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**Exploring Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Practices: A study of the Kuzhami
Chakhesang Naga People**

Mr. Wepekhro Wetsah

Asst. Prof, Department of History,
Pfutsero Government College, Pfutsero, Nagaland

Ms. Zunyiteu Mero

Asst. Prof, Department of Political Science,
Pfutsero Government College, Pfutsero, Nagaland

Abstract:

This paper delves into the rich tapestry of indigenous religious beliefs and practices among the Kuzhami Chakhesang Naga people of Northeast India, through an interdisciplinary approach combining ethnographic research, historical analysis, and religious studies. This study seeks to illuminate the intricate symbiosis between the Kuzhami Chakhesang Naga culture and their spiritual world view. The paper investigates the core tenets of their belief system, including animistic elements, ancestor veneration, and the significance of natural phenomena in their cosmology. Furthermore, it explores the rituals, ceremonies, and communal practices that constitute the religious fabric of the Kuzhami Chakhesang Naga society, highlighting their role in maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity. Knowledge of a particular culture is also obtained through religion. By shedding light on the spiritual landscape of this indigenous community, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the diversity and resilience of indigenous religious traditions in the contemporary world.

Key Words: Indigenous, Beliefs, rituals, cultural & Identity.

Introduction:

Religion played a vital role in the history of mankind from time immemorial. From the primitive to the modern times, religion captured and dominated the structure of a particular society and thereby influenced and directed the activities of a mankind either directly or indirectly. Knowledge of a particular culture is obtained through religion. Whether a religion is prior or subsequent to early social institutions is a debatable matter. Nevertheless, that religion dominates both conscious and unconscious activities of mankind is an undeniable fact.

According to Emile Durkheim, “Religion is a collective act and includes many forms of behavior system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things...” The integrative function of religion plays a pivotal role in traditional society. Scholars have put forth different opinions regarding the definition of indigenous religious beliefs and practices but it is commonly accepted in believing the existence of one supreme God. The Supreme God is Protector God, a God of goodness and power.

The spiritual and inspirational value of nature drives societal motives and respective behavior to live in harmony with nature and to protect it for present and future generations. The cultural and spiritual significance of nature has been defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as: “the spiritual, cultural, inspirational, aesthetic, historic and social meanings, values, feelings, ideas and associations that natural features and nature in general have for past, present, and future generation. Religion is a paramount social institution and enmeshed within the daily activities of most of the population. Spiritual values derived from religion do not only influence people’s behaviors, but also affect social inclusion, political engagement, and economic prosperity. Importantly, faiths and religions utilize these resources with care and with next generations in mind.

The Naga had a strong traditional belief in Supreme Being. This belief is associated with the spirit of nature and believed that natural environment are the abode of spirits and provide all essential needs to mankind and hence were respected and preserved (Kazhie, 1999). They worshipped nature and have strong beliefs that man, God, animals, aquatic creatures and plants symbiotically co-existed. Accordingly their mode of communication with God was through some natural agents like birds, plants animals and signs and dreams. They listened to noises and chirping of certain birds, dreams or any unnatural signs in the surrounding which were carefully carried out either by an individual or through elderly wisdoms or with the help of soothsayer. Interpretation of dreams and divination has an important role in people’s life (V. Epao, 1993). They sincerely believed that God speaks to them through various agents on their natural environment as such their beliefs and predictions were mostly true. Their mythical beliefs, practices, tales and songs have always revolved around nature. Both animate and inanimate objects were looked upon as friends and they contribute to their fulfilling life (Hormaila G. Z). The fear of spirits of the forests enabled them to protect and preserve them to a large extent. Their intimate link with the forest and rivers for food, security and development has been the basis for their social, cultural and spiritual growth. This has been meaningfully manifested in all their cultural and customary practices, worship and through their songs and folklore. While on the other hand, their deep understanding, ethos and values of their natural environment and observation of taboos and genna have helped them protect their environment for centuries (Lkr Lanusashi & Martemjen, 2014).

The Kuzhami people as a distinct group consists of 17 (Seventeen) government recognized villages and 3 (Three) unrecognized villages and four towns. Out of which, there are

15 (Fifteen) government recognized villages in Phek district of Nagaland and 2 (Two) recognized villages located in Ukhrul District of Manipur (Source: Kuzhalhii Zawe, 2021). Kuzhami are a Patrilineal group of people. They claim common descent and common culture and were from the same socio-cultural and religious background. In Kuzhami dialect, “*Ku*” means strong or victory and “*Za*” (Zha) stands for order, Protector and controller and “*Mi*” stands for People.

The religious belief and practices of Kuzhami people are known as *Medani* religion and *Medanism*. All the religious beliefs and practices of Kuzhami people are instructed by *Medani*. They believed that *Medani* was one of the fathers of Kuzhami people. But the history of oral tradition shows that *Medani* was the person who gave all the religious instructions. That is why they called this religion is called *Medani religion*. In the same way who ever follow this religion is called *Medanian* (K. Lohe, 2010). *Mewu* is the political chief as well as religious priest. He occupies the highest position in the village. All the religious rituals are performed by him. In *Medani* religion there is no written dogma about the idea of God and faith but is well expressed in the religious rituals. God is known as *Menupi* and is considered as the father of gods and mother of gods (*erupfii eruzu*) and the creator of the universe, powerful and omnipresent. They believed that *Menupi* judges the people in the interest of justice. He is a just God and believes that all the actions of people will be judged by *Menupi*. They believed that there are two types of spirits, one is benevolent and the other is malevolent. Places like thick forest, rocks, mountains, springs, lakes, big rivers, big trees, and other natural objects are believed to be the abodes of these spirits. It is believed that the benevolent spirit works with *Menupi*. They offered sacrifice ranging from leaves of plants to domestic animals. The benevolent spirit is believed to be the spirit responsible for the welfare and prosperity of human being. This spirit protects and guards the human from natural calamities and all kinds of misfortunes. The benevolent spirits are worshipped and offered sacrificial animals, not out of fear but out of reverence and love. It is believe that the malevolent spirit is dangerous and causes destruction to all human affairs. It is also believed that all forms of human suffering, natural calamities, disease, accident of various kinds, etc are result of the work of this spirit. In order to avoid being harmed by the malevolent spirits, they offer countless sacrifices ranging from leaves of plants to domestic animals. They believed that supernatural forces caused natural phenomena earthquake, hailstone, storms, drought and heavy rains, etc. Therefore, when some natural calamities occur, they observed *menyi/genna* to appease their God to avoid any such misfortune in the future.

Menyi/Genna

The Kuzhami people observe *Menyi* on certain days to appease their God for different purposes. They observed *Menyi* on the first day of the month called *khritsheriimenyi*. The *menyi* is observed in the form of worshipping their God to protect them from natural calamities, famine, sickness, bad luck, drought, etc. the observation of all these *menyi* are conducted by the

Mewu/Priest in the village. There are numerous *menyi* observed by the Kuzhami people in connection with festivals, crops, diseases and seasonal changes. Generally, they are classified into two types: *Menimela* and *Menikekhrii*.

Menimela is a loose *menyi* and is observed on certain days. On such days, it is a taboo to do handicrafts like making baskets, spinning, weaving clothes or work like cutting of trees and bamboos for house construction and even normal work in the field. This loose *menyi* are observed when they are going to enter new month or to start a new seasonal work and when the season changes. This *menyi* is observed to appease their God for his favor.

Menikekhrii is strict *menyi* during which many things are forbidden to do. It is forbidden to do normal work in the field. It is taboo to do handicraft, cut tress and bamboo for house construction, or firework, to kill any living beings, to travel or to go to the fields, to hunt or collect snails, to fish or catch other insects under the water. They observed *menikekhrii* when they are going to sow seeds, or when crops are in the process of growing and during harvest, or when there are unusual accidents or natural calamities such as earthquakes, rain of hail stones. If someone was burnt to death by fire, drowned in the water, or houses, clothes are burnt; they observed *menikekhrii* known as *ekromeni*. They observe *menikekhrii* when the lunar eclipse or solar eclipse occurs. They believe that a person who faithfully observes all these rituals and *menyi* will have good health, good harvest and a prosperous life.

Kenyi/Taboo

In the Kuzhami society, the term *kenyi /taboo* is very important and forceful in the society. *Kenyi* restrains the people from doing all kinds of the evil. The consequence of breaking *Kenyi* is unnatural death, disease, being crippled, dumbness, blindness, etc. It is *kenyi* to offend god, spirits, to cut sacred trees, to kill innocent people of their own, to give birth to illegitimate children, to ill treat weak people and women, to trespass sacred places, to eat certain food, to be involved in incest, stealing, lying, insulting orphans, widows and cheating strangers. It is *kenyi* for a warrior to have sexual intercourse before going for war, hunting, games, etc. It is *kenyi* for a woman to do certain things like hunting, firing gun, etc. it is a taboo for man to weave clothes, etc. It is *kenyi* to sow seeds before the observation of *menyi/genna*. Essentially *kenyi* helps people to abide by the law, rules and regulations of the society.

It is *kenyi* for any village to permit an illegitimate son or daughter to live in their village. They believe that if there is an illegitimate child in the village, the villagers will not have fortune or luck in the hunting of wild animals, trapping of birds, collection of water insects, war of head hunting or even in the competition with other villages. It is *kenyi* to insult handicapped person. They also believe that if they insulted and laughed at the blind, crippled, handicapped, and ugly men and women, their children and next generation of their offspring may become like them. It is *kenyi* for a person to swear falsely. One of the greatest fears for a person is to wrongly swear/oath and claim to be right or take another person's land or properties. If a person swears

falsely, the consequences will be suffered by all his descendents and he will be deprived of heirs. It is *kenyi* to remove land boundary stone, or to extort from others and to cheat the mentally weak in the society. It is *kenyi* to displease one's maternal uncle or to look at the private parts of one's parents as it is believe that the latter may become crippled or teeth will fall from the mouth. It is *kenyi* to block the main foot path with any objects like wooden block, stones, thorns or anything which can hurt others or to cut down the trees near the footpath. If a person does so he will not have protection of shade in his death. It is a taboo to dirk the footpath. It is *kenyi* to cut the crops and trees that are planted by others. If so, it is believe that a person will die early. If a person does such things, he will die early. It is *kenyi* to spit upon others as he will become poor. It is *kenyi* to kill the mother as well as offspring of birds which are in the nest. It is *kenyi* for a person to block the water from the source and direct it to his own paddy field. It is *kenyi* to marry a woman who belongs to the same clan. It is *kenyi* to defecate and urinate on the footpath. It is *kenyi* to keep quiet when a person hears someone calling him/her. It is *kenyi* for a person to keep quiet when one sees someone damaging and stealing other's property. It is *kenyi* to deny the meat brought by someone to one's house. It is *kenyi* to kill and hurt when people come inside his house and called him father. It is *kenyi* if a person does not protect the person who enters his house for life security. It is believed that anyone who enters a person's house is a sign of belonging to him. It is an obligation that he has to give protection to the person.

Thozo/Omen

Kuzhami people practice omen to read their future. They used to see omen for the crops, weather, headhunting, and hunting animals for the village. Materials such as leaves of a particular trees, bamboos, etc were used to observe the **thozo/omen**. They selected the righteous men among the villages because those who were going to perform ritual of omen must follow certain rules for a month. It was taboo to eat burnt and roasted food or to have sexual intercourse with their wives if a person is going to represent village and group to perform ritual of omen. The most important omen is known as *thoqapfi/thorapfi*.

Metymi and the belief in Lycanthropy and witchcraft

Metymi is the one who claims to have contact with spirits. *Metymi* can cure disease and heal the sick with the power of spirits. In general, *metymi* acts as the mediator between men and spirits. *Metymi* gives advice to the sick to offer chicken, cloth, etc. to the spirit in order to be healed. Usually this ritual practices were done outside the village gate. *Metymi* also escorts the soul after the death of person.

The Kuzhami also believe in the transformation of a person into animal (tiger) from time to time with the influence of supernatural power. In this process a person's body will not change into tiger, but if any injury occurred to a tiger, a person's physical body was also inflicted with pain or even death. When a tiger-man dies, the supernatural power reoccurs in one of the family members or relatives. In the society he was regarded as extraordinary person. They were also

believed to have had a league or association with unknown spirits, demons and ghost to enhance the power of a person for healing or performing extraordinary deeds.

Life after Death

Kuzhami believe that the soul resembles a person. Each person has a soul which enables the person to become a complete being. The soul is immortal, and after death this soul continues to be active. Therefore, at the time of burial of the dead all the necessary weapons, tools, etc. are buried along with the death. The concept of a living soul after the death of the body influences the people to help each other on the funeral day. Animals like dogs, pigs, bulls, buffalo, mithuns, etc. are killed on the day of a person's death. It is believe that all these animals accompany the death person to be with him. All the villagers also observe one day *menyi* on the funeral day. It is taboo for all the villagers to do normal work on the day of a person's death. They also believe in the transformation of soul. The soul goes to the abode of the death village where all souls live a similar kind of life as here on the earth. They have the concept of reincarnation. They also believe that the righteous men and women will be transformed into a star after their death. They believe that a dead man's soul comes to their houses and eats food every day till the celebration of *Eriinye* festival (December). It is a taboo for the father to cut his hair and wear new clothes till they celebrate the *Eriinye* festival. Wearing old clothes and keeping a long hair (*medopfi*) is a sign of mourning for the dead person in the family. After this festival, it is believed the dead man's soul leaves the home and goes to the village of *Ketshimikie* (a place where the soul lives after death).

Kerhutshii/Curse

The village law and religious taboos control every aspect of their social life. The *kerhutsii/curse*, this rituals is perform in the month of *Selukhrii* (July) during the *Etsiinye* festival (Millet festival). At this time, an animal, usually a cat or a chicken is pierced through the anus to the mouth with a sharp pointed stick, the pierced animal is kept on the pole that pierce through bounded leaves as ball from the ground. Curses were chanted upon the person who steals, lies, and violates village norms. Many sharpened sticks are pierced across the bounded plant leaves known as *Metshochie*. They believe that those cursed persons die an unnatural death and even in his life he will suffer from various diseases and sickness, blindness, deafness, cripples, etc. Therefore, people fear to do what is considered to be bad and undesirable for the society.

Ceremonial Ritual

This is usually observed upon young children to be prosperous and to have good fortune. If a child is sick they observe this feast to appease their God to give the child good health. This is observed for both boy and girl child when they are below three years or above ten years of age. This ritual for children is known as *Sese*. This ritual is not compulsory for every child but depend

on the person or family. There are two types of ceremonial rituals for the child. One is called *Sese* which is observed for one day and the other is known as *Sedese* which is a three day ritual.

Rituals associated with different Festivals

The Kuzhami people have a number of festivals connected with the agricultural season, ritual sacrifices for good crops and good harvest, ritual for departed soul and thanksgiving to their God in performing different rituals. Some of them are:

Tsiikhenye: This festival is celebrated in the last part of *TsiikhenyeKhrii* (April) when the full moon is waning or when a new moon has just come up. This festival is celebrated for five days after completion of sowing the seeds. The festival marks the end of the joy and leisure during the winter and spring, and beginning of the hardworking days of the monsoons. During the festival, it was a taboo for anyone to do normal work in the field. Wrestling competitions and also selecting of most beautiful girl were also conducted during the *Tsiikhenye* festival. Some of the Kuzhami people observed *Kerhutshii* during this festival where a curse is uttered for all wrong doers to suffer the fate of cat and cock. A symbolic effigy with sharp stick and the persons whose property or things are stolen would smash an egg on the ground and curse the culprit to suffer the fate of the egg.

Etshiinye: This festival is celebrated in the month of *Etshiinyekhrii* (July) after the harvest of *Etshiibe* (Millet). They perform religious rituals as a sign of thanksgiving and worship to their God. This festival is celebrated for five days. During the festival, it is forbidden to do normal work in the field. The first day is called *Ekiedi*. Domesticated were killed and celebrated on this day. On the second day, they cleared the footpath in the village. On the third day of the festival, some of the Kuzhami villages perform *Kerhutshii* during this festival. On the fourth day called *Enyetena* (a day between festivals) a man can go to the field or attend to some light work. On the fifth day and last day of the festival, they would stay at home and celebrate with friends, family and neighbors. The priest performs rituals for the village children on the last day of the festival.

Enonye: *Enonye* is held in the month of *Enokhrii* (August) for two days. Strict *Menyi/Gena* was observed during the festival. Animals were sacrificed to invoke their god to protect the crops from hailstones, insects, pests, etc. These rituals were done to please god and have a bountiful harvest. It is a taboo to draw water from the well, wash clothes, pluck living plants, or allow outsiders to enter the village. It was also forbidden to carry a cup of *hazi* (rice beer) openly outside the house. It is also prohibited to take bath. After celebrating this festival, it was a taboo to wash their clothes outside the house or in the open space.

Ebouloto/Ebouchiito: This festival is celebrated in the month of *Eboulotokhrii* (November) after the harvest of paddy for seven days. It is a taboo to eat newly harvested paddy until they celebrate the *Ebouloto/Ebouchiito* festival. Women folks play a prominent role in this festival.

After this festival they are free to blow the trumpet, wash, weave clothes, fly kites, etc. and also can collect thatch for constructing of houses whenever they needed it.

Eriinye: The *Eriinye* festival is considered to be the most joyous festival and is held for ten days in the month of *Eriinyekhrii* (December). The term *Eriinye* is a combination of two Morphemes 'erii' meaning paddy and 'nye' meaning festival, they observe different rituals to worship their God. During this festival they use to see omen for the village in the coming year. They wore the best dresses during this festival. During this festival elderly people give food with blessings to children in return for their act of good will. The children give *hazi/rice beer* to the elders as a symbol of respect and love. During this festival before the sun rises, all the male members compulsorily take bath as a sign of purification, followed by a ceremonious ritual called *thozo/omen* in which the fortune or fate of the village is predicted for the year. All the male members go for hunting and all the animals killed will be hung on a tall bamboo pole for the year as symbol of victory.

The indigenous religious beliefs and practices followed by the Kuzhami Chakhesang People have undergone lots of changes with most of the people discontinued to fellow the old religion and converted to Christianity. The Medanians are unable to observe all the rituals as they do not have enough people to perform them. This changing system of the Medani religious rituals is known as '*tekhe*' meaning minimizing difficult rituals which they could not put into practice because they do not have sufficient persons to perform the rituals. Some of the *kenyi/taboo* could not be observed due to the encounter with the outside world. Medani religion does not have a particular place to worship together. They do not have a script and all the religious *kenyi/taboo* and ethics are passed from one generation to generation through oral tradition and practices.

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