

Traditional Belief System and Health Practices of Tribal People: A Case of the Naga People in Northeast India

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Abstract: Belief constitute the totality of an individual's knowledge, including what people consider as facts, opinions, or hypotheses, as well as faith. Individuals in a society have specific beliefs, but they also share collective values. Religious beliefs and concepts are expressed in the form of symbols and rituals that influence the individual, and communicate one's attitude towards the world of nature, and one's fellow beings. Traditionally, the Naga people of Nagaland in Northeast India had a concept of belief in God and spirits embodying both malevolent and benevolent characteristics. Nagas considered benevolent spirits to be responsible for man's well being and blessings, whilst malevolent spirits were responsible for causing suffering to man. Accordingly, the health care activities of the Nagas are embedded in the traditional beliefs, customs, folklore, taboos, prescription, etc. enacted through healers/medicine-man. Healing rituals employed for invoking the intervention of supernatural forces are an integral component of the treatment procedure. As such at every step of life they put religion into action in such ways as sacrifices, performance of rites and abstention from routine chores. The study indicates that the primary conception of traditional Naga belief converged on three aspects, that is, to escape the wrath of malevolent spirits from disease and death, to ward off the evil spirits through pacification, and conciliation to maximize good harvest and win their good will.

Key words: *Appeasement; lycanthrope; Nagas; omens; spirits; taboos.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Belief systems have been a feature of cultures throughout human history and also an integral aspect of indigenous cultures. Beliefs are the tenets or conviction that people hold to be true. Beliefs have been viewed by psychologists as units of cognition. They constitute the totality of an individual's knowledge, including what people consider as facts, opinions, or hypotheses, as well as faith. Individuals in a society have specific beliefs, but they also share collective values. The term belief is the social experience which members in society usually experience from shared knowledge and idea through the use of common sense to interpret the basic social facts in certain ethnic group. They consist of fables, proverbs, myths, folklore, traditions, superstition, education, etc. that influence the ideas, values, emotions, perceptions and attitude of the member of the society. Thus, a belief system is an ideology or set of principles that helps people to interpret their everyday reality. This could be in the form of religion, political affiliation, philosophy, or spirituality, among many other things (Teasley, n.d.). They not only respond to human needs for reassurance in times of trouble and for averting misfortune but also provide rituals that bring spiritual healing and address the major passages and transitions in human life (UN, 2009). They are commonly associated with religion.

Religion occupies a central place in the life of most people and influences the cognitive, co-native and volitional aspect of man. Therefore, for the indigenous people, the total or whole being of a person comes under the purview of religion. All religions have an ordered system of beliefs and ideas. Religious beliefs and concepts are expressed in the form of symbols and rituals that influence the individual, and communicate one's attitude towards the world of nature, and one's fellow beings. Ceremonies and rituals which are the expression of beliefs and ideas can be better understood after considering the beliefs systems of the people (Imchen, 1993). Although indigenous beliefs and cultural practices vary according to region, all groups tend to show some important similarities. These similarities appear not in the specifics of the belief system but rather in its overall nature. Indigenous religion or belief systems develop explanations of the world and its origins based on the characteristics of their region. Most indigenous religions believe in a Supreme Being, a God, whether male or female, who created the world and is responsible for the way the world works. Some believe in multiple Gods, where they also tend to believe that the natural world is full of spirits who control the weather, the success of a hunt, and illness. Shamans and diviners are believed to be able to read signs of the natural order, communicate with the spirits, and understand the future and the will of the God or Gods. The shaman are priests or priestesses who are perceived to have strong connections to the spiritual world and use that connection to help other and the diviners are people who can read signs in nature to determine things such as the future events. The indigenous people have strong ecological beliefs as people try to live in harmony with the natural order. The indigenous religions, instead of being formal institution tend to be an undefined part of everyday life.

2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The North Eastern region of India is home to myriad tribal and other ethnic groups. Their cultures are still in perfect harmony with, and spiritually tuned to nature. The religious practices, folklores and cosmologies of most of these indigenous societies maintain a conservationist ethos in order to sustain their natural resource base (Guite, 2011). It is noteworthy that many of the tribal communities as a rule, living amidst unspoilt forested hilly regions successfully managed healthy and active lives aided by their own healthcare practices based on sound environmental and cultural ethics. The health care activities are embedded in the traditional beliefs, customs, folklore, taboos, prescription, etc. enacted through healers, shamans, priests, medicine-man,

magicians etc. (Guite, 2014). Healing rituals employed for invoking the intervention of supernatural forces are an integral component of the treatment procedure. Each tribe has their own unique way of traditional healthcare system that has been handed down from generation to generation orally. Such is the case with the Nagas as well. However, the traditional knowledge on healing practice is gradually being corroded from their culture and the values, social institutions and subsistence pattern have undergone vital transformation due to the influence of modernization. This necessitates the proper systematic study and documentation of the traditional beliefs system related to its health care so that these age-old cultures are not lost.

3. TRADITIONAL BELIEF SYSTEM OF THE NAGA PEOPLE

Prior to the advent of Christianity in the Naga Hills, the Naga tribes were basically animists with no outstanding difference in their religion from one tribe to another. They neither had a founder nor a great historical person to be centred around. Rather, it was centred on earth and creations. The dichotomy of the sacred and the secular or the spiritual and the material, was unknown in the traditional Naga religion (Shikhu, 2007). They were very religious by nature manifested through series of rituals and rites in all processes of life. For instance, they minutely observed certain rituals and *genna*, which means abstaining from going or doing anything on certain occasions and only when there were good signs, then only they go ahead with their cultivation. An essential part of their ritual was to offer animal sacrifice, fowls or eggs to the God or spirits during feasts and festivals. When they offered sacrifice, they appealed to God with sayings like so:

“Today we make an offering to you with this mithun, pig, dog, fowl or eggs; may there be rain or no rain today or tomorrow; may everything go well; may all our men and women flourish, give us good crops” (Nshoga, 2009).

The Nagas were spirit worshippers. The universe to them was peopled with innumerable spirits, the majority of whom were malignant. These multitudes of spirits besides inhabiting all the likely places were also found lurking in the queerest places. There were spirits in the forest, stream, house, bushes, and fields and of course in the village itself. These lurking spirits were believed to be capable of bringing untold misery and ill luck to the mortals who might even unwittingly offend them. They also believed that they might ruin crops, cause sicknesses, famine, cattle epidemics, death of infants and expectant mothers and other such misfortune (Kath & Thong, 2011). It is evident hence, that the Nagas had a concept of belief in God and spirits, which did not affect the society directly but influenced them in the form of malevolent and benevolent characteristics. Therefore, they took shelter under religious observances and tried to placate the angry spirits, ward off the evil ones and please the one that could be, as per their belief, by rituals, offering, prayers and sacrifices (ibid). The Nagas had a well established and systematised form of religious beliefs and practices which are discussed in the following sections:

3.1. Of Supreme Being and Spirits

The Nagas believed in the existence of a Supreme Being, the spirit God, who created everything. This manifestation was expressed through their traditional myths, songs and folklore. It has provided them with a clear understanding of the living world in which they are an integral part (Martemjen & Lkr, 2014). The Supreme Being has different names among the different Naga tribes. The Ao Nagas call it *Lijaba*, the Semas refer to it as *Alhou*, the Angami Nagas *Ukepenuopfu*, the Lothas call it *Potso*, and the Konyak call it as *Hahzang*. All these concepts and terms denote the Supreme Being as ‘Creator’, who created everything for the good of the universe and humankind. A unique aspect of their belief was that creation was not external to the Supreme Being but he was an integral part of creation. They perceived the Supreme Being as a male and benevolent God, who visited their village and homes from time to time, eating rice and drinking rice beer with the inhabitants. He is merciful to those who allow him to enter their homes and invite him to stay with him; however he brings wrath to those who do not welcome him. Thus, the visitation of the Supreme Being always accompanies unusual blessings as well as curses (Vashum & Longchar, 1998).

To the Nagas, the Supreme Being represents the manifestation of the unseen divine power behind every creation and all productive activity of men and the destiny of humankind (Kath & Thong, 2011). Some Nagas perceived the Supreme Being as the Creator of the whole universe while for some he is the spouse of the land and some perceived him as in dweller of the soil. The Supreme Being showers blessing through the land, works through the land and reveals through the land (Longchar, 1997). He appeared in every being, beckoned in every relationship and bursts forth in every ecosystem. Likewise, people cannot celebrate and worship the Supreme Being without creation. Their festivals, ceremonies, worships, prayers, rituals and dances were all directly interrelated and centred on the soil (ibid). The Nagas did not erect temples for the Supreme Being. As he is an integral part of creation, he cannot be restricted to any location of the earth. This explains why the Nagas see the dynamic and active presence of the Supreme Being in all creation, including the wind, sun, trees and rivers (Dudek, 2008). The Supreme Being’s goodness and activity were also seen in his averting calamities, supplying rain, providing fertility to people, cattle, fields and so forth.

The Nagas also believed in the existence of spirits, which occupies the core of the tribal religion. They believed in different gods for different social and spiritual needs such as god for home, for wealth, for forest, for rivers and lakes and mountains etc (Martemjen & Lkr, 2014). There were different types of spirits, both benevolent and malevolent and some even indifferent. Benevolent spirits were generally thought to be responsible for the welfare and prosperity of humans. They not only guard and protect the village from the wrath of the nature such as disease, drought, destruction of crops in the field from wild animals and natural calamities but also brought abundant harvest and blessings. Malevolent spirits on the other hand were thought to be dangerous and destructive to human affairs. These spirits were believed to reside everywhere, on the road side, in the fields, outside the village, rivers, ponds, trees and stones. It is believed that all kinds of human sufferings such as damage to properties, diseases, sicknesses, and accident of various kinds, madness and even sudden death were caused by these spirits. Traditionally, springs, lakes, marshy land were supposed to be the abode of spirit of sickness. Generally chicken, eggs, ginger, charcoal and metals were proffered to these spirits as propitiation so that they may not bring disease and sicknesses to man (ibid). Thus, worship of spirits and sacrifices to the malevolent spirits played an integral part in the Naga religious system.

3.2. Omens, Divinations and Dreams

For the Nagas, natural phenomena were not just mere objects, but they were living and dynamic. All wisdom, knowledge and understanding came to them through observing the signs and listening to the voices of the nature. The Nagas believed that all the natural objects and living creatures were believed to be the gifts endowed and symbols used by the Supreme Being to disclose or reveal his works to the people. Therefore, the people tried to listen to the voices of nature and remain sensitive to the message from the mystery beyond. Consequently, the idea and belief in omens, divination and dreams have a tremendous impact on the lives of the people (Dudek, 2008). They not only look for strength, guidance and inspiration but also all important direction and decision in life were expected to be in consonance with the signs of omens, divination and dreams (Longchar, 1995). Omen is perceived as any phenomenon which is believed to have supernaturally inherent potent. They meticulously observed the omens before undertaking any major advent such as farming, going on a journey, war or hunting etc.

Omens predicted the future events through divination. Divination is an act, practice or performance to know the divine will, that is, to know the future of a person or hidden meaning of a certain object and its interpretation as a divine revelation of the supernatural being (Kath & Thong, 2011). Through divination, the Nagas sought to assess whether undertakings such as hunting or fishing was worthwhile or whether any war or headhunting expeditions would be successful or not. They also tried to ascertain the reasons for anybody's illness by divination. Among the Nagas, divination by strangling a cock was one of the most common practices. To do this, a cock's throat was slit open and its blood was sprinkled around the ground or any object invoking the name of the Spirit or spirits. When the cock dies, the diviner examines the position of the legs and the way it excretes. If the right leg was placed over the left, it was assumed to be a good omen but if it happened to be opposite, it was perceived to be a bad omen. Again, if the legs rested parallel to each other then it was also assumed to be a good sign, but it indicates danger if it is not parallel. Eggs were also used for purpose of divination by examining the yoke in order to ascertain whether a sick person would be cure or not, or to predict impending dangers of drought or natural calamities. Some tribes also used it to determine the direction where cultivation was to be done that year. Additionally, bamboo was also used for divination and the signs read by splitting and observing its fibres. This was done to detect sickness, loss of properties and so forth (Longchar, 1995).

Nagas were profound believers in their dreams to the extent that no adventure or daily chores were carried out if they were hag-ridden on the previous night for they believed that it was a prescient about the premonition on their life (Nshoga, 2009). Dreams are interpreted to common conceptual belief and predict immediate or distant future (Imchen, 1993). The Nagas believed that while asleep, human soul wanders with their ancestors' spirits or other supernatural spirits during which time the spirits conveyed any impending dangers as also the blessings to come in the future. For the Nagas therefore, dreams were revelations of divine will which foretold one's fate, danger, fortune, blessing and direction (ibid).

3.3. Taboos and *Genna*

The term 'taboo' originated from Polynesian tongue *tabu* and in Maori *tapu*, whereby literally *ta* means mark and *pu* means exceedingly or mark exceedingly of social prohibition. It means forbidden or prohibition of an action or things that is not permitted and approved by social mores and put under the control of social activities from normal life or the use of an object based on ritualistic distinctions of either as being sacred and consecrated or as being dangerous, unclean accursed. It was from this context that the term taboo is implicated as *genna* probably, which is believed to have been derived from an Angami word *kenna*, meaning prohibition (Kath & Thong, 2011). The term taboo and *genna* are so close and in many instances inter-woven, so much so that observation of one leads to the other at the same time. However, the basic difference is that taboo implies prohibition on something that is regarded for religious or other reasons as not to be done, touched, used, speak etc. while *genna* applies to abstaining oneself from going to fields and work on certain occasions (Martemjen & Lkr, 2014). Strict observance of taboos and *genna* were a guiding principle in the life of the Nagas. Taboo is a prohibition which, if violated, leads to supernatural anger or penalty such as sickness, injuries or even premature death etc. Imposition and observation of a taboo is not the application of established rules and regulations, but it is just a reduction of normal activities into a temporary halt, so as to propitiate the spirits to obviate from its wrath to utter destruction of lives and property (Nshoga, 2009). Majumdar (1961) takes the religious side of taboo as safeguard ritual operations to protect religious persons and places of worship and prevent irreligion from spreading (in Rai & Vidyarthi, 1976). Like other tribal people, the Nagas believed that certain stones, trees, jungles and rivers cannot be touched as they are thought to have supernatural powers and touching them would invite calamities or destruction to the individual or to the society as a whole (Dudek, 2008). This phenomenon was alluded to by Sir James George Frazer (1957) when he wrote:

"Hence, this belief in the noxious and infectious nature of certain personal qualities or accidents has given rise to a number of prohibitions of rules of avoidance: people abstain from doing certain things lest they should homoeopathically infect the fruits of the earth with their own undesirable state or condition. All such customs of abstention or rules of avoidances are examples of negative magic or taboo."

For the Naga people, there were taboos against offending the gods, spirits, cutting sacred trees, killing of animals at certain stages of life, failing to contribute to a sacrifice etc. For instance, hunting, killing and keeping traps were forbidden during the breeding seasons. Killing of pregnant animals and birds and during gestation was a taboo, for by doing so it would bring misfortune to the hunter and his family (Martemjen & Lkr, 2014). It was a taboo for man to kill any wild animals, snakes etc., when his wife is pregnant otherwise the child would resemble the animal killed by her husband. The whole village was restricted to kill any kind of animals during the taboo period as they believed that it would bring calamity to the whole village community. Again, when it comes to agriculture, sexual activities before clearing jungle, sowing seeds or other crucial work in the field was a taboo which was strictly observed in order to ensure healthy food crops and abundant harvests.

It was a taboo for a pregnant Naga woman to eat cross-bred fruits, for by doing so it was believed that the child would be unhealthy. A pregnant woman was advised not to take any twin fruits like double banana, papaya etc. similar to the Native American cultures as it was thought to increase the likelihood of giving birth to a twins. They were also forbidden to eat certain animal meats such as monkey, gibbon, bear, black crow, tortoise, crabs etc., for fear that the child would imitate the behaviour such abominable animals, resulting in deformity and disability after the birth. It was a taboo for tattooed Naga women to eat frogs, crabs, eggs and certain fishes and meat in the belief that this would turn the tattoo marks into deadly sores. For children, it was a taboo to eat the flesh of owl, crow etc. as they believed that doing so the child will grow abnormal. It was a taboo for warriors to eat food cooked by their womenfolk, when they go for a raid and after they return from the war, lest they would be killed by the enemies (Nshoga, 2009). Altar or religious platforms were forbidden for children and women too as they believed that it would result in a death in the family.

Moreover, sexual abstinence between husband and wife was strictly observed for six months before and after war. Such taboo was also observed when one declared feast of merit, where an individual host a feast for the entire community in declaration of being a rich man in the village (Imchen, 1993). From the day of announcement until the day of the feast, strict taboos were observed by the host and he may not receive anything given by others; the meat of the *mithun*, the pigs or hens which were to be killed for the feast was taboo too for the individual. Frazer has noted in reference to the Naga people back in 1911 that among some of the hill tribes of Assam both the headman and his wife have to observe many taboos in respect of food; thus they would not eat buffalo, pork, dog, fowl or tomatoes;¹ in one group of tribes the headman is forbidden to eat in a strange village, and under no provocation whatever may he utter a word of abuse. Apparently, the people imagine that the violation of any of these taboos by a headman would bring misfortune on the whole village (Frazer, 1911). Thus, the whole idea of prohibition on work, sex, eating habits etc. was to avert the wrath of malevolent spirits which was the essence of Naga primal religion.

The custom of *genna* too played an important role in the social and religious life of the Nagas. The traditional Naga religion was full of ceremonies and sacrifices. There were individual or household and public ceremonies throughout the year. Every ceremony was followed by *genna*, which was observed before and after every ceremony (Lanunungsang & Jamir, 2005). During *genna*, the people affected are supposed to abstain from all work, in some case, even restricted from eating or entertaining guests and nothing is taken out or brought into the house or village. It includes a series of ritual acts which may affect an individual, a single household, exclusively men or women groups or even the entire village. Failure to observe or misconduct of *genna* is believed to lead to tragedy or misfortune. As a result, no ceremony was performed without strict observance of *genna* to avoid misfortune. *Genna* was observed at the time of preparation for head hunting or animal hunting expeditions, feast of merit, sowing and harvesting crops harvesting, birth of a baby, the rise of new moon, death of important personality or chiefs, unnatural death of a person such as those killed by wild animals, or cases of drowning, etc. Whilst the individual *genna* was performed during childbirth in the family, birth or death of domestic animals and so forth, the village or community *genna* were observed during sowing, reaping, festivals, religious ceremonies, natural calamities etc.

The observance of community *gennas* were invariably announced by the priestess or the village chief, but in the case of individual, family or clan *genna*, it was observed according to the convenience of the concerned. The purpose of community *genna* was to invoke fertility for the agricultural crops. When the agricultural operation begins, *genna* was observed by the village men to mark the selection of new *jhum* field to be cultivated by the entire villagers. On this day, no village men would engage in woodcarving, matting, peeling the bamboo thongs, husking, spinning, weaving, sewing and all the household handicrafts.

The observance of *genna* was applied to all beings regardless of whether they are human or animal for the Nagas considered domestic animals as a part of the family. Hence, if a calf was born or new litter of pigs or chickens were hatched in the house, the whole household observed *genna* to preserve, dedicate and welcome the life of the new born calf, piglets and chickens. A period ranging from three to six days was devoted to care and welcome the animals. Similarly, no guests could be entertained for five or six days if a household has a new born baby or at times of death. Thus, *genna* possesses serious social and religious attributions and was believed to produce positive effects. Therefore, it was to be strictly observed in order to avoid unwanted consequences upon one's life which may come through fellow beings in the society or from supernatural forces (Martemjen & Lkr, 2014).

3.4. Soul and the Land of Dead

The Nagas even in the pre-Christian era believed in the existence of soul. A soul is the spiritual or immaterial part of human being, distinct from the physical part often regarded as immortal. Some Naga tribes believed that every person has three souls each while some believed in two souls each. For instance, the Ao Nagas believed that there is one soul in a person's eyes, which is believed to travel from the body to the 'Land of Dead' at the time of death. It was believed that the second soul lives in the form of either a tiger or wildcat or locust or rat, which on the death of a person either dies or escapes death and live elsewhere. While, the third soul is a hawk, which on the death of that person, flies to the 'Land of the Dead' along with the person and becomes the messenger between the dead and the living family members (Imchen, 1993). Some Nagas believed that the dead person's soul does not immediately depart the corpse after the death but it remains in the house till the disposal of the body. While, some believed that it remains till the annual festival, whereby during such period, food is often served to the soul on the grave and after the festival, the soul is believed to leave the village and goes to the 'Land of Dead'. This belief is said to be maintained by the Rengma Nagas which can be observed through the fact that during the *Ngada* festival, which is celebrated just after the harvest, the third day of the event is set aside for dead soul. On this particular day, meat and rice beer are served on the grave, to mark the farewell or separation between the dead souls and the living. They believed that the souls of all the people who die before the *Ngada* festivals remain in the village and only after the festival they go to the 'Land of Dead' (Nshoga, 2009). They also have a custom of burying the belongings of the deceased along with the body in the belief that those materials will be needed by the soul in the next world.

The Nagas also believed that the dead souls induce the living souls who are whisked away into the jungle and causes premature death. If a dead soul appears frequently in dreams, it is believed that the dead soul is visiting them to take away the living soul to the 'Land of Dead' (ibid). Sometimes when a person returned sick from the field or jungle or where he has worked, it was feared that his soul had not returned with him. This phenomenon was considered as 'spirit possession' by the Nagas. At such times, a sorcerer or a diviner was consulted and when it was ascertained that his soul has been captured by some evil spirit, a fowl was taken to the spot by the relatives of the sick person and was released as a ransom to the captive soul. The sacrifice was usually performed by the eldest man in the group by saying such words like, "take this hen instead of the person and release the soul immediately". He then calls out at the top of his voice the name of the sick person and tells him to follow them home. After that, they return back home slowly in silence making sure not to talk with anybody on the way back, with the belief that the missing soul is following them. The healing through soul calling was believed and practiced by all the Nagas and it was considered as one of the most popular Christian science known to the Nagas (ibid).

They also harboured belief of a heavenly home where the souls of men eternally lived. The Nagas believed that this life was temporary whereas heaven was everlasting and eternal (Aier & Bendangangshi, 1997). According to the Ao Nagas, when a man dies, his soul goes to that eternal home of the souls called *Kodakli* or *Tipuli*. As he enters, he first crosses over a stream of bitter water called *Longritzu* and then he enters into the land of *Meyutsungba*, who was considered as the God of truth and justice and final judge between life and death. But just on the entry, there is a big tree called *Sungtidong* standing and every individual soul must throw his spear, if it is a male and for a female, she must throw her weaving batten called *alem* in Ao Naga dialect at this tree. It is said that for those, who have lived a righteous life on earth could hit the tree whereas, for the ones, who lived an unrighteous life would miss it (ibid). It was believed that the individual soul carries with him a load of whatever he did in his earthly life. The righteous men will find their burden light whilst for thieves, dishonest and crooked, the burden will be heavy. Having crossed the *Longritzu*, carrying his load which was heavy or light according to his ethical and moral earthly life, the dead man reaches the gate of *Meyutsungba* (Imchen, 1993). The righteous souls, who could hit the tree of judgment with his spear or the batten were permitted to enter into the eternal joy of the lord. But the unrighteous souls, who failed hit the tree, were sent to a place of punishment for eternity. Such a belief in divine judgement instilled ethical values and practice among the Naga people manifested in their everyday interaction and living.

3.5. Mystical Man-Animal Bonding

Lycanthropy refers to the supernatural phenomenon of mythical transformation of a person into an animal, or a form of madness in which people imagine themselves as an animal (Shikhu, 2007). It is not gender specific and such a person draw power from the animals like the wolf, wildcat, leopard and even tiger. Many Naga tribes practices lycanthropy, in which it is commonly believed that a person is having a spirit in the form of a tiger (Martemjen & Lkr, 2014). The existence of lycanthropy among the Naga tribes was first reported by Davis, A. W. (1891) who wrote:

"Men with the power of turning themselves into tigers. Tiger-men are well known and I have the pleasure of the acquaintance of one. This gentleman is a Sema Chief of a small village in Tizü Valley. He himself disclaims the power, but that he has it is implicitly believed by the whole of Sema and Angami tribes. A whole village of tiger-man is said to exist in the far northeast" (Lanunungsang & Jamir, 2005).

It is said that the man neither possesses the tiger for his own exploitation nor does the tiger possess the man. But a mysterious power controls both the tiger and the man and the two personalities become familiar to each other only with a great deal of understanding and help. They are inseparably related to each other and if one is affected, the other also feels it. At times the animal works at the wish of the person to do certain constructive works such as fighting enemies or strangers but sometimes it can turn out to be cruel and monstrous. The man knows the whereabouts of his tiger and if his tiger is hunted or is wounded, sores and fresh injuries occur on corresponding parts of the man's or woman's body. If the tiger eats a wild animal, the man feels satisfaction and they are known to have vomited out the eaten animal's hair or skin from his mouth. If the tiger is chased by men in a certain place, the man remains restless and runs here and there at the same time. The man expresses a great sign of relief if the tiger escapes unhurt (Imchen, 1993). While narrating about a Sangtam Naga man, who had a relationship with a leopard, W. G. Archer writes:

"My soul does not live in my body. It lives in the leopard. It is not in me now. It visits me in a sleep. I meet it in dreams. Then I know that it has been doing....if anything happened to my leopard in the day, my soul would come and tell me. I would get the same wounds" (Nshoga, 2009).

Generally, lycanthrope is believed to be inherited and exist in some families or clan. It is said that in the initial stage, the partner animal takes place with an ordinary grasshopper or reptile, and then gradually transforms into a wildcat, wolf, leopard, and finally a real tiger. The spirit of a tiger man is replaced six times and five times in case of a tiger woman during the entire span of life. The role of a tiger man or woman was important in the socio-religious life of the Nagas today as in ancient times. They are regarded as diviners and often consulted for the whereabouts of missing cattle, theft, locate criminals, to point out any untoward social elements or incidents and also to find out the causation of any kind of sickness. On many crucial occasions, the tiger man/ woman is consulted for the safety of the community as well as for the individual.

The supernatural phenomenon of the existence of tiger men and women is closely associated with primal religion and remains shrouded in mystery not only to the common people but even to the possessors. They are ignorant about the mystic development of relationship with the animal as one body and soul. Most of the Naga tiger men/ women are now converted to Christianity causing overwhelming decline in lycanthropic activities yet this phenomenon still exists in Naga society. Nonetheless, men and women with such power still exist though not disclosed publicly pointing to the necessity of further in-depth study to of this mystical phenomenon.

4. CONVERGENCE OF BELIEF SYSTEM AND HEALTH PRACTICES

Before the advent of contact with the modern world through the arrival of the British colonizers and Christian missionaries in the Naga Hills, the Nagas depended primarily on herbal medicines like plants, roots and herbs for treatment of illness, wounds, injuries and the like. Any sickness was treated using different medicinal plants and substances available in their kitchen garden, field or forest. Significantly, many of the antidotes for various illnesses among the Nagas were connected with magico-religious beliefs and propitiations of the supernatural beings and spirits. As discussed in the preceding sections the Nagas believed in the existence of several gods/spirits, deemed capable of causing miseries when displeased. Hence, animal sacrifices were extensively practiced to placate the spirits. They also believed in the existence of ghosts and evil souls, who might cause harm and ill luck to the mortals. The Nagas assigned every illness to the wrath of malevolent spirits. Therefore, in the olden days the only 'doctors' were the traditional healers, who diagnosed the causes as well as treat the sickness too. They were considered as the mediator of God/spirits and thus interpreted the causes of illness or sufferings. When someone fell ill, the traditional healer or divine man was consulted and according to their prescription animals such as pigs, cows, fowls, dogs, etc. were sacrificed to the gods/ spirits to propitiate the spirits. Sicknesses were primarily treated with various rituals because people believed that sickness, epidemics and death were due to the curse of an angry deity who had to be appeased through offerings. As the go-between, the diviner would inform the victim or patient that the spirit seeks a sacrificial pig or hen, and so forth, which the patient accordingly provide in the belief that it would cure them of whatever ailment had befallen them. Sometimes the diviner would split a bamboo, uttering curses at it and thereafter read its signs. Generally, a healer or diviner sacrificed an animal in the forest while, the sick person including his family members was to observe *genna* at that time. All this ritualistic sacrifices were offered by pleading the spirits 'to take the animal as a substitute for the sick person'. Now the acceptance or rejection of these sacrifices was communicated to them through dreams.

In cases of 'spirit possession' or a phenomenon whereby a person experiences sudden shock or fear only in a particular place spot, the Nagas seek a traditional healer. Consequent to such incidents, the victim often suffer for a long period of time, accompanied by symptoms of talking loudly alone or being lost in thought. To treat this problem, the healer in his/her dream professes to go to that place where the victim left the spirit and try to bring the victim's spirit back by calling out the victim's name. He/she then returns back home taking care not to look back on the way even once. Alternatively, if it does not work then the healer goes to the place in reality carrying a dao and a basket. Thereupon, he calls back the victim's spirit and collects six stones in case of male and five stones in case of female. The notion behind collecting different numbers of stones could lie in the belief which the Nagas hold that males are supposed to possess six strengths, whereas the females only five. Thus, males are even christened on the 6th day and females on the 5th day (Jamir, 2012). Then, the healer returns back to the victim's house without uttering a word even if he/she meet any person on the way, all the while ensuring not to look back. The healer then puts the stones near the victim's head where he/she is lying. This supposedly cures the victim of spirit possession. The door of the sick person's house must not be kept shut that night, but be kept open, ostensibly to allow the victim's spirit in as it returns back.

However, if the case of spirit possession took place in some one's field other than one's own, the healer changes tactics, such as, going to the place by himself and bringing the victim's spirit back etc. But if all that does not work, then the last option resorted to would be for the healer to take the owner of the field besides the victim along with six other people to the spot, carrying some rice and the liver of a chicken. Thereafter, they sprinkle it all around the field by chanting words such as, "*Take this meat instead of xyz (name of the victim) and release him/her*". They believed that if they offer such a sacrifice and appease the spirit, then it would release the human spirit. This procedure is believed to help the victim recover his wellbeing.

5. CLOSING COMMENTSS

All these rituals and practices were clearly devoid of any scientific rationalization but the faith and belief reposed by the people upon the traditional healers and medicine men can only be attributed to the indigenous belief system of the Naga people which is characterized by belief in spirits. As a result at every step of life they put religion into action in such ways as sacrifices, performance of rite and abstention from work or *genna* days. It is clear thus that the key notion of traditional Naga belief converged on three aspects, that is, to elude the wrath of malevolent spirits from disease and death, to ward off the evil spirits through pacification, and conciliation to maximize good harvest and win their good will.

Endnotes:

ⁱ During the British rule, the Nagas were administratively under the Assam province of British India as Naga Hills District until it was merged with the Tuensang Division to create the state called Nagaland in 1963

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