

The Angami-Naga Perspective of Culture and Value in Nagaland of North-East India

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Abstract

Every Naga community has its own dominant oral narratives that have passed on from one generation to the other talking histories, stories, identity and culture of its people. Naga culture is defined by its rich traditions, customs and cuisines and is also known as the 'Land of Festivals'. This place is marked by immense beauty of its rich cultural ethnicity. One among the community are the *Angami* (Naga) who lived with utmost fear for God. This had allowed people to live in harmony with a fearful relation to God. The moral code of conduct, they practiced is called "*Kenyü*" or its translation "prohibition". However, with modernity creeping into the culture, the people are forgetting the unique culture that defines the *Angami Nagas*. Does that mean their philosophy and way of life is affected? Why and how they practice "*Kenyü*" is dying out. This is an issue of concern that has affected the culture. Thus, in this paper, the researcher is trying to explore and analyze factors that are causing changes. How values that have been practiced through ages are maintained even in the seemingly changing *Naga* culture.

Keywords: Culture, Modernity, *Kenyü*, Angami-Naga

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Introduction

Nature had been very generous to Nagaland and its people. Nature and people live in harmony and extreme poverty never had its presence. The Naga society is divided into several tribes and each of these tribes has its own cultural uniqueness. Each *Naga* village or tribe was independent of the other village. Thus, a *Naga* identifies with one's village and tribe that distinguish them from the others.

“Before the advent of the British, the world of the Naga revolved around his village, family, clan, *khel* and village largely represented the extent of his concern and involvement. It was said, He is passionately attached to his land, his system of land-tenure, the arrangements for the government of his village, the organization of cultivation, the administration of tribal justice through the village and tribal courts.” (Varrier Elwin, Nagaland, 1961).

A *khel* or clan territory is an autonomous unit within the village named after the apical or founding ancestor. In former times, each *khel* was surrounded by a wall to protect it from outsiders, including members of the *khels* in the village. Entry into a *khel* was only through the gates, which were guarded at all times and closed at night. In fact, the so called “village gates” of the *Angami* are really *khel* gates. (Marwah. I.S. and Srivastava Kumar Vinay 1992. *Khel Gate and Social Structure: A Study of their Relationship and a Note on the Place of Material Culture in Anthropology*”. Pg.81).

“At a time when there was no unified system of administration, a village elder or *Gaonburas*¹ settle disputes and disagreements of the village. “Traditionally, the *Nagas* had no kind of internal government and they acknowledge no supreme authority.” (Hargovind Joshi, Nagaland: Past and Present 2001, pg.14-15). Thus, *Nagas* do not have a unified system of administration in the past. They were regulated by customary laws and the village chief was the head of the administration in the context of the *Nagas*. The customary laws implemented by every village stood for a form of governing the people and thus administration was indigenous and independent.

Dr. V. Elwin summed up the administrative practice in *Naga* society in the following way, “*Naga* society presents a varied pattern of near-dictatorship and extreme democracy. There is a system of hereditary chieftainship among the *Semas* and the *Changs*. The *Konyaks* have very powerful chiefs or *Angs* who are regarded as sacred and whose word is law. The greatest of *Angs* no commoner may stand upright. The *Aos*, however, have bodies of elders, who represent the main family groups in the village and the *Angamis*, *Lothas*, *Rengmas* and others are so democratic that Hutton remarks that in the case of the *Angami*, it is difficult to comprehend how in view of their particular independence of character, their village hold together at all before the coming of the British government.” (Varrier Elwin, Nagaland, 1961, pg. 6-7)

Therefore, in this paper an attempt has been made to explain how the *Nagas* in general and *Angami* society in particular are retaining the essence of their culture in the midst of rapidly changing modern world.

¹ . Gaon-Village, Buras- elders or Old people.

The Angami Tribe

Angami-Naga tribe is one among the many other Naga tribes and has its own cultural identity. J.H. Hutton also mentioned in his book “The *Angami Nagas*” that *Angamis* are known for their honesty. For *Angamis*, honesty is not just an aspect but it is their culture. “The village has been an important unit in *Angami* history because each village had a distinct identity and was self-sufficient in most things. Therefore, an *Angami* village has been described as a “Village state”. (Yonuo Asoso 1974. Pg.76. The Rising Nagas-A Historical and Political House Study).

“The *Angami* tribe was one of the first *Naga* tribes that came under the expansionist policies of the British colonial power.” (Ao Tajenyubam, British Occupation of Naga country, 1993. Pg.4). The *Angami* tribe is made up of different groups. Hutton (1921:15) identifies four distinct groups among them. They are i) the *Khonoma* group ii) *Kohima* group iii) *Viswema* group iv) *Chakhroma* group.

These groups of people even at present are commonly identified based on their geographical distribution. The Northern *Angami* are the people living in and around *Kohima*, the Western *Angami* are those living in the West, the Southern *Angami* are towards the South and the *Chakhroma Angami* lives on the slopes of national highway from *Kohima* to *Dimapur*.

In a traditional *Angami* life, the feast of merit have come to be known and identified in which richness, splendor and extravagance is concentrated. A person who is able to finish the ritual of *sha*, *zha* and *leishü* will give feast to the entire village. “In the feasts of merit, in order to gain honor now and credits in the here-after, a wealthy man fed the village in a rising scale of ceremonies and festivity. Thus, it helped promote the notion of wealth for a purpose and accepted as a blessing. The rich did not look down on the poor and the poor did not hate the rich but tried to emulate them. Equally interesting is the importance given to the woman in a society often castigated latterly for being patrilineal, even patriarchal.” (Chasie Charles, Nagaland in Transition, 2005. Pg.254).

“The *Angami* have played an important and leading role in the Naga ethnic movement and conflict, especially under the leadership of A.Z.Phizo, himself an *Angami*. In this conflict, a large number of *Angami* men fell in the battles with the Indian army in the 1950’s and 1960’s.” (Iralu Kaka. D. 2000. Nagaland and India: The Blood and the Tears. *Kohima*: The Author. Pg.242).

God in *Angami* Tradition

The traditional religion of the *Angami* was often described as Animism. According to Bareh 1970: Naga religion is described by sociologists to be animistic which lays emphasis on the existence of the deified manifestations of nature and propitiation of spirits both benevolent and malevolent. The causes of troubles and torments, which befall the family and the inhabitation are attributed to the action of the evil spirits. They hold commitments, omissions and occasional failures to appease them are the reasons for incurring the spirits’ displeasure. By divination, they trace such sufferings, ailments and ill luck to the influence of the evil spirits, and the spirits having been traced, appeasement to them follows. (Pg. 61)

The God in *Angami* tradition is believed to give everything when God is pleased. In the beginning, they believed that a creator exists. However, the name of the creator is not known. Therefore, they named the creator as '*terhuomia*'², which means 'spirit'. The spirit created the heaven and the earth and everything that exists. Humans seek help and blessings from the spirit especially in times beyond their capacity. They however believe in the good and the bad spirit. To name a few and believed to be dangerously harmful are the bad spirits of *Kesüdei*, *terhuothie* and *temi*.

Kesüdi- kesüdi is full of wrath and anger. Therefore, this spirit is feared by all.

Terhuothie – terhuothie is believed to cause sickness or ill health. At a time where diseases were not diagnosed and people dies, they believe in the mysterious deaths of those people. They talk of the deceased as being touched by *terhuothie* taking away one's life.

Temi- temi creates nuisance among people. When one is believed to have come across *temi* on the way then there will be wind and storm like weather and trees will bang on the road creating fear to humans.

The good spirit on the other side brings joy and prosperity to many. *Miawenuo* and *Nhakuonharuo rhuopfü* are the gods of prosperity.

Miawenuo – is a female spirit with very long hair. Whoever comes her way can ask for anything rice, food, richness or whatever comes to their mind. She will bless people with the opposite of what one asks for e.g. if you ask rice, she will give you food and so on. She is in a human form but different from human as a God has her feet reverse. Therefore, when she walks ahead her footprint leaves a mark of heels walking front and her toes backwards.

Nhakuonharuo rhuopfü (God of seafood) – she is believed to bless specially women; so that the day they go looking for seafood gets extra. Whenever, a woman gets her share of seafood more than the others do, they say you are blessed by *Nhakuonharuo rhuopfü*.

Pleasing God

How is god pleased and why God should not be displeased is the question that allowed the *Angamis* to live with utmost fear for God. God is pleased and obeyed by performing ceremonies. One of the most important ceremony and festival they observe is *Kipfhünyi*. Where the life of the people is dependent on agriculture, they celebrate *kipfhünyi* to offer food to the God. In praying that one will reap rice in abundance that will feed enough, they will offer food to the toad in a separate leaf asking blessings of richness in grains. Thus, when God is pleased in such a way, they will reap more and have prosperity that year.

Culture of Angami People

The culture of *Angami* people can be defined in many ways such as dressing pattern, the food they eat, and the language they speak etc. However, the one unique and important factor, which can define the culture of *Angami* people is "honesty".

At a first glance *Angami* society appears as fragmented into many sub-groups. This is because *Angami* society is not confined to just one village or one small area but it spreads over many villages. Each of these villages maintains its own specific cultural

² *Terhuomia* is spirit as well as their God.

identity, which is not totally different from other *Angami* villages but slightly altered. However, if one dive deeper and look at these villages, one can understand that all these fragments are united and have something in common as a cultural identity that is the culture of honesty that stands tall and proudly contributes to the beauty of unity within the *Angami* society. The culture of honesty of *Angamis* does not only define their cultural identity but also defines their uniqueness from the rest of the Naga communities.

Angamis have been practicing honesty through the generations. In almost every aspect of their life, honesty is embedded. There is no clear historical data available as to how and why the practice of honesty has become a tradition of *Angamis*. However, one can observe and understand how it is practiced. If we carefully observe the people of *Angami*, we can understand how honesty is practiced in their everyday life in the following glimpses from everyday life of *Angami* people below.

Honesty among *Angamis* is a dominant force that not only unites them but also brings prosperity. This is the reason why absolute poverty is totally absent among these people. For example, houses of *Angami* people are usually kept unlocked, because it is commonly understood among the *Angami* people that stealing is not only considered as bad but they believe that it displeases God.

Another example is that while a person takes harvest from field to home and gets tired on the way then the person can leave it on the side of the road and can come and pick it up the next day without a fear of theft.

Further, *Angami* people love sports and games. They organize sports events time to time on certain occasions. Before going to play a game or a sport, the teams come together and pray to God that the event organized is fair and successful so that it brings glory to God. Praying to God is to make sure that every player is warned not to breach the rules of the game and maintain their honesty.

The above mentioned situations in everyday life of *Angami* people gives an impression that they maintain honesty in all the course of life. This culture of honesty among *Angami* people is actually nurtured by their moral conduct of taboo called *kenyü*. Anything that is *kenyü* is prohibited or taboo or considered as bad to practice. Therefore, anything that is *kenyü* displeases God. So, whoever displeases God, it is believed that he or she will never live a good life. *Angami* people take *kenyü* so serious that they have altered the patterns of their living accordingly so that they do not breach their moral conduct or *kenyü*. The following section gives a brief about *kenyü* and its role in the culture of *Angami* people.

Kenyü

The most important aspect in *Angami* culture is “*kenyü*” which means prohibition or taboo. What does it mean to say that something is *kenyü*? *Kenyü* prevents people from doing wrong. It is also the moral code of conduct they follow to live a good and harmonious life. *Kenyü* is the prohibition of an individual from doing wrong in the society. We say people in the society are bound by the rules and regulations of the state or the country. Here, the people are bind by taboo. The word *kenyü* itself has so

much weightage in the culture that hearing the word itself tells one that they should abstain from what is so called *kenyü*.

J.H. Hutton in his book “The *Angami Naga*” also writes that *kenyü* is used without any reference. He writes “so loose is the use of the word ‘*kenyü*’ that it may refer not only to the breach of the strict rule of a magico-religious observance or to the breach of a social law, theft for example, but to the most trivial matter of pure utility”. (The *Angami Naga* J.H.Hutton, page 190).

Hutton’s mention about *kenyü* is more of an outlook and less in detail. Hence, though Hutton’s writing about *Angami* culture is popular in academics, it is not adequate enough to draw parallel understanding of *kenyü*. Therefore, to understand the importance of *kenyü* in *Angami* culture one need to look in to its deeper meaning. The following section gives everyday practice of *kenyü* among *Angamis*.

How do they practice *kenyü*? To begin anything, it is *kenyü* to start without performing and offering ceremonies to God. When meals are served, a little bit of food is taken and offered to God. They pray and thank God for the food. To begin work, the eldest person prays and invoke blessings and perform rituals. *Kenyü* allows them to live with a fearful relation to God. They have the practice of *kenyü* for almost everything and some important practices of *kenyü* in their everyday lives are:

- i) It is forbidden to dis-respect elders even at sunset.
- ii) It is *kenyü* to raise hands on parents because that will allow danger and misfortunes in our lives.
- iii) It is *kenyü* to let elders serve our food unto our seat. This is because of the fear that it may cause paralysis to the person.
- iv) It is *kenyü* to accept bribes because it is wrong to accept what is not ours. It is believed whoever take bribes never had a good fortune and receives curse.
- v) It is *kenyü* to pay half the amount of wages to people who worked for us. This is because when they are half paid, the blessings that are meant for us will become theirs.
- vi) It is *kenyü* to eat cross-legged. This is because danger and emergencies in life often comes quick and they believe when one is cross-legged they usually meet accidents.
- vii) It is *kenyü* to re-locate boundaries. God had created the earth and our few days on earth cannot be celebrated by re-locating boundaries outside of our land. If one does that then they commits mistake in front of God and people and therefore punishment will definitely come. Therefore, there is *kenyü* of re-locating boundaries.

It is said there are more than 154 *kenyü* they observe and follow to live a good life. The ones just discussed are few to show how they live in accordance to following the rules of *kenyü*. It can also be seen that each *kenyü* is followed by a logical reason. An example as simple as this is, it is *kenyü* to eat chili leaves. Here, we can understand that there is nothing wrong in eating the leaf but when the leaves are eaten, the tree cannot bear fruit and it may not provide chili in abundance for the people. Therefore, its leaves are not eaten. However, all this has become prohibition and thus part of their daily life.

- viii) It is *kenyü* to marry in February, the month of darkness since such marriages will not be successful and they believe the couple often divorces because of marrying in a no moon month³.

The *Angamis* lived a simple yet a righteous life. They avoid whatever seemed wrong because of the fear that God will be displeased. Thus, they lived a morally good life and as mentioned above a fearful relation to god with *kenyü* as moral code of conduct.

The Advent of Modernity

The *Angami* culture is also so called defined by festivals and ceremonies that becomes an inherent part of their everyday life. The biggest festival they celebrate is “*Sekrenyi*” in February also called “*Kezei*” (darkness) in *Tenyidie*⁴. *Sekrenyi* is the festival of “*Phousanyi*”(purification). This is a festival and also a rites of “*nanyü*” (ritual ceremonies) involved to ensure health, hunting and agriculture of the community during the coming year. The men folks take part and they eat separately and remain chaste at least for three days. *Sekrenyi* also has as its object the prevention of illness for the coming year.

Sekrenyi is one among the most important part of their culture that they give the highest value. *Sekrenyi* also associated with “ritual ceremonies” has each different ritual to be performed on each day of the three-day *nanyü* and seven-day celebration. The ceremonies are: i) *Kizie* – on *kizie*, the men folks should go and clean the well after which women will not be allowed to draw water from the well. From now on, the men will keep a watch in the night to prevent women from drawing water. ii) *Sekre* – on the second day of *sekre*, all the man will go to the well to draw the sinked water. They will draw water in a new mug and wash six *zowhenyü*⁵ inside the mug. After washing, they will put the first leaf on the forehead, another one on the right arm, next on the chest, the next one on the left arm, the fifth on the right leg and lastly the sixth leaf on the left leg. The only thing they are doing here is break the *zowhenyü* on the body and says sicknesses and misfortunes are broken. After that they will draw fresh water and return home. iii) *Pruo* – on the third day after feasting at home all the men will get their shawl, dagger and spear in the afternoon and go beyond the village area and pray the “*sekresenuo*⁶” should come back soon. After observing this ceremony they will return home and by night cook and share food from the same pot as they do on other days. A man after completing *sekrenyi* believes his body is cleansed and will start everything securely.

However, with the advent of modernity the traditional culture has changed. Whatever they practiced was considered wrong now because it was their way of living. The practice of traditions are left behind and Christianity was embraced. “However, the acceptance of Christianity has not completely wiped out traditional animist belief and practice.” (Mathur. N, Religious Ethos of The *Angami Naga*. Pg.144). “When Christianity was introduced, the *Angami* received it rather slowly, and even at present,

³The Angamis have their own calendar counting and the month of February is supposed to be a no moon month. Therefore, it is called *kezei* (darkness).

⁴*Tenyidie* is the language they speak and *Angami* are the people.

⁵A plant that looks like a grass with sharp edges.

⁶Their prayer to the God that *sekrenyi* should return soon.

there is a sizeable number of *Angami* who practice traditional religion.” (Down Fredericks S, Christianity in North-East India, 1983. Pg.135-136).

Nevertheless, there is a new way of thinking that supposed the traditional way of living as old fashioned. The way of life, dressing and education has brought about change in the society.

According to Sanyü (1996): A history of Nagas and Nagaland-dynamics of tradition-village formation, among the many forces that came to penetrate north-eastern region along with the colonial rulers, introduction of Christianity was one which stood out in playing a major role in the process of modernization. He wrote if one responsible dynamic factor were to be singled out for an overall change in the life of the *Nagas*, it would undoubtedly be the introduction of Christianity among them. (Pg.115). He also said the introduction of education, the advent of Christianity and economic development had modernized the Naga society.

Though Christianity did not try to help preserve the traditional religion, it has helped the *Nagas* preserve their identity to function with the new society that modernization has brought about. According to Nuh (2002), Christianity had changed the outlook of the *Nagas*, which was limited to clans and villages. With its advent and introduction of education, the *Nagas* began to share a global view with the rest of the world. Pg.23. Singh (2008) observed that the Naga society, which was classless, has moved towards class-consciousness and undergone multifarious transformations on its way to modernization. (Pg.159-160).

Does that mean the old way of living was bad? It is not so. The deep rooted uniqueness of honesty defines them over the ages. However, culture is not constant and it changes according to time.

With a new way of life, the festival of *sekrenyi* is celebrated only on a day to commemorate the festivals but ceremonies and rituals are not practiced anymore. Thus, we can see that culture has changed. What remain unchanged is *kenyü*, taboo or prohibition that still allows them to refrain from doing what they believed was taboo to practice. For e.g. it is *kenyü* to cut hair after sunset, which is something people still find it wrong to practice hair cutting in the night. The practice of *kenyü* is still very much said to be prevalent because the elders and parents and even a religious leader would teach us not to do something because it is *kenyü*. Therefore, it can be understood that culture may change but the core practice of culture that defines its uniqueness may or may never change with change of time.

“The British paved the way for entry into Naga society by the Christian missionaries-with profound and far-reaching consequences. They brought a religion that was universal, to make the *Nagas* part of the larger human family. They brought education and introduced the roman script, and made communication easier between the *Naga* tribes as well as with the outside world. Tragically many of the early missionaries also treated Naga culture and traditional practices as ‘pagan’ and ‘evil’ and to be shunned. Although there are, signs of young, *nagas* wanting to revive their culture, for a long time it “simply linger(ed) on for exhibition to important visitors.” (Chasie Charles Nagaland in Transition, 2005. Pg.256).

Conclusion

Angamis may be identified by their traditional dressing patterns or specific dishes that they prepare or their language *Tenyidie*. Many cultural identities are altered or modified due to advent of modernity and Christianity. However, they have been constantly maintaining their culture of honesty with the help of moral conduct *kenyü*. Therefore, modernity and Christianity may have affected many aspects of *Angami* culture adversely, but they have only acted as complementary to their culture of honesty. Therefore, the culture of *Angamis*, though look modern at the periphery but remains traditional (in maintaining *kenyü*) at heart.

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