

## **Indigenous religion of Nagaland before the coming of Christianity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Indigenous religions of Nagas are quiet fascinating in nature as it is animistic and revolves around superstition, logic, and the ways of virtuous life. The present study is attributed to the quest for more informative knowledge regarding the Nagas and their indigenous primitive religion. The Nagas have a series of indigenous religion which was practiced by their ancestors of which there is one prominent indigenous religions namely The Heraka which is animistic in nature, the many indigenous religions that existed were of similar character. Emphasizing on The Heraka religion as it is better organized and has an interesting past with the British India; this study will prove to be a boon to the individuals who thirst for more in-depth knowledge about the Heraka religion of the Zeliangrong Nagas. The concept of the knowledge about God as the creator, moral life, ways of proper and an organized way of worship practiced by the Nagas will give the readers a new opinion about the Nagas and their past. An interesting fact about this study is the gradual insight on how the Nagas slowly adopted the practice of their indigenous religion into a more refined way of life, which also with the passage of time became their culture and tradition. It contains an interesting fact as to how this indigenous religion passed down from generations to generations when there were no written records maintained. Hence it is a means to answer to the ignorant assumptions of the world outside with special regards to the Nagas and their beliefs.

**Key Words :** Religion, Animism, Indigenous, Worship, Beliefs, Practice, Culture

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Nagas as an ethnic group of the Northeast India has one of the most complex past, making their history an interesting and alluring past to study about. The many tribes existing in the Naga hills have a distinct culture and tradition and at the same time sharing a similar belief system which are both spiritual and superstitious in nature. Animism is the right term for the indigenous religion practiced by the different Naga tribes, their belief in the existence of spirits in all the aspects of life and their surrounding environment like the trees, rocks, rivers etc. remained unchallenged till the arrival of Christianity in the Naga Hills. One such indigenous religion of the Nagas is the Heraka religion practiced by the Zeliangrong tribe of Nagaland and the Zeliangrong dominated areas of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh.

The study of the indigenous religion of the Nagas covers almost every aspects of an indigenous tribal religion which is animistic in nature and revolves around superstition and taboos. Driven by curiosity and enthusiasm on the study of facts about the religion of the Naga hills and as to how and why it came into being, it is a study to better acquaint the present generation with more facts and findings so as to avoid unnecessary assumptions and perceptions which also in return will prove to be a boon for researches based on tribal religion or the researches based on the study of the indigenous religions of the Naga Hills.

The Method adopted in the course of the research are based on oral interview, observation and study of multiple works done in the field of indigenous religion based on the Naga Hills and its indigenous religion, the methods adopted in this study are both qualitative and quantitative in nature. A survey was done in four districts of Nagaland namely Peren, Dimapur, Kohima (capital) and Mon, by means of oral interview with much emphasis laid on the older generations of their society as they are better equipped with the knowledge as to how rituals and worships of local deities are carried forward, the norms, their beliefs, the practices and every aspects with regards to their own local religion. And hence most of the indigenous religion of the Nagas are of similar nature and emphasis was laid on the Heraka religion of the Zeliangrong tribe of the Nagas inhabiting the areas in and around Peren district as it is considered and known as a full flagged and an organized form of indigenous religion in the Naga Hills.

### **The Heraka Religion :**

The birth of Heraka religion began with the efforts of a prominent leader Jadonang, he emphasized on doing away with the staunch belief in superstition and practice of taboos among the Zeliangrongs who were still practicing the age-old tradition of their ancestors known as "Paupaise" (literally-Grandfather grandmother way of life) Jadonang considered himself to be a man chosen by the supreme God to turn people away from the insolent practices and beliefs that the people has been following till then. A clear picture of Jadonang can be presented by the three phases of his life, firstly, the Profound phase which presented a strong attachment to religious activities, he built sanctuaries (Tarang Kai) to demonstrate to the people to revere Tingwang/the prominent God, he built more sanctuaries in the Hills of Assam and parts of Manipur during his journeys.

Secondly, in the social phase he emphasized on the hardship faced by the people who at that time were being drawn towards Christianity with the teachings of Christian missionaries, seeing it as a threat to the indigenous religion, he made policies to bring back the people from the alien religion. The political phase Jadonang strived to keep the people away from other ideals other than the traditional religion, this transformation took place with the influence of the battle for religious, political and cause of the people fought in the Mesopotamia during the world war 1. In order to save the traditional religion from the grasp of the Christian Missionaries Jadonang joined the councils namely The Naga Club which later developed to Naga National Council as against the British rule, and even emphasized on the Motto 'Makamierui Gwangtupuni' (The Nagas will Administer one day), unfortunately Jadonang was captured on 19th February 1931 in the Bhuvon Hills and was executed on 29th August 1931 by implicating the murder of four Manipur Traders. The ideals presented by Jadonang in the Zeliangrong religion were a combination of Christian Monotheism and Hindu worshipful nature. He also composed religious songs which gave direction and steps for the Zeliangrongs to follow.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Rani Gaidinliuwas born on 26th January 1915 in Lungkao village in the west district of Manipur. N. Ramkui (2002)

Another important personality in the Heraka religion according to Ramkui Newme's "Rani Gaidinliu" is 'Rani Gaidinliu was born on 26th January 1915 in Lungkao village in the west district of Manipur', being a strong willed girl she was associated with Jadonang by the age of thirteen, Gaidinliu took over the leadership in the freedom movement after Jadonang's death in the hills district of Manipur, during the time the people there were under the harsh and oppressive rule of the British, therefore she stood up against the unjust rule of the Whites. There bellion was concentrated on the Trans-Barak Basin. The social aim was to unite the Zealiangrongs (Zeliang, Zemeand Rongmais and preserve their culture and customs. On religious grounds, She wanted to preserve the former cult of traditional religion called Heraka (pure). Heraka believes in the supreme God and life after death.

According to Pautanzan Newme in his book "Heraka The Primordial Religion and it's Revitalization Movement" Rani Gaidinlui and Jadonang tried their best to revive the primordial Heraka religion with meaningful rites and customs. Gradually, animal sacrifices and offerings were abolished. There were four stages of the religious movements.

1. First phase lasted for about 20 years. It required the followers to conduct animals sacrifices, the animals were to be killed only by traditional weapons

2. After more or less than 13 years of practicing the Second phase, again, Gaidinliu made a little renovation in the mode of worship. The animal sacrifices were continued and a lots of complication were removed during the second phase.

3. Gaidinlui made some renovation in the mode of worshipping. It required the people to asphyxiate the offerings so that no drop of blood will be spilt.

4. Animal sacrifices were abolished on 11th January, 1990. The people realized that their offerings were being eaten up by the Demons. The system was replaced by reading psalms and singing devotional songs.

The Heraka religion became more flexible and there is free worship of their God. Prayer is always an important aspect. The followers usually offers prayer during full moon. Also there are certain rituals on birth, death and marriage. They make use of the Telau dui (holy water). Besides that, they observe certain rituals on epidemic, unproductive harvest, infertility of villages and natural calamities. The Herak as like the other religion also observe certain auspicious days, they also have specific days of worship, they worship on full moon night. They are restricted from doing any work on this day, instead it is a day to worship their God through sacrifices and rituals. The festival of Full moon (Bupu Ngai) is considered the most sacred festival by the Herakas.

The eldest in the family and the most experienced male in the village is selected to be the Priest who also heads the village. A headman chosen by the Heraka members of a village, who will act as their priest. The main role of the Priest is to head every prayer and lead every ritual. He also governs the village till his death. The Herakas also believe in the existence of Heaven and the domain of darkness. They are of the view that after death, the soul of a person reaches land of death (hemuiram) where Jaumuangpeu (the king of the dead) justify the souls on basis of deeds that a person does while on earth and accordingly they are either send to Heaven or The land of Darkness. The Herakas believed in the existence of a supreme God and worship him through prayers and songs which also include sacrificial devotion, Its ideology teaches men to do away with jealousy, violence and to acquire a childlike attitude.

The term Heraka is "not impure" according to the dialect of the Zeliangrongs, however Arkotong Longkumer in his article "Where do I belong? Evolving reform and identity amongst the Zeme Heraka of North Cachar Hills, Assam, India" says "I soon realised that this definition is used in

much of the wider Heraka literature to portray an image of the Heraka as practicing the ‘pure’ indigenous tradition of the Zeme.” Hence de defined Heraka as “pure”. There is no word for religion among Herakas instead they inclined towards the word ‘Hingde’ which signifies ‘rules overseeing regular daily existence’. This book of laws was believed to be given by Tingwang/God to Jadonang in Bhuban, (Bhuban-situated in the North Cachar Hills of Assam where the religious pilgrimage site of the Herakas The Bhubon Cave is located)<sup>2</sup> The Heraka religion with the passage of time underwent a series of changes in its ideology and the practices, also with the introduction of Hinduism in the Naga Hills the Herakas took inspiration from Hindu deities Vishnu and named their God as Bhishnu as in Vishnu, Mahadeo as in Mahadev (also referred to Shiva). The leaders of Heraka religion felt the need to introduce some reforms and changes in their religion in-order to retain the people from converting into Hinduism or Christianity, hence as discussed earlier Rani Gaidinliu introduced certain reforms which are necessary to do away with the flaws in their form of worship and practices as well as to update their religion in a more rational and logical ideology.

The Herakas till date are in majority in some of the remote Zeliangrong dominated areas in Nagaland and other northeastern state practicing and believing in the age-old traditions and practices of their ancestors with pride.

## METHODOLOGY

A series of oral interviews with minimum 20 open-ended questions each were asked in-order to ensure unbiased answer from the respondents, the questions depending on the tribe and their belief system, a total of 12 villages from four districts of Nagaland was covered, the respondents were mostly aged between 60-80 as they have better knowledge with regards to practices and beliefs of the ancestral Nagas, a total of 36 households was covered in the study out of which 27 are still practicing their own indigenous religious beliefs and 9 households which have recently converted to Christianity. A series of analysis was also done on published books and articles relating to the indigenous religion of Nagaland, observation by means of spending time with the people of the particular religion was also carried out.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It has come to light that even though the Nagas consist of various tribes and has different cultures and tradition, the Nagas shares a similar belief system with regards to the existence of spirits in the forces of nature. Even though the theories of origination of each tribe differs in bulk their practices and the superstition that revolves around them are of similar feature. As for the Heraka religion, it is an offshoot of the ancestral practice called “Pau-pai-se” (grandfather grandmother practices) literally the practice of the forefathers. Heraka religion is also a religion which seeks to preserve the cultures and traditions of the Nagas as a whole, and a movement against the Christians beliefs because of which they think that the Nagas have abandoned their cultures and traditions and went on to adopted the traditions of the western world. The Heraka religion is the result of two important aspect that is, that it is a movement against the fast domination nature of Christianity and Hinduism which are newly introduced to the tribal people of the Naga

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Hills and are engaged in converting them into their respective religion, to which the founder of the Heraka religion (Jadonang) felt the need to stop the spread and the mass conversion of his people into other western religion, because he believed that it will lead to the destruction of their age-old traditions and practices.

The Heraka movement though came into being after the coming of the Britishers it is by large a reformed indigenous religion which existed since time immemorial. After the death of its founder Jadonang the Heraka people were led by a lady popularly known as Rani Gaidinliu who was considered more important than the founder himself because of the many reforms she brought about in the Heraka religion, Rani Gaidinliu was also a freedom fighter struggling for the rights of her people against the Britishers. As per the findings the Heraka religion is also not without its limitation even with a lot of reforms, the Heraka religion is still confined to superstitious beliefs and taboos where there are lots of do's and don'ts without proper logic. The main ideology of the Heraka religion is that it emphasizes on the moral life of an individual where one should live having good terms with nature and also live up to the reputation that one's ancestors has set.

### **Conclusion :**

The Nagas even though may seem and be considered as backward and uncivilized by the world outside, they have another distinct identity that sets them apart from the rest of the world, the way they remain gratified and thankful to the creator for the many-full blessings and the gift of nature to mankind. Writers like Christoph Von Furer Haimendr had branded the Nagas as ignorant savages after his expedition with J.P. Mills to the Naga hills but Nagas back then were very particular with their moral life and the pride they have for their ancestors and the family and which is what keeps them from lying and cheating their fellow mates. Even though there are a number of tribes among the Nagas they in unison believed in one common supreme being, the Creator, but due to the lack of physical proof they took to personifying various forces of nature as their god, which in the end up being polytheistic in nature. But with the passage of time the Nagas slowly got to understand the concept of worshiping and pleasing gods with sacrifices and offerings and slowly took the form of an organized mode of worship, as the style of worship gained popularity it took the form of a monotheistic religion which is indigenous to the Naga Hills, The Heraka religion of the Zeliangrong is one such indigenous religion which came into being from the practices of their ancestors, it is more or less a way of life as to how one should live a virtuous life, The Herakas have their book called "Hingde" which is also known as the book of law for the Herakas and to which the people abide, follow and refer to, in their day to day life. However one must keep mind that the Heraka community does not only consist of those living in rural areas or the ignorant people living in remote areas, there are a number of Herakas who are in-fact very well informed about the modern world and about the different religion and its philosophies, yet remain a Heraka with the aim to carry forward the traditions of their own ancestral practices and way of life.

The Heraka religion can be understood as the only indigenous religion which of the Nagas which is properly organized in a systematic manner and is an institutionalized religion which is still at large till date. The Herakas are mostly settled in Zeliangrong areas of Manipur and Assam, there are also a large number of Herakas in Nagaland who lives peacefully along with the Christians despite the bitter relationship in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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