

The Festival of Purification: A Case Study on the “Sekrenyi” Festival

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ABSTRACT

This paper is immersed in the society and culture of Nagaland. “Sekrenyi” is one of the important aboriginal cultural festivals of the Angami tribes of Nagaland. A case study of the festival has been conducted. The research questions were, what are the different forms of purification rituals associated with the festival; and how the purification rituals could be analyzed? The data was collected from primary and secondary sources. The techniques of observation and interview were used. A thematic analysis was done to determine the findings. The findings suggest that the “Sekrenyi” festival involves rituals called ‘Kizie/Kide’, ‘Sekre’, and ‘Kratsu’. All are the rituals of purification. Angami tribe believes bodily excretion, sexual intercourse, disease, birth, death, menstruating women, pregnant women, widows, killings, murder, war, unusual birth or death, physical deformities, etc. could impure individuals and society. The purification ritual gives individuals and communities a chance to start their life afresh. The psychoanalytic, classification, and denial theories of purification were used to describe the phenomenon.

Keywords: Festival, Angami Tribe, Rites, Purification

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INTRODUCTION

The festivals have been part of human society since ancient times. There is no all-inclusive definition of festivals. The present study has tried to see the festival from social science perspective. Here, the festival has been viewed as a celebration of religion, rites, and agriculture. There are different ways to categorize festivals starting from religious saturation, scale, themes, season, location, nature of the audience, etc. The definition and typology of festivals suggest that different festivals have different intentions. Sometimes the intentions may overlap. The present study delimits itself into the type of aboriginal cultural festivals. Performance of rituals and rites like thanksgiving rites to spirits and evils; religious rites; rites of passage; purification ceremonies; agricultural rituals; rituals to maintain social order; and cultural rituals are indivisible parts of aboriginal cultural festivals. Purification of intrinsic and extrinsic space of individuals and communities is one of the reasons to perform rites, rituals, and festivals. The study explored the socio-psychological background of purification rites of festivals. It took one important festival of Angami tribes as a case study to understand the background. The objectives of the study are to explore the major aboriginal cultural festivals of the Angami tribes; to investigate the purification ritual associated with it, and to analyze the purification rituals from the point of view of purification theories.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sociologists emphasized the socio-religious aspects of festivals. Festival is an institution where the bonds among the members of the society are maintained and reproduced (Durkheim, 1912). Festivals are a system of reproducing beliefs (Frazer, 1989). A Festival is the performance of sacred religious or social rites (Caillois, 2001). A festival is a celebration and reinforcement of the social order (Piette, 1992). The festival is an intangible cultural heritage of a society (UNESCO). A festival is a periodic occasion where different types of communities participate to share their worldview (Falassi, 1987). A festival is a manifestation of society or group's consciousness and identity (Freidrich, 2000). There are religious festivals and secular festivals (Durkheim, 2001); festivals celebrating birth, initiation, marriage, and death; purification and restorative festivals; rural and urban festivals (Duvignaud, 1989); renewal and revival festivals (Brennan Horley et al. 2007); multicultural and aboriginal cultural festivals (Chang, 2006), etc. The typology of the festival points towards the intention behind the celebration of festivals.

One such intention is purification. The present research explored the theoretical background of the purification ritual.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study took a qualitative approach to investigate the phenomenon of purification rites in tribal festivals. It is a case study of the "Sekrenyi" festivals of the Angami tribe to understand the purification ritual performed by them. To collect the data five respondents were chosen through purposive sampling. The informants were elderly people from Khoonoma and Jakhama villages of Kohima district belonging to Angami tribes. A semi-structured observation and interview were conducted. Secondary sources like books, journals, newspapers, and web resources were used. A thematic analysis of the data was conducted for findings and discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Angami tribe is one of the major indigenous tribes in Nagaland. According to the 2011 census 1,41,732 Angami population lives in Nagaland. Kohima is considered the home of the Angami tribes (Census, 2011). It is believed that Angamis are divided into "Thevo" and "Theva" according to their ancestral lineage. They are considered two brothers. Angami society is divided into clans. Each clan separates their area in the villages, called "Khel". Angami societies are patriarchal. Clan exogamy is practiced. The majority of Angami speak the 'Tenyidie' language. Agriculture, weaving, pottery, and basketry are important economic activities. Festivals embedded with rituals, folk tales, folk songs, and folk dance are integral to their culture. All the festivals are deeply interwoven with their social practices, religious faith, and economic activities. 'Sekrenyi', is the common festival observed in all Angami ranges and villages (Nagi, 2018). The term "Nyi" suffixed with the name of the festival means "feast or celebration".

Sekrenyi

"Sekrenyi" or "Phousanyi" is the major festival of Angami tribes. It means "fest or celebration of new life." Every Angami village has its religious officials called "Kemevo", "Phichü" and "Zievo" (Das, 1993). The "Kemevo" and "Phichü" announce the day of festivals a week before the event. The date of announcement is known as "Nyi-shi". "Kemvo" and "Phichü" usually perform community rituals in the festivals. They appoint two officials "Tsiekrau" and "Liedepfu" to perform community rituals. "Tsiekrau" means "first sower" who performs the ritual of sowing the seeds. "Liedepu" means "first reaper" who performs the ritual of harvesting. First reaper must be an old woman preferably a widow from "Theva" ancestry. "Zievo" on the other hand performs the individual rituals in the festival.

After the immediate announcement of the festival 'Thenyi-thouzu' is observed. During this time villagers start brewing rice to prepare 'Zu'. 'Zu' is a kind of rice beer brewed from rice, millet, or corn. It is an essential ingredient in performing any kind of rite.

Angami observes the Sekrenyi festival for a maximum of twelve days. It starts right after the soil has been tilled for cultivation (Hutton, 1969). The important ritual part of the festival lasts for three to four days. It may be prolonged for eleven to twelve days by incorporating folk songs, folk dance, games, agricultural activities, gate pulling, village-to-village visits, mass feasts, etc.

The first day of the festival is called 'Kizie/Kide'. 'Kizie' is strictly performed by the female members of the family in the morning. They prepare four conical-shaped cups made of 'Pfethonyü' or wild varieties of banana leaf and pour 'Zhmho' into it. 'Zhmho' is fine quality rice beer or rice-soaked water. Cups tied with bamboo or cane strips are placed on the inner post and outer post of the house to seek blessings for shelter; plenty of food; prosperity and good health. They seek blessings from 'Ukepenuopfü', the spirit of birth. The female signifies care, responsibilities, and fertility; the banana leaf signifies rapid prosperity, and bamboo or cane strips imply the strength and health of family members. Women performing the ritual had to follow strict restrictions in bathing and washing hair. After the ritual women fetch and store water from community ponds for the next two to three days. In the evening male community members perform cleaning of community ponds. They guard the ponds from female members. In this case, female members are considered as defile because of their menstrual cycle. The male members must remain separate from their female counterparts until the next ritual is over. On the second day, men go and collect good and spotless wood (preferably Alder and Oak) and bamboo called 'Mishu' from the forest for use in the hearth or furnace. The third day of the festival is called 'Sekre'. Early in the morning, before dawn, every male member of the community including young boys reaches the community pond and performs the ritual called 'Dzüseva'. It means 'touching the sleeping spring or water'. Male members in their newly woven shawls carry their weapons and 'Lipfu' or water carrier. They light their way to the pond by making fire. Sometimes they use aromatic plants called 'Chiena', 'Artemisia', and Millet plants to

produce fire. It is believed that the aroma of the shrubs keeps evil spirits away from the villages. After producing fire male members say:

“Women members gave birth to men, men gave birth to fire, let me prosper and excel all others”
(Nagi, 2018)

One eldest member from the “Thevo” and “Theva” lineage places the fire on the two sides of the pond. After that eldest among them sprinkles the water scooped out from the ponds on his bodily parts, weapons, and shawls. The rest of the men follow them. The act of sprinkling water symbolizes the cleansing and purification of all impurities. In the olden days, the Angami tribe was engaged in so many battles with enemies. They practiced head-hunting, committed killings, and stained hands with blood which made their body and souls impious. The cleansing ritual is a way to expiate and seek blessings from the divine spirit for starting life afresh in the new year. After the ritual, they fetch the water in ‘Lipfü’ and return home. They place two more similar kinds of fire on the village gate. After the cleansing ritual is over, they remove their shawl and shake it in the air by saying:

“All the diseases are shaken off, diseases and suffering on me are forbidden.”
(Nagi, 2018)

Shaking of the shawl implies keeping the disease, suffering, and misfortune away from the house and villages. The male members come back home shouting and singing. It is called ‘Kehoo’. ‘Kehoo’ is practiced to keep the evil spirit away.

Throughout the ritual, the community follows certain ‘Kenü’ (restrictions like fasting, and avoidance of sexual intercourse) and ‘Penyie’ (abstention from field activity). After reaching home they prepare a separate furnace at the entrance of the house and make fire in the traditional method called ‘Sügo mishü’. It is a method of producing fire through friction of bamboo strips and tinder. It is believed to be the time of renewal of life in the community.

Before cooking food in the fire, a sacrificial ritual is performed. Each male members or group of male members carefully choose a fowl called ‘Kizhievü’ preferably reddish and sacrifices it to escape from the death trap set by the evil spirits. They strangle the fowl and say:

‘May I live through the year and reach the next year’
(Nagi, 2018)

After that, the omen or luck is read from the positioning of the legs of the fowl. They also observe omens from the length and direction of the Caecum of the fowl. After that male members cook their fowl in the furnace. As the curry is ready, the eldest members of the family perform a ritual called ‘Chüse pe’ or ‘hitting the liver’. Here, the eldest male members of the family will collect the liver of the fowl from the curry mix and throw it into the open air or keep it at the main post of the house and say:

‘May the wild beasts and enemies lose sight and may I be able to slaughter them. May my enemies doze and I slay them.’
(Nagi, 2018)

Only those who participated in the cleansing ritual can test and share the foods. Male members in their traditional attires gather around a stone circle called ‘Thehouba’ for the mass feast. Interference of women in stone circles and participating in feasts is believed to have disastrous effects on the community. The last part of the ‘Sekre’ ritual is called ‘Thepru’. After consuming all the food and rice beer male members wash their hands and feet with the water stored earlier. They test the new ‘Zu’ led by the youngest to the eldest. Family members join with them after. This symbolizes starting life afresh. On this day father of the family also performs a cleansing ritual for the mother and infant called ‘Nuosuotho’.



Fig1: Youths performing Kratsu

Photo Courtesy- Vikunu Neikha

The fourth day of the festival is characterized by the event called 'Kratsu' or 'Thekranyi'. On this day groups of youth called 'Pelikro' sing traditional folk songs, parade around the stone circle or 'Thehouba', pound paddy, share gifts and food among themselves, and participate in mass meat feasts. The event signifies respect, solidarity, and the socialization of youth. The events could be extended up to the twelfth day by including events like 'Mivi' or peace-making; 'Phieda' or balance game; 'Swordsbean' game; 'Kharushü' (gate pulling) and 'Rünakinyi' (intervillage visit).

The brief account of the Sekrenyi festival describes that it is predominantly a ritual of purification or cleansing ritual. The 'Kizie/Kide' ritual is associated with cleaning residences, inner posts, outer posts, furnaces, etc. 'Sekre' rituals on the other hand associated with the purification of bodily parts, and belongings. Purification of the village gate, community pond, and village environment from evil spirits, disease, death, and misfortune are observed. 'Sekre' and 'Thepru' are the rituals for starting the 'life afresh'. 'Sekre' and 'Kratsu' are the rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1909) through purification. It is a socialization process through which young members of society gradually transform into youth and adults. The idea of purification assumes that the essence of an individual or object could either be pure or defiled. If individuals and objects become polluted, the spiritual, cognitive, and physical essence of individuals and objects become corrupted. Angami believes that pollutants could be categorized as physiological processes (bodily excretion, blood, sexual intercourse, disease, birth, death, menstruating women, pregnant women, widows), violence-related processes (killings, murder, war), disorder or anomalies (unusual birth or death, deformities), etc. It is believed that the lost purity could be regained through performing purification rites. It is observable that Angami society performs a variety of purification rites ranging from washing; fasting; purging; restraining from bathing, washing hair, sexual intercourse; scapegoat; purifying through water, rice beer, or 'zu'; shaking the shawl in the air; shouting or 'Kehoo'; making fire, etc.

The rationale behind the performance of purification rites could be found in the psychoanalytic theory proposed by Freud. The instinctive drive like aggression, sexual drive, and excretory activity is socially unacceptable. Repression of instinctive drive could lead to fear of guilt, sin, and impurities. It could be projected that these instincts act as pollutant agents (Freud, 1912).

Classification theory (Douglas, 2014) is based on the concept of order lessness or anomalies. Things that don't fit into the order of society are thought of as pollutants. That is why birth, death, etc are impure. The patriarchization process always tried to reinforce some kind of order in the Angami Society (Das, 1993). That is why women are considered defiled. In the Angami society aggression, sexual pleasure, excretory activity, birth, death, etc. are 'denied in the full expression'. They are denied because these things are viewed as volatile, threatening, and capable of erupting at any moment. That is why they are taboo and impure. (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the above findings and discussion that "Sekrenyi" is an aboriginal cultural festival of the Angami tribes where the rites of purification are performed. Naga society believes in good and evil spirits. They believe in the defilement of the physical, psychological, and spiritual state of individuals and society. The rites of purification are the gateway to regain the lost purity. Cleaning, fasting, purging, using scapegoats, and thanksgiving or offering to spirits are the purifying processes involved in the rituals. Psychoanalytically it is a way of projecting the repressed experience. It is a way of reinforcing a patriarchal order of the society. It is a way to deny marginality that society considers threatening.

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