

Gods Venerated by the Nagas: Traditional Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

Before the advent of Christianity in the Naga Hills at the end of the 19th century, various Naga groups believed in different gods. Gods were formless, feared and appeased by the people. Any practices in the society had to be pleasing to the various gods. Though just a preliminary work, this paper tries to highlight the various gods venerated by the various Naga tribes before the introduction of Christianity, along with their abilities and their dominion. The paper also tries to understand their supremacy and the various practices and festivals associated with these gods.

Keywords: Beliefs, Practices, Traditional, Gods, Naga society

Introduction

Believing in a god plays a central role in every society irrespective of traditional or modern society. It teaches about ultimate claims on believers' lives, providing a core vision which influences and shapes their socio-cultural aspirations and activities. According to Tzüdir (2019), there was no particular name for the Ao religion, which we can apply to almost all the Nagas, as it was not restricted only to the ritualistic part of life, but was the very basis of their identity. Many Naga researchers believe that there was no proper word for religion in a traditional Naga society. However, believing in various gods, who were formless yet controlled human affairs, existed in almost all the

traditional Naga societies even before the introduction of Christianity. This belief in various gods garnered such authority that it maintained, controlled and sanctioned the various ways of life in the community; be it social norms, economy or even polity.

Nagas reveal a rich tapestry of beliefs, practices, and rituals focussed on various deities, spirits, and natural forces. They practised animism that often entailed reverence for the land, plants, animals and celestial bodies, with rituals aimed at maintaining harmony between the human and the spiritual world. Various types of traditional Naga worship centres on multiple gods or deities, whether

they were good-spirited / bad-spirited, and they were often linked to specific aspects of life such as fertility, harvest, war and weather. Each god had distinct roles and attributes. This paper will focus on the concepts and ideas of the traditional Naga belief system and the practices associated with the various gods worshipped.

The various traditional Naga gods

1. The Ao Nagas

The Ao Nagas are one of the major tribes in Nagaland. Majority of the Ao population reside in Mokokchung district. The whole district is divided into six ranges where various villages according to their geographical location are placed within the range. Traditional Aos believed in number of spirits called as *Tsiüngrem* (god) associated with rocks, rivers, trees and mountains (T. Ao, 2019). It is the *Tsiüngrem* who plays an important part in human life and largely depended on man's health and happiness. *Tsiüngrem* was present everywhere be it the fields, jungle, streams, trees, house etc. *Tsiüngrem* acted as a guiding principle of their conduct in life. Therefore, each individual is enjoined to revere god and conduct his/her personal life to justify his blessings.

Longtitsüngba Tsiüngrem is revered as the Lord of the Sky or Heaven.

This was the *Tsiüngrem* attributed with the power over the heavenly bodies like the sun, the moon and other elemental forces like the rains, storms, lightning, thunder and winds. *Tsuba Tsiüngrem* (spring god), *Tekong Tsiüngrem* (mountain god) *Along Tsiüngrem* (stone god), etc. are also some of the gods revered by the Aos (T. Ao, 2019).

According to Mills (1973), the religion of the Aos is not a moral code. It is a system of ceremonies, which is lawful and right in the moral sphere. A person will not prosper if he omits the sacrifices that are due to the various gods around him, who if unappeased, will bring disaster to the crops and illness to the family. Therefore, it was a necessity to perform the necessary sacrifices in high spirits in all the social activities.

Huge, and naturally formed boulders were also worshipped and regarded as sacred, wherein their gods resided. Mills (1973) writes about how the Aos also worshipped the sacred boulders, and mentions a sacred boulder by the name of *Changchanglung*, a huge boulder on the very top of the Changkikong range in Mokokchung district, between Waromung and Dibua village. In the olden days the *Tsiüngrem* of *Changchanglung* was believed to be having a bad

reputation as a poltergeist. Boys sleeping in the Morung (traditional school for males) would be knocked off from their sleeping benches by its invisible hands or even their bodies be carried outside the village unknowingly by the person. Animals tied up for sacrifice would often be loosened. The spirit of the stone was not wholly malignant. However at times, it would appear in a dream to the man who performed the annual sacrifice, and give useful information about the future.

The creation of the world is attributed to the greatest of the *Tsüngrem* called, *Lichaba* by the Aos. He is also known as *Lungtisannga* by some villages. During traditional times, a yearly sacrifice called as *Lichabamung* was held in his honour in all villages. It is said that it prevented landslips since *Lichaba* made the world; it is he who can keep it firmly held together. If anyone breaks the *Lichabamung*, a supplementary ceremony in honour of *Lichaba* called the *Lichaba ayi* was performed about ten days after the main ceremony. During this time all agricultural activities and other engagements were withheld (Mills, 1973).

When an Ao village is established, the villagers would decide a day to worship the village god, *Yim Külem*

(worshipping the village god) known to be the sustainer as well as the protector of all humankind. As a tradition and practice, the worship of *Yim Külem* was done once in every three years, mostly after the harvest (October / November). This is done to invoke peace, prosperity and victory over the enemies in case of war as well. Such practice was carried out entirely for prosperity and if anyone did not observe the worship in its rightful way, there is a legendary belief that there would be famine, disunity and defeats at the hands of the enemies (Sosang, 2012).

Meyutsüngba was another important god venerated by the Aos, who was known as the supreme judge over every man and all his deeds at death. At the gate of *Meyutsüngba*, every sin will be revealed and disclosed for shame and punishment (Imchen, 1993). Minor spirits were also worshipped by the Aos where the most important was the house spirit known as *Kitsung Tsüngrem*, and the house site spirit called as *Kimung Tsüngrem*.

2.The Angami Nagas

The Angami Nagas mainly occupies the Central and Northern part of Kohima district which is also the capital of Nagaland. The Angamis identify themselves to be *Tenyimia* and some people believe that the

name is derived from *Tuonyümia* (the epithet given to him, the Angami) which means the Swift Walker, because he was always walking ahead of his two brothers who were most probable Sema and Lotha (Zetsuvi, 2014).

Traditional Angamis practised animism characterised by the belief in both good spirits and bad spirits. These spirits were believed to be source of all events and occurrences. It revolved around superstition, logic and ways of virtuous life. They had belief in the existence of spirits in all aspects of life and their surrounding environment like the tress, rocks, rivers, etc. Good spirits were worshipped and revered whereas bad evil spirits were feared. They believed that they were the cause of calamities, natural disasters, illness, death etc.

Angamis believes in a supreme being who is known as *Ukepenuopfü*, which literally means, “she who bore us”, giving a simple logic that only a female can give birth to any being (Zetsuvi, 2014). Thus, for the Angami Nagas unlike many other Naga tribes, the supreme being is said to be a female. Zetsuvi also writes that there were also deities called *Terhomia* with personal names, and several unnamed spirits. Angamis believed that the

world is full of *Terhomia*, with both benevolent and malevolent spirits. To appease these deities, rituals were performed where offerings were made to the god *Terhomia* to seek more blessings. Among these, the Angamis considered *Terhomia Rutzeh* (the evil one) as the giver of sudden death (Hutton, 1969).

The presence of spirited stone is also observed in most of the Angamis villages. According to the belief system of the Angamis, there were several spirits known and worshipped. Zetsuvi (2014) mentions the names of the various spirits worshipped by the Angamis as given in Table 1 on p. 75.

Chükhio, the god of beasts, to whom the hunters would give offerings before ensuring their hunt so that they would get a bountiful kill. *Chükhio* ascertains that no one kills his animals for sport but only for food. Successful hunters even offered him a part of their kill.

Miaaweno, the goddess, had a penchant for ignoring a devotee’s actual need while granting wishes. If a person sought good harvest, she would bless them with children; if someone asked for children she would grant them livestock. *Miaaweno* in a way helped the Angamis think before wishing. She also taught them a lesson: to rely

more on their own enterprise than on the supernatural to get work done.

Name of God	Classification
<i>Kesüdi</i>	The giant ferocious spirit
<i>Ketsierho</i>	The spirit of stone
Rothse	The killer
Rapu	Ghost of nightmare
Mechiemo	Gate-keeper of death
Chükhio	God of beasts
Temi	Ghost
Ruopfü	Men's spirit
Telepfü	Spirit of intellect
Miaweno	Goddess of blessing
Dzürhu	Goddess of water creatures

Table 1

There were also gods to ensure rain, children, good health and harvest. Gods of war and victory were also

worshipped. Certain rituals and sacrifices had to be performed to keep the gods and goddesses in good spirits, so that the people would receive their blessings. Different gods and goddesses were worshipped. The earth, the sky and other natural elements were considered to be sacred. They believed in divine powers and superstitions linked to various animistic beliefs. It was only after the coming of Christianity that such beliefs ceased.

3.The Sumi Nagas

The Sumis, one of the major tribes in Nagaland is located to the north-east of the Angami country. The belief system of the Sumi Nagas is also labelled as animism. The spirits which the Sumis revered are divided into three distinct deities. *Alhou* or *Timilhou*, regarded as usually beneficent, as supreme god. *Kungumi*, the spirits of the sky, and the third spirit, *Teghami*, the spirits most in touch with man and the spirits of the earth. The Sumi Nagas also believed in the spirit of the house called as *Aghau*. These spirits are attached to individuals and houses and perhaps villages, although it is difficult to obtain a precise description (Hutton, 1921). There are also some *Teghami* spirits like *Litsaba*, *Shikyepu*, and *Muzamuza* whose functions are reckoned by the Sumis. *Litsaba* or

Latsaba, is more often attributed as the important spirit as he is apparently the spirit of fruitfulness and gives the crop. He is usually recognised as being responsible for the increase of the crops. Some of the Sumi villagers considered Latsaba as a spirit of fertility and beneficent rather than malicious (Hutton, 1921). The Sumis also believed in malicious spirits of the woods known as Muzamuza (echo),

who lead men astray in the jungle (Hutton, 1921). Hutton (1921) mentions that the Sumis also believed in the spirit of the house called as Aghau. These spirits are attached to individuals and houses and perhaps villages, although it is difficult to obtain a precise description. Some of the names of the several spirits associated with the belief system of the Sumis as recorded by J.H. Hutton are (Table 2):

Name of Spirits	Classification
Tegha-aghüzuwu	The delirium spirit
Aphowo	Spirit propitiated in alternate years at harvest
Tegha-kesa	The bad spirit often associated as the spoiler of crops and also mischief maker
Kukwobolitomi	The spirits who destroy children in the womb and cause miscarriage
Loselonitomi	A malicious spirit who causes strife between families and friends
Kitimi	The spirit of the dead.

Table 2

4. The Phom Nagas

Phoms are one of the 16 major tribes of Nagaland residing at Longleng district, Nagaland. The district can be divided into three regions topographically, namely: *Chingmei* range in the Northern part, *Shemong* range in the middle part and *Yingnyü* range in the Southern part. The Phoms call themselves *Yingnyüli*, referring to the legendary origin from Mount *Yingnyüshang* located at Longleng district.

Traditional Phom Nagas believed in *Vaipüvanglem* – the way of faith or belief. For the Phoms, *Vaipüvanglem* was the way of life. Thus, every aspect of their lives is related to the system of religious beliefs and practices (Henshet, 2015).

Monyü is the biggest festival of the Phom Nagas. Monyü like the Ao Moatsü, is celebrated in April for twelve days after sowing. Like all other sowing festival of the Nagas, Monyü festival is for worshipping the supreme spirit whose blessings are sought to protect the crops. In each house, the head of the family sacrifices the chicken with its hot blood sprinkled at all the posts of the house and the granary as for a sign of opening the festival. The rites in which the intestine of the chicken is examined for prediction of the family's future and the meat

cooked with prawns and crabs and the portion of the meat tied to the posts with leaves. Everything is done meticulously for any mistake would mean failure of the rites, and it was believed to be followed by wrath of their God (Shimray, 1986).

The Phoms defined *Kahvang* for god where '*Kah*' means earth and '*vang*' means sky or heaven. God was understood as the transcendental god of earth and heavens, the ultimate, who is beyond human comprehension; he was omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. God was believed to live somewhere beyond the blue called *Shang Kahvang* which means celestial god (Among, 2018). The Phoms also believed in the celestial god for healing and practiced certain rites as a sacrifice to appease this god. Such sacrificial rite was called as *Vahng jingpü*. The belief system of the Phoms also says that both benevolent and malevolent spirits were known to them. Among (2018) pointed that when a person climbed on a tree, the *Chong Shepe* (terrestrial devil) would try to make him fall, but the *Shang Kahvang* would not allow him to fall. They also believed that there were constant warfare between god and the devil.

Everything that happens from above like rain, snowfall, lightning,

thunder, sunshine and so on is believed to be the work of *Shang Kahvang*. However, Henshet (2015) further explains that there is *Vangyong Ongba*, a distinct name given to the god of lightning. *Chong Kahvang* or *Chong Shübe* was believed to be responsible for everything that happened on earth. The Phoms also believed in many deities like god of home, god of paddy field, god of forest, god of river. Rites and sacrifices were performed by the Phoms associated to these deities with the observance of taboos, and often believed that misfortunes comes to those people who does not adhere to these practice.

There is also another figure called *Akongdiudangba* in the traditional Phom Naga religious belief system, understood as god in one sense but never termed as god. He acts like a judge who passes judgement to the souls of the dead on their way to *Yimching*, the land of the dead souls. Phoms also believed in many deities like the god of home, the god of jungle, the god of paddy fields, the god of river and big trees, high cliffs, dark and thick woods, lofty mountains, etc. were the abode of gods (Henshet, 2015). The deities were appeased to let the crops grow or to heal their sickness. It was believed that it was god who saw the actions and was judged according to

their actions. The wicked were punished and those people who obeyed were rewarded accordingly.

Discussion

The Nagas believed in various gods who were formless yet feared and their involvement in the beliefs in spirits, ancestors, and supernatural forces influenced the physical and social world. Though the Nagas during the traditional time did not have a developed religion as how we understand in the modern context; yet, they constantly felt and feared a supernatural force that was guiding and leading them. It was thus common practice and in their belief system to revere a supreme being and a divine power who was presumed as the creator, provider as well as destroyer.

For the Nagas, to fathom the various gods in the form of images was impossible. However, there are certain sites all over the Naga Hills venerated and observed by the various tribes habiting there as sacred sites and groves. Such sites are served and recognised as sacred with embodiments of natural elements and are believed to be the dwelling and sacrificial areas for the gods and spirits. Lanukumla Ao (2023), talks about the important significance of such sacred groves among the Nagas where sites like *Yimchingkaba*, located at Lakhuni

village, Mokokchung District; Mt. *Tiyi*, Wokha District; *Ihaingkia*, located at Peren village; *Yemetsu Lhove*, located at Mishilimi village, Zunhebphoto District; *Wohnu-ya* meaning abode of birds, located at Sotokur village, Tuensang District; *Oloanu*, Zakho Village, Mon District, etc. were respected and observed as the dwellings of spiritual beings which they had deep reverence for. They worshipped and made sacrifices seeking blessings, protection, and guidance in the belief that by doing so, the gods and spirits would bless and protect them. Nagas venerated and respected these places to be holy, and a certain demarcated area within the sites was protected where no agricultural practices or any other social activities were allowed besides the sacrificial ritual. This is also reflected on the tribal's way of preserving and conserving socially and religiously important sites, and also recognizing their ecological importance. Thus, to say Nagas were savage and primitive by various colonial ethnographers is debatable. Various archaeological works on such sacred sites and groves carried out by researchers like Walling (2016), and Ao (2023) have recognized and confirmed the existence, and the kind of practices in such sites.

Henshet (2015) discusses one

peculiar belief among the Phom Nagas which was addressing their god as *Obü*, meaning grandfather. He further explains that perhaps this is because of the culture among the Phoms where the eldest member of the community commands the highest respect and authority. Therefore, it might be to show that god is the eldest and the greatest among them all. However, reverence to female goddesses is also emphatically mentioned in the Angami Naga belief system. They were worshipped for their connection to nature, regarding them as a nurturing, life-giving force; to fertility, ensuring human reproduction and agricultural prosperity; and to water, linking to the fertility of the land, health of the crops and the control over water sources such as rivers and rainfall.

The Nagas believed that deviating from traditional practices may provoke anger from these spiritual entities, leading to punishment such as illness, misfortune, or disturbance in their daily lives. The fear of not following the traditional tribal belief systems is rooted in the interconnectedness of social, cultural, spiritual, and historical factors. These create a complex web of reasons why adherence to these beliefs is not just a matter of personal choice but is often linked to survival, social cohesion, and the

preservation of identity.

The religious beliefs and practices of indigenous people are diverse and deeply embedded in their cultural identities. Understanding this system requires respect and acknowledgement of their complexity and significance. While modernity has influenced many of these practices, indigenous religion continue to offer insights into the humanity's fundamental questions and connection to the environment. The arrival of Christianity brought significant changes to the traditional way of life as the people began to adopt new beliefs and practices. While this transition marked a significant shift in the Nagas' cultural and religious landscape, it is essential to acknowledge and respect the rich cultural heritage that defined them.

Conclusion

With the advent of Christianity, Naga beliefs and practices underwent great changes. Nagas no longer inferred upon such gods and deities as seriously as they had done in the past. However, it does not mean that Naga society has completely changed and forgotten their indigenous beliefs and practices. According to Henshet Phom (2015), Christianity could not completely uproot all the indigenous beliefs and practices in the Phom society. They believed their god was a powerful god who punishes the wicked and rewards the good. They tried their best to live a good moral and honest life. Thus, the socio-religious and customary laws strongly disciplined the life of the Nagas who lived with a strong sense of community, unity, backed by their submission to the power of God.

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