjoy a good meal. (Patton 101)

Indigenous culinary cuisine is an interesting aspect of indigeneity as the platter contains simple yet mouth-watering delicacies made with organic and natural products. Food acts as an emblem of a region or a community’s identity, serving as one of the primordial signifiers that defines the fabric of a particular locality. The story “The Legend of Man and Wolf” includes such words as are quite common in a Lotha kitchen. The meal of *etyo tsung* and *machiihan* is a Lotha delicacy that means a platter of sticky rice and chilli curry which is often accompanied with *oso* meaning meat, “Every Morning he’d wake up and prepare breakfast for the entire brood, only then would he get himself seated and enjoy his meal of *etyo tsung* and *machiihan shungcho*, and sometimes *oso*” (Patton 171). The culinary lexicon of the Lotha Nagas is an indicator of not only the indigenous worldview but also the region’s topography, vegetation, and the ecological symbiosis practised in a distinct locale. The ingredients, the style of cooking, the seasonal availability of vegetables reveal much about the lifestyle of the community. Losing these culinary signifiers will not only pose a hindrance to the linguistic continuity but will also efface the social, cultural, and ecological narratives. As Chelliah notes:

When walking through a Lamkang village and the kitchen garden of friends and consultants, I have in the past mistaken as weeds and brush many plants, grasses,

trees, bushes, and fruit that have local names and culinary, ritual, or medicinal uses. The Lamkang community is all too aware that this knowledge and the flora itself is in danger of being lost within the next generation, so that soon young community members may also make the same mistake that I have. (20)

Conclusion

Patton brings to the fore not only the Lotha Naga cultural sub-conscious but also the linguistic uniqueness of a language that suffers from the curse of vulnerability. With an insight into the socio-cultural Lotha landscape, Patton desperately tries to bring to the readers the essence of oral storytelling and the beauty of Lotha vocabulary. Patton's endeavour of retelling Lotha tales also offers formal recognition to Lotha knowledge system which will serve as a potential step towards preserving and protecting Lotha against endangerment. In April 2024, the Lotha Academy in collaboration with Lotha Naga Cultural Resource Centre and Mount Tiyi College had arranged a Pre-Festival of the Lotha Language Festival to aid the language "which has remained stagnant for too long" ("Lotha Academy"). In a recent notification dated 16 June 2025 issued by Nagaland University, the approval of the Lotha syllabus at the undergraduate level also comes across as a touch of optimism, underlining the state's initiatives to protect and preserve the language. The documentation and preservation of Lotha can also be fostered by creating a digital archive comprising audio-visual recordings of Lotha cultural aspects, performance traditions, and transcriptions and translations of Lotha oral history and literature to formulate a comprehensive Lotha resource. Patton's book, government initiatives, local endeavours, and the prospect of a digital archive may together usher in a linguistic and cultural renaissance for the Lotha language.

Notes

¹ Evenki is one of the indigenous tribes of Northern Siberia. Alitet Nemtushkin is an Evenki poet whose work was cited in the *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. See page. 19. <https://eklektika.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Unesco-Atlas-of-the-Worlds-Languages-in-Danger.pdf>.

² *Kyong* stands for the Lothas whereas *Juli* means paddy culture (can be loosely translated to mean culture). The meaning of *Motsu* is story. So taken together, the phrase in Lotha language means the Lotha culture.

³ A lower body wraparound garment for Lotha girls.

⁴ A garment worn by married Lotha women.

⁵ A wraparound garment for women.

⁶ A shawl for a Lotha man who has hosted a feast. *Phanrup* is generally worn by Lotha men when they have performed only one *genna*.

⁷ It is a shawl earned by Lotha men after they host a series of feasts. *Longpensu* is worn by Lotha men when they have performed a lot of *gennas*.

⁸ The traditional Assamese attire for women comprising a skirt and a drape to cover the upper part of the body.

⁹ A Mizo *puan* is a wraparound shawl which is wrapped around the waist. *Puan* is a traditional dress in Mizoram.

¹⁰ Handwoven wraparound skirt worn by Manipuri women. *Phanek* holds profound cultural and symbolic significance. It often becomes a powerful sartorial tool of resistance and protest.

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