

Aphiküsa (Feast of Merit) of Sümi
Naga: It's Cultural Significance

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Abstract:

The Sümi Naga is one of the indigenous tribe of Nagaland. They possess a rich cultural heritage which was passed down orally by their forefathers. Among the diverse cultural practices, one practise which was very significant but is no longer practised in its original form is the ritual of *Aphiküsa* or the feast of merit. This practise entailed a rich man giving feast to the entire village enabling him and his family to not only gain social status but also the right to wear certain shawls, ornaments, which was taboo for others. This paper looks into the cultural significance of this practise by analysing its origin, various rituals connected with this feast, the unique practise of wealth sharing among the Sümi and the causes for its decline.

Key Words:

Sümi, Feast of Merit, *Aphiküsa*, Naga, Culture

Introduction

The Sümi Naga is one of the major Naga tribe from the Indian state of Nagaland. The Sümi like all other indigenous communities depend on oral source to derive their history. These have been passed down by their forefathers in both tangible and intangible forms. The Sümi before their coming into contact with the outside world lived a life of independence, a systematic indigenous administrative structure of hereditary Chieftainship which was authoritarian in nature, a strong clanship which made sure every member of the clan was taken care of, and those who were orphans were taken care of by the village Chief.

The Sümi being animist and dependent on agriculture, every ritual was connected with agriculture. Every social and religious practice was connected with agriculture. Connected with this was one such ritual which was considered to be the most prestigious and the highest form known as the practise of the *Aphiküsa* or feast of merit which entailed a man of wealth sharing and giving feast to the entire village, neighbouring villages or even village of other tribe with whom their village shared friendship or with whom they wanted to share good relationship. These depended on the wealth of the feast giver. The completion of the rituals and the giving of the feast entailed a man and his family gaining social status in the society.

Origin of the Aphiküsa (Feast Of Merit) among the Sümi Naga:

The origin of the Aphiküsa is connected with the origin of traditional attires, ornaments, folk dance and folk songs of the Sümi and though there seems to be slight variations, all the stories points to the origin story from Chisholimi village. According to the elders of Chisholimi, there once lived a man called Khumtsa. One day he went to set trap with his son Ali in the jungle. When they arrived at the place where they were supposed to set their traps, a large wood separated them. Because of this, Khumtsa instructed Ali to set the trap and then return. Khumtsa waited for his son, but Ali did not come back. Worried, he turned toward the spot where he had last seen Ali, but he was nowhere to be found. Khumtsa repeatedly called out to his son, yet received no response. Heartbroken, Ashu Khumtsa cried and eventually returned home alone.

That night, while asleep, Ashu Khumtsa saw Ali in a dream. Ali told him, “*O Ipu (my father), I was standing right beside you, but the Kungumi warned me not to speak to you, so I remained silent. They then asked me to stay with them, and from now on I will live with them and will not return.*” From that time onward, Ali lived with the *Kungumi*.

In the third year, one night at midnight, Ali came to his parents’ house and called them outside, asking them to open the door. His parents hesitated, unsure whether it was really Ali, since many years had passed since his disappearance. However, because the voice sounded like their son’s, they finally opened the door and were astonished to see Ali standing there. They welcomed him inside, and Ali told his father, “*Ee Ipu, the Kungumi are asking you to give a feast of merit for them.*”

His father replied that he was willing to do so but did not know how the feast should be conducted. The *Kungumi* sent a message through Ali explaining the proper method and rituals to be followed. While preparing the *Akimithe Ji*, the grain had to be dried carefully, ensuring that chickens did not come near it or eat even a single grain. The rice had to remain pure and completely unblemished. In this way, the first pure rice beer for the feast of merit was prepared and used as the sacred drink for the ritual.

Once everything was ready, Khumtsa informed Ali, who returned to the *Kungumi* with the news. Ali then came back again and instructed his parents to place all the prepared food and drink outside their house, close the doors, and remain inside without coming out. Leaves used to eat the food (*Alu*) were placed alongside the food and drink. While distributing the *Alu*, they chanted “*Alu alu alu,*” and while distributing rice and meat, they said, “*suwo tova mo qawo tova mo.*”

After finishing the meal, the *Kungumi* began dancing the (*Aphilo wo*), though they did not reveal themselves to Ali’s family. When it appeared that they were dancing in front of the house, they were actually dancing behind it, and when they seemed to be at the back, they were really at the front.

Two types of songs were sung during this folk dance. The first, *Aphi le*, was sung without words, using sounds such as “*Ha... o... hoi.*” The second, *Aküza le*, was sung with many words. Some songs praised the sun and moon, while others honored Rotokhi. Although

Khumtsa, Rotokhi's son, gave the feast of merit for the *Kungumi*, the *Kungumi* sang praises of his father Rotokhi.

On the day of the feast, the weather was drizzly and the sky was cloudy. Ali instructed his parents to look toward *Khucho Hu* (a hill near present Mudutsugho village), when the sun appeared. When they did so, they saw a procession of people in full traditional attire entering Khucho Hu. This place was believed to be where the *Kungumi* or spirits departed together. Before this event, there was no practice of Aphiküsa or feast of merit rituals. These traditions began only after the *Kungumi* visited Khumtsa's house, performed the dance, and taught the rituals.

Later, the *Kungumi* sent Ali again to inform his father that they would provide meat and instructed him to place wood outside the house. Khumtsa followed the instruction, and the next morning he found animals tied outside with a single fold of thread. Ali advised his father to kill the animals one at a time at different places, but Khumtsa ignored this guidance and tried to kill them all together. As a result, the animals escaped.

When Khumtsa informed Ali, the *Kungumi* explained that this happened because the instructions were not followed. To chase the animals, they sent Atungu. Khumtsa chased them with Atungu, but Atungu ran too fast, forcing Khumtsa to climb a tree and shout instructions. One partially deaf animal misunderstood the message, leading to a belief that this animal still behaves in that way today.

The *Kungumi* later sent a dog to help Khumtsa hunt. Although Khumtsa was unfamiliar with hunting using a dog, the dog hunted successfully and brought back a leg of the animal. From this event came the custom that when a hunting dog is borrowed, its owner must be given the dog's share if the hunt is successful. As Asu was the first to do this, he was named Shithu.

The story then tells of two brothers. The elder had already given a feast of merit, and the younger was preparing to give his own. When the younger invited his elder brother, the elder said he would come after finishing work on a carrying basket. The younger waited, but when the elder did not arrive, he returned to his brother's house and found only his sister-in-law. Not knowing his brother was in the *Amqha* (smoke loft), he raped her. The elder brother witnessed this silently.

Later, during a communal deer hunt, while people were fighting over the intestines, the elder brother cut off the younger brother's private part, causing him to collapse among the hunters. The part was hidden in the Wotsami Kutsa. The villagers declared that whoever possessed it would no longer be allowed to live in the village. Upon discovering it in the Wotsami Kutsa, conflict broke out between clans, and both clans eventually left Chisholimi village.

The narrator explains that although some Sümi have written and misinterpreted the story of Rotokhi, the version passed down orally in Chisholimi is considered the authentic account. Rotokhi belonged to the Shohe clan, and the narrator's son has been named after him. (Yezuqhe, 72 years, Chisholimi village).

There are variations in the rituals depending on the village and area but in this paper the rituals from Natsumi village, a Sümi ancestral village has been taken. Before the feast of merit begins, three rituals must be performed, most of which involve the sacrifice of animals. The first ritual involves the killing of a cow, and its meat is known as *Asa*. This ritual is called

Tiye. The meat from this *Asa* is distributed only to families who have already given a feast of merit and to wealthy families known as *Shisho*. The second ritual is called *Tiyi*, which also requires the killing of a cow, and the third ritual, known as *Ayii*, similarly involves the sacrifice of a Mithun.

When a Mithun is to be sacrificed for the feast of merit, one person is assigned the responsibility of killing it. However, many people gather around the animal and wait for the person in charge to make a small opening in its stomach, large enough for others to insert their hands and remove the innards. Those gathered compete with one another to obtain the largest share of the Mithun's innards, making this process a form of competition.

Prior to the feast of merit, the *Natsumi* observes a ritual in which a cow called *Ayichi* is tied and led around the entire village by strong and able-bodied young men. This is done so that young boys who have not yet developed physical strength can kick the cow or strike it with a stick called *Ayeghubo kushu*. It is believed that performing this act helps the boys gain strength. After completing a round of the village, the cow is then killed.

During the feast of merit, one animal without any spots or blemishes is carefully selected and sacrificed. This animal symbolizes the purity of all other animals slaughtered during the feast, even those with imperfections such as shortened tails, twisted horns, or deformed legs. Individuals who have given the feast of merit are identified by the presence of a king post, known as *Angutsü*, and a *tünhaqü* placed on top of their house. The king post is a wooden pillar carved with designs arranged in a specific order from top to bottom: *Asükhi*, *Asafu/Asabu*, *Asaye leqhe*, *Ilimi Kichi*, and *Amishi Kibo*. This post is installed only in the houses of those who have given the feast of merit at least twice. It is considered taboo for anyone who has given fewer than two feasts to erect this post.

In earlier times, only men who had given a feast of merit were permitted to wear the men's shawl known as *Avikiyiphi*. The narrator observes that today this shawl is commonly worn by all men, even without performing the ritual requirement of sacrificing an animal and offering the meat to one's parents as a sign of completing the tradition.

Depending on the wealth of the feast giver, they would give feasts. Some would give feast without killing the mithun and some who were very rich would give feast by killing the Mithun which was considered to be the highest form and this would make the feast giver eligible to wear a shawl called *Avikiyiphi*. It was a taboo for other men even if they have given feast to wear this shawl if they didn't kill a Mithun. A feast giver's wife was also entitled to wear certain shawls, mekhalas and ornaments. Even the children of a feast giver would be entitled to wear specific shawls, ornaments but they would forego this entitlement when they get married and would be eligible to wear again only if they complete all the rituals as was done by their parents. This indicates that the entitlement wasn't hereditary but had to be earned.

Some men who were very wealthy would even give feasts by inviting the neighboring villages. According to the memorial stone of Kuhozu Chisho Swu at Chisholimi village, Kuhozu Chisho Swu, Doabashi (DB) and Head Gaonbura (Head GB) was a very rich man who owned more than 60 granaries and 130 Mithuns. He hosted many feasts and even for the Khukishe and Ikiye villages in which he is said to have killed 80 Mithuns in one day for the feast of merit. It is said that he used to dry the British silver coins on the drying mats. These were said to have been buried in four unidentified spots. After his death, his movable and immovable properties were shared by his kith and kin from Chisholimi, Khughutomi, Kilomi

and Chishilimi villages. His stories of feast giving is still shared with awe and wonder among the Sümi as well as other communities as he created the history of the maximum feast given and maximum Mithuns sacrificed for the feast in one day.

Significance of the Aphiküsa in Sümi society and culture:

When we analyse the practise of *Aphiküsa* in the Sümi society, we can understand many facets of the Sümi cultural practices and way of life. The Sümi concept of wealth seems to be that of ‘sharing’ and not of ‘accumulation’ as is the case today. The feast giver who completes all the ritual and killing Mithun (the most prestigious animal for the Nagas and the Sümi in particular) was given the highest status and honour by bestowing the right on his family to wear distinctive attire, ornaments, design on his house like installation of the King post, and ornamentation on the top of his house, designs on his beer cup to cite a few instances. This signified that the accumulated wealth was only valuable if it was shared and not stored up. Another aspect to the feast of merit was how it brought the whole community together. For instance during the course of the field work, some elders recollected how when a feast of merit was to be given, the villagers would take out certain days to work in the field of the feast giver as well as to carry the firewood, water from the pond and also the men and women would be engaged in all the works connected with the feast thus making it a community affair. In the forefathers’ days the food and meat wasn’t plentiful and sometimes for the poor families, the stock of meat, rice and vegetables wouldn’t last till the next harvest, therefore such feasts enabled such families to enjoy meat and drinks. These feasts were occasions when food and drinks would be available in plenty and another aspect of the feast of merit was also the sharing of the meat to each household thus enabling every family to get their stock of meat. The feast givers spent their wealth but every member of the village in turn contributed their work in every capacity to make this occasion successful. Thus the feast of merit enabled the community to come together in peace, harmony and joy. There was no discrimination as to who could take part and who couldn’t thus such feast of merit enabled the society to develop a more egalitarian outlook and respect for every member of the village.

The feast of merit in some ancestral Sümi villages entailed the erection of megaliths. The megaliths were brought from the riverside. Since the Sümi Naga villages were always located on top of the hills and the rivers were located at the bottom of the hills, stone pulling ceremonies entailed all the able bodied men coming together and pulling the stone for the feast giver. At Lazami ancestral village, they would erect two megaliths signifying the husband and wife feast giver. The wife was also given equal importance because she worked hard along with her husband in completing all the rituals to gain the status. Such practise shows how in the Sümi society, women’s role weren’t sidelined or ignored but equal recognition was given for the achievement of the husband. As her husband secured the entitlement to wear designated shawls and ornaments, she also secured equal right to wear specific shawls, mekhalas and ornaments that were reserved for the feast givers. This right was given even to their daughters.

The feast of merit was also a contributing factor towards preservation of many Sümi cultural practices. For instance, the usage and continuity of the traditional attires and ornaments derived their significance from the observation of the feast of merit. Their value and prestige came from the value and prestige that was attached towards not only the accumulation of wealth but the process of fulfilling all the rituals connected with the feast of merit. The feast of merit

kept the Sümi tradition alive on two aspects. From the tangible point of view, it kept alive and helped in the continuity and preservation of certain attire and ornaments which was specific to the be utilised by the feast giver and his family, then there were the specific ornamentation on his house, the practise of installing the King post which had beautiful carvings of moon, machete, women's bust, mithun's head, then there was also the installation of the Y shaped post outside the feast giver's house where the Mithun was tied before it was killed for the feast. The first feast of merit at Chisholimi had the *Kungumi* go around the house of feast giver Khumtsa by singing and dancing, ever since then men in full ornamentation and attire with their machete and spear would go around the house of the feast giver singing and performing the folk dance. Since specific designated attire and ornaments were to be worn by the feast giver, it gave birth to the feast giver shawls with beautiful patterns and motifs as also the mekhalas and the ornaments. Even in modern times such ornaments are very expensive and only the rich can afford it. From the intangible aspect, there was the passing down of the stories connected with the tangible, the traditional knowledge about the shawls, ornaments, the rituals, making of the varieties of rice beer, the use of certain plants, animals, the ornamentation on the house, the folk songs and dance, etc. It was said that a feast giver could be recognised by anyone even if he travel to a new village because of the ornaments and attire worn by him. Even is a new person visit a new village, they could easily make out the feast giver's house from the ornamentation on his house. The feast of merit also enabled the spirit of unity and respect for each other.

Causes for the decline in the practise of Aphiküsa:

When the Sümi came in contact with the Britishers and simultaneously the American Baptist Christian missionaries in the 19th century, this practice of feast giving which was accompanied with many rituals was considered to be a pagan practise and the Sümi who converted to Christianity were discouraged from taking part in such rituals. They were even discouraged from wearing the colourful traditional attires and ornaments. Initially only few Sümi converted to Christianity but with the passage of time as more and more Chiefs converted to Christianity, the entire village started converting. This resulted in the giving up of the animistic practices as the people having converted started living a life that was decreed by their new religion. Christianity brought about many positive influences and change in the Sümi society but culturally many practices were given up which led to creation of the knowledge gaps which further led to the degeneration of many cultural practices. But it is also without doubt that as Christians, one cannot continue such animistic practices and therefore slowly these practices were given up. But since many elders lived through the transition of animistic life to Christian life, they still recollect and recount the memories of feast giving with deep fondness and joy as feast giving seems to be the only time when they were free from their hard life of being tied to their fields and enjoyed the camaraderie of their fellow men in celebration. The feast giving period was when everyone came together, working together and enjoying the food, drinks and the singing of folk songs and dances. When the feast giver was wealthy enough to host the neighbouring village, it added more colour and joy to the event.

Conclusion:

The Sümi are culturally very conscious about in the last few decades, they have woken up from their initial belief that everything to do with their traditional life was to be given up. The Sümi has a deep understanding that their cultural identity and religious identity is what makes them a Sümi. With such an understanding the Sümi has learned to balance their cultural identity with their religious identity. The feast of merit which was an animistic practise but which granted a feast giver social status and the right to wear certain shawls has now slowly transitioned into the Christmas celebration where if a wealthy individual hosts a Christmas feast by killing the mithun then there is general agreement that maybe such individuals could wear the shawls that was meant for the feast giver though at present this shawl *Avikiyiphi* is worn by everyone without distinction. but there is an ongoing debate as to make this shawl retain its prestige as it was in the past in order to maintain its cultural value. The Sümi having balanced their two identities in the modern world and also the efforts that are being made to preserve and continue many cultural practices is a positive landmark and also something that all indigenous communities should strive to emulate. The animistic life may have been replaced by Christianity but the Sümi never left their Sümi cultural identity. There are still many works to be done but when we look at the direction in which the Sümi are going then there is surely a beacon of light at the end of the tunnel for the future generation.

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