

# A Study of Traditional Religion of the Nagas with Special Reference to the Sümi Nagas

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## ABSTRACT

**The present paper seeks to explore the traditional religious practices of the Nagas in general and the Sümis in particular. It is an attempt to find out how Sümis in the days of the ancestors before the advent of Christianity follow many practices in relation to their religion as tradition. It also attempt to look in brief about the shift in religious practices from animist belief to Christianity.**

**Keywords: Religion, Animist, Practices, Traditional, Christianity**

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## INTRODUCTION

Long ago, more than a century back before Christianity set foot in the Naga Hills, the ancestors had religion of their own. According to Hutton (1921: 191) the religion of the Sümi Nagas is labelled 'Animism' by the census of India and official authority which meant that they believe in the existence of spiritual beings in the natural world. The word 'animism' comes from the Latin word 'anima' meaning "breath, spirit, life". (Animism - wikipedia :1) Animism is believed to be the oldest known type of belief system in the world that even antedates paganism which is largely practiced even today in a variety of forms in many traditional societies. The word animism is used in the anthropology of religion for the belief system of many indigenous peoples especially in contrast to the relation of more recent developments of organized religions. The idea of animism was developed by the anthropologist Sir Edward Tylor in his 1871 book "Primitive Culture", in which he defined animism as "general doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings in general." According to Tylor, animism is a belief that natural objects other than humans have souls which represent the earliest form of religion. Guthrie in 2000 suggested that the "most widespread" concept of animism was that it was the "attribution of spirits to natural phenomena such as stones and trees". (Animism –wikipedia: 4)

Animism believe that soul or spirit exist not only in humans, but also in other animals, plants, rocks, mountains, rivers or other elements of the natural world including thunder, wind and shadows each being a spirit that can help or harm human. These spirits must be either worshipped or appeased in the form of sacrifices, prayers, dances or other forms of devotions to these spirits in hopes of getting blessings upon crops, health, fertility etc or for protection from harm. (Animism – wikipedia: 1)

Animism is mentioned in the Bible (2002: 788) which has been practised since ancient times. The Israelites were commanded not to follow the practices of the nations around them who follow other gods. In this case, the Egyptians who enslaved the Israelites prior to their wilderness journey to the land of Canaan followed many deities as animists. In the book of Daniel 5:4, the people drank the wine and praised and worshiped the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. In the Bible, (2002: 1010). the New Testament also gives an account of the people who worshiped idols and other inanimate objects. In the book of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 8: 4 – 6 the apostle Paul teaches, "So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even there are so called gods, whether in heaven or on earth on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live."

In comparison with biblical Christianity, Animism is a false belief in gods who are not truly gods at all" Isaiah 45: 5 teaches, "I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God"(The Holy Bible 2002: 648). Animism is instead taught as a deception that leads people astray from true and living God in the Bible in 1 Peter 5:8 (The Holy Bible 2002: 1070). As we see, even today animism continues in most tribal indigenous movements, in Shinto, in eastern religious such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and in Pagan/ Neopagan movements. Though many offered food to

inanimate objects as animists, Christians believed in the existence of one Divine Supreme God and understands that these objects did not really have a spirit or exist as god.

According to Sema (1986: 34) the Nagas were the fervent believer in the existence of soul or spirit. The ancient Sümi Nagas have strong faith in natural forces. They appeared animist by their faith that worshipped nature like sun, moon, trees, stones etc. and offered animal sacrifices to appease the spirits. Their beliefs system reflects a clear indication of being animistic in nature and their adherence to a belief in the existence of soul or spirit. It was believed that there was an invisible spirit in man which gives the power and enabled him to speak, walk, breathe, eat etc. However, as soon as this spirit left the body, a man was announced as dead. He acknowledges the presence of an invisible higher authority which presided over his destiny and was empowered to obedience, respect and worship. Their religion was manifested through their worship of nature and their faith in the power of magic and omens which lay emphasis on the existence of the defied manifestations of nature and propitiation of spirits both benevolent and malevolent. It was believed that the causes of discomfort, illness and troubles which come on the family and the inhabitation are all ascribe to the actions of the evil spirits. In an event of commitments, omissions and occasional failures to appease the spirits are said to be the reasons for incurring the displeasure of spirits.

The Sümis believe in three distinct classes of Spirits. (Hutton 1921: 191) The first category was the “*Alhou*” (creator Here the creator is referred to God the creator of the universe The Ao referred to it as “*Lijaba*”, the Lotha call it “*Potso*”) who was concerned with the process of creation. The second class were the spirits of the sky, “*Kungumi*” who dwell high up aloft and the third category was the “*tughami*” that belongs to the group of spirits of the earth and lived among men. These spirits are often deliberately evil as well as beneficial when propitiated.

The “*Alhou*” is believed to be the supreme creator of all existence and is all omniscient and omnipotent (Hutton 1921: 194). The creator is manifested to a number of creations depending upon the particular creation in question (Sema 1986: 36). When the purpose is of the creation of the sun, he is called the “*Khetsunhe Lhou*” (Sun – god); for the creation of the moon, the manifestation is called “*Aqhi Lhou*” (moon – god); the creator of the earth is called “*Ayeghiqha lhou*” ( the earth – god); the creator of man is called the *Timi Lhou*. The manifestations of all these different names are various attributes of the same creator. As Hutton (1921: 194) said “*Alhou*” is the supreme dispenser of both good and evil who makes men rich or poor. This spirit is beneficial to man who is all -good as well as almighty and all – knowing.

The “*Kungumi*” or the spirits of the sky are said to be both male and female. The male spirit is known by the name “*Kungumi*” while the female spirit is known as “*Kungulimi*”. They live high up in the sky but legend says that these “*kungumis*” often come down to earth and marry the sons and daughters of man. They dwell up above in the sky but legend tell us that they used to come down and mix with virtuous boys and girls particularly on foggy days. These spirits execute kind deeds even though they dwell up high in the sky. (Sema 1986: 36)

The “*tughami*” who belongs to the third class of spirits live on the earth, in the jungles, in the lakes, among men and in their houses. These spirits desire evil towards man and are generally harmful to man but can be appeased through offering of sacrifices. “*Tughami*” means ‘Wildman’. They are called so because of their allurements and favour to live on the environment of wilderness. These spirits are further categorized in accordance to the definite place of their dwellings and their specific functions.

House spirits: - The House spirits or *Akighau*, are mostly found in big and in rich men’s house and in an empty buildings abandoned by their owners after some ruin in the family. They show the appearance of a monkey or an ape but each time they quietly become invisible. These spirits can be heard making sounds all over the houses as they go about moving the different things in the house. (Sema 1986: 37-38) recount many instances where these spirits prevailed at his grandparents’ house. On several occasions the people of his village talked of the house – spirits of his grandfather. Many of these people were afraid to go to his grandfather’s house all alone as they had seen this house – spirits. He remembers hearing his grandmother talking to the spirits as if she was having a conversation with a human being. His grand - parents were always concerned about keeping the spirits in good humour.

They always threw rice – beer and pieces of meat and rice around the ‘king pillar’ of the house everyday to please the spirits. Every big or small genna or feast, was initiated with the propitiation of the house - spirits by his grand – parents by throwing rice, meat and rice – beer around the king pillar of the house and inviting the house – spirits to take their bountiful share of food provided for their happiness. It is clearly evident that during the early days, these spirits were always kept in appeasement as discontentment of these spirits are said to be harmful to the householders in a lot of ways. These spirits remained helpful and generous to their owner while they are kept happy and satisfied but at the same time malevolent to his enemies. There is a story told about a man who went to his friend’s house in his absence. As he felt thirsty, he puts his hand in the liquor vat for drinks. There the invisible spirit of the house caught hold of his hands by the wrist and held him till the owner of the house came back in the evening and freed him.

Field Spirits: - The field spirits belong to the second category of the spirits of the earth (Sema 1986: 38). They dwell in the fields and gives protection to the crops from any harm or destruction by animals or hailstorms. They also guard the owner as he works in his fields. The Sümi Nagas believe in the *Alhou* the creator who ordains man's worldly lot while his health, happiness, abundant life and wealth are provided to him through the spirits of the field. The *Litsapa*<sup>1</sup> is considered the most important of the *tughami* as he is obviously the spirit of fruitfulness and wealth and is responsible for good and abundant crops. The *tughami* must always be appeased in order to procure good crops as this spirit is bound to visit the earth in the form of violent windstorm and damage them. It was believed that *Litsapa* had a good friendly relation with the *tughupu* (toad). Hutton (1921: 106) mentions that in some other parts of the world, toads have been connected for both obtaining the rain and preventing the storms. It is therefore likely that the Sümi connection of the *tughupu* (toad) with the spirit responsible for the harvest indicates the association of the toad with rain and storm. As a result whenever the *tughupu* cried out from the field, the *Litsapa* would send down at his call.

Jungle spirits: - The third category of spirits is the spirits of the forests known as "*muzamuza*" (echo). They are malevolent spirits of the wood who usually takes man to an unknown direction in the jungle and make them permanently or temporary mad. In earlier times there were many instances being heard taking away by *muzamuza*. In such situations the relatives of the lost person must release a chicken in the jungle at a place where the person seems to have been taken away by *muzamuza* and sings "*muzamuza! Show me where so – and so is!*" Hutton (1921: 198) reported the instances of two man namely Vutahe and Kocheke of Sukhalu village where the former was lost but was found in this way. Similarly, the latter was also carried away to a far off place by *muzamuza* was at last found. A lost person if found also is never the same as they were before even if they regain from their madness who were once driven mad by *muzamuza*. If any person is found to be missing in the forest, is assumed to have been taken away by *muzamuza*. If a man loses his way in the jungle inspite of his struggle to find his way home, he must cut off a piece of the fringe of his cloth and leave it on a tree and he will find his way home.

The fourth group of spirits is the "*Aghau*" also called ghosts of men (Sema 1986: 40). The Nagas believed that these spirits are attached to men who dictate their fate. While the Sümis called them "*Aghau*", the Angamis called it "*Ropfu*" and the Aos "*Nisung Tanula*" They are often seems to be entirely generous and harmless but some times are extremely unpleasant causing man to go on a rampage and to perpetrate crime which raise the fury of the community against him. It is said that some individuals possessed numerous spirits which are of animals like tiger, snake, ape etc. Some *Aghau* is believed to have gifted with the ability of prediction while some others were given the ability of extracting foreign objects like stone etc. from the sick person's bodies; the objects which were thought to be put there by the evil spirits.

Like any other Nagas, the Sümis also believe in the might of the *Tumumi* who were consulted in the event of sickness, who would apprise the sick person of whether he had been affected by the touch of the evil spirits or have put dirt objects in his body. The *Tumumi* would then rub the affected portion of the sick body (sometimes with the mouth) and draws out some brown juice, piece of stone, or bits of bone or hair from the body of the sick person without leaving a mark on the body. This is clearly evident from Sema (1986: 40) where the writer reports his personal experience with the *Tumumi* when he had a severe pain in his stomach and was relieved after *tumumi*'s touch. His mother sent for *Tumumi* by the name Luzuli in his village. The *Tumumi* brought a clump of *Ailo*;<sup>2</sup> a medicinal plant with her and with it touched his stomach. She seems to have uttered something which he couldn't understand and gently massaged his stomach and gather the skin in a specific area where he was feeling the pain. She put her mouth around the skin and sucked out several small pieces of stones from his stomach. The *tumumi* told him that an evil spirit had put the stones in his stomach while he was playing alone on the road which caused him great pain but was relieved after all these stones were removed. Looking back at the days of our ancestors where there was no access to medicines or doctors and nurses and hospital or medical facilities, the *tumumis* were consulted. The *Tumumi* played a significant role as they were also believed to be communicative with the unseen world. If a person wishes to talk to the soul of his/her loved one, it was done with the help of the medium or *tumumi*. The departed soul spoke to the person seeking him through the mouth of the medium. The same kind of this has been reported even after conversion to Christianity.

The Sümi Nagas believed in the existence of the soul (*aghungu*) of man (Sema 1986: 41). If a Sümi man built a temporary shelter in the jungle or on the roadside during his journey, he would always burn it down before he leaves it. It was feared that his soul would remain in that shelter and would finally forsake him resulting in his death if this was not done. If anybody fell sick after his return from the field or any other working place, it was assumed that his soul had not pursued him and hence caused illness. In this case, the relative of the sick person will go to call his soul. They will take a rooster or a dog to the particular place where the sick person had last been and is supposed to have left his soul and there they would kill the animal. Firstly they would offer a share for the sick man's soul and they would eat up the remaining completely as it was a taboo to carry home the leftover meat. Later, the eldest man amongst them calls out loudly the name of the sick man requesting the soul to follow them home. They would return home very slowly without neither looking back nor talking to anyone on the way. The soul was escorted into the house and let entered the body. It was possible that the soul might be easily frightened away again to the same place. Hutton (1921: 200) relates one such incident about a mischievous fellow who laid in wait for an acquaintance who had gone to the fields to call the soul. As he approached his way home, the man in ambush came out suddenly, beat the ground just behind the passer and shouted loudly. The frightened soul which had been following its body fled away again, and the unfortunate

body, deprived of its soul, died after few days. In spite of Christian belief, the people still believed that the soul linger behind and can be brought back through prayer. The author has witnessed many instances in her native village wherein the soul are brought back by going to the spot where the soul is supposed to have lingered. It is believed that the person who goes to bring back the soul must resist from looking back and talking to anyone while returning on the way less the soul will again linger back. I remember one such incident in the mid 1980s when I was playing along with my friend in the neighbourhood and saw my father and one man coming from the field. They just pass away without saying a word even if we tried to talk to them. Later it was learnt that they went to the field to bring back the soul of a girl whose soul was said to have remain in the field and has been sick for many days. Zhimo (2015: 75) also reported one such instance during the late 1980s where Heshe of Shoipu village was hospitalised at Guwahati. After the treatment he returned to his village but was however in a semi – conscious state and also had disturbing dreams. In his dream, he always carried his luggage trying to find his way out from the Guwahati hospital. Then his relatives realised that he had left his soul behind in the hospital. His brother – in – law travelled to Guwahati hospital, opened its gate and called out Heshe’s name asking him to follow him. The moment his brother – in – law reached the village, he regained full consciousness and recovered.

It was also assumed that if a Sümi killed a tiger, he had to sleep on an uncomfortable slippery bamboo bed in order to be wakeful so that the soul of the dead beast can do him no harm (Hutton 1921: 200). The beliefs in the immortality of the spiritual part of man and in the metempsychosis of souls prevailed in the mind of the Sümi Nagas. The spirit of a dead person is believed could exist in various states and was vulnerable to joy and sufferings in future states of existence. They believed that the soul of a dead man remains in his house for some months before leaving for the hill of the dead. In the earliest days, one would find in a Sümi house the seat of a dead man at the eating place being kept vacant and every time during meal, some food was put aside for the dead till the time the soul is said to have left the house for the hill of the death. It was believed that the soul of the dead often supposed to take the form of some bird called the “*Kithimi ghau*” (kite) meaning the bird of dead (*Kithimi* – dead, *ghau* – bird). The soul of a dead person in the form of a kite flies away to *Kithilato* Mountain which means the path to the hill of death near Wokha (*Kithi* – death, *la* – path, *to*- hill). It is believed that the soul is then passes off into another world which is said to be the heavenly home for souls. The *kithimi ghau* was highly revered and respected for some obvious reasons. Whenever this bird is seen hovering over any house, the owner offers rice and rice – beer.

The physical features of the Wokha mountain are such that the Sümis associated it with the path to the next world and might have called it *Kithilato*. This is a very rocky mountain with many layers of rock in sharp defined layers going up into the sky. This *kithilato* can be clearly seen from the Sümi region with its peak mainly covered in clouds. The scholar recalls a childhood memory in my native village at Lizu Avikato<sup>3</sup> where the villagers’ used to talk about this *Kithilato* which can be clearly seen on a sunny day from my home even to this day. There is a saying that there are numerous wild fruits growing there and one can eat as much as he wants on the spot but cannot be taken home because if he does so, it is said that one will be returning at the same place again and again unless he throws away the fruits or finished eating there. The paths were clearly visible and as a child I used to be very curious about this certain place. There is a numerous step leading up to a partially hidden peak, which must have led to the idea that the creator and the spirits of the sky lived above this mountain. Perhaps for this reason the Sümis called these spirits *Kungumi* or celestial beings. This heavenly dwell is believed to be the terminal and eternal home of the souls after leaving the body (Sema 1986: 42). Mills (1936:169 – 170) reported that after death, the Rengmas except the Kentennenyu clan, also go to the Wokha Hills and enter the earth by the Road of the Dead.

After conversion to Christianity, the Sümi Nagas now organises a prayer by the deceased family called the ‘*akukho kighini*’<sup>4</sup> (parting prayer) on the third day, thus severing bond with the deceased. The pastors and the church members known as deacons and deaconesses along with the relatives and friends are invited to pray for the departed soul. The Christian believed that the soul of the believers depart for the heaven which is believed to be a paradise place of man after death instead of the soul departing for *Kithilato* mountain. In the traditional religion before Christianity, animals, chicken or eggs were offered to the spirits for the release of soul. With the conversion, people solely believed in the power of prayer to bring back the soul from the bond of the evil spirits.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Animist or the traditional religious practices of the Sümis is the worship and sacrifices of animals, fowls or eggs etc. to the unseen spirits or the supernatural forces. They believed in an evil spirits which are at times benevolent and beneficial to him and his family when appeased or propitiated. These spirits are also malevolent and appears harmful to man in a failure to appeasement. Such was the practises of the traditional religion that the people had to live in constant fears and superstitions because this religious practice involved the propitiation of different spirits at every cycles of their life activities which is complex and must have been beyond the means of some common men. There is a place called *atukumilla*<sup>5</sup> nearby my village which had very big stones. It was believed that the *tughami* used to live there. As a child we used to run away in hurry whenever we cross that particular place for fear of being haunted by the evil spirit. The stone is now demolished after the village conversion to Christianity in the year 1932. One of my informant<sup>6</sup> recounts that whenever she accompanies her mother to the field during late 1950s and early 1951s, she notice her



mother plucking leaves and placing on the stones as offering. Another informant <sup>7</sup> who is 88 years old reported that during his time people used to offer fowls and coins to the stones. During olden times, sacrifices of animals, offering of fowls, eggs and rice beer was a very common practice in the traditional religion to appease the spirits. In the present Christian era, this practice is shifted to church as an offering to God whom the Christians believed is the divine and supreme above all things. People nowadays offer every first – born animals, egg, vegetables, pulses and grains in the church to thank God for the bountiful blessings. The traditional religion of the Sümis is the practice of rituals and animal sacrifice done for the appeasement of the sprits and the benefit of the individual concerned.

## APPENDICES

1. *Ailo* is a medicinal plant said to be found in almost all regions of the Sümis.
2. *Litsapa* is used differently by different writers; As Nitsapa by Sema, Hokishe; Emergence of Nagaland, Uttar Pradesh: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1986 pg 38; *Litsaba or Latsapa* by Hutton, J.H; The Sema Nagas, London: Macmillan and Co.Limited, 1921 pg 19; *Litsapa* by Sema, Najekhu Yephtho; Sema Theological Text Book No. 3 Sümi Chine eno Apine Jeliqo (Gennas and Festivals of the Sema Nagas), 1991 pg 18. However I have taken the liberty to use *Litsapa* here since it is believed to be widely common used word in almost all the Sümi regions.
3. Nowadays most people organises the *akukho kighini* on the same day of the death.
4. Lizu Avikato is a village in the district of Zunheboto, Nagaland in North – east India.
5. *Atukumlla* is a place in the village of Lizu Avikato under Zunheboto district. *Atu* – stone, *Kumlla* – worship so literally it means stone worship.
6. Informant Y. Shiheli 76 years of L/ Avikato village, interviewed on 26/02 2018.
7. Informant H. Nihovi 88 years of L/Avikato village, interviewed on 24/02/2018.

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- [3] Ibid, pg 4.
- [4] Ibid, pg 1.
- [5] The Holy Bible New international Version published by Zondervan Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530, U.S.A 2002 pg 788.
- [6] Ibid, pg 1010.
- [7] Ibid, pg 648.
- [8] Ibid, 1070.
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- [10] Hutton, J.H; The Sema Nagas, London: Macmillan and Co.Limited, 1921 pg 191. Ibid, pg 194.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Sema, Hokishe; Emergence of Nagaland, Uttar Pradesh: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1986 pg 36.
- [13] Ibid, pg 37 - 38.
- [14] Ibid, pg38.
- [15] Hutton, J.H; The Sema Nagas, London: Macmillan and Co.Limited, 1921 pg 106.
- [16] Ibid, pg 198.
- [17] Sema, Hokishe; Emergence of Nagaland, Uttar Pradesh: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1986 pg 40.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Ibid, pg41.
- [20] Hutton, J.H; The Sema Nagas, London: Macmillan and Co.Limited, 1921 pg 200.
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