
ANIMISTIC MOTIFS AND THE CROSS: A VISUAL NARRATIVE ON INDIGENIZING CHRISTIANITY

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ABSTRACT

An array of images has been used in this photographic essay to argue how the Sumi Naga (erstwhile Sema Naga) of India has indigenised Christianity as a strategy to retain their cultural identity while holding on to the new faith. The conversion to Christianity resulted in a change in social structure and culture. The converted Sumi Naga took water baptism to indicate that their old life is gone, behold the new has come. While renouncing their old self, they also disengaged every belief and practice. By the late twentieth century, the realisation dawned, that they can be Christians at the same time remain a Naga. Erection of centenary gate in the middle of the town decorated with animistic motifs and celebrating Tuluni, an agricultural festival in the church are some examples of indigenising Christianity.

KEYWORDS

Indigenising Christianity, Naga tribes, Tuluni, Headhunters

BIO

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Introduction

For Christian Sumi Naga, anything that has linkage with the traditional religion was considered the ways of the 'devil' or was perceived a few decades back. The older faith that inclines animism includes propitiation of spirits, folk dance, folksong, headhunting, personal adornments that indicate social hierarchy, ceremonies that had taboos inbuilt. The twenty-first century saw a conflicted identity; it was time to pause, rethink, reevaluate and imagine how their future could be. The Sumi Naga is one of the major Naga tribes, documented as headhunters in monographs written by colonial administrators cum anthropologists (Hutton, Mills, Fürer-Haimendorf, Elwin) in the early twentieth century. They are found in the frontier state of Nagaland in India. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Sumi Naga embraced Christianity. With their new religious identity, they start renouncing their traditional faith and ceremonies. Conflicts between traditional faith and Christianity erupted often leading to segregation (Zhimo, 2015). New converts refused to touch liquor in any form, as it was considered a sin. Christians who went back to drinking liquor (rice beer) were excommunicated from the church membership. *Anaji* (rice beer) was a popular drink among the Sumi before the advent of Christianity. Certain ceremonies required the participation of the whole village. The non-Christians insisted that every member of the village must observe the animistic ceremony, and nobody should violate the tradition. The converts refused to participate in ceremonies that required sacrifices for the propitiation of the spirits. Conflicts continued, but eventually, most of the Sumi Naga converted to Christianity.

With this newfound worldview, society underwent a colossal transformation. The important positions of the village office like *Awou* (Priest), *Chochomi* (village counsellor), *Lapuu* (Corpse burier), *Amthau* (the first person to reap the harvest), became redundant. Social stratification changed when rich landlords and chiefs gave up their ownership of bondmen after becoming Christians. The aesthetic aspects of the culture like traditional architectural design, animal heads valued as trophies of valour, and horns of Mithun (*Bos frontalis*) as a symbol of prosperity, objects of art, were almost destroyed as they were considered integral to animistic tradition. Colourful ornaments of great artistic and value were discouraged from wearing due to their association with the varied spirits. Expression institutions got disrupted. According to folklore, some heavenly beings came down to earth and taught the steps of the traditional folk dance, thereby making it unholy to pursue. The traditional religion revolved around rituals that had prohibitions and taboos, especially for women. The life of a Naga revolved around agriculture. Agricultural rites enjoyed a prominent place among all the festivals. Society was in a conundrum at one point in time when the new converts were sceptical of their own culture, at the same time, not quite at ease at being who or what they were becoming.

However, in recent times, with the progress of formal education, the Sumi Naga have realized that they can be Christians and, at the same time, retain their Naga identity. The celebration of a traditional festival like *Tuluni* in the Church is the testament of indigenising Christianity. Another conspicuous symbol of indigenising Christianity is the erection of a big gate celebrating hundred years of Christianity where the pillars of the gate have traditional religion or animistic motifs. Apart from the Church hymns, people take joy in singing songs of indigenous style. They also attend the church service in traditional attire despite knowing that personal adornments represented one's social status in the past.

Most of the Sumi Naga are settled in Zunheboto district, in the state of Nagaland. The district headquarter is known for Sumi Baptist Church Zunheboto (SBCZ), considered to be one of the largest Churches in Asia. In July 2019, SBCZ celebrated the traditional agricultural festival inside the church. *Tuluni*, an agricultural festival, is observed to celebrate the harvest of the first fruits (Jimomi 2018). The Sumi celebrate the *Tuluni* festival after sowing and transplantation of paddy crops.



FIGURE 1. The Sumi Baptist Church Zunheboto stands majestically on the top of the hill in Zunheboto town, Nagaland. The building was designed by Honoholi K. Chishi. It took ten years to complete. The building dimensions are 203'x153'x166' with a seating capacity of 8500.

Derivation of the word 'Tuluni'

The term 'tuluni' is derived from the word *tulu*. *Tulu* was the name of a rich man who was generous and kind. He had a big house where people always gathered. He threw a feast for the entire villagers irrespective of their status after the sowing season. Thus, an annual gathering at his place came to be known as Tuluni. Jimo (2008) argued that Tuluni is derived from the word 'Tulu'. Among the Sumi, when a person sees another carrying a heavy load of wood or stone, the former offers to help the latter. *Tulu* is the verb used in the sentence while asking a person to go and *tulu* (help) another. Thus *tulu* means helping or supporting. After heavy or rigorous work, a day is set for rest which is called *Ni*. *Tuluni* thus literally means helping each other and resting after the end of heavy work (Jimo 2008, 56). The *Tuluni* celebration is usually for seven days. Each day has a unique name and activity from which the days in a week derived. During the observance of *Tuluni*, going to the agricultural fields is not permitted. They remain chaste to ward off ill-luck to the family.

Asuzani (Monday): Sowing of *Asu* (millets) always preceded paddy. Hence, *Asuzani* is considered the first day. On this day, it is taboo to step out of the village. Everyone must stay and clean the village.

Aghizani (Tuesday): *Aghi* (paddy) is the main food item but comes second to the millets as regards sowing. Hence, the second day is called *Aghizani*. Those persons who have acquired social status by performing certain rituals like the feast of merit, brew rice liquor.

Ashigheni (Wednesday): The third day is *Ashigheni*, meaning 'cutting meat'. All the members of *aloji* (working gang) would work for a one-day wage and out of that money, they would buy *awo* (pig) or *amishi* (cow). On the day of *Ashigheni*, they distribute meat among themselves. On this day, everyone had to remain in the village and eat pork. It is compulsory to stay in the village and consume pork to enhance the proper formation of grains.

Annighini (Thursday): Among all the days of *Tuluni*, *Annighini* is the most important day. It involves merrymaking and a grand feast. On this auspicious day, the enemies reconcile and settle differences by

inviting each other and sharing a scrumptious feast. No one is allowed to work on this day for fear of storms damaging the crops. No one is permitted to comb hair for fear of paddy crops getting entangled, thus becoming unproductive. Married couple make offerings at the foot of the front central post of the house called *Akhetsu Kucho* (King pillar). This day also marked the events of many competitions held among young unmarried people. The poorest of the poor are also invited for the feast, thereby making them happy. *Angakupumi* (a young girl who looks after a baby) receives a large piece of meat on this day. The bonded men had to present their master with any meat, and the latter, in turn, invite them for a feast. The prospective grooms get an invitation to a banquet thrown by his future in-law. The prospective grooms get to display their capabilities and potentials by indulging in games that require agility.

Mucholani (Friday): *Mucholani* marked a clearing day after the grand feast. All the *Muchomi* (married men) of the village would clear the village paths leading to the agricultural fields as well as granaries, thereby preventing inconveniences during harvest.

Tupulani (Saturday): *Tupu* means youth. On this day, young men and women would feed one another. Young men compete with one another in traditional sports like spear kicking, top-spinning, high jump and long jump.

Tughakhani (Sunday): *Tuluni* celebration goes on till *Tupulani*, but on the seventh day, nobody is allowed to go on a journey or agricultural fields. This day is considered a quarantine day. The village gate (*ayingo*) will be closed for two reasons: to prevent villagers from going out to fields or other villages and to prevent outsiders from coming in.

In the last few decades, *tuluni* is celebrated every year on the eighth of July. However, due to interruption by monsoon rains every year, the civil organizations decided to stop celebrating *Tuluni* and started giving more importance to the harvest festival *Ahuna*. For some years, people started observing *Tuluni* at the household level though it was supposed to be a community one. Thus, it was a timely intervention when the church stepped in to take over the celebration of the agricultural festival inside the premise of the church. Instead of observing all seven days, the church decided to pick selective *tuluni* activities as a representation of its entirety. The other days are left to each household or clan to celebrate. The church looked splendid with the material culture that was once an integral part of Sumi culture. The programme commenced with usual Christian worship - invocation prayer and singing Church hymn. An elderly member of the church gave a speech on the origin, meaning, and significance of *Tuluni*. Womenfolk presented a folksong while pounding rice as was done in the past. A group of young people staged a play depicting the visit of prospective groom or son-in-law to their respective in-laws for the *tuluni* feast. The *Tuluni* programme ended with the pastor pronouncing blessings over the paddy crops and invoking bountiful harvest for all the church members who are cultivators.



FIGURE 2. A replica of traditional bamboo hut with its long horns and bamboo wind chimes is created on the stage of the Church. The stage is adorned with traditional artefacts that include carrying basket, winnowing fan, machete, spears, bamboo mugs, wooden crockeries etc.



FIGURE 3. One elderly man, a member from the Church is deliberating the congregation on the essence of *Tuluni*.



FIGURE 4. Display of the first fruits of the season on the stage. The first fruit of every crop produced in the agricultural field or kitchen garden is brought to the altar of the Church as an offering. In the pre-Christian days, the same was offered to propitiate spirits.



FIGURE 5. A feast fit for son-in-law and prospective groom during the Tuluni festival. Cooked rice with pork curry on banana leaf spread over a wooden platter.



FIGURE 6. A group of women singing *Thishole*. Tuluni is incomplete without women pounding rice and singing folk song in praise of the village chiefs or brave warriors. The tune may remain the same, but the lyrics have been modified to suit the changing times. Christian terminologies tend to find their way into folk songs.



FIGURE 7. Feeding of prospective bridegroom during the *Tulumi* festival is enacted inside the Church. Whether the prospective groom is worthy or not is determined by how much pork fats he can consume and how many mugs of rice liquor he can drink besides competing in traditional sports to display his agility.



FIGURE 8. Pastors, deacons, and elders in Sumi Naga traditional attires after the Church *Tulumi* programme. Not only during the festival, but the congregation has started attending worship service wearing their traditional attire which was once discouraged as a reminder of older faith that revolved around spirits.



FIGURE 9. Centenary gate in the heart of Zunheboto town. Two huge pillars with animistic motifs proudly stand. A beam above the pillars reads 'Celebrating Hundred years of Christianity'. Motifs like flap meat, woman's breasts, star and moon are carved on the pillars. These motifs are representations of wealth, abundance, and generosity, which were exhibited by the wealthy people in the village. Flap meat symbolizes the ability of the person to share his resource with everyone in the village. The woman's breasts indicate the abundance of resources sufficient for the entire village. The skull of Mithun (*Bos frontalis*) indicates wealth and prestige. The motifs of the star and the moon indicate how all the above-mentioned activities are executed under the glaring aura of the stars and the moon.

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