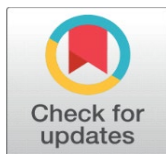


ETHNO CULTURAL HERITAGE CARVED IN THE ART OF TENYIMIA KHARU

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ABSTRACT

Strong traditional elements and ethnic culture come to life and are made apparent in its people's crafts, art, and practices. Kharu which is a word spoken by the Tenyimia Nagas means 'Village Gate'. Kharu is not a mere gate but it is a prodigious representation of the rich cultural antiquity of the Tenyimia Nagas. The utilitarian aspect of it defines the traditional system of polity, defense mechanism, protection, and sovereignty of most Naga villages. The paper showcases the functional meaning and symbolic significance of traditional gates with varied motifs carved on them and etches deep into the carvings of the Angami village gate and gives a voice to the art that talks about a people who once upon a time lived in the sublimity of animism. The paper also delved into the transitioning times of the Nagas which is having an eroding impact on the pristine nature of traditional practices.

Keywords: Tenyimia, Angami, Kharu, Village Gate

1. INTRODUCTION

Nagaland is one of the smallest States of India located in the country's far north-east region. However defying its size, the State has attracted many travelers to venture into its land with its charm replete with rich history, colorful culture, and intriguing traditional practices as a tribal State. Internationally known as The Land of Festivals, it is home to a conglomeration of seventeen tribes identified and celebrated for their rich cultural heritage, the Angami is considered a major tribe among these. As a peacock that proudly displays its colorful crown tail of feathers that never fails to enchant, every Naga tribe too has a train of cultural display to regale anyone who would be intrigued enough by the richness of cultural treasures tucked in this part of India.

1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research seeks to understand the primacy and the integral nature of the Angami village gates with its traditional culture. In doing so, it seeks:

- To explicate and illuminate the meaning, and significance of Angami traditional gate called Kharu.
- To explore the functional and symbolic cultural aspects of Kharu.
- To explore the specific symbols and design elements used in the Kharu along with their cultural and spiritual significance.

1.2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

The interest and significance of the study lie in documenting Kharu and expounding the magnificence of the rich culture embodied with it. Many have written on different aspects of Angami traditional culture and belief system however not many have cogitated in detail about Kharu, hence the author pens the paper with the intent to record and perpetuate to posterity the knowledge and significance of the celebrated Kharu which stands replete with ethno-historical shreds of evidence rendering a voice of the past to the present.

1.3. DELIMITATION

This paper would delimit the writing to the context of the Kohima Village which is the largest village amongst the hamlets of the Nagas as well as the second largest village in Asia.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Hutton, J.H. (1969) in the *The Angami Nagas* is one of the first and most informative ethnographic monographs on the Angamis where the author extensively dwelled on the primordial habits and domestic life, laws and customs, religion, folklore, and language of the Angami Nagas. Bearing as one of the most valuable records the author compiled the data as early as 1915 which the author opines should be treated as a historical document due to the lapse of time between the completion year and the publication year. In the context of this paper, however, no satisfactory information could be excavated. Zetsuvi (2014) in his book *Traditional Culture of Angami Nagas* deliberates on the Angami tribe of Nagaland. It records the primeval traditional practices of the Angamis in terms of their social structure, their belief system and practices, the polity of their laws and customs, and their art and culture. The author also discourses on the dynamic cultural practices of the Angamis. In another book by the same author entitled *The Angami Nagas under Colonial Rule*, the focal point of discussion is the Angamis exploring the people in their pre-colonial and post-colonial ways of life. In both books, despite extensive discussion on the Angamis, minimal discussion on the subject matter of this paper is done. Except for its function as a security measure to ward off enemies, no other details are delineated. In a book written by Mechülho et.al (2024) entitled, *Pfutsau Nanyü & Kelhou Dze*, the authors make a fine chronicle of the Angamis where various facets of their social culture, material culture, festivals, religious beliefs, and rituals, the lifestyle of their forefathers, etc. The authors covered all these facets and more in twenty chapters. In chapter eleven, the authors also touched briefly on the subject matter under consideration however it has no

adequate information on kharu besides its traditional function and its size which necessitates the need to discuss further on the topic of this paper.

Hence, in the narrative literature review conducted, a stark gap was identified was the miniscule measure on which the topic in discussion has dwelled on which opens a wide space for a very extensive study of research. This gap churns out the objectives of the study as cited above.

3. THE ANGAMI NAGA

The Angamis are one of the major tribes of this fascinating land of the Nagas. As Jamir described culture as, “our beliefs, attitudes and values, our behaviors, mannerisms and rituals, our visible and material creations are all elements of culture and constitute together.” (Jamir et al.,2007. p.7-8.), even the Angamis possess a tapestry of rich cultural history woven into their way of life. The Angamis are a part of a people of ten Naga tribes called the Tenyimia. Like the rest of the other Naga tribes, even the Angami tribesmen were generally cultivators rendering agriculture to be their main source of sustenance and economy. The Polity of this tribe prior to their contact with the outside world, before the infiltrating effect of colonialism on their society, functioned in the lines of pure democracy. Zetsuvi writes, “the highest form of polity among the Angamis was the Village. It was the village around which all their activities political, social, religious and economic revolved.” (Zetsuvi,2014, p. 26.). The Angami villages had their own system of governance drawn along with non-interference from other villages or any outside force. Any interference would mean provocation to warfare. Records states that, “Angamis have no regular settled form of government. With them might is right, and this is the only form of law -or rather the absence of all law-heretofore recognized among them. Every man follows the dictates of his own will, a form of the purest democracy which it is very difficult indeed to conceive as existing even for a single day, and yet that it does exist is an undeniable fact.” (Butler,1875, p.4.).

This information is corroborated well by Christoph von Furer- Haimendorf in his book Return to the Naked Nagas, “The Angamis were never ruled by chiefs, and no one individual seems ever to have had authority over an entire village community. Wealth and prowess in war certainly gave a man a good deal of influence, but the villages were run on strictly democratic lines and no one could command his neighbor.” (Haimendorf,1976, p.13.). All Angami were then self-sufficient and in matters of decision-making, the voice of the majority takes precedence and is considered as the final authority. Communal unity has always been the strength of this tribal society.

Patriotism is marked characteristic of the Nagas including the Angamis as “warfare has held centrality amongst the Nagas.” (Neichüriaz,1989, p.2.). The men would keep their village protected with all their might and with their life. The history of the Angamis wrought in head hunting practice makes it an essential prerequisite to guard their boundary with all vigilance, preparedness and watchfulness. Thus, Kharu embodies functional and symbolical significance for the Angamis. Kharu in English is Village Gate. However, unlike common knowledge and function attached to the word gate which primarily would mean entry and exit points, traditionally this village gate for the Angamis meant more than purposes of mobility to venture out or in. In itself today, this significant imposing wooden village gate which adorns the entrance to Angami villages, as well as khels (clan), speaks rich and intriguing history and nature of the Angamis replete intrinsically with deep cultural connotations touching on the prowess of their warriors, their defense mechanism, the strength or ego of the village, their festivities and their deep belief

system. This paper would delimit the writing to the context of the Kohima Village which is the largest village amongst the hamlets of the Nagas as well as second largest in Asia. This paper will etch deep into the carvings of the Angami village gate and give a voice to the art that talks about a people who once upon a time lived in the sublimity of animism. The Kohima village is divided into four khels (clans) namely, Lhisemia Khel (L Khel), Tsütuonuomia Khel (T Khel), Pfuchatsumia Khel (P Khel) and Dapfütsumia Khel (D Khel). The village would have a main gate but all the khels would have their respective gates. All villages or khels are expected to respect the sovereign boundary of each other. Kharu was thus the unspoken diktat over unwanted intrusion. Kharu is an artifact that is an enthralling art and craft put together in line with the thought that, "The artifact, the object of material culture such as the crucifix or Plow, simultaneously gives pleasure and serves some practical social or economic end. If a pleasure -giving function predominates, the artifact is called art; if practical function predominates, it is called craft." (Dorson,1972, p,252.)

4. FUNCTIONALITY AND SYMBOLICAL REPRESENTATION OF KHARU

Figure 1



Figure 1 Traditional Kharu Erected In 1940 (Sorhie L,1984)

Figure 2



Figure 2 Traditional Kharu (Kohima) (Sorhie L 1984)

Kharu is deemed sacred and is ritually important as it stands functionally as a wall of defence of the village especially in the context of inter-village feuds that existed in pre-colonial Angami society. It is interesting to note that most Angami villages are located on mountain tops perhaps strategically, for defensive or offensive reasons as head hunting was a common practice. Inter-village feuds too existed making it a paramount duty of the men to protect their sovereign boundary as well as to ward off any attack. The fierce tactic of offensive strategy taken by the man of the Angamis is recorded in the writing of J.H.Hutton, “Deep pitfalls and small holes covered over with a light layer of earth and leaves, concealing the bamboo spikes within, are also skillfully placed along the paths by which an enemy is expected to approach.”(Hutton,1969, p.44.).

The Angamis were a deeply spiritual people. They believed in Ukepenuopfū who they considered as a supreme being or a benevolent spirit who is believed to be the creator and keeper of all things. The Angamis render utmost reverence to their belief that the making of a new Kharu heralds an abundance of blessings in all aspects of their lives. As an agrarian society, by way of spirit propitiation, the plausible blessing of the new village gate is prosperity in their agricultural activities besides a manifold increase in their livestock and abundance of food and drinks. The making of the new village gate also connotes blessings to multiply their population besides victory in warfare and also in their fights with wild animals. “Traditionally, in times when the village would experience poverty or lack in any area or if their population seems to dwindle or remain static, the people will hasten to make a new Kharu which they believe will beckon and bring back good fortune. Thus, Kharu serves not only as protection but also a conduit of blessings on the village.” (Banuo, personal communication, January 4, 2024)

Kharu was also a matter of pride and prestige for the Angamis. The bigger and the more imposing the structure, the better it was as far as its functionality is concerned besides its symbolical representation of the strength or status of the village or Khel

5. CREATION AND PULLING OF KHARU

The making of Kharu is carried out with utmost reverence, care and precision. The L Khel gate is etched with the message, great care is taken in choice of wood for the door to ensure its quality and durability. The village gate is both symbolically and functionally important. As aforementioned, for reason that the village gate signifies protection from danger or enemy attacks besides posing as a symbolical representation of the status and strength of a village, careful attention is given to its condition. When a sign of decay is noticed, the village would sprung to action to replace the decaying one with a new kharu. “Traditionally the Kharu in size measures to 8 or 9 feet in height and 5 to 6 feet in breadth”. (Mechülho et al.,2024, p.143.). The decision to construct a new kharu entails a unanimous call by the village elders and every possible care will be taken to run through the whole process of its construction starting with the selection of the tree. The sacredness of the selection is directly linked with their belief system in a higher being. The quest for the probable tree would then be initiated immediately. The tree meant for the kharu is to be a tree which has not been cut in any way or a tree with any sign of decaying or which has any sign of being eaten by insect. Once the tree is earmarked, the people will return home with the hope to be directed by the deity or as a way to consult the Will of the deity through their dream. “The Angamis also consider dreams to be very significant to foretell their future. Dreams are consulted for any special event in their

lives.” (Zetsuvi, 2014, p.42.). Thus, dreams become the deciding factor for any crucial decision matter. Simply put, a good dream would mean the earmarked tree is suitable for the purpose and a bad dream equates to bad omen which means that particular tree is deemed unfit for the task and another tree is then selected. Generally, the approximate size of the kharu will be 5ft in breadth and 9ft in length even though some are even bigger or smaller than this average size.

A tree that is found ideal for the making of a new kharu would entail a day set aside specifically for felling it. People who are skilled would carry out the task. However, even this process is never arbitrarily carried out. Before the process commences, “two young men will carry out the ritual of invoking the blessing of the deity. These two men will be the first to cut the tree. The entreaty of blessing is invoked thus:

Themia kelhou cha (entreating for population)

Tie mu zu cha (entreating for food and drinks)

Kicukiri cha (entreating for domestic animals)

Hieko bu keviu chulie luo (bless us with good luck or fortune)” (Sorhie,1984, p.71.)

Following the pronouncement of this prayer, the two men would begin the process of cutting the tree and the others will follow. No one is allowed to eat or drink anything before the cutting of the tree and the act of refraining from eating continues should they fail to fell the tree that day which will be continued the following day. Another sign is observed wherein stringent observation is done on how the tree falls after it is cut. If it falls the wrong way, it is rejected and not used for the new kharu, but if it falls the right way, the people will finally rest and relish their food and drink and return home singing.

After the tree is carved into the shape of kharu, they will drag it to the main road where the craftsmen will commence the carvings and drawing on it with great dexterity. The best artist of the village will be chosen to carve the drawings or motifs on the gate. After finishing the carvings, the path leading to the village will be cleaned so as to drag the kharu to the village. As practised by their forefathers, till date no metal chain or other material is used to drag the gate other than indigenous jungle ropes as shown in figure number 3,4, &5.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Indigenous Rope is Used to Secure and Pull Kharu (Kekhrie, 2023)

Figure 4



Figure 4 Indigenous Rope is Used to Secure and Pull Kharu (Kekhrie, 2023)

Figure 5



Figure 5 Indigenous Rope is Used to Secure and Pull Kharu (Kekhrie, 2023)

“The two men who carries out the rituals will then take a clean unblemished cock/rooster and leave it on the stump of the felled tree. If the cock so crows loudly after it is released, it indicates an extremely good fortune. After releasing the

cock/rooster, they will again say their prayers in an act of appeasement to the spirit.” (Sorhie,1984, p.71.)

Kharu tree is usually the best and the largest tree in the forest, so to take that away, they have to appease Terhuomia (deity) first and this is done by giving a clean cock/rooster in exchange. The two selected men will begin the dragging ritual by pretending to pull the gate. Then all the other men will pull it concertedly. Some of the young men will pull from the frontside and some others from behind to strategically pull the kharu which would prevent any wrong movement or breakage of the rope as well as to control the speed to which the gate is pulled. A leader would stand on the kharu to monitor the movements, the tugs etc. of the gate as seen in Figure no.6. Traditionally, the people would drag the kharu till a few miles away from the village to make it easier for it to be dragged to the village on the appointed day. Interestingly, no one is allowed to eat or drink before the arrival of the kharu in that particular spot.

Figure 6



Figure 6 The Leader of The Gate Pulling on Top of the Structure. (Kekhrie, 2023)

Figure 7



Figure 7 Men Pulling the Main Structure. (Kekhrie,2023)

The Women folk (figure no 8 & 9) would carry their food and drinks in their traditional baskets and they would serve the food once the gate is brought to the spot. After food is relished, the village would come home joyfully singing.

Figure 8



Figure 8 Women Marching Behind the Men Carrying in their Traditional Baskets, Food and Drink for the Men. (Kerehieü,2022)

Figure 9



Figure 9 Women Participate by Carrying Food & Drinks for the Men. (Kerehieü,2022)

The auspicious day of the gate pulling is then carried on the 8th day of Sekrenyi. Sekrenyi is one of the many festivals celebrated by the Angamis. It is considered as a major festival of the Angamis as well of the Nagas. Zetsuvi writes, "This festival is celebrated to ask God's blessing for good health throughout the year. It is also known as Phousanyi or 'festival of purification' as the males observe a series of rituals for purifying themselves." (Zetsuvi,2014, p.48.) Traditionally, the festival stretches over ten days observing various rituals and merriment. Thus, on its 8th day, all male members of the village, young and old would participate. Young boys would wear colourful ceremonial clothes and the older members would dawn warrior clothes and according to the decoration they have earned. Before they proceed, they will first arrange the queue according to their age and the procession will begin.

Figure 10



Figure 10 All Male Members of the Village Including Little Boys Participate in the Event. (Sorhie L,1984)

Figure 11



Figure 11 Same with Figure 10 (Kekhrie,2023)

Once the march begins (figure 13, 14) it is considered a taboo for anyone to cross over or break the line and so none is allowed to do so.

Figure 12



Figure 12 The Man in the Middle Monitoring the Speed & Movement. (Kekhrie, 2023)

Figure 13



Figure 13 The Procession (Kekhrie, 2023)

Figure 14



Figure 14 The Procession. (Kekhrie, 2023)

Figure 15



Figure 15 The Rich Display of Traditional Costumes Worn During Special Occasions. (Kekhrie, 2023)

On reaching the spot where the new village gate is kept, the two elders will invoke blessings and commence the gate pulling to the village. Every male in the village has to have his hand on the rope, though the proper dragging is done by a dragging party. If it is a gate of a particular clan, the clan to whom the door belongs drags the right rope and the other clan or village drags the left rope.

The next day, they will clean and polish the kharu and until the gate is erected, the young men will keep guarded every night. For reason that no one is allowed to attend to fieldworks, until the gate is erected, the craftsmen make haste of the process.

The day the gate is to be erected, the ceremonial clothes are dawned again and utmost care is taken to carry out the task. Before the gate is pulled up, everyone is required to be in the village or return to the village for reason that the priest would close the gate for the day and would return the next day only in the morning to open

the gate. The opening of the gate in the morning brings a completion to the new kharu.

6. SYMBOLICAL AND SPIRITUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE CARVINGS AND MOTIFS

Carved on the kharu are motifs and symbols that embody deep traditional narratives intrinsic to the culture of the Angamis. One would observe that the carvings on kharu differ slightly from village to village. However, the most prominent features of every kharu are a massive Mithun head and in between the two horns of the Mithun head, a warrior stands. Listed below are some motifs with its symbolic meanings:

Figure 7 Tsiituonuomia Khel Kharu : This newest gate of T Khel, Kohima Village, measuring 10.11 feet by 5.8 feet, was pulled for over 3 km on National Highway 29 from Merhülietsa to T Khel Model village in Seithogei.

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Figure 7 Tsiituonuomia Khel Kharu: This newest gate of T Khel, Kohima Village, measuring 10.11 feet by 5.8 feet, was pulled for over 3 km on National Highway 29 from Merhülietsa to T Khel Model village in Seithogei.

Figure 16



Figure 16 The Tsiituo Kharu (Kekhrrie, 2023)

Figure 17



Figure 17 Kohima Village: Lhisemia Khel (Fompa 2024)

- Main Mithun Head: Signifies that the village is wealthy and prosperous
- The man with the spear standing between the horns: signifies a warrior. It stands to show others that there are warriors in that village.
- Spears and shield on the sides: signifies victory and prowess in warfare and prayer for the same.
- Heads lined up at the top: signifies copious population
- Sheave of paddy and rice stalks: signifies prayer for good crop and bountiful harvest
- Women's breast at the bottom of the gate: Prayer for fertility and growth in population
- Cows /roosters: prayer for blessings over livestock
- Two circles at the top represents the moon /sun and the stars – signifies prayer that the celestial bodies will always light up humanity and for the village to exists as long as the sun and moon remain in the sky.
- The clothe like shape at the bottom (kharu nei morei puo nei) - meaning the clothe covering of the gate represents prayer for clothing which can provide adequate and proper covering for the body. (Kelhouravo Kire, personal communication, January 29, 2024)

7. TRANSITION IN THE TRADITIONAL VALUE OF KHARU

A semblance of the stark transition of this age-old tradition can be understood in perusing through statements recorded as early as 1921 by J.H.Hutton and the thought expressed in 2022 by K Neibou Sekhose, a village leader of the T Khel in Kohima Village. Hutton records "These paths (village paths) lead up to gates or rather doorways, closed by the strong, thick and heavy wooden doors, hewn out of one piece of solid wood. The doors are fastened from the inside and admit of being easily barricaded and thus rendered impregnable against all attack." (Hutton, 1969, p. 44.) whereas K Neibou Sekhose states in an interview to the media "May the people who pass through this gate experience the spirit of oneness! This gate is open to everyone, and it need not be closed again for fear of enemies, intruders, or outsiders because we know that our Almighty God is our Protector." (Eastmojo 2023). The fusion of the stark distinction of perception finds an echo in the

statement of the Chief Minister of the State on the occasion of gate pulling by the Tsütuonumia Khel of Kohima Village on the 7th of December 2023 that, “while the population is predominantly Christian, there is value in remembering our traditional practices” (Nagaland Tribune 2023).

8. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The pristine process of the narrative afore-discussed has undergone many changes. With the advent of Christianity in the land of the Nagas, faith has undergone immense transformation. Today, the State of Nagaland has predominantly embraced the Christian faith which also gave way to the closure of their animist belief and erosion of traditional cultural practices. Although the significance of this culture in practice may have been reduced wherein rituals along animist belief are not performed anymore and the efforts of its preservation are still a prerogative that may be percolated down to generations. With the change of time, even guns are carved on kharu which holds the same meaning as spear, dao, and shield. Carvings of men in warriors' costumes holding hands are a symbol of peace, understanding, and harmony within the village and with other villages too. With the onset of modernity which brought an end to the culture of inter-village warfare, kharu now stands to symbolize a gate of peace and harmony. The latest pulling of the village gate by the T Khel of Kohima Village on 7th of December 2023, was an exhibition galore of Nagas' rich cultural heritage for others who came from far and near to revel in the biggest festival of the Nagas, The Hornbill Festival. Despite changes, the Village or Khel gates of the Angamis, both old and new would continue to stand tall and tell stories of lore.

Figure 18



Figure 18 An Old Kharu of Kohima Village (Sorphie L, 1984)

Figure 19



Figure 19 The Newest Gate of Kohima Village-T Khel (Fom

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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