Multidisciplinary Journal of Shri Trilochan Upreti Smriti Shodh Sansthan DOI :
Volume (1) Issue 1, 2026, Jan-jun 2026

Naga Culture and Tradition

Jagdamba Mall

The Naga people are believed to have descended from the Qiang, a Chinese ethnic group who lived in northwestern China between the 13th and 11th centuries BCE. The Qiang are said to have migrated to Tibet due to conflicts with the Shang and Zhou dynasties. From Tibet, the Naga people are thought to have migrated to Naga Hills in due course which are located in areas overlapping the borders of China, Bharatvarsh and Myanmar (Burma).

It is said that the Naga people belong to the Mongoloid stock with the migration originating in Southeast Asia. The Naga people speak Tibeto-Burman languages which further suggest connection to the broader linguistic family of the region. **The Naga languages have many words from Sanskrit, Hindi and middle Bharatvarsh. This shows their ancient connection with Hindu and Hindusthan. The Nagas had link with Bharatvarsh since Mahabharat era. The Naga damsel Ulupi was married to Arjun and another Naga girl Usha to Aniruddha, the grandson of Lord Krishna.**

1. The Culture of Nagas

The Naga culture is diverse, encompassing numerous distinct tribes with their own customs, languages, and dress. It is a rich tapestry of traditions, festivals and beliefs deeply rooted in the agrarian landscape of Nagaland. Key aspects include a strong sense of community, hierarchical social structures, and a deep connection to the natural world. It is characterized by vibrant festivals, unique arts and crafts and a strong connection to the natural world and traditional values. The Nagas as a group of diverse tribes, have distinct customs and languages, yet share a common foundation of respect to elders, strong community bonds and a deep appreciation for their ancestral heritage.

Key Aspects of Naga Culture

These are described below in brief.

Tribal Diversity

Nagaland is a home to 18 major tribes and numerous sub-tribes each with unique characteristics. They are – Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Konyak, Khiamniungan, Sangtam, Tikhir, Yimchunger, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sumi and Zeliangrong. The other three tribes are Kachari, Garo and Kuki. These tribes are distinct in their customs, languages and attire each contributing to the rich cultural spectrum of Nagaland. Dimapur is the home of Dimasa and Mech Kacharis since Mahabharat era who trace their origin as the progeny of Bhima – a Pandav brother of Mahabharat Mahakavya.

Festivals and Rituals

The Nagas celebrates multiple festivals often centered around agriculture, social structures, spiritual beliefs and the solar calendar. These festivals are marked by vibrant music, traditional dance, customary attire and variety of foods and house-made traditional drinks.

Key Festivals and Rituals

Every tribe of Nagas, Dimasa and Mech Kacharis, Kukis and Garos have their variety of festivals and

rituals.

Hornbill Festival

An Annual collective and all-inclusive congregation of main festivals of all Naga tribes, Dimasa and Mech Kacharis, Gorkhas, Assamese, Kukis and Garos are celebrated on 1-10 December each year showcasing the rich and diverse Naga ethnicity and eternal culture and eternal religion through folk dances, worship of traditional Gods and Goddesses, music, and cuisine. These celebrations are a vibrant expression of their eternal culture and indigenous religion and serve to reinforce social bonds and honor ancestral traditions. The cultural troupes and renowned artists are invited from all the other seven states of NE region through Northeast Zonal Cultural Council (NEZCC), Dimapur and other states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal etc. It encourages cultural exchange and social harmony between different communities of the country by dancing and singing together, eating together, and moving together.

Moatsu is the main festival of Ao Nagas celebrated in May each year. It invokes blessings of God Lizaba for the well-being and happy life of Ao Nagas, protects people from epidemics, rich harvest and protects crops from pests.

Other festivals are Tokhu Emong (Lotha), Aoleang Monyu (Konyak), Tuluni (Sema), Sukrunye (Chakhesang), Sekrenyi (Angami), Ngada (Rengma), Monyu (Phom), Yemshe (Pochury), Metemneo (Yimchunger), Naknyulum (Chang), Mongmong (Sangtam), Mimkut (Kuki), Chaga Gadi (Zeliang), Gaan Ngai Rongmei, Busu Dima (Dimasa) and Aai Sagi (Mech Kachari) and Wangala (100 Drums Festival) of Garo tribe.

Traditional Arts and Crafts

Naga artisans are renowned for their skill in weaving, wood carving and metal works producing intricate shawls, decorative carvings and functional tools and weapons.

Housing and Household Articles

Traditional Naga houses often made of wood, bamboo and thatch are designed to be practical and durable, reflecting a deep connection to the environment and the resources available.

Family and Community

The family unit is of paramount importance with strong emphasis on respect of elders and a strong sense of community cohesion. Mother is the in-charge of house-hold affairs while father is the overall head of the family. The sons and daughters are free to choose their life partners but marriage in the same clan (gotra) is prohibited. After marriage, the daughter goes to her husband's house and adopts her husband's clan (gotra) while son builds a separate house for himself after marriage. The parents and other brothers and sisters including married one help him in constructing the house. The parental house goes to youngest son.

Religion and Beliefs

While many Nagas are converted to Christianity, traditional devotion in Gods and Goddesses continue to play a significant role in their lives particularly in the context of festivals and rituals. Traditionally, the Nagas practiced eternal religion and culture venerating natural elements such as God – The Almighty, sun, moon, earth, giant trees, giant stones, mighty rivers and mountains. They believe in a Supreme Spiritual Being - God – The Almighty, inhabiting the natural world and various lesser of demi-gods and

goddesses associated with nature, conducting rituals and sacrifices to appease these entities and deities of their Naga pantheon. They believe in some gods and spirits living in the sky and earth influencing human affairs through "fertility". They give offerings and animal sacrifices to gods and spirits including forest god (Van Devta) and mountain god (Parvat Devta) to ensure positive intervention and maximize "fertility" about good harvest and birth and survival healthy children. It is believed that there is invisible spirit known as soul in man and woman which gives the power and enables them to speak, walk, breath and eat etc. However, as soon as this spirit/soul leaves the body, a man or woman is declared as dead.

The Nagas acknowledges the presence of an invisible higher authority which presides over his destiny and was empowered to obedience, respect, and worship. The religion of Nagas was manifested through worship of nature and propitiation of gods and goddesses - both benevolent and malevolent. It is believed that the causes of discomfort, illness and troubles which come on the family and the inhabitation are all ascribe to the actions of the evil spirits and sinful deeds. In an event of commitments, omissions, and occasional failures to appease the gods and spirits are said to be the reasons for incurring the displeasure of gods (spirits).

The Sumis (Sema Nagas) believe in three distinct classes of gods and goddess whom J. H. Hutton, a British ICS officer and anthropologist, described as mere spirit to look down gods and goddess of Nagas and to establish Christianity as superior to Naga religion. *The first category in Sumi pantheon was the* ***"Alhou"*** *(Creator of Universe – God the Almighty. The Ao Nagas referred to it as* ***"Lijaba"***, the Lotha call it ***"Potso"*** who was concerned with process of creation. The second class was the demi-gods and goddesses of sky, ***"Kungumi"***, who dwell high up aloft and the third category was the ***"Tughami"*** that belongs to the group of gods and goddesses of the earth and lived among men and women. These gods and goddesses are often deliberately harmful as well as beneficial when propitiated. Hutton described and looked down them as mere spirit.

The Alhou – The God Almighty, is believed to be the Supreme Creator of all existence and is all Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient. The Creator is manifested to several creations depending upon the particular creation in question. When the purpose is of the creation of sun, he is called the ***"Khetsunhe Lhou" (Sun God),*** for the creation of the moon the manifestation is called ***"Aqhi Lhou" (Moon God),*** the creator of the earth is called ***"Ayeghiqha Lhou" (Earth God),*** the creator of man is called the ***"Timi Lhou"***. The manifestations of all these different names are various attributes of the same ***Supreme Creator, Alhou*** who is the supreme dispenser of both good and bad and who makes man rich or poor. This God is beneficial to man who is all good as well as almighty and all-knowing.

The ***"Kungumi"*** or the gods of sky are said to be both male and female. The male god is known by the name "Kungumi" while the female god is known as "Kungulimi". They live high up in the sky, but legend says that these "Kungumis" often come down to the earth and marry sons and daughters of man. They dwell up above in the sky, but legend tell us that they used to come

down and mix with virtuous boys and girls particularly on foggy days. These gods execute kind deeds even though they dwell up in the sky.

The "Tughami" who belongs to the third category of gods live on earth, in the jungles, in the lakes, among men and in their houses. These gods or spirits desire evil towards man and are generally harmful to man but can be appeased through offering of sacrifices. "Tughami" means "Wildman". They are called so because of their allurement and favor to live on the environment of wilderness. These gods are further categorized in accordance to the definite place of their dwellings and their specific functions.

House Spirits or House God or *Kul Devta* : The House Spirit or House god or ***Kul Devta*** – **Akighau** are mostly found in big and rich man's house and in an empty buildings abandoned by their owners after some ruin in the family. They show the appearance of monkey or an ape like ***Mahabali Hanuman ji*** in Hindu families but each time they quietly become invisible. These spirits can be heard making sounds all over the houses as they go about moving the different things in the house. The house –owner always offer rice-beer (Madhu) and pieces of meat and rice around the "king pillar" of the house every day to please the spirit. Every big or small *gena or feast* was initiated with the propitiation of the house-spirits by grand-parents by throwing rice, meat and rice-beer (Madhu) around the king-pillar of the house and inviting the house-spirits to take their bountiful share of food provided for their happiness. It is clear that during the early days these spirits were always kept in appeasement as discontentment of these spirits are said to be harmful to the householders in a lot of ways. These spirits remained helpful and generous to their owner while they are kept happy and satisfied but at the same time malevolent to his enemies.

Field Spirits or *Krishi Devta or Tughami* : The field spirits or *kheti ke devta or Krishi devta* belong to second category of the spirits of the earth. They dwell in the fields and give protection to the crops from any harm or destruction by the animals or hailstorms. They also guard the owner as he works in the field. ***Tughami*** must always be appeased to procure good crops as this spirit is bound to visit the earth in the form of violent windstorm and damage them. It was believed that ***Litsapa*** had a good friendly relation with the **Tughupu (toad or frog).** In Hindu tradition and in some other parts of the word, toads or frogs have been connected for both obtaining the rain and preventing the storms. It is therefore likely that Sumi connection of the **tughupu (toad or frog)** with the spirit ***Litsapa*** **(Kuber in Hindu pantheon)** responsible for the rich harvest indicates the association of the toad with the rain and storm. **As a result, whenever the tughupu (toad) cried out from the field the Litsapa (spirit or God of fruitfulness and wealth like Kuber in Hindu Dharm) would send down the rain at his call.**

Jungle God or Spirit or Van devata: The third category of spirits is the spirits of the forests known as ***"muzamuza"(echo or pratidhwani).*** They are malevolent spirits of the wood who usually takes man to an unknown direction in the jungle and make them permanently or temporarily mad. In earlier times there were many instances being heard taking away by ***muzamuza.*** In early such situations the relatives of the lost person must

release a chicken in the jungle at a place where the person seems to have been taken away by *muzamuza* and sings *muzamuza* ! Show me where so and so is! If any person is found to be missing in the forest, is assumed to have been taken away by *muzamuza.* If a man loses his way in the jungle despite his struggle to find out his way to home, he must cut off a fringe of his cloth and leave it on a tree and he will find his way home.

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

Like any other Nagas, the Sumis also believe in the might of ***Tumumi*** **(like Dhanvantari or divine healer in Hindu Dharma)** who were consulted in the event of sickness who apprise the sick person of whether he had been affected by the touch of the evil spirits or have put dirt objects in the body. Accordingly, the ***Tumumi*** **(divine healer)** heals the sick person by identifying the causes of sickness and apply the suitable medicines (jadee-booti – medicinal herbs in the jungle) and his divine healing power acquired by birth or by divine efforts (sadhana - meditation).

The Sumi Nagas believe in the existence of the **soul *(aghunghu)*** of man and woman. If a Sumi man built a temporary shelter in a jungle or roadside during his journey, he would always burn it down before he leaves it. It was feared that his soul would remain in that shelter and finally forsake him resulting in his death if this was not done. It was assumed that if a Sumi killed a tiger, he had to sleep on an uncomfortable slippery bamboo bed in order to be wakeful so that the soul of the dead beast can do him no harm. The beliefs in the immortality of the spiritual part of the man (soul) and in the metempsychosis of soul prevailed in the mind of the Sumi Nagas.

The basic beliefs of Nagas are –

- One Supreme God (Ameowa) as the creator of cosmos.
- God created all living things and the environment with humans as the guardian.
- Existence of good and evil spirits.
- Respect for the earth, sun, moon, and stars as God's creation and older than humanity.
- Justice, honesty, devotion in God and hard work lead to a good and successful life.
- Earth is mother of us all as sustainer of life.
- Sun and moon are gods as powerful source of energy'
- Rivers are holy and mighty rivers are worshipped as divine creation.
- Concept of sin and bliss, hell, and heaven, are strong and Nagas lead their life accordingly.
- Fear of God while committing sinful acts and belief in incurring bliss and boon from

God, the Almighty, by blissful deeds leading to solvation.

- Belief in existence of soul or spirit

Occupation and Livelihood

Agriculture, particularly terraced farming, is the primary occupation of many Naga tribes, providing sustenance and a strong connection to the land.

Traditional Dress and Ornament

Naga attire including shawls wrap-around skirts and headgear are highly valued for their intricate designs and vibrant colors serving as a visual expression of cultural identity.

Language

The Nagas speaks a diverse range of languages and dialects, many of which are not written.

Social structure

Village chiefs or elders often hold significant authority making decisions and leading the community life.

Dignity of Labor

A strong sense of dignity in labor is emphasized with no work being considered too menial.

Customary Laws

The Nagas of Nagaland have a rich cultural heritage and their customary laws reflect their traditional practices and values. Traditional Naga customs and laws, often unwritten, govern social behavior and dispute resolution.

- **Community-based:** Naga customary laws are often community-based with decisions made by village councils or elders.
- **Tribal-specific:** Different Naga tribes have their own distinct customary laws reflecting their unique cultural and historical contexts.
- **Oral tradition:** Many Naga customary laws are passed down through oral tradition with elders playing a significant role in interpreting and enforcing these laws.

Key Aspects

- **Land ownership:** Naga customary laws often emphasize community ownership of land with individuals having rights to use and cultivate specific plots.
- **Dispute resolution:** Customary laws provide mechanisms for resolving disputes often through mediation and reconciliation.
- **Social norms:** Naga customary laws also govern social behavior including marriage, inheritance and community responsibilities.

Importance

- **Cultural preservation:** Customary laws help preserve Naga cultural heritage and traditional practices.
- **Community cohesion:** These laws promote community cohesion and social harmony.
- **Autonomy:** Naga customary laws reflect the community's desire for autonomy and self-governance.

Challenges

Modernization, Conversion to Christianity and Westernization : The influence of westernization in the name of modernization, urbanization, forcible conversion to Christianity and imposition of foreign culture and English language by the nexus of Naga Christian terrorist organizations and American Baptist Church organizations coupled with constant and continuous condemnation of eternal religion, culture, traditional Gods and Goddesses and traditional institutions lead to changes in customary laws and practices.

Conflict with statutory laws: There occurs occasionally conflicts between Naga customary laws and statutory laws requiring careful navigation and reconciliation.

Revival of Culture in Naga Society: The revival of culture in Naga society involves efforts to preserve and promote traditional practices including languages, arts, music, and social customs while also adapting to modern influences. This movement recognizes the importance of preserving Naga identity in changing world and seeks to empower communities by reclaiming their forefathers' heritage and ethos.

Addressing modernization

The revival movement acknowledges the impact of modernization and globalization on traditional culture and seeks to find a balance between preserving heritage and adapting to the modern world.

Role of Literature and Education

Literature and educational institutions play a crucial role in promoting cultural awareness and transmitting traditional knowledge to younger generation.

Examples of Revival

Examples of cultural revival include the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland which showcases the diverse tribe and their cultural practices. Each Naga tribe have started celebrating all of their major festivals in the traditional way with great enthusiasm and started observing "gena" (religious holiday). The costly traditional ornaments including golden chains and pearls' garland, necklace in their necks and diamond and other precious stones in golden and silver rings in their fingers (men and women) and golden or silver earrings fixed with costly diamonds in ladies' ears, bracelets and bangles are now new additions in their ornaments. Salwar-suits are also a popular addition in the dress of educated Naga ladies. Naga ladies have started trying sari as well. Food habit of Nagas is drastically changed with coming of education and exposure and assimilation with Hindu society. Kurta-pajama is now a popular dress among educated section of Naga society. Approach of Naga society to Hindu society is also quiet cordial today in comparison to bye-gone days. Anti-Hindu and anti-national narratives are getting transformed into nationalist mind-set.

Challenges

The revival process faces challenges such as the impact of Christianity and westernization in the name of modernization which have led to drastic changes in traditional values and cultural practices.

Importance

The Naga people recognize the importance of their unique cultural identity and strive to preserve it for future generations.