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Mortuary Rituals and Indigenous Cosmology: Understanding the Death Customs of the Sümi Naga

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Abstract

Death rituals represent one of the most significant expressions of cultural identity and social organisation in human societies. Among the Sümi Naga of Nagaland in Northeast India, mortuary practices reflect deeply rooted cosmological beliefs concerning the soul, the afterlife, and the relationship between the living and the dead. Prior to the advent of Christianity in the late nineteenth century, Sümi society practised a complex system of funeral rituals grounded in animistic beliefs, ritual taboos, and communal obligations. These customs regulated the treatment of the deceased, the conduct of mourning relatives, and the symbolic severance between the living and the spiritual realm.

This paper examines the traditional death rituals and customs of the Sümi Naga and analyses how these practices have evolved in response to religious and social change. Drawing on oral testimonies from community elders as well as existing ethnographic literature, the study explores Sümi beliefs about death and the afterlife, the classification of different types of death, burial rituals associated with social status, and rituals of separation between the living and the deceased. The paper also investigates the transformation of these practices following the spread of Christianity among the Sümi community.

The study argues that although Christian conversion brought significant changes to Sümi mortuary rituals, many traditional elements continue to survive in modified forms. This reflects a process of cultural negotiation in which indigenous beliefs and Christian practices coexist and interact. Sümi death rituals therefore illustrate broader processes of cultural continuity, adaptation, and identity formation within indigenous societies undergoing religious and social transformation.

Keywords: Sümi Naga, Death rituals, Indigenous culture, Nagaland, Funeral customs, Christianity, Anthropology of death

Introduction

Rituals associated with death constitute a fundamental aspect of human culture. Across societies, death rituals not only honour the deceased but also reaffirm social relationships, express cosmological beliefs, and regulate the transition between life and death. Anthropologists have long emphasised that mortuary practices provide valuable insights into a society's worldview and social organisation (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991).

Arnold van Gennep's theory of *rites of passage* provides an important analytical framework for understanding death rituals. According to Van Gennep (1960), life-cycle rituals—including birth, initiation, marriage, and death—follow a tripartite structure consisting of separation, transition, and

incorporation. Funeral rites mark the separation of the deceased from the world of the living while simultaneously guiding the community through a transitional phase of mourning before social equilibrium is restored.

Similarly, Robert Hertz (1960) emphasised that death rituals often reflect collective beliefs regarding the transformation of the soul. In many traditional societies, the deceased is believed to exist temporarily in an intermediate state before reaching the final realm of the dead. Ritual practices therefore serve to facilitate the safe passage of the soul while protecting the living from spiritual harm.

Among the indigenous societies of Northeast India, mortuary rituals play a particularly important role in expressing cultural identity and social relationships. The Naga tribes, known for their rich cultural traditions and complex ritual systems, have historically maintained elaborate funeral customs reflecting their animistic worldview (Elwin, 1961).

This paper focuses on the Sümi Naga, one of the major tribes inhabiting the Indian state of Nagaland. Prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, Sümi society practised a variety of rituals connected with death that reflected beliefs about the soul, supernatural forces, and the afterlife. Although Christianity later transformed many of these customs, several traditional elements continue to influence contemporary practices.

The objectives of this paper are therefore threefold:

1. To document the traditional death rituals and customs of the Sümi Naga.
2. To analyse the cultural and cosmological beliefs underlying these practices.
3. To examine how these rituals have transformed following the spread of Christianity.

Through this analysis, the paper contributes to the broader anthropological understanding of mortuary practices and cultural change among indigenous societies.

The Sümi Naga: Historical and Cultural Context

The Sümi are one of the prominent Naga tribes residing in Nagaland in Northeast India. They constitute the second largest tribal population in the state and are primarily concentrated in the districts of Zunheboto and Dimapur, although their presence extends across other regions as well (Government of Nagaland, 2011). The term "Sümi" originates from the language spoken by the community, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family.

Historically, the Sümi were known for their martial traditions and warrior ethos. Like many other Naga groups, they lived in fortified hilltop villages and frequently engaged in inter-village warfare. The practice of head-hunting, common among several Naga tribes in the pre-colonial period, was associated with notions of bravery, prestige, and spiritual power (Hutton, 1921).

Sümi society was organised around clan relationships, customary laws, and ritual practices. Their worldview was shaped by animistic beliefs that recognised the presence of spirits in natural elements and ancestral beings. Various *gennas* or ritual taboos regulated social behaviour and ensured harmony between the human and spiritual worlds.

Although the introduction of Christianity in the late nineteenth century significantly altered many aspects of Sümi culture, traditional beliefs and practices continue to influence social life. This cultural continuity is particularly visible in rituals associated with death and mourning.

Sümi Cosmology and Beliefs About Death

In traditional Sümi cosmology, death did not signify the complete end of existence. Rather, it represent-

ed a transition from the physical world to a spiritual realm. The Sümi believed that while the body ceased to function after death, the spirit continued to exist independently.

The spirit was believed to travel to a place known as *Kithilato (Kithi-la-to)*. The term *Kithilato* is a compound word in the Sümi language, formed from three lexical elements: *kithi* (death), *la* (way or path), and *to* (mountain)- collectively referring to the symbolic 'mountain path of the dead' in Sümi cosmology often interpreted as the "Land of the Dead". Oral traditions describe this place as being located symbolically in the direction of the Wokha region. The journey of the spirit to this realm required appropriate rituals to ensure safe passage.

Immediately after death, the spirit was believed to linger near the corpse, unaware that physical death had occurred. During the burial ceremony, mourners would shout ritual expressions intended to inform the spirit that it had departed from the world of the living. Only then would the spirit begin its journey to the afterlife.

Such beliefs reveal the importance of ritual in mediating the relationship between the living and the dead. As Hertz (1960) observed, funeral rituals often serve to transform the deceased from a potentially dangerous spirit into a socially recognised ancestor.

Classification of Death in Sümi Tradition

Traditional Sümi society recognised several categories of death, each associated with particular causes and meanings. These classifications reflected the community's moral and cosmological understanding of life and misfortune.

The most common type was *Alhoaye kithi*, referring to natural death caused by illness or old age. Such deaths were regarded as normal and socially acceptable.

Another category was *Ghüyi lo kuwo kithi*, which referred to death in warfare or combat. Given the warrior traditions of the Sümi, such deaths were often viewed as honourable.

Deaths caused by enemy capture and torture were known as *Aghusu no küghakulu kithi*, while accidental deaths were classified as *Musumumu lokuwo kithi*.

Women who died during childbirth were categorised as *Asüla lo kuwo* or *Nhapithi*, reflecting beliefs associated with ritual impurity and spiritual danger.

Other categories included *Tukunni kithi*, associated with illness causing bodily swelling; *Kükha kithi*, referring to suicide; *Akhuava-kithi*, or death caused by famine and starvation; and *Yengu kithi*, believed to occur when a person was killed by supernatural forces.

These classifications demonstrate that death in Sümi society was interpreted not merely as a biological event but as a phenomenon embedded within moral, social, and spiritual frameworks.

Burial Rituals and Social Hierarchy

Mortuary rituals among the Sümi varied according to the social status and achievements of the deceased. These ceremonies therefore reflected broader patterns of prestige and social recognition within the community.

Feast Givers

Individuals who had performed the prestigious 'Feast of Merit' during their lifetime were accorded elaborate burial ceremonies. On the day of their funeral, villagers refrained from leaving the settlement as a sign of collective mourning. A mithun or cow was slaughtered, and its meat was distributed among

the villagers.
A significant ritual associated with such funerals was the communal act of stone pulling. The stone was later erected near the grave as a memorial monument, symbolising the generosity and prestige of the deceased.

Warriors
Warriors who had distinguished themselves in battle were commemorated through the erection of a wooden effigy known as *Athigho*. The effigy was decorated with traditional ornaments and attire representing the warrior's achievements.
Such displays reinforced the importance of bravery and martial success in Sümi society.

Hunters
For individuals known for their prowess in hunting dangerous animals such as tigers and bears, special rituals were conducted before burial. A dog would be sacrificed so that the spirit of the hunter could overcome the spirits of animals encountered on the journey to the land of the dead.

Ordinary Individuals
For individuals of modest means, funeral ceremonies were simpler and primarily attended by family members and neighbours. Nevertheless, the fundamental elements of burial and mourning were observed.

Ritual Restrictions and Mourning Practices
Following a death, the Sümi observed several ritual restrictions or *gennas* designed to protect the living and ensure the safe departure of the deceased.
One important ritual was *Akulu Chine*, which required the surviving spouse to observe strict dietary restrictions until the next harvest. Violation of these taboos was believed to result in spiritual misfortune.
Another practice involved the ritual purification of the household through the creation of a new fire using traditional methods and the cleansing of the house with fresh water. Such acts symbolised the restoration of normal life after the disruption caused by death.

Ritual of Separation: *Akukho*
Two days after the burial, a ceremony known as *Akukho* was performed to symbolically sever the relationship between the living and the deceased.
During this ritual, food was placed at the favourite location of the deceased within the house. Family members completed their meals before sunset and washed all utensils to ensure that the spirit departed before nightfall.
The ceremony concluded with the distribution of meat among relatives, marking the final communal act of remembrance.
From an anthropological perspective, this ritual represents the final stage of the rite of passage in which the deceased is fully separated from the social world of the living (Van Gennep, 1960).

Transformation in the Christian Era
The spread of Christianity among the Sümi in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought

profound changes to traditional mortuary practices. Missionaries condemned many animistic rituals as pagan practices and encouraged converts to adopt Christian funeral ceremonies.

Today, most Sümi funerals are conducted according to Christian rituals involving prayer services, hymns, and pastoral leadership. The belief in the afterlife has been reinterpreted within Christian theology, emphasising heaven and eternal life rather than the traditional concept of *Kithi-la-to*.

Nevertheless, certain indigenous practices continue to survive. The ritual of *Akukho*, for example, is still observed in some communities, though it is often accompanied by Christian prayers rather than traditional invocations. Similarly, communal gatherings and the sharing of food remain important elements of funeral ceremonies.

Conclusion

The death rituals and customs of the Sümi Naga reveal a complex cultural system shaped by cosmological beliefs, social hierarchy, and communal values. Traditional Sümi mortuary practices emphasised the continued existence of the spirit and the importance of ritual in facilitating the transition from life to the afterlife.

Although the spread of Christianity brought significant changes to these practices, many traditional elements continue to persist in modified forms. This reflects the adaptive nature of Sümi culture, in which indigenous traditions and Christian beliefs coexist and interact.

Understanding these rituals is therefore crucial not only for anthropological scholarship but also for preserving the cultural heritage of the Sümi community in the face of rapid social change.

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