

The Traditional Religious Life of the Naga Tribes of Manipur

Dr. Ng. Mataisang

Assistant Professor

Pettigrew College, Ukhrul, Manipur, India – 795142

ABSTRACT

The term ‘Naga’ is a generic name whose actual meaning is not known beyond hypothetical interpretations put forward by various authors and researchers. It is the Britishers who gave the knowledge of the common Naga entity and collective notion of Naga community. There are twenty (20) different Naga tribes in Manipur. Ethnically, they are Mongoloids and linguistically belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. Though they do not have written record of their past history, yet they have rich oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. One of their traditions says that they came out of a cave/earth hole and took settlement over the surface of earth.

The Nagas has their own religion before the advent of Christianity to Manipur during the British rule in India. They were a religious and god fearing people. Their religion is a mixture of animism and theism. The main characteristics of their religion are animism, theism, naturalism, polytheism, totemism, taboo, myth, social custom, belief in dream and omen and stone worship. They had their own concept of God, concept of soul, concept of life after death and concept of sin.

The Nagas had two types of religious practitioners or functionaries, who performed the vital role in the religious ceremonies and functions of both for the community and individuals. They were the priest and the shamans. The Nagas did not have any house of prayer or worship like the church of the Christian and the temple of the Hindu. But their altars were the main place of their worship where offering were made. Offering, Prayer, rituals and genna were the main mode of the Naga traditional religious worship. The term ‘genna’ which can be best explained as ‘ban’ or ‘prohibition’ was the most important form of worship of the Nagas

In the past, the religious life of the Nagas was governed by belief in omens and dreams. They never venture any important task without good omen or dreams, e.g., a matrimonial engagement would not be settled or a marriage would not be contracted, a war would not be waged without positive/ good omen/ dream. Thus, in the past a Naga must consult omen or dream first before he undertook his plan and if the omen was not good, his ventured would be suspended until favourable omen or dream is found.

Key Words: Animism, genna, myth, polytheism, taboo and totemism.

1. Introduction:

The hill tribes of Manipur are divided into two ethnic groups viz, the Nagas and the Kuki- Chin- Mizos. The Naga tribes of Manipur are Anal, Mao, Poumai, Tangkhul, Zemei, Liangmei, Rongmei, Puimei, Moyon, Maram, Monsang, Maring, Tarao, Lamkang, Chothe, Kharam, Chiru, Koireng, Thangal and Angami (Ngalengnam 1916:17). In all there are about forty (40) tribes that constituted Naga community. The term ‘Naga’ is the generic name whose actual meaning is not known beyond hypothetical interpretation put forward by various authors and researchers. It is the Britishers, Who gave the knowledge of the common Naga entity and collective notion of Naga community during their colonial period in India. Earlier, the Naga tribes are known only by their respective tribe’s name, e.g, Mao, Maram and Angami. The Hill districts of Manipur – Ukhrul, Senapati, Chandel and Tamenglong are the main homes of Nagas in Manipur. Their settlement is also found in the valley of Imphal. As they speak different dialects, Manipuri is used as their lingua franca. Apart from Manipur and Nagaland, the Nagas are found in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Northern Myanmar. Ethnically they belong to Mongoloids and linguistically they come under the Tibeto-Burman family (Sarthek Sengupta 1993:213). They have patriarchal and patrilineal social system and hence the father is the head of the family and inheritances of property goes through male members alone. Every Naga village society is composed of several exogamous clans. The position of women in the society is lower than that of man. They are considered to be subordinate to man. They are model of labour and industry and are mainly valued on that account. They do everything which man does not do in the household.

Land and forest are the primary resources of the Nagas. Agriculture, both shifting and terrace cultivation is the basics of their agrarian economy. They maintain four types of land owning system: family land, village land, clan land and land own by the chief. In the past they followed Lunar Calendar. Traditionally, a rich man in the village based society of the Nagas is one who has sufficient food grains to last him and his family for one agricultural year and also can afford to share some with others when the need arises. In other words, food grains, which is the chief food of the Naga traditional wealth determines the economics position of an individuals. In the past every Naga village was socially and politically independent organised unit. A

Naga village has its own traditional administrative system under which the village chief and the village council is the only Supreme administrative organ. The Chieftainship of Naga Village is hereditary and is succeeded by the custom of primogenital. The Nagas of Manipur have one common traditional festival called 'Lui-Ngai-Ni' celebrate on February 15 of every year. On account of it, February 15 is general holiday in Manipur and the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India has also listed the festival as one of the tourist festival of India. They have also an old Tribal level Social Organisation called the United Naga Council (UNC) which stands for the strengthening of fraternity and unity among them as an ethnic community/group.

Though the Nagas do not have written record of their past history, yet they have a rich oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. One of their traditions says that they came out of a cave or earth hole and took settlement over the surface of the earth. This similar tradition of origin is found among almost all Nagas tribes. According to the Tangkhul version, they came out from a cave one by one, but a large tiger which was watching them devoured each of them as soon as they came out of the cave. Therefore, they took recourse to a stratagem. They dressed up one effigy of a man and threw it outside, thereby distracted the Tiger towards the object. Having done so, they rushed out of the cave and the tiger was greatly baffled to see the large crowd of people and it fled. In that way, they came out of a cave and spread themselves over the open space of the hills around. And to mark the occasions they set up a large stone on the top of the hills near the spot which is there to this day.

Scholars have now generally accepted that the Nagas of Manipur originated from North West China based on their ethnological and linguistic facts. And they entered their present habitats through North-West Myanmar.

2. Objectives of the present paper:

The main objective of present paper is an attempt to study the past religious life of the Nagas of Manipur before their conversion to Christianity and to discover the rich cultural heritage of the Nagas and to record it objectively in their history.

3. Methodology of the present paper:

The present research paper is mainly based primary sources on the Naga myths, traditions, and personal interview with aged person of the concerned tribe who were once professing their own religion before the advent of Christianity and subsequent conversion to the new religion (Christianity). Secondary sources like published works also used whenever necessary arises.

4. Results and Discussion:

a. Meaning of Religion:

So far there is no single definition of religion which is universally accepted, because people take the word to mean their own religion, regarding all other forms of religion as non-religion, irreligion, superstition or anti-religion. Hence, it is not an easy task to give a definition of religion which will satisfy everyone. In the broadest term, it may be best defined as the relationship between man and the super human power we believe in and feel ourselves to be dependent on.

In sociology the word religion is used in wider sense than that is used in religious books. A recent sociological work defines religion as those institutionalise systems of beliefs, symbols, values and practices that provide group of man with solutions to their questions of ultimate being. (Mehille J.Herkovits 1974:498)

Religion is instinctive to man. Man is the only religious being. From the time when he opened his eyes on this planet he has been desirous of knowing and being acquainted with the conscious power latent in nature. As and when he was compelled to face natural hardship and danger, storms, floods, lightning, epidemics, famines, deluge, scarcity, dangerous animal etc., man has looked up to some invisible power for some assistance, motivation, strength and help. Thus, this religious tendency awoke in man when he was gripped sometimes by fear and at other times by curiosity (Ram Nath Sharma 1989:45). Religion is found to have exercised the most profound influence on man's thought and culture since time immemorial. In all ages men hope that by the proper performance of religious actions or observance they would obtain some specific benefits like good health, long life, children, materials wellbeing, success in hunting, rain, good crops, victory in war etc.

b. Origin of religion:

The origin of religion remains hidden from human knowledge. Nowhere the evidences of its origin are found. There is a great deal of disagreement among thinkers on the origin of religion. Sociologist and anthropologist believe that the primitive man's imagination born out of fear and insecurity, mode of worship, beliefs and liturgy are instrumental in the development of modern organized religion. But it should be noted here that the origin of religion cannot be traced to a single element – fear, belief in impersonal power, rites and ceremonies or response to definite need. The beginning of religion is as old as the human consciousness. There is no primitive society which was without a religion. If religion is universal Phenomenon, it cannot be consider as an artificial state of human nature but as something permanently embedded in man psychology. Like other social institution religion also arouse from intellectual power of man in response to certain felt need of man or because of conditions accompanying his life on earth (Vidya Bushan 1980:503). Thus to speak of the historical origin of religion has no sense, because it is as old as mankind. Religion is a very ancient institution. It goes back to the beginning of human culture itself. But, it may be noted here that the Neolithic people were the first to conceive a real sense of religion (SC. Raychoudhry 1978:17).

c. Characteristics of the Nagas' religion:

The main Characteristics of the Naga religion of Manipur are animism, ancestor worship, stone worship, magic, mythology, naturalism, polytheism, taboo, totemism, social custom and dream and omen. They are briefly discussed as follows:

i. Animism:

It forms an important part of the Naga religion. The Naga traditionally believe that natural objects such as stones, trees, ponds, rivers, forests etc. are the abode of spirits which can cause various calamities such as epidemic diseases.

ii. Ancestor Worship:

Most of the Nagas of Manipur believed that the spirit of the dead ancestors had the power to shape the destinies of the living. They also believed that such spirit gave them protection from calamities. Therefore, they were worshipped in times of misfortune and trouble and for welfare.

iii. Stone Worship:

Stone worship was prevalent among the Nagas in the past. The stone worshipped by them consist of monoliths, cairns or heaps of stone, single smaller stones and flat stones. Such stones were worshipped as they were believed to be places where spirits dwelled. Among the Tangkhuls no one dared swear falsely on the heaps of stone kept at the courtyard of village chief. Human heads taken on raids was offered to the heap of stone.

iv. Magic:

Belief in magic forms a part of some of the Nagas traditional religion of Manipur. It may be mention here that a magical act is a rite carried out to twist nature in a specific way to satisfy human desire (K.P.Bahadur 1977:94). Some of the Nagas tribe of Manipur like Maring believed in Magic.

v. Mythology:

It forms an important part of the traditional religion of the Nagas of Manipur. The religious tradition has myth of various kinds.

vi. Naturalism:

It is the worship of nature and natural phenomenon. It is found in the Nagas religion as an important form.

vii. Polytheism:

In the Naga tradition religion, the divine power is identified with many powerful forces and deities which are believed to control events. Each deity has its own department and influence like a god of protecting the fields and crops another protecting the home, family, property and wealth and so forth. The Nagas had god of household, god of crops and field, goddess of the sky and so forth.

viii. Taboos:

Taboos form an important part of the Nagas' religion. They are the prohibitions enforced by fear or belief that some misfortune would come if the prohibition were not followed.

ix. Totemism:

It is a characteristic of the Naga religion. Totemism is a mysterious relation of man with some animal and/or plant.

x. Social Custom:

It is an important characteristics of the Naga traditional religion. In the past the Nagas believed and feared greatly that some terrible calamity would inevitably follow if their custom was violated.

xi. Concept of Gods:

The Nagas believed in the existence of a Supreme Being. He is the creator of the universe. He is called Asapavan by the Anals (Gangmumei Kabui 1985: 23), Raagong by the Rongmeis (G.Makuga 1934:93), Paramhaba by the Marams (Joseph Athikal 1992:120) and the Tangkhul call him by different names such as Reisang chonme, Arah, Kazing Ngalei etc. He is all powerful. Besides the Supreme Being, the Nagas also believed in the existence of many other supernatural beings some of which are benevolent and some are harmful to men.

xii. Concept of Soul:

The Nagas believed in the existence of soul in the body as a separate entity. Soul is invisible while the body is visible. The presence of soul in the body or their combination is conceived to be the source of life. They believed that at that soul leaves the body permanently. Soul is called 'mangla' in Tangkhul and 'pathakthe' in Anal. They believed that soul outlives the body. Many of them like the Anals, Maos, Maring etc. believed in rebirth of the soul of the dead. But only those good ones were believed to be reborn. Some of them believed that the souls of thieves would be turned into animals and those of the wicked would be annihilated. But some of them like the Tangkhuls did not believed in rebirth of soul after death, but they believed in the existence of another life at another place.

xiii. Concept of life after death:

The Nagas believed in the existence of another life after death. They believed that all the dead would go to a place and live there after death. But according to the Tangkhuls, those who die far away from home, by suicide, by tiger, women who died in childbirth etc. do not go to the land of the dead. The Anals, Zeliangrongs and Tangkhuls call the land of the dead 'Athokpam' or 'Tang sunbung', 'Taroilam' and 'Kazeiram' respectively.

xiv. Concept of Sin:

Sin in the views of the Nagas consist primarily of breaches of the unwritten laws of the society. They believe that some deliberate calamity will inevitably follow if any of their rule of taboo, custom, genna etc. are violated. The acts of stealing, adultery, cheating and deceiving, telling lies, betraying, encroaching by removing or altering boundary marks are viewed as sin. False witness is a serious in according to them. Such sin bring serious misfortune to the person concerned. They believed that betrayal of pledge brings death to the betrayer, those who commit adultery meet death in war and if somebody intends someone child's to die, his own child will die instead. A high standard of marital fidelity is maintained among them after marriage, unfaithfulness of marriage is a serious sin.

xv. Dream and Omen:

Belief in dream and omen or superstition form an important part of the traditional religion of the Nagas. In the past, the Nagas religious life was governed by the belief in the dream and omen.

Thus, the religious life of the Nagas before their conversion into Christianity was mainly based on honesty, morality and social custom.

d. Religious practitioners/functionaries among the Nagas:

In the past the Nagas had two types of religious practitioners or functionaries, who performed the vital role in the religious ceremonies and functions of both the community and the individuals. They were the priest and the shaman.

The priest:

The priests were the performers and masters of the rituals of the village community and thus they were well versed in their sphere. It may be noted here that there was no priestly class/clan among them as was the case with ancient Jews and Hindus. Usually their priests were chosen from among the old man of the village. The priest is called 'Sharva' in Tangkhul. Among the Tangkhuls the religious function were shared by them with the village chief. But most of the ceremonial sacrifices, religious worship etc. were performed by them alone. In return for their services, the priests were exempted from all compulsory active services of the village (Information collected from RS. Lungrei through personal interview of the present paper writer). Among the Tangkhul as a rule in every ritual killing of animals, especially buffalo it was the priest who would spear first the animal and only then others could join in the process of killing the animals. Besides the village priest, they had also their own respective clan priest who performed the religious ceremony of the particular clan and in the case of family the head (father) of the family performed the domestic religious ceremonies or worship.

The Shaman:

A shaman was the medicine man/sorcerer/witch doctor called 'Khunong' in Tangkhul. Such men possessed healing power and they treated illness. The medicine man or witch doctor played a role even higher than the priests, for a priest was a mere man of age who performed sacrifices for the people. A medicine man among the Nagas prescribed the kinds of the articles to be offered. They were believed to be accompanied by a supernatural spirit known as 'shu' in Tangkhul (T. Luikham 1996:84). They prescribed the animal sacrifice for the cure of the illness.

The Shaman among the Tangkhuls was of different kinds with different power. While some of them had the power to call in soul, some made use of jungle herb as medicine, some other had the power to go to the land of the dead in spirit and talk to the dead and some other foretold the future events. Those who foretell the future events are called 'maran khunong' in Tangkhul. Dreams and omen were also interpreted by them.

In the past some of the Tangkhul Shamans served as a messenger between the living and the dead. So the living and the dead could communicate through the shamans. The shamans of the Tangkhuls had also the power to show the face of the dead to the living members of the family concerned. It was done by means of huge wooden basin filled with clean and clear water in which the dead would appear in living form. This practice is called 'khongthengra khayang' in Tangkhul.

Thus, the Shamans played a very important role in the religious life of the Nagas by performing various miraculous acts.

e. Worship of Gods:

The Nagas did not have any house of worship or prayer like the church of the Christian and the temple of the Hindus. But their altars were the main places of their worship where their offerings were made to their gods. Their altars were simple structures made of two or more stones of which one was erected vertical (Information collected from RS.Lungrei through personal interview of the present paper writer). The altar was called 'hanphutpam' in Tangkhul. Their altars were kept as most sacred and no one dare to defile them.

Offering, prayer, rituals and genna are the main mode of worship in the tradition religious life of the Nagas.

Genna:

It was an important form of worship of gods of the Nagas. The term 'genna' can be best explained as 'ban' or 'prohibition'. It was observed by the village community as a whole and also by the families individually. Thus, genna was of two kinds' viz., village wide genna and individual family genna. They are briefly discussed as follows:

The Village-wide genna:

A village-wide genna was a collective form of worship of the entire village community. They had periodical and occasional gennas. Most of their periodical gennas were connected with the rice cultivation. The Tangkhuls observed such six gennas annually. The first genna of its kind of the year was observed in the first three days of the 'Luirra phanit' (seed sowing festival) (RR. Shimray 1985:143), the second was observed when the paddy was about to be sown for five days, the third when the rice was about to be transplanted for two days, the fourth was held when the transplantation was over lasting of two days,

the fifth one was observed when the harvest was about to begin for two days and the last genna was held after the completion of the harvest two days (T.C Hodson 1989:168). Thus, every stage of rice cultivation was marked by a village genna. These gennas were invocation and prayer for the protection and prosperity of the crops. The Maos had four gennas connected with crops, the Marams observed six gennas for crops and the Koirangs had four crops gennas (T.C Hodson 1989:170).

In some of the villages which had no terrace field, the first genna was held when they were ready to start felling the jungle for jhums, the second when the jungle was all ready to be fired, the third when the rice was to be sown and the last when the rice was about to be harvested. According to T.C Hudson, about five gennas of crops were found among the kabuis. The first named 'Faidoutingam' occurred before the jungle was cut and lasted for one day. The second genna called 'Taissipa', lasting for two days, at which no stranger might be present, was held before sowing. The third one known as 'pluphoi' genna followed when the crop was about a foot high of its growth. The fourth genna named 'Nakonna' lasting for one day was observed before harvest and lastly, a genna called 'Pumthummai' was celebrated for one day at the end of the harvest.

During the genna observation, all kinds of daily activity – hunting, fishing, tree and grass cutting, weaving, pot making, salt working, games of all kinds, bugling, dancing all trade – were forbidden, lest all grains in the ear be lost (T.C Hodson 1989:167-168). The village was closed and no outsider was allowed to enter the village and at the same time no one of the village could also go beyond the village gate during the genna. It was feared that the outsider were supposed to bring evil and external influences and thus pollute the sanctous atmosphere of the village. The village thus remind shut up within its bounds during village gennas. T.C Hudson may be quoted here who writes "... the village remains shut up during the two days and so no one is allowed either entry or exit and it is also affirmed that anyone attempting to force an entrance during this period would be liable to be killed". (T.C Hodson 1989:165).

The occasional village gennas were observed when any calamity occurred in the village or in a neighbouring village. Thus, a Naga village was genna whenever an epidemics disease spread in the village or in a neighbouring village, burning of the village or neighbouring village occurred and a man of the village was killed by tiger. The observation of such gennas were the intention of preventing the calamity from further happening. It was customary among the Maos to hold a village genna at every time a villager died. A Naga village was also gennas when the village warriors returned home with human head from raid. In such a case the women were strictly forbidden to have any kind of relation with the warriors for three days consecutively after return.

The household gennas:

Unlike the village gennas, the household gennas were held only by a single family. It was customary for a Tangkhul family to be genna when a child was born – six days for male and five days for female. They were also occasioned by event of the birth of domestic animal in the house. During a household genna no outsider was allowed to enter the house for fear of causing harm to the baby.

f. Dream and omen:

The Nagas believed that gods indicated the future through dream and omen, and hence, were believed to be an unerring presage of the future. Therefore, in the past the Nagas particularly the Tangkhuls never venture any important task without good omen or dream. In the past, a matrimonial engagement was not settled or a marriage was not contracted, a war was not waged without a positive/favourable omen / dream. Thus, in the past a Naga must consult omen or dream first before he undertook his plan and if the omen was not positive, his venture /enterprises would be suspended until favourable omen or dream was found.

The Tangkhuls had various means by which they consulted omens to ascertain /divine their near future. The popular means were 'harkho khayang', 'kapa khayang', 'chikren khangana', 'mang khangana', 'hara khayang', 'makho khayang', 'rihai' and 'kagingramli kashok bingli khamachut'.

Harkho Khayang:

It was one of the most popular practices/means of taking omen by means of chicken's feet to divine the success or otherwise of any enterprise to be undertaken. A chicken was killed by holding tightly by the neck with hand and the position of the feet was observed carefully. If the right foot crossed over the left, the omen was believed good/positive and in such a case the proposed enterprise would be certainly successful, but the opposite i.e. that is crossing of the left foot over the right was a bad omen which was an indication of failure

Kapa Khayang:

It was another popular method/means of omen taking by means of bamboo. They took a bamboo or cane and split it suddenly and if the fracture be regular without any overlapping strands, the omen was good and the venture would be fortunate or successful. This first two means of omen taking were mainly employed in cases of wars, matrimonial engagement, buying of paddy field, construction of new house and hunting.

Chikren Khangana:

It means listening to the cry of a little bird called 'Chikren' in Tangkhul. The Tangkhuls took omens by means of the tone of its cry to divine one's fate of the day. In the past a Tangkhul Naga on journey must return home immediately even if he was at the point of preaching the destination if the omen indicated by the cry of this bird was not good.

Mang Khangana:

It means seeking or taking of omen by means of dream. This means of omen taking was employed when the consent of deity was sought for various purposes like collecting of wooden materials from forest for construction of dwelling house, giving name to baby and so forth. Here, T.C. Hudson may be quoted "...dreams are often the sole means employed in deciding a child's name..." (T.C Hudson 1989:134).

Dreams were believed by the Nagas as the divine revelations of the future and their fate. To dream of a spear when seeking a name for a boy was good and conversely bad when the child was a girl. The appropriate dream when naming a daughter was of a stick. To climb a hill was fortunate, while to go downhill was warning of death. To dream that on a journey a bridge was crossed safely meant that luck would attend all enterprises undertaken. Among the Tangkhuls a man who was attacked by buffalo in dream would lose any law suit in which he happened to be involved at that time. To dream that a tooth falls out and was lost was an omen of an early death in the family.

Hara Khayang:

It was another means of omen taking by means of egg. This was employed mainly in selecting the site for jhum cultivation of the year.

Makho Khayang/kazang:

It was another important means of omen taking to divine the coming year which was consulted once in a year at the altar place or Makho of the village chief. A well covered empty earthen pot without any crack was buried under the earth and it was unearthed when 'Laira phanit' (seed sowing festival) came and the pot was opened. When it was opened if the inside of the pot was found wet, the coming year would be rainy, but if the same was found dry it was believed that there would be scanty of rain in the coming year. Any insect in the pot was a portent of epidemic disease in the village, stain of blood was a presage of war, green leaves and grains were a sign of good harvest and pests were a presage of crop failure and famine.

Rihai:

It was a small black round stone kept in a pile of stone in the courtyard of the village chief (T.S Zingnim 2000:9) from where omen was read by the village warriors whenever they had to go for war or raid. Stain of blood on the stone was a presage of success in the raid/war (T.Luikham 1961:84-85).

Kazingramli Kashok bingli Khamachut:

It was the observation of the heavenly phenomenon. When the sun was circled by rainbow it was believed that chief of a certain village would die.

5. Findings:

The Nagas had their own religion before their conversion to Christianity. They were a God fearing and religious people. The traditional religions of the Nagas of Manipur is a mixture of theism and animism. Their religion is one of the most ancient religions. They used all their domestic animals in sacrifices to their gods. The traditional religious life of the Nagas was full of expensive sacrifices and superstitious ritual practices. The purpose of their worship of gods was for the welfare of their material life and safety and longevity of life rather than spiritual upliftment and salvation. Honesty, morality, social custom, taboo and genna are the basis of their religious life. Their religious life was governed by superstitious beliefs in various omens and dreams. As a result, they never undertook anything of importance without positive omen or dreams. They have a rich cultural heritage.

6. Conclusion:

The Nagas of Manipur were a religious and a god fearing people. Their moral life was of high standard. They believed in plurality of god. Their religion was one of the most ancient religions characterised by animism, ancestor worship, mythological beliefs, polytheism, belief in dreams and omens, taboo, totemism and social custom. They continued to follow this form of religion or traditional religious system till they embraced Christianity in the last decade of the 19th (nineteenth) century. Some of their social custom, morality, tradition, and cultural are retained till present day after their conversion to Christianity.

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