



## Human-Animal Transitions: A Case Study of Sümi Lycanthropy Khesheli Aye

### Abstract

Amidst globalization and modernity, myths and legends continue to linger in the form of oral tradition; serving the purpose of preserving tribal culture and identity. The growing fear of endangered identity among the indigenous community calls for self-assertion through intangible culture. The juxtaposition of tradition and modernity is not alien to the Tribal society. And why, as rightly asked by Easterine Kire, can we not have a foot in both the world? The legend of Lycanthropy appears to be one such belief that has survived to modern times. The Nagas, despite the wide acceptance of Christianity, continue to believe in the myth and legend of Lycanthropy. The present study attempts to shed light on the legend of lycanthropy as a peculiar expression of human-nature association and analyze the socio-religious implications of this belief through a case study of the Sümi Naga. The current study further examines the process by which tribal identity is sustained to the present day.

**Keywords:** Lycanthropy, Zoomorphism, Myths, Metamorphosis, Sümi Naga, Aghungu, Indigenous, Myths and Legends

### Introduction

The tribal population is socially, culturally, economically, religiously and politically differentiated on account of their historical context. The earlier discourses described the tribal society as backward and primitive. Such ideology regarding the tribal prompted the so considered advanced culture to take up a self-claimed responsibility to civilize the savage. Xaxa (2021) in his lecture on *Elwin-Ghurye debate in Retrospect* traced back this popular debate to 1940s, concerning the tribal population. According to Xaxa, Elwin's stand was to adopt non-interference

policy towards the tribal. On the contrary, Ghurye attempt to assimilate the tribal with the mainstream. Ghurye (1963) described the tribal as the backward Hindus; counter-productive to the element of cultural diversity. He went on to argue that there were no sociological grounds on which a fundamental distinction could be made between castes and tribes. Contradicting his opinion, Elwin (1964) asserted that the tribal were the custodians of unique cultural traditions that were not just distinct but supercilious to the Indian culture and the western culture. Both ideas, however, were abandoned and a policy of integration was adopted. Subsequently, considering the unique historical underpinnings of the tribal society, the constitution of India guaranteed a special provision for the tribal in the Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution.

Despite the initiative, the multifaceted implications of globalization and modernity have been manifested in every aspects of life. The cultural globalization in particular has brought forth the concept of mono-culture, risking the indigenous cultures. The absorption of the subordinate ethnic group identity into respectively larger group in the extreme cases led to an extinction: a process which is anthropologically referred to as Ethnocide<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the interference has resulted in the degeneration of the harmonious relation that co-exist between the indigenous people and the natural world; the implication which hinders the identity of the indigenous people as being the custodian of the planet earth. Retrospecting on the question of what role the indigenous people play in managing and protecting the nature and ecosystem? Rekha Shangpliang through her narrative illustrated on how nature is perceived as a 'cultural space' among the tribal, and the nature, as such, is embodied and symbolized in the myths, legends, and beliefs and so on. The debate on culture and nature has heightened with the implications of population growth and global warming. Hence, such myth and legends illuminate the complex and inextricable links that binds human and the natural world. Additionally, Hutton's record of the rituals observed related to affinity of human and non-human world states:

When an Angami village kills a tiger or a leopard the Zievo<sup>2</sup> (used Kemovo by Hutton; the meaning of which is fasting), the priest, proclaims a non-working day for the death of an 'elder brother'. The flesh of tigers and leopards is often eaten by Angami (men only and under certain restrictions), that of leopards (never of tiger) by the Changs, but the Sümi<sup>3</sup> would not dream of eating either. It is absolutely genna<sup>4</sup> to touch it, and most Sumi villages, if they kill a tiger or a leopard, leave the body to rot where it lies, though the head may be taken and brought back to village. The fear of the tiger among the Nagas is considerable, and all regard them as being apart from the ordinary animals and very nearly connected with the human race. (Hutton, *Sema* 208)

The current study intends to examine the intangible culture as the catalyst to identity assertion with special reference to lycanthropy. It explores the assertion of indigenous cultural identity through the lenses of myths and legends. The driving force for the present analysis is thus shaped by the question of how the indigenous people construct their identity in the face of cultural imperialism.

In resemblance to any other tribes, the Sümi myths and legends in many cases depicts the harmonious accord between the natural world and the human world; the social and the non-social world. Lycanthropy is a universally held belief among the tribal societies. Hutton and Mills used the same term in their monographs to address the expression of human-animal relationship in the Naga Hills. Since nineteenth century, the figure of werewolf or what is scientifically known as 'lycanthropy' has constituted a pertinent part of ghost and horror genres and literature. The account of metamorphosis is commonly observed in China, India, Africa, Central and South America. The study calls for multidisciplinary interpretation of the belief. Over the time, the interpretations have evolved from religious-superstitions to medical models to psychodynamic interpretations. The science-superstitions dichotomy in

interpretations of lycanthropy has become a subject of contention.

The word 'Lycanthropy' has its origin from the Greek *Lykanthropia* from *Lukas* for 'wolf' and *Anthropos* for 'man'. It is the belief in the ability of humans to transform into animals. This myth of human metamorphosis is found among several tribes of Nagaland including the Sümi Naga<sup>5</sup>. The origin of the belief has been traced back to the ideology of divine retribution found in the book of Daniel (4:33) where king Nabuchadnezzar<sup>6</sup> was transformed into an ox for seven years. Historians also trace back the legend of lycanthropy to Greek Mythology. Zeus, the Greek God, punished Lycaon by transforming him into a wolf for his attempt to deceive Zeus into eating human flesh. Additionally, the symbolism of human and nature association is reflected in the image of Hindu god Ganesh; a famous man and animal hybrid. The historical painting that dates back to million years also portrays the affinity of human with nature.

In congruence with its universality, across cultures, the belief is known by different names. Among the Anglo-Saxons the term "Werewolf" is used. In France, it is termed as *Loup-garou*, in Russia as *Volkulaku* while in Italy it is known as *Lupo-manaro*. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the term *Insania Zooanthropica* was used to refer to this transition. Among the Lotha<sup>7</sup> Naga the term *Sonhyuz*<sup>8</sup> is used to refer to lycanthropists. The Angami<sup>9</sup> Naga referred to the shape-takers as Tekhumevi<sup>10</sup>. In Sümi dialect the lycanthropists are known as *Nodilho*.<sup>11</sup>

Several discourses on lycanthropy established theories stating the possible reasons for lycanthropic occurrence. The first theory asserted that the essentiality of characteristics such as courage and guile in the head-hunting era coincides with the ideology that the person temporarily retains the characteristics of tiger's nature by taking the form of a Were-tiger. The ideology gave rise to the folks believe in werewolves or human-animal metamorphism. Another theory embarks on the notion of expansionist ideology. One basic defining feature of the

Sümi tribe is the continual expansion in the wild. In correspondence to physical expansion, the notion of symbolic movement/expansion of the *Aghungu*<sup>12</sup> (Soul) evading a person's body to reside in the non-social or wild creatures is observed. The boom in the lycanthropic occurrences was witnessed among the Sümi Tribe. Some studies associated the boom with the notion that with the growing difficulties in the real/physical expansion, the more symbolic expansion has been resorted to. Consequently, the animal associated possesses either symbolic or religious significance as in the case of 'Totemic' belief.

The legend evokes enthusiasts from varied disciplines giving ways to multidimensional explanations. Clinically, the condition is believed to be an expression of Psychiatric pathology while biblically it is held to be a divine punishment or curse. Cultural studies assert it as a culture-bound syndrome. This is efficiently supplemented in Tambiah's view that 'cultures and social systems are, after all, not only thought but also lived' (211). The question of rationality and realism has been the central theme of the legendary accounts. The aim of the present study, however, does not focus on the question of realism of metamorphosis or to draw a rational explanation. The naivete is intentional. The study rather aims at a deconstructive perspective on Totemic belief, shared affinity between humans and animals and the socio-religious implication of such intangible culture among the Sümi Naga community.

In the zoomorphism found among the Sümi Naga, a close association is established between a person and a particular animal to which a human projects one's soul. Thong and Kath (2011) asserted that there exist a certain connection between the body and the soul; as they co-exist. The close association is manifested in the expression that the pain incurred by one is inflicted upon the other. The soul takes the shape of *Apighi*<sup>13</sup> [Snake], *Angushuu*<sup>14</sup> (Tiger) etc. One respondent's description closely coincides with Hutton's work when he contended that when a werewolf or snake gets wounded the wound would

correspondingly appear on the body of the person. However, the wound would appear only after s/he hears about the injury of his host animal. The body would suffer the pain and also experience the fetid of decomposed flesh ensuing succumb to the injury. Toivi Aye<sup>15</sup> (age 64), in his interview, held the view that the consumption of the meat of *Jichukili*<sup>16</sup>, and *Aukhüjukumo*<sup>17</sup> prevents the metamorphosis. This belief was augmented by case study account of one respondent where she affirmed that her parents fed her *Aukhüjukumo* to avert her transformation.

The commonly held belief is that the matured lycanthropist could assume the form of any animals they intend. Choppy in his work on the religious system categorized the lycanthropists as the group of sacred 'specialists'. He assigned the expression 'specialists' to lycanthropists on the virtue of esoteric knowledge they hold; the trait which set them apart from the lay people. Their ability to liaise with the other worldly i.e. the domain of the spirit transcends the lycanthropist beyond this worldly. Here, the transformation of the body does not take place. It is the *Aghungu* that escapes the body and temporarily resides in the body of the animal until dawn. According to Hutton, the peculiarity about the Sümi lycanthropy is that the *Aghungu* at times remains with the host body for a couple of days. Under such circumstance, a person experiences a semi-conscious state where they are unable to communicate intelligibly.

Consequently, an intimate bond is created between a human and a nature. The perpetuation of the legend corresponds to two possible means of bequeathing. The first is hereditary and the other is an intimate association with the shape-shifters such as sharing beds, dishes and intake of the leftovers. A noteworthy correspondence is that when the morphed animal has inflicted an injury and succumbs to it, the person undergoes the same fate. This tradition and belief system has its role in preserving biodiversity through a shared bond between humans and animals.

Albeit the various Medical and Psychological studies account the belief to pathological anomaly or hallucinations, the practice of lycanthropy or the ‘totemic’ belief is still accepted among the Sümi Naga. Ovesen (1983) in his study of lycanthropy in the Naga Hills asserted that the forms of Lycanthropy found among the Sümi tribe varied from the tribes of Lotha and Ao (“Man”). Hutton further stated that several Sümi have been considered lycanthropist in their younger days.

### **Methodology**

Autoethnography<sup>18</sup> method has been employed for the present study in order to understand the cultural experiences and societal phenomenon. Besides, interview method was employed for an in-depth exploration and free-ranging discourse from the respondents to obtain rich information for the study. The study further recorded two Case studies from varied Sümi inhabiting regions for a comprehensive understanding of the myths and legend of lycanthropy among the Sümi Naga.

### **Case Report 1**

A 68-year-old respondent of Village A<sup>19</sup> stated that her *Aghungu* at one point of time took the form of *Angushuu*. She cited an incident of eavesdropping on the conversation of other people at night. In her sleep, a respondent recalled her *aghungu* sliding down the slope with head downward to drink *Amkhizü/Amtizü*<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, Chophy cited that Hotoyi Awomi of Surumi village, a lycanthropist narrated about the brine hole where the novice has to enter and drink with great difficulty risking one’s life. The survival of the ordeal confers the individual with knowledge and skill of the secret society. She mentioned that she saw an enormous amount of skeleton of those who fell into *amkhizü/Amtizü* and meet their death while trying to drink the water from the brine hole. It is commonly believed that once the *aghungu* sip the *Amkhizü/Amtizü*, the *Aghungu* can no longer return from the state of metamorphosis. She stated that there were several incidents where she slaughtered pigs and chickens causing inconvenience through such act. The lycanthropists, at times being the harbinger of

unanticipated incident while simultaneously causing disturbance calls for an ambivalent attitude towards them; an expression of internal contradictions. She opined that her great-grandfather and mother were also *Angushuu*. Her great-grandmother was said to be *Amikhi*<sup>21</sup> and she believed that her great grand-father acquired it through her great grandmother by sharing utensils, leftovers, bed and the like. She went on to state that her parents gave her *Aukhujukumo* to prohibit her spirit from transforming into an *Angushuu*. Metamorphosis was believed to be hereditary and in several cases, the study shows a unique trend of the transition skipping one generation in its transmission.

### **Case Report 2**

A 63-year-old Respondent of Village 'B'<sup>22</sup> described her soul as *Apighi* (snake). She claimed that she has been taking the form for over twenty years. She considers herself to be much matured *Apighi* assuming to be a thigh size of an adult. She would spy on the conversation at the nightfall and would warn the relatives of the untoward events. She cited an incident where she took vengeance on one of her adversary by causing a landslide in the adversary's paddy field. It is believed that the lycanthropist who takes the form of *Apighi* challenges *ayeghi*<sup>23</sup> to catch them, whenever they want to cause a landslide. However, the act is believed to be life threatening because in doing so, the lycanthropist put themselves at risk of being buried by the land sliding behind them. At times the *Aghungu* of the lycanthropist remain in the body of the host animal and the generally held belief is that the sight of one's soul in the host body will result in the death of that lycanthropist. The respondent stated that she escape death by an inch when she saw her own soul in the host animal. It was through Lajo<sup>24</sup> that she recovered from her close to death ailment. She further narrated that her several attempts to visit pastor's residence turned out to be failure due to a burning fire (symbolic of divine power) that stopped her. The respondent further narrated her experience of numbness and body ache when she wakes in the morning. Additively she

stated that *Aku-ü* (ginger) and *Atsuna*<sup>25</sup> (scallions) serve as an effective treatment for the injury of lycanthropist.

### **Discussion**

The present study on the human-animal transitions has been conducted among Sümi inhabiting various topographical distributions. The study on a broader context sheds light on the multidisciplinary approach namely medical, historical, fictional and religious interpretations of the myth of lycanthropy, while in particular emphasized in the prevalence of the belief of lycanthropy in Sümi society. The myths of existence of tiger-human dates back to Census report of India carried out by Davis in 1891. The portrayal of oneself as social and non-social symbolizes the duality of human and animal. From the Psychoanalytical paradigm, the ideology closely coincides with the Freudian notion of Id and Superego, while through the prism of ecology it mirrors the affinity between human and nature.

Several case report accounts lycanthropy as a delusional ailment ensuing markedly in patients who is believed to be labored under diabolic influence; an expression of retribution of their deeds. Here, the imperative element is the cultural environment of the patient and as such, the animal species often symbolize the patient's illusory rendition of evil. However, Hutton opined that 'the lycanthropic occurrences in the Naga Hills are not too circumstantial to be dismissed as mere delusion and one is almost tempted to impute to certain individuals a telepathic sympathy with leopards in the jungle' (Hutton 1931). Levi Strauss' (1962) pioneering study on Totemism emphasized the importance of human and animal relations. Likewise, Leach (1964) highlighted certain affinities between social and zoological categories.

Lycantropy, for many tribal societies, has become a phenomenon of the past; a myth and legend. But for the Sümi Naga, the practice persists to this day. The perpetuation of this belief is well summed up in an interview with several

respondents, who, to these days consider themselves to be shape-shifters. Thong and Kath in their study cited an account of Zūkiye of Kulhopu village and Kiyezü of Nikuto who bore the marks of injury that resembles a gun shot. Iralu (2009) in his groundbreaking work, *The Naga Saga: A Historical Account of the Sixty Two Years Indo-Naga War and the Story of those who were Never Allowed to tell it*, mentioned that the NSCN- Khaplang (known commonly as NSCN-K) believed that the presence of werewolves among them helps them to spy on the enemy and alert their comrades of the enemy's move.

Drawing on the researcher's own experience using the autoethnography method, the researcher recalled an incident where a woman, who claimed to be an *Angushuu* was shot by the owner of the swine when she was trying to slaughter it. With passing days, the woman felt uneasy and sickly. Relative to the generally held belief, she died few days after hearing the news of *Angushuu* being succumbed to the injury. A mark that resembles the gun shot appeared on her body and she subsequently died of excessive bleeding. In another instance, a researcher recalled a man who in his paroxysm would throw himself on the *Atozu*<sup>26</sup> the act which would go on for weeks. Initially his peer mates tried to stop him but an aged folks in the village refrain his friends from stopping him by stating that his soul was having a tussle with the opponent in the spirit land and the act of stopping him would result in the other *Angushuu*, i.e. his foe killing him.

With the advent of Christianity, the belief in lycanthropy became intertwined with massive socio-religious implications. The lycanthropic behavior was confronted and rebuked. Christianity ruled out the possibility of human-animal metamorphosis. The church refuted the human-animal transition and asserted that God alone can alter substance. It altered the whole concept of the traditional belief by depicting lycanthropy as a 'curse' and 'satanic' practice. The Christian principles strongly uphold the uncompromising Christian distinction

between human and animal with an argument of human being created in the very image of God. Consequently, the belief was later attached with the social stigma. The fear of this stigma and labeling led to many lycanthropists conceal their identity. This is evident in the challenges the researcher faced in finding the respondents for the present intended study. Hekhuvi in his interview maintained that the lycanthropic-like behavior signifies *Tughami gho*<sup>27</sup> and added that all this belief was a result of lack of faith in God. Heneise's (2016) study summed this vividly that substantial number of informants appear to be apprehensive about the subject, and often brush it away with the statement that 'those are archaic belief, but now we are Christians'.

### **Conclusion**

The globalization, initiation of colonization and the advent of Christianity in the Naga Hills has resulted in the cultural reconstruction; which is transforming the indigenous social fabrics. This entails for counter response through identity reconstruction. The fast changing era has in several ways ripped off the culture, language and the scenic beauty of the tribal people. Since the colonial period, the notion of the supremacy of western culture over indigenous culture gave rise to popular concept known as 'white man's burden', which indeed was a self-proclaimed responsibility. The tribal society of Nagaland is no exception to such transformation introduced by the so called 'great-tradition'. The parochialisation of great traditional elements, in most cases, has a devastating and destabilizing impact on the tribal society; to the cost of disintegration and extinction of 'little tradition'. The loss of culture, as rightly asserted, is the loss of identity. Thereby, in the phase of cultural imperialism, the indigenous people call for self-assertion through their intangible cultures such as beliefs, myths, legends and folklores.

As advocated by Giddens, modernity is a double-edged sword and so are its implications. The positive as well as negative impacts of modernity and globalization are has a

discernable effect in daily aspects our lives. The circumstances, as such, raise a question on the cultural identity and sustainability, which constitutes the imperative element of modern context. Henceforth, the intangible cultural heritage with its unique traits enables to maintain cultural diversity in the face of growing mono-culture and serve as a representation of identity in the face of historical trauma and the process of cultural identity assault.

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### **Endnotes:**

1. Ethnocide is also termed as cultural genocide. Bartolome Clavero stated that Genocide terminate people while ethnocide kills social culture.
2. The term Zievo is used to refer to the priest in Tenyidie dialect. The word Kemovo (correctly used Kemevo) is mistaken for the priest in the Sema Naga book of Hutton.
3. The researcher has replaced the nomenclature 'Sema', as formerly used, with the newer nomenclature 'Sümi'. Through the initiative of Sumi Hoho, the apex body of the Sumi Naga, the administrative order was issued by the Home Department, Government of Nagaland under the declaration No. Home/SCTA-16/94, that hereby, the name Sema shall be replaced by the nomenclature Sümi (wef. 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1994).
4. The word genna stands for something forbidden, also known as Taboo. The term has its origin from the Tenyiedie word Kenyü, meaning the forbidden practice/beliefs. The belief in genna is deeply entrenched.
5. Sumi Naga is the tribal group inhabiting the North Eastern region of India. They constitute one of the major recognized

tribes of Nagaland; predominantly found in Zunheboto District of Nagaland.

6. New International Version, Daniel 4:33: Immediately what has been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from the people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.
7. The Lotha Naga constitutes one of the indigenous tribe of Nagaland predominantly inhabiting the District of Wokha. It is one of the sixteen major tribes of Nagaland.
8. Sonhyuo is a Lotha term used to refer to a lycanthropist. A lycanthropy being a commonly held belief especially among the tribals has various terms to define the belief.
9. The Angami are the ethnic group native to Nagaland. The common dialect spoken by the Angami tribe of Nagaland is *Tenyidie* and the tribe predominantly inhabits the district of Kohima.
10. *Tekhumevi* is a Tenyidie term for the lycanthropist
11. See S. Vihoto Sheyepu, 'Angshuu Kugulho' in Kichitssat hoh (Yekala 9, 10 Kiphi): A Text book of Modern Indian Language (Sümi) for Class 9 & 10 Nagaland Board of School Education (Zunheboto: Sümi Literature Board, 2005), p. 14.
12. *Aghungu* is a Sümi term for the soul or the spirit.
13. *Apighi* is a vernacular word for the snake or the serpent.
14. *Angushuu* refers to the tiger in Sümi dialect
15. Interview with Toivi Aye on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2022. He asserted that both his great-grandfather and great-grandmother were lycanthropists
16. *Jichukili* is the vernacular term for the portmanteau of Squirrel and field mice.
17. *Aukhüjukumo* is a literal translation for an egg that is left unhatched. Typically, it is considered taboo for young unmarried people to consume *Aukhüjukumo*. The belief held that such consumption may result in the abandonment of an individual by their spouse in the marriage life. The belief continues to the present days among certain sections of Sumi, albeit some families have forfeited the belief with the advent of Christianity.
18. Autoethnography is a research method and methodology which employs the personal experiences of the researcher in

data collection to analyse and comprehend the cultural encounters. Danahay (2006) as cited in Cambell describes the method as a form of self-narrative where the self is placed within the social context as the researcher's personal experience is employed as data.

19. The name of the respondent and the village has been disguised as a respondent and Village 'A' to protect the privacy of the respondent. The arrival of Christianity discouraged and rebuked the belief in metamorphosis. The Christian doctrine preached against lycanthropy as being a form of satanic belief and curse. This brought forth a social stigma and suspicious attitude towards the lycanthropists. Hence, this change in attitude of the people towards the lycanthropists has necessitated the researcher to change the name and the village of the respondent.
20. *Amkhizü*, also known as *amtizü* among certain group of Sümi Society is a salty water which a novice lycanthro pist drink to make their metamorphosis perennial.
21. *Amikhi* refers to mature lycanthropist or an individual who has been transforming for a longer period of time.
22. The name of the respondent and the village has been disguised to protect the privacy of the respondent. The arrival of Christianity discouraged and rebuked the belief in metamorphosis. The Christian doctrine preached against lycanthropy as being a form of satanic belief and curse. This brought forth a social stigma and suspicious attitude towards the lycanthropists. Hence, this change in attitude of the people towards the lycanthropists has necessitated the researcher to change the name and the village of the respondent.
23. The term *Ayeghi* in Sumi dialect refers to the earth or the land
24. *Lajo* is a vernicular term for ecdysis. It is the process of periodic shedding off of the outer inelastic cuticle that commonly occurs during the growth and development of various insects and anthropods. A generally held belief in lycanthropy is that a lycanthropist who takes the form of *Apighi* (snake) can recover from an injury caused in their venture through the process of *Lajo* (ecdysis).
25. *Atsuna* is the Sümi term for scallions, also known as spring-onion.

26. A house built of bamboo with a thatched roof. It was predominantly found design of house among the Naga tribes, especially in the rural areas.
27. In an interview with Hekhuvi of Village C on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022, he asserted that such behavior in the Christian era symbolizes a *Tughami gho* which can be translated as the satanic power or the gift/power acquired from the evil spirit.

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