

The Narratives of Agricultural Cycle and Eternal Life After: The Tangkhul Naga Tribe

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Abstract: *At the advent of Christianity in 1896, Tangkhul Nagas seemed to live a life without any form of religion but only with the fear of the spirits in different forms in the natural world. Their beliefs seemed to be more of fear of offending the spirits rather than worshipping the spirits. Yet on close examination, there is a proximity to the beliefs of many of the world religion including Christianity to which they have been proselytized to. The narrative of this paper is to bring to light that the beliefs of the Tangkhul Naga in the bygone days were not just random beliefs as has always been projected but that it was a systematic belief which was strictly adhered to but without a specific name to describe the religion. And one of the strongest elements in the tribal belief is life after death "the abode of the death soul" for eternity.*

Keywords: Agriculture, Lycanthropy, Animism, Monoliths, Christianity, Luira

1. Introduction

India is a country of diverse culture and communities living in harmony over the centuries. Every community and culture have contributed to the National movement for freedom in every way they can which can never or should never be forgotten. When Pandit Shri. Jawaharlal Nehru said "While the world sleeps, India awakes" referred to the great nation that was freed from the colonial yoke with effort put in by every community.

In this narrative, the Tangkhul Naga tribe as the other Naga tribes bore the brunt of the Japanese invasion in 1944. How can history deny and forget the defeat of the Japanese in Kohima, Shāngshak, Sina Keithei etc. Did the Japanese not invade India simultaneously through the territory of Manipur and the Naga hills? Were the Japanese not taken by surprise that the Nagas and Manipuris fought to defend every inch of India? Amid this WWII history is the territory of the Tangkhul Naga who encountered the Japanese in two invasion points Jessami - Kharāsom (Ukhrul District, Manipur) and Krihāng - Bungpā (Kamjong District, Manipur). At that stage the Tangkhul Naga were mostly animist, and Christianity was at its infancy. They lived in remote villages practicing animistic rituals but were people ready to defend their ancestral land. By then they know who their friends are and who are the enemy. The culture, traditions and beliefs influenced the decision to side with the British. By culture, traditions, and beliefs, Nagas always stand by their friend to fight against the enemy and to protect their ancestral land to please the spirit of nature to be blessed for doing something good. The animistic practices have witnessed demise and neglect with the spread of Christianity and western education.

Agricultural cycle and Animistic practices

The Tangkhul Naga tribe dependent on Agriculture and forest for their livelihood. They live in harmony with the nature and therefore their culture and traditions are very closely related to Agriculture and natural phenomena. Every traditional practice is to please the spirit of nature and any bad omen is the result of having displeased the spirit. Traditional practices

such as headhunting, festivals, selection of sites for farming etc. are all animistic in nature.

The father is the family priest, and all rituals and sacrifices are performed by him on behalf of the family. The Tangkhuls are community - based tribe and lived in a village republic under the village headman assisted by his council of elders. Every village has a village priest known as "Sharva". The village priest is responsible to perform all the traditional rituals and rites of the village such as invoking the spirit to initiate the new year or spring festival, the selection of the site for Jhum cultivation, prediction of the monsoon, the conduct of the sending of the death spirit festival "Thishām".

The headhunting practice of the Naga tribes has been misrepresented and misunderstood as barbaric and uncivilized. The world has failed to understand the motivating factor to hunting human head. Much has been written about headhunting as a sign of induction to adulthood, warrior, victory and subjugation of another rival village etc. There is no denial to such but the real motivation to head hunting which if understood as it should be then headhunting in that perspective at that age will be more highly appreciated. The spiritual and ethical implication of head hunting among the Tangkhul Naga tribe. They do not hunt the head of anybody except that of a declared enemy of the village. In fact, it is against the interest of the village to take the head of anyone other than that of the enemy. It was believed that the enemy is evil, and therefore destroying the enemy "evil" is considered a good act and is blessed by the spirit. Thus, to kill and take the enemy's head is a good deed by eliminating the evil but otherwise killing the head of a non - enemy is a curse for it will bring misfortune to the village by creating more enemies and the spirit will be angry.

The practice of Lycanthropy is very prominent among the Tangkhul Naga tribe, especially before the arrival of Rev. William Pettigrew and Christianity. With the spread of Christianity, Lycanthropic practice is not heard of much but has not been completely wiped out. There are different forms of Lycanthropic practice, some are mild, while some are fatal;

The spirit of a person leaves the body and enters the body of the intended or enemy body to disturb and destroy, some individuals can transform into the form of other beings such as snake, lion, cat, bear etc., some can even harm another merely by touching or sharing food etc.

They believe in nature and natural phenomena, and the spirit that rules nature controls their way of life and activities. The Tangkhul Naga are dependent on natural produce and wild animals as food. They hunt wild animals which were in abundance using unique black dogs, spears, and bow and arrow. Success in hunting depends on the skills of the hunter but there is also another weapon called "Ahairā". It is a sacred stone owned only by a few with whom the spirit associates very closely. Those who own this sacred stone are successful not only in hunting but also in all other activities they undertake since the spirit dwells in it.

Tangkhul were animists who observe and follow natural phenomena, but they believe that there are different Spirits that dwell and controls every element of the nature. This belief controls their actions and way of life as they always strive to please the spirit to continue enjoying the blessings. It was the fear of spirit that kept the tribe within the realms of the traditional practices. Thus, it was the animistic beliefs which held the social fabric together. The major spirits in nature for the Tangkhuls were;

Ameoa: The spirit who will do evil to you if you are not good or bad spirit.

Kokto: The ruler of the land of the death or the kingdom of the afterlife.

Kazing - Ngalei Kasā Akhavā: The spirit or all - powerful God who created the heaven and the earth.

Varivarā: The name used for God of the Christians. This title "Varivarā" is a recent one coined after the arrival of Rev. William Pettigrew. One day, he went with Hunphun (Ukhrul) village chief to the forest to see the largest tree. He asked the chief "How old was the tree?" to which the chief used the word "Varivarā" meaning that no one knows the age for it has been there forever and for ages to come. That was when Rev. William Pettigrew decided to call God "Varivarā", describing nature of might, eternity, forever etc.

After life (Kazeiram)

The Tangkhuls believed that there is life after this life on earth. They believe that the spirit of the death travel to the Kingdom of the death "Kazeiram" ruled by the spirit "Kokto". The Kazeiram was somewhere in the eastern horizon of the Tangkhul territory and every death spirit travels towards it after the rituals of sending off the death spirit is performed during the festival of the death "Thisham" after harvest.

The "Thisham" festival is an important event in the calendar of the Tangkhuls. It is an observation to say last goodbye to the departed soul as they will never return to this life. The Tangkhuls hold the belief before Christianity that the death continues to be with the family and in the village until the Thisham rituals are completed. It is for this reason that the family would weep over the death until then, they would set

aside the share of food and drinks every meal "Khor Kharung" meaning serving of rice beer and food. This ritual of weeping and sorrowing over the death and serving of drinks and food will continue till the sending off the spirit to the eternal after death abode "Kazeiram".

The "Thishām Phanit" or the festival of sending off the death spirit last for days. During this period, food, clothing, drinks, and many items are collected from the village, especially from the family. The items collected are then packed in the traditional baskets and on the final night of the festival the items are carried by the person selected to represent the departed soul carries the items and proceeds to a designated spot in the village. The whole village would follow with the lighted oil sticks extracted from pine wood. Once the spot is reached the items meant for the dead souls would then be dropped off the cliff with the last words of goodbye. The going of the spirits can be viewed from the "Nāraoshān", a particular spot or Rock in the village. The spirit moves to the east with lighted oil sticks. The night would be very sober and quiet, and no one would be permitted to venture out of their homes for fear that the spirit may return. It is believed that they can see that death souls marching towards the east across the Shiroy mountain range with their light oil sticks. It is said that the older ones would tell the younger ones, if the oil stick lights are not visible "the death soul went off track to gather the cattle that strayed into the forest".

Once the soul reached the land of the eternal abode, the ruler "Kokto" would ask "what have you brought for me?". That is when the soul would unpack the items that he had brought along for use in this life in the eternal abode. All the new shawls and wrap arounds would be slightly cut except an old one which is not torn at all. So, the departed soul would then tell "Kokto", Oh Lord, I have brought all these but how can I present you these torn ones, but I have brought for you this and present the old one. Then "Kokto" would let them in to the eternal abode. Thus, when a person dies in the village, they are buried with all their moveable and treasured belongings for them to use in the afterlife for eternity.

Burial:

Every Tangkhul village has a designated burial ground just outside the village homestead or boundary Called "Veikhur". After all the rituals are performed, the body is buried in a specially dug family grave. The grave is a hollow dug out underground about 8 – 9 feet deep. The grave is dug in as a cave. Once the passage is dug "Kashova", a room is carved out with shelves to lay the body and place the items of the person. The body is then buried with all the necessities along with the instruments, implements and weapons that the individual used here in this life for his socio - economic and political activities. It is buried along with him because of the belief that he will continue to need and use such in the life after.

At the outskirts or the designated edge of the village settlement is the burial ground known as the "Veikhur". Example: in Hunphun village, the burial ground used to be where the present Seventh Day Adventist church is located since the village settlement was on the northern ridge of the hill. The death body is laid on a bed called "Samkok" and eventually the grave is covered with a large stone to protect the body

from being eaten by wild animals. In most cases, one grave is for the family. So, the grave would be open again when another family member dies. The bones of the previous person are then wrapped in a shawl and kept in the corner of the grave and the body of the person is placed on the bed "samkok".

Erecting Memorial Monoliths

These monoliths are found outside of the village or settlement boundary, especially along the way to the Shifting cultivation or sedentary cultivation. They are monoliths erected by economically abled families in memory of their loved ones who have gone to dwell in the eternal abode. The Monolith is carefully selected after rituals of acceptance by the natural spirit. Then it is drawn to the spot of erection with feasting and rituals. The spot of monoliths is also the resting place of the villagers on their way to the farm on their way home from the farms. The spots are revered and the monolith is treated with utmost respect.

2. Conclusion

It is interesting to observe and learn how the animistic beliefs and rituals are like some teachings and beliefs of Christianity. Could this be one of the reasons how Christianity spread and captivated the minds of the Tangkhuls and the tribals. How is it that they believe in the evil and the good spirit, the creator of heaven and the earth, the eternal abode etc? Does the design of the grave and the covering with stone sound familiar to the Christian brethren. True that the practices and rituals were different but surely systematic and organized based on certain sets of beliefs passed down as traditions which should never be forgotten or brushed aside as hidden in nature but accept it as a tribal religion, and a part of the lifestyle and cultural identity. They believed and lived accordingly, but do we live according to what we claim to believe?

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