

A Study of Interpreting Text: The Sümi Naga Folklores

¹Y. Hukheli Zhimomi & ²Dr. Priyanka Singh

¹Research scholar of Sri Satya Sai University of Technology & Medical Sciences, Sehore (India)

²Associate professor of Sri Satya Sai University of Technology & Medical Sciences, Sehore (India)

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ABSTRACT

Folklore connects the past with the present to the future. Hence, by studying and interpreting the folklore of the Sümi Naga it can offer important perspectives in understanding the indigenous Sümicultural society. The Sümis folklore is a rich repository of cultural values and wisdom. Therefore it can become a key element in understanding the heritage of its people or tribe. It can also be a great element in understanding the history of the Sümis and can produce a feeling and a strong sentiment towards culture and unity and upholds the moral value of its culture and society. In this present society where human and social values are deteriorating faster than ever, folklore can provide an effective moral education in the society. Folklores contain many aspects of culture which serve as an important source of cultural knowledge and understanding. Thomas Wright has rightly said "There is no subject of inquiry relating to the history of a people more interesting than its popular mythology and superstitions". Thomas goes on to say that folklore is the source to trace deeply the formation of its nation and its identity than in any other thing. Further validates folklore as an aspect of culture through the stories he collected in Scotland in 1859 and 1860 which can teach about the people, their origin and their habits, pasts and present. Pocius writes that hooked rug made in New -Foundland incorporated traditional symmetrical patterns which have a geographical and temporal distribution. Contrasts to these, other hooked rugs are individualistic and asymmetrical in design. Individualistic and asymmetrical rugs are spread in the parlor for merchants and clergyman away from the noise and smell of the kitchen where interaction is hierarchial. On the other hand, the traditional symmetrical, geometrical rugs are used to welcome friends and neighbours into the kitchen. Differences in hooked rug styles relate to where the rugs are used which reflects social stratification.

INTRODUCTION

The unfortunate rise in cultural lag in folklore theory since the thirties led to a so few notable theoretical advances in folklore. There came the development of various schools of theory. The most influential theory to emerge in the folklore studies was the structural theory in the 1960s based primarily on synchronic principles and it still dominates the current trends in folklore studies. Dundes (1968: xi) in the Morphology of the Folktale talk about two different types of structural analysis in folklore and Vladimir Propp's Morphology is one in the best of its kind. Here, the structure of a folkloristic text are reported following the chronological order of the linear sequence of elements in the text as reported from an informant which is termed "syntagmatic" structural analysis, taken from the concept of syntax in the study of language. Another type is describing text of the folklore basing upon binary principle of opposition. The elements are taken out of the given order and are regrouped in one or more analytic schema. This pattern or organization might be termed "paradigmatic" taken from the concept of paradigms in the study of language. While Propp's syntagmatic approach dealt with the structure of text alone without context, Levi Strauss the champion of paradigmatic structural analysis bravely attempted to relate the paradigms he finds in myth to other aspects of culture such as cosmology and world view

(Dundes 1968: xii - xiii). Levi – Strauss approach helped lead to the new notion of myth as models. Structural analysis as a powerful technique of ethnography lays the essential form of the folkloristic text. But it is most important that the form must ultimately be related to the culture(s) in which it is found. While Levi – Strauss paradigmatic structural analysis has been applied to the story of the three bears and to classical and Sumerian myths, Propp's syntagmatic has inspired analyses of American Indian tales, African tales and Sicilian puppet plays (Dundes, 1978: 178).

All known cultures utilize signs to convey messages swiftly and conveniently. Peirce (1955: 99) defined sign as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capability". Signs may depend for their meaning upon their form, setting colour, or location. Folklore as the representation of culture and tradition of a particular group of society is understood as a system of signs. Structuralism is the theory that conceives of all cultural phenomena as sign system, operating according to the rules of a deep structure. Structuralism looks at the basic structures of a text. Structuralism concerned with the study of structures looks at things, how they are organised to become meaningful entities. Structuralism argues that every text has its own structures and that the text can be understood through perceiving the structure.

Ferdinand de Saussure envisaged semiology as a science of sign in general, not only in linguistic signs (word). Saussure distinguished language (language) and parole (speech). He put forth the idea that language is a system of signs with a structure of relationships and that language is intellectually tangible only when the words have meaningful relationships with others, that is, it's interrelations between particulars that give sign meanings. Thus the foci of study here is language. The Sign is the whole that arise from the relations of the signifier with the signified. A sign is thus consists of a signifier and the signified, the form which the sign takes and the concept it stands for and the relationship between them is called signification. Saussure also made distinction between the synchronic - analytic and the diachronic - historical analysis of the structure of a language. He encouraged synchronic studies of language which center on systems as they operate at a given point in time rather than a diachronic analysis of language which changes over a period of time.

Semiotics or semiology explains science of signs within social life. Semiotics was viewed by Saussure as a key to unlocking a variety of cultural phenomena of which are various sign systems. Semiotics began to be the most significant approach to the study of cultural studies in the late 1960s next to Roland Barthes work. Barthes popular *Mythologies* (1957), in line with many of his writings in the 1970s and 1980s largely raised scholarly awareness of semiotic approach. According to Umberto Eco (1976: 7) "Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign". Here, it is understood that Semiotics is the study that include not only of what we consider to as signs in everyday speech, but it can be of anything which stands for something else. As stated by Saussure a linguist, Semiology as a science which explores the part played by signs as part of social life. Charles Peirce who is a philosopher states Semiotic as the formal doctrine of signs which relate closely to Logic (Peirce 1931 – 58, 2,227).

Semiotics makes an attempt to define culture from semiotic point of view and as a type of human symbolic activity creation of signs and way of giving meaning to everything around through both linguistic and non-linguistic ways. It is the study of signs and symbols and their use of interpretation. Usually semiotics analysis studies the roles of signs and the part they play on a social and cultural scale. Thus, in semiotics analysis, an arbitrary and temporary separation is made between content and form, and attention is focussed on the system of signs that makes up a text. Language is a system of sign that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing etc. Since signs systems acquire meanings through interpretation, signs systems are analysed and interpreted to understand the culture of the SümiNagas.

Saussure's (1915) book on *A Course in General Linguistics* suggests the possibility of Semiotics analysis. It deals with many of the concepts that can be applied to signs. Semiotics is seen as the queen of the interpretive sciences. It is the key that unlocks the meanings of all great and small things. Since the study of folklore becomes incomplete without interpretation, in this study semiotic interpretation of culture is applied to unravel various cultural meaning hoarded in the Sümi folklores. Culler (1976) provides an excellent discussion of the basic principles of semiotics analysis and its application to literature. To quote Jonathan Culler (1976: 4) "The notions that linguistic might be useful in studying other cultural

phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, that social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects or events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations. Signs and relations are the two key notions of semiotics analysis. Folklore can be taken as a system of signs. The meaning in the culture stems from the signs and from the system that ties the sign together.

An important aspect in folktale analysis is to establish or find out what is constant and what is variable which will make the distinction between form and content. Form will be the constant while content will be the variable (Culler 1976: 64). In the words of John D. Niles (1999: 54) "Story telling helps the members of a group maintain an awareness of how the present is a result of past action. It can thus help groups maintain their identity without institutional amnesia, thereby relating their past history to the present state of things and preparing the way for an imagined future that may be a more blessed state". The Naga society is deeply rooted in their oral tradition. Orality in the Naga context can be seen as a means by which societies of varying culture regulated themselves. The Oral tradition of the Nagas serves as a rich resource to reveal their identity and their history. The study of folklore is thus important as it gives us a privilege to learn about one's own culture and society. Folklore study is the only means to retain one's own roots, culture and a sense of belongingness to a certain community. By studying the folktale we find the solution to the problem if we attempt to uncover the symbolic meaning behind it. We should search for the answers for the society from folklore. The true image of our culture and society can be achieved through folklore which is purely based on oral discourse. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to the analysis of some selected folklore of the Sümis.

SÜMI NAGA FOLKLORES ORAL NARRATIVES

Folklore has been an eternal part of every culture since ages, from the story-telling to the songs, poems, proverbs, riddles and the list goes on. They are an oral tradition having no written language but are passed down verbally through the word of mouth by our ancestors. Oral tradition as the source of all folklore provides a chronicles of human history presenting evidences of the origin and migration of people. Tradition is traced back to the Latin word, *traditio* which means transmission or handing down (Datta 2002: 66). Francis Bacon is known to have used it in the sense of "expressing and transferring knowledge" as far back in 1605. Tradition came to be more intimately with folklore when Romantic nationalism promoted societies to look back with nostalgia at their respective national heritages and agreed such folklore materials belonged to the oral tradition as rightly said by Newell (1890) "By folk – lore is to be understood oral tradition, - information and belief handed down from generation to generation without the use of writing" (Newell in Datta 2002: 66). At a time when the Nagas are struggling for identity and trying to go back to their own roots, folklore is a source of identifying one's self in the society. The Naga folklores consist of the origin and migration stories which tell about the past of who they are and where they come from. Nagaland (India) has a rich oral tradition. The Nagas claim that their oral tradition was recorded on the skin of an animal but unfortunately consumed by a dog. Thus they do not have a written script. Since then the folk literatures of the

indigenous people are being preserved in their memories only and passed down to generation in the form of tales, songs, myths and other forms of expressive behaviour.

Nagaland is one of the most beautiful states of the Indian Union situated in the north – eastern part of India with distinct customs, languages and dress of different tribes. It has its state capital in Kohima with Dimapur as the largest city. As per 2011 Census, Nagaland was formally inaugurated as the 16th state of the Indian Union on 1st December 1963 by Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the then president of India. Nagaland is home to 16 major tribes and sub-tribes. The major tribes consist of Sümi, Ao, Konyak, Angami, Khiamungan, Kuki, Sangtam, Lotha, Pochury, Chakhesang, Chang, Phom, Kachari, Rengma, Yimchunger and Zeliang. These tribes are broadly classified under the Tibeto-Burman language family (Grierson 1903: 228, Longkumer 2014: 1008). The word “Naga” as a generic term used for the tribes can be originally traced back to the following theories which gave rise to many interpretations and suppositions (Nekha 2015: 2). Scholars and writers have made several attempts to trace out the origin of the term “Naga”. Firstly, the wide held version among the Nagas about the word ‘Naga’ is a Burmese word ‘Naka’ mean people with pierced ears, in view of the fact that all Nagas in the earlier days had pierced ears (HetoniSwu 2016: 1). This can also be substantiated by IsakSwu assertion that the term ‘Naga’ comes from the Burmese word ‘Naka’ meaning people who have holes in their ears (Nekha 2005: 3). During the ancient days, it was a traditional practice among the Nagas to pierce their earlobes for the purpose of decoration to appear beautiful or grandeur during festivals. Second, from the Assamese word ‘Noga’ which meant ‘mountaineer’ or ‘mountain man’, taking into account that Nagas lived in the mountainous region. Another view of the word Naga is that, it might have come from the word ‘Nok’ or ‘Noka’ which means ‘folk’ or ‘people’ in some tribal languages. Others were of the

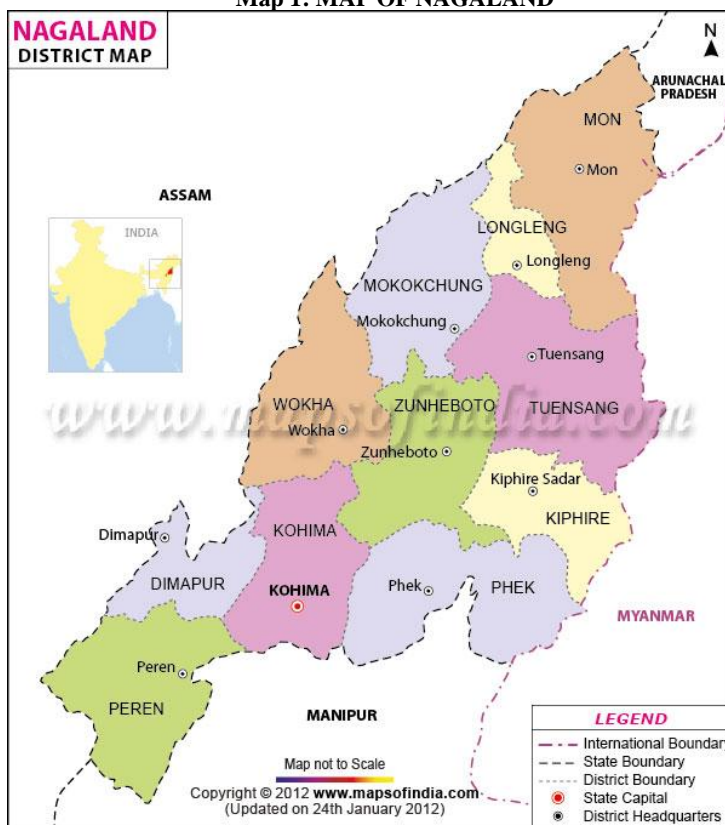
view that it might have come from the Sanskrit word ‘Nanga’ meaning ‘naked’.

The Nagas were a distinctive people and their ways of living and behaviour were far distinct from other tribal people (Nuh 2002: 9). They are a distinct ethnic group with different language, culture, customs, legends and history of their own. The Nagas have their own well maintained institutional system and settled their disputes independently and were self – governing. They were also agriculturally self – reliant; blessed with other valuable resources and natural beauty. Though the indigenous people had no written document they trusted on the wisdom of village elders who settled all cases. The Naga ancestors had no army, but a warrior themselves guarded the village from their enemy.

As with any other indigenous hill people, Nagas too have similar history of the traditional mode of passing the indigenous knowledge, culture, habits and belief verbally. It is the richest and priceless ancestral legacy left behind in the hearts of the young generation in the form of folklores by our ancestors. There were times where these treasures were left untold but presently the young generations are beginning to show interest in unfolding this legacy and trying to rescue one’s identity through folklores. They have come to realise the importance of identifying oneself and going back to their roots.

Each Naga tribe possesses distinct languages and well – demarcated ethnic territory. Based on the oral history that the Nagas have travelled from Samsok in Burma; the presence of Nagas can be seen in Myanmar (Burma), parts of the hilly region of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (See Map 1). A strong presence can be found in Nagaland - North-east region of India. Map 1 gives the location of the 11 (eleven) districts of Nagaland that geographically shares the boundary of Myanmar in the east, Assam in the west, Arunachal Pradesh and part of Assam on the north and Manipur in the south.

Map 1: MAP OF NAGALAND



There is no known human society in the human world which does not have folklore. All human societies have folktales, myths, folk songs, folk dance, proverbs, riddles, ballads, folk poem, folk drama etc. Folklore is a traditional art, belief, traditional ways of work, practices, festivals and celebrations by which a group of communities uphold and passes on the tradition. Thou (2009: 22) write "The area of folklore studies wide and extensive, and it is not possible to give a complete list of what are included under the subject of folklore in the modern context". Many scholars have defined the concept of folklore from different perspective, yet the answers seem uncovered. Ben (1938) a New York based folklorist defines folklore as "Every group bound together or by common interests and purposes, whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban, possesses a body of traditions which may be called its folklore. Into these traditions enter many elements, individual, popular, and even "literary," but all are absorbed and assimilated through repetition and variation into a pattern which has value and continuity for the group as a whole". Folklore are learned informally through performances such as songs or dances (McHale 1994: 21). They are learned, preserved and shared among the group member of the community. This experience within the group gives a sense of identity to the community. A member of a particular group or community may not know all other members in that concerned group. However, he may know the core traditions of that particular group or communities which defines the group identity. Similarly, the Sūmis have their own culture and traditions which makes them one of the major distinct tribes among the Nagas. Every Naga tribes are identified by their rich cultures and traditions. Each tribe have their own distinct cultures. The Nagas observe various gennas, and ceremonies. Festivals are celebrated with great pomp and show with different traditional costumes. The Nagas celebrate Hornbill festival on the first week of December every year. During this festival there is a large participation of the group in different costumes and colourful attires showcasing folk dance, folk song and different indigenous games. The rich and colourful clothes and ornament of different groups are displayed. The Nagas expressed themselves through narratives, songs, dances, games, arts and many other forms of their culture.

FOLKTALES

Folktales are prose narratives and regarded as fiction. They form a part of oral tradition that refers to the tales or stories of a particular group of people or a place. The folktales of the Nagas depict a remarkable continuity of tradition from ancient society to the present. John D. Niles (1999: 54) was right when he said "story telling helps the members of a group maintain an awareness of how the present is a result of past action. It can thus help groups maintain their identity without institutional amnesia, thereby relating their past history to the present state of things and preparing the way for an imagined future that may be a more blessed state".

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were said to be the first scholarly folktales collectors who compiled two volumes of their *Kinder – und Hausmärchen* (1812 – 14) both from the tellings of oral poets and from early literary collections. According to Grimms and their disciples, folktales are the later relics of the ancient mythology of the Indo Germans, and the

myths of gods and heroes can be reconstructed from these fragmentary mosaics. Folktale serve us with reliable and valuable sources of knowledge about the people and their way of living, beliefs, heroes, wars, human emotions like love, hatred, revenge, supernatural, animals and birds etc. Folktales enthrall the young, the old and the children by their narration because of the satisfaction of the basic curiosity they find in folktales. It takes man through the world of fantasies and beliefs which helps him to satisfy the curiosity about the mysteries of the world and particularly the many inexplicable phenomena of nature around him: of plants and flowers, landscape and trees. Folktales are in fact the traditional form of imaginative literature i.e. oral literature that has come down to us.

Folktales are the stories that have been passed down from ancestors to the younger generations through the word of mouth. Unlike myths and legends folktales can be regarded timeless and placeless. They can therefore be set in any time and place. These stories can be different from one another and thus they belong to the different genre. Folktales can include adventure stories, fairy tales, historical tales and even ghost tales which emphasizes that, folktales includes a blend of stories. They usually consist of supernatural elements, actions and happy endings and provide moral lesson to the listener. Antii Aarne (1910) in his *Verzeichniss Der Märchentypen* developed the first indexes of the classification system of international folktales which is an essential tool for folklorists. Folktales are and have been told and retold for over a thousand years yet it is never old. People need folktales to regulate their lives. The educational function of tales is eternal. It is the best teaching materials which have and will exist in people's lives for ever. It is impossible to have a proper understanding of man's history without giving due attention to their tales and legends. The 200 fairy tales stylized by Wilhelm Grimm made a tremendous impact on the international folktales which soon become the subject of folktale research.

IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON CULTURE

When a new kind of religion is introduced to a people who follow a particular kind of religion then obviously cultural changes follow. Change is inevitable. However, change embraced at the cost of one's culture and tradition can never be welcomed. Adoption of new religion does not guarantee one to neglect, forsake or overlook one's own cultural heritage. Kaeppler (1970: 266 – 276) laments how changes occurred in Tongan traditional dances on the arrival of Christian missionaries on the Tongan Island home. "The coming of Christian Europeans changed many things. Methodism became almost a state religion, and the old dances were considered 'heathen' and not in keeping with the precepts of Christianity. Hence, they were banned²². Catholicism, however, permitted dances but required certain changes." Mills (1973: 307) also lamented how the folktales and folk songs of the Ao Nagas that has been kept alive for centuries were made to be buried with the dawn of the alien culture. "Another generation and hardly a memory will remain of the stories and songs which the AOs have handed down from father to son for untold ages...the past are being allowed to die". Like the Tongans, the Nagas underwent tremendous transformation in their traditional practices consequent to the coming of Christianity. The indigenous dances were regarded

as an act of worshipping the devil. Thus, it was banned. When the indigenous people were introduced to a new religion at the same time they were made to forget their own culture like giving one at the cost of other. While concerning with the history and consequences of the Christianization of the Teutonic tribes in the fourth century Wright remarked that “missionary’s succeeded in destroying everywhere “the worship of Woden”. When Christianity first came to the Naga country, the indigenous people were told to give up not only their animal sacrifices to God and spirits but also their beautiful cultures because their religious and cultural practices were assumed to be of the devil which was not acceptable to the Christians. Consequently, the early indigenous converts gave up everything related to their traditional religious practices and beliefs, drinking of rice – beer, folk songs and folk dances. Thus, the missionaries succeeded in spreading the new religion and destroying the other. The folktales, folksongs and folk poetry were replaced by Bible stories, gospel songs and Bible verses. The villagers were keenly interested into listening Bible stories and singing gospel songs and reading Bibles which enriched their spiritual faith. Mass conversions to Christianity among the Naga communities have beyond doubt implied the demonization and prohibition of many core aspects of their traditional culture such as headhunting and all ritual practices, songs and dances, many of the elaborate house decorations, drinking of rice – beer which was a staple to Naga diet. The rich culture of Sümi Naga has been passed over from the ancestors generation to generation verbally. The Sümis have their own distinct culture, customs, traditions and political views like the other Nagas. Art and artefacts, food habits, tales, games, songs and dances form an integral part of their lifestyle. Sümi people had traditional tribal institute called *Apuki /Iliki* where oral tradition, tribal life values, customary practices, leadership building skills were taught and passed on from the elders to the younger ones (Swu 2014). The *Apuki / Iliki* was regarded as the best institution which imparted practical teaching and oral education to the youngsters which shaped them to form a well maintained and strict disciplined life in their family and villages. Those were the times where people hardly indulge in dirty practices as doing so was a taboo. Sadly, the spread of Christianity has badly affected the traditional social and cultural values. The indigenous people were compelled to do away with all their traditional cultural practices because these practices and values were different from the values which were imposed upon by the missionaries. The missionaries regard all these as animist practices and beliefs. Every indigenous ceremonies and festivals were considered as an act against Christianity by the Missionaries. The Nagas decorate their house with animal heads and Mithun horns which they valued as trophies of valour and a symbol of their prosperity and status. However, all these were made to destroy. Even the wood carvings on the pillar were also made to burn. The beautiful and highly valued ornaments such as *Achiku*, cowries and many other valuable treasures were burnt and destroyed. Nagas material culture such as jewellery and textiles appears to have lost their symbolic value at the cost of Christian identities. The rich art and culture of the Sümi Nagas nearly disappeared with many of them been neglected and destroyed as they were taken to be the works of the devil and therefore unbecoming for the Christians. The beautiful and colourful weavings were replaced by the European dresses, mostly rags which the missionaries received as gifts from America and England were

sold to the people. They also encouraged them of null clothes from Assam. In this way the indigenous people started neglecting their own talents of weaving clothes and started following the western culture and cultivating the western outlook. The Nagas as a distinct tribe had been living in these beautiful mountaneous and hills since time immemorial (Nuh 2001: 32). However, when dominant cultures from outside came to influence their age old culture and customs, they were induced to adopt the culture which was strange to them. Ultimately, the indigenous people bury their own culture; their own customs and traditions in order to follow the new culture. It is disheartening to see the loss of interest in one’s own way of life which led to the gradual decay and eventual neglect of one’s rich culture. When these people moved towards modernity under the influence of Christianity, they barely looked back to their golden past cultural and rich social values. It is a serious matter that one has to forsake his own beautiful culture to adopt an alien culture. Long time back, the indigenous people were so admired by others for their beautiful ways and simplicity of life. However, with the forces of the alien cultures, the people are losing their original identity (Nuh 2001: 32). Hence, the crucial event in the history of the Nagas is the considerable changes and ramifications in the social, cultural and political life of the Nagas with the coming of Christianity. Mills (1973: 307) held the missionaries and their activities responsible, “What care the well-oiled youths of the Impur Mission Training School for the foolish traditions of their ignorant health forbears? To bury the past is the tendency of the semi-educated generation which is growing up. Christians never join in the old songs; they are definitely forbidden to do so, I believe. A number of Ao stories have been recorded by Mr. H.G. Dennehy, I.C.S., who acted as Subdivisional Officer in Mokokchung for a year, but the book is not used in Mission Schools”. Conversion to new religion affects the people which made them to draw back from their age old traditional practices.

CONCLUSION

The year 1904 is said to be the greatest and most important event of the Nagas. The coming of the American Baptist missionaries into the Naga region lead to the spread of new religion at a very fast rate with establishment of Churches and schools in the villages. These are the historic events that brought the traditional outlook of the indigenous people which opened a new approach for social as well as political changes destroying indigenous age – old culture. The gospel message of love and peace brought by the missionary won the hearts of the headhunters. They gradually accepted Christianity as their religion. Conversion to Christianity and free access to education brought a drastic change in the indigenous society with the changes in their concepts. These changes led to the beginning of new political structure and laws, establishment of new administrative headquarters in towns, new economic order and new financial policies which brought the indigenous society close to the threshold of modernity. This acts as an instrument to transform the traditional indigenous society into a modern society. The students who were admitted in the missionary schools were asked to abandon their own culture and traditions. They were asked to desist from performing ritual practices, singing folk songs, and folk dances. This was one of the obvious reasons in the declination of their love and admiration towards their own tradition and culture. The

traditional institution was replaced with church building where singing of hymns, conducting prayer meetings and fellowships was done on a regular basis. Christianity and education both slowly deprived the people of their numerous cultural practices related to their daily lives. Thus, in the process of change, modernization and westernization the traditional culture of the indigenous people is rapidly disappearing. G.K Ghosh (1995: 35) lamented the cultural decline of the Sümis, "These rich traditions of the Semas however are gradually dying due to advent of westernization, and if this trend continues a day will come when the Semas could no longer proudly say that he is aSema nor he can be proud of his culture". However, the culture and traditions of the indigenous people was so deeply rooted into the heart and mind of the indigenous people that it could not be obliterate completely. It is high time for the upcoming scholars and researcher to document traditional and cultural practices that are nearly dissolving in the wake of modernization and westernization. The Nagas in general and the Sümis in particular has undergone a tremendous change in cultural tradition consequent to the coming of the Christian

missionaries. The indigenous society which was once casteless and classeless, has been stratified on the basis of division of power, status and prestige. Consequently, the march of the Naga society from traditionality to modernization carries numerous wonderful histories, which need thorough investigation, close observation and critical interpretation and the the present study is a wakeup call to the young researchers to have a thorough study on the same. With the advent of modernity, each Naga tribes have become serious conscious of their identity resulting in their search for their roots. A reviving and restoration of the lost traditions, lost language and lost ways of life of the people is possible means to their formation of their identity. When the Christian missionaries came to the Nagas their language was reduced to writing with an aim to evangelize them to enable them to read Bibles and hymn books. However, it was ironical that it promoted in the growth and creation of a standard language which brought in the development of literature in the local languages. Thus, the growth of language and education create awareness in their mind to be conscious of their identity as a distinct people.

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