



A Discourse On The Interface Of Religion And Nature As Reflected In The Naga Folklore

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Abstract

This paper situates itself as an attempt at exploring the rich cultural heritage embedded within the Naga folklores. It is built upon the premise that the Nagas had a strong sense of connection with nature and that this connection permeated almost all aspect of Naga way of life. This paper specifically looks at the interface between Religion and Nature as embodied by the rich folklores. To supplement and support its claim, the paper attempts at a close reading of a poem titled “*Shusie Aneipfu*” and translated as “*My Fair Beloved*” which is a retelling of a Tenyimia folklore in the form of a love ballad.

Key Words: Religion, Nature, Folklore and Oral Tradition

Introduction

Situated in the North-Eastern part of India and home to a sizeable number of tribes, Nagaland has been characterised as a treasure trove of culture. Among the many tribes in Nagaland, there are 17 recognised tribes. Some of them are Ao, Angami, Chakhesang, Lotha, Sema, and Rengma. Each of these tribal groups has their own distinct language and cultural practices making diversity the essence of the Naga people. However, beneath the magnitude and immensity of diversity the Nagas are bounded together by several factors one of which would be the rich oral literature in the form of folklores, folksongs and legends. For centuries, these oral tradition has been the primary and only source for the Nagas to preserve and transmit their values and culture from generation to generation. Even today oral tradition is looked upon as an indispensable vehicle for gathering data on the past glories and traditions of the Naga people.

The oral folktales, folksongs and legends of the Nagas reveal a unique aspect of the Naga Indigenous people, the undeniable interface between nature and religion which is embodied in almost all the folklores. The paper takes up this theme of religion and nature in Naga folktales as an attempt in exploring the richness of oral literature. For the purpose of our discussion we have chosen a poem composed by Vesetso Rose titled “*My Fair Beloved*” a translated version of the Tenyidie poem “*Shiisie ANeipfii*”, a poem that retells a popular Tenyimia Naga folktale. However, before we proceed towards our analysis of the poem it is deemed necessary to provide a brief introduction on the Naga Indigenous religion and its interrelatedness with nature in the next section.

A Brief Introduction on Naga Indigenous Religion

Religion is one of the basic institutions in every human society, regardless of its indigenous, rural or urban status. It is a system of beliefs usually involving the worship of supernatural forces or beings which continues to have major influence. The Naga indigenous religion has been classed under the so called 'animism' by many scholars. 'Animism' as defined by Tylor (1871) (as cited in Taylor, 2005) is "*the theory which endows the phenomenon of nature with personal life*". He uses the word "savage" in his definition of animism and calls it the "religion of the savages". The 19th century writers may have freely used the word 'savage' but in modern times the usage of the term may invite many critical receptions. Over the years, Tylors' concept of animism has been put through many critical receptions and there have been many conceptions of animism.

The concept of animism as relevant to the subject of our discussion is broadly as a belief that nature is endowed with a supreme being and that all natural objects have a soul. Naga Indigenous religion is deeply rooted in a vast understanding and respect for nature. The Nagas believed in the existence of a supreme being who created all things, including man, down to the ants, trees, stones, etc, put divine souls in them and connected them with the natural laws. Martemjen (2014) writes that Nagas worshipped nature and have a strong belief that man, God, animals, aquatic creatures and plants symbiotically co-existed since time immemorial. 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 surroundings which were carefully carried out either by an individual or through elderly wisdoms or with the help of soothsayer. Nagas had the concept that all men and women are equal before god and that there was no distinction between men, plants and animals etc. The Naga cultural practices and beliefs were directly influenced and shaped by their reverence and understanding of nature. To sum up, a study of Naga Indigenous religion in many ways presents nature in a mystically high manner where nature is seen as a benevolent force shielding men from the misfortunes of life and is strongly embedded in the rich folklores and folksongs.

Naga indigenous Religion and Nature as reflected in "*My Fair Beloved*"

As mentioned above, the poem selected for discussion is a translated version of the poem "*Shiisie Aneipfü*" which is adapted from a popular Tenyimia Naga Folktale. The folktale is reproduced in the form of a dramatic monologue, a verse form popularised by Robert Browning. It depicts a scene where a young lover saddened by the inevitable parting, exhorts and comforts his beloved. As a love lyric, the entire poem is tinged with a feeling of sadness, at the knowledge that parting is inevitable. However as a text within the context of our discussion it is a poem that presents the rich cultural heritage of the Nagas. In the following few lines we shall attempt at presenting the lines that contain reference and allusions to aspects of Naga cultural beliefs.

Significance of 'rocks' in the poem

To begin with, there is a reference to rocks in the lines;

Amidst all the splendid rocks that stands

There is one that shall always stand, the rock of our vow (Lines v-vi).

The reference to rocks bears a huge cultural significance. For the Nagas, stone or rock is an important object of worship especially for the Tenyimia. Some spirits are believed to reside in them and most villages have a spirit stone called '*Kiputsie*'. The god of stones is called '*Ketsierhuo*'. The reference to rocks here is seen as a rock that will keep the lovers' vow eternal. This can also be seen as a reference to the traditional stone pulling ceremony of the Nagas. Stone pulling (*Ketsieshii* in Tenyidie) is a traditional ceremony where a huge

monolith is dragged from a distance by young men and is erected to commemorate the holding of festivals or feasts. The erected monolith becomes a symbol of achievement and success. This traditional ceremony is still practised by the Nagas and is done to commemorate the holding of festivals, building of new offices or institutions. The introduction of the concept of a rock as "*the rock of our vow*" also serves as a symbol of enduring commitment. Rocks are often associated with stability and permanence, suggesting that while other things may change, the foundation of their bond remains unshaken

Allusions to Nature in the poem

Secondly, the belief in the all embalming power of nature is evoked in the lines;

And with Men is an abundance of concocting and scheming,

The Green in the woodlands, will we be (Lines xiii-xiv).

The lines above may be read as a reference to the rich natural greenery of Nagaland on one plane and on another plane it may be read as evoking the belief in the benevolent spirit of nature. Nature is seen here as a safe abode that provides shelter from the evils of men. An extended reference of this could very well be the morality embedded in the Naga traditional religion. Nagas not only believed in the presence of souls in all natural objects but also that there are some other good and evil spirits and other godheads dwelling in rocks, forests, groves, streams and rivers. The malignant demons are very fond of doing harm or killing men intentionally while the benevolent spirits keeps them safe. The '*green in the woodlands will we be*' in this sense therefore is also a suggestion that nature that is benevolent will keep them away from evil.

Another reference to the religious beliefs of the Nagas can be found in the following lines;

waned and gone we may but with new year we will sprout again

with renewed shoots and tender greens to adorn young sprightly souls

And be a sanctuary for those who breathe(xvii-xix).

The Nagas in general had their own concept of heaven where everyone would go after death except those who had unnatural death. The concept was a force, which tempered the hearts of the Nagas and made them thoroughly sincere and straightforward in their social life. The Nagas had their own version of eternal life. They believe that all the worldly riches would go to heaven along with the dead person and that they would meet with all those who were already dead and would pass on the news of their respective families when he met them and would make some presentations, which were sent by the living. The concluding three lines of the poem presented above can therefore be seen as a reference to the life beyond death as was central to the Nagas religious belief.

Conclusion

Naga's collection of folklores is immensely rich and inexhaustible. The subject of any Naga folklore are almost always stories about animals, nature, spirits and magic which are handed down orally from generation to generation. Occurring in the forms of folksongs, proverbs, myths and folktales, these folklores provides a lucid understanding of the cultural past and glories of the Nagas (Sentinaro & Chandra, 2010). This paper has been an attempt at exploring the close knit relationship between nature and religion in the traditional Naga society as embedded in the folklores.

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My Fair Beloved

My Fair Beloved,

Those tranquil and soothing moments of a once happy time

Call to mind we may, but this our fate now

The sweet promises we made, might too pass.

Amidst all the splendid rocks that stands

There is one that shall always stand, the rock of our vow

In a place untouched by landslides will we safely harbor;

a haven, a paradise unsurpassable

Where there is no parting, no withering

For when it must also wither

ti's not just you and me, the flowers and the plants

Too will wither away in sorrowing

And with Men is an abundance of concocting and scheming.

The Green in the woodlands, will we be

that though we must still wither away

a vast enormous tree, will we be

waned and gone we may but with new year we will sprout again

with renewed shoots and tender greens to adorn young sprightly souls

And be a sanctuary for those who breathe.

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