Chapter Two

INDIGENOUS SOCIETIES OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities across the globe are rarely bequeathed with written histories and traditions that made redundantly difficult to present their accurate accounts. However, every discernible tool is traced from the antics of paleolithic and early human civilization to the contemporary world. Civilizations were greatly contributed with the crossed-culture of different peoples and nations, and fore-mostly attributed to the Greco-Roman fusion of cultures. Similarly, the European societies were widely swept to changes with the advent of the Roman Empire after the tenth century A.D. The indigenous populations of North-East India, with the rest of the Asian and African continents felt its first human civilization at the advent of the European colonial powers, particularly, the British.¹

The British occupation of North East India began by the early part of the 19th century. The British government in their utmost diligent policy to avoid unnecessary problems from the people, the autochthonous life of the populace was left undisturbed. They followed policy of gradual introduction of an administration suitable to the needs of the colonial power. During this period, British administration concentrated on the maintenance of law and order. They directed their policies primarily towards practical and

¹ Mention must be made here that it was the British administrators, philologists, anthropologists and American missionaries that researches across the vision of centuries upon the historical threads survived in those of legends, traditions, and the background of primitive social, political, economic and religious beliefs, customs and institutions of the indigenous populations of North-East India, amongst whom their lives were acclimatized more deeply, and they wrote about them. However, the writings were inevitably lacking in objectivity, accuracy of information, shorts of methodology, misinterpretation of events, though it largely served as a primary information to a great cogent and orderly study of the life and the history of the people.
pressing problems such as the establishment of law and order, the foundation of administrative system and the dispensing of justice, and, not the least, the raising of the revenue necessary for the discharge of the function of the government. From the meager advantage gained by the colonial British, however, its administration made no significant conscious efforts to introduce Western values in the region. Evidently, the interest of the British government in the North-East lies in colonial project of connecting the administrative unit of Assam to the administrative unit of Burma.

**North East India: An Overview**

The North East\(^2\) region presents the complexities of the sub-Himalayan ranges, the Indo-Burmese hills of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram and the eroded surfaces of the Meghalaya plateau, all encircling the Brahmaputra valley. The region presents itself as a replica of the subcontinent both physically as well as culturally, only on a much smaller scale. Linguistically, the North East represents a much greater diversity than any other comparable regions in the entire subcontinent. Barring the Dravidian speech forms, all other languages are spoken by the people of the region. The social structure of North East India has emerged out of various integrations, for example, the Nagas among the Indo-\(^2\) Officially, North East begun only in 1972 with the formation of North Eastern Council (NEC) as a regional planning body to look after the welfare of the people in the region of the country. Prior to that the region was commonly known as Assam, particularly by the Indian mainland, which does not include the princely states of Manipur, Tripura and NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency) now called Arunachal Pradesh and Tuensang district of Nagaland. Perhaps, Woodthorpe, R. G. was the first person to use the term in the article ‘Notes on the Wild Tribes Inhabiting the so-called Naga Hills, on Our North-East Frontier of India’, in *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 11, 1882, pp. 56-73, as cited in Athikho Kaisii, ‘Struggling People of South/South-East Asia: Nagas in India’s North East’, in *Nagas Today: Indigenous Discourse* (New Delhi: NSUD, 2010), p. 152. During the colonial regime, the North Eastern part of the empire was not perceived as a political entity. Most part of the present day North East was included in the province of Assam and the limited objective with which the British administered the hill districts of Assam did not warrant much thought about their status in the Indian body polity. See also Sujit Choudhury, ‘The North-East: A Concept Re-Examined’, in Kailash S. Aggarwal, ed., *Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North-East India* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999), p. 90.
Burmese; and the Khasis and Jaintias among the Austro-Asiatics. The indigenous people of the region make up these integrations.

The Constitution of India categorizes the indigenous populations of North East as Scheduled Tribes. Some of these indigenous populations practice their traditional or primal religion. However, in the subsequent period, the Brahmaputra valley came under the influence of Hinduism on account of a large-scale immigration of Aryans. Today the majority of the people living in the plains of Assam, Manipur and Tripura are sanskritized. In recent years there are several movements among the sanskritized tribal to rediscover their tribal origin. For example, the Meiteis of Manipur, who were claiming themselves as high caste Hindu, are now affirming that their traditional roots are basically tribal in both culture and religion.

The geographical patterning of linguistic groups provides valuable clues to the complex process of peopling of this region. For example, the Khasi and Jaintias in Meghalaya have a close affinity to Austric speech forms forming the Mon Khmer sub-region. Tribes living in Arunachal Himalayas such as the Aka, Dafla, Abor, Mishmi etc. speak dialects forming Tibeto-Himalayan sub-region. On the other hand, the Tibeto-Burmese sub-region forms a contiguous region in the rest of North East India. However, this branch is split into a number of speech forms as spoken by the Nagas and other tribal communities of the region. The component dialects have an interesting spatial arrangement of the Naga dialects: Lotha, Konyak, Sema, Pochury, Angami, Ao, Tangsa, Wancho and Nocte are spoken in Nagaland and Tirap sub-division of Arunachal Pradesh. Lushai is
spoken in Mizo Hills, Garo in Garo Hills, Mikir and Boro in Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong) and North Cachar Hills district and Manipuri in Manipur.³

The religious composition of North East India is equally complex and forms regions intersecting tribal and linguistic regions. The most interesting aspects of religious composition of North East India are the intrusion of significant influence of Christianity and Tibeto-Chinese Buddhism in some areas. While the influence of Hinduism, the dominant religion in the mainland, is confined to Brahmaputra, Barak and Imphal valley and parts of Tripura plains, supporting bulk of the non-tribal population, Christianity has made significant inroads among the tribal population living in Naga, Mizo and Manipur Hills as well as in Meghalaya plateau and among the tribal population living in Assam valley and hilly areas.

The influence of Buddhism is confined to the high altitude zone in Arunachal Himalayas.⁴ The Meiteis or Manipuris believed in a religion called Sanamahi before the Manipuri king Pamheiba adopted Hinduism in 1714 and declared it as the state religion. The imposition of Hinduism from above and the anti-caste and anti-ritualistic character of Vaishnavism helped the spread of Hinduism among the Meiteis. Though many Hindu sects were active in Manipur it was Chaintanyite Vaishnavism which was accepted by the king. By the 19th century Hinduism was firmly established despite opposition from the

supporters of the traditional religion.\textsuperscript{5} Besides, there are some tribals who still continue to practice their own indigenous religion.

The ethnic heterogeneity of the region unfolds a complexity based on distinctive historical experiences. Out of the seven states, as many as four-Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are not only tribal majority states, but their culture and economies have features remarkably different from the tribal pockets elsewhere in the country. The three other units-Assam, Manipur and Tripura have a majority of non-tribal population, but even in these states the tribal population is substantially more than the national average. The peculiarity of the geographical and historical conditions of the region have offered relative isolation to the culture groups who found their way into the region through the passes from the north and the east and this feature alone is responsible for some kind of a stability in the human-nature interactions in the little habitats of tribal groups for a much longer period than elsewhere. This is why the region continues to be an anthropologist’s wonder.

Contemporary social and cultural history of North East India has marked a tense and contested terrain of political claims and counterclaims with its cultural overtones. The claims of people belonging to the ethnic and cultural settings of the North East, and a consequent national identity of their own, posited against the Indian national identity has generated considerable debate and controversy among scholars, intellectuals, social activists and others. There is quite a bit of indecisiveness in finally settling claims of specific ethnic and cultural identities that defy the dominant logic of identity, as

propounded by the Indian state. The dominant logic is that of construction of an identity that consents to an inclusion within the Indian national identity and thereby lives in agreement with the territorial and constitutional authority of the Indian state. Most of the identities in North East India assume a space of difference for realization of their own aspirations, cultural and political, with all other economic and social ramifications.⁶

For Sujit Choudhury, ‘the term North-East is relevant and valid only as a geographical entity, but unfortunately some misconceived notions of commonness have been attributed to it and this superimposition has been accepted as reality by the administrators, politicians, media and the majority of the social scientists. And more significantly, through a process of internalization, the peoples of the region have also accepted, to a considerable extent, this identity as their own’.⁷ Choudhury further elaborated that an artificial North Eastern syndrome has been constructed and as a result, ethnic groups, who do not have any inbuilt social compulsions to be part of this syndrome, are opting for social action of the kind that would enable them to play the role expected of them as a rightful component of the North Eastern scenario.

**Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh: An Overview**

Arunachal Pradesh is the extreme North East of the Indian sub-continent, and adjoins China and Burma. Through the mountain passes of the Arunachal hills, India has maintained contact with Tibet, China, Burma and other South Asian countries over the

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ages. The eastern Himalayan states, therefore, hold the key to the South Asian cultural contact that is known to have existed since prehistoric times.8

Arunachal Pradesh, the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency is the homeland of diverse groups of people, who are bewildering in their variety of social life and customs. There are as many as 25 major tribal groups which can be further divided into 80 or more sub-groups. The Adi, for example, has 18 known sub-divisions, such as the Ashing, Begum, Bokar, Bori, Botung, etc. This is common to many ethnic groups in the region. There are language variations from place to place despite of belonging to the same ethnic language group. This is because many ethnic groups in the region did not develop their own script and literature.

In Arunachal Pradesh, traditional identities are expressed in oral stories, histories and genealogies. More important for the construction of local or traditional identity among the tribes of central Arunachal Pradesh is a series of stories about a figure called Abo Tani. He is considered as the first ancestor, from whom descend all the tribes in the Tani group which includes Apatanis, Nyishis, Tagins, Adis, Galos, Hill Miris, Sulungs, Akas and Mijis. This Tani group has strong cultural commonalities and is recognized as a separate branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. This collective identity is maintained primarily through the stories of Abo Tani, who is the not only the first ancestor but also a culture figure and a trickster.

Apart from the Tani group, there are other tribes such as Monpa, Sherdukpen, Aka, Khowa, Wancho, Tangsa, Memba, Khamba, Chakmas, and Noctes. Some of these major

tribes are further divided into sub-groups mainly on the basis of dialectical variations. The Monpas are simple, gentle and courteous people who follow Buddhist religion and profess Mahayana Buddhism. The Sherdukpens are a small tribe. They are good agriculturist but in the traditional period they depended much on indigenous trade. Their religion is an interesting blend of Buddhism and tribal magico-religious beliefs. The Mijis originally settled in the plains of Assam and subsequently made the hills their habitat. They have also come under the influence of Buddhism though they are not Buddhist in the strict sense of the term. The Khowas are one of the non-Buddhist tribes inhabiting the West Kameng District. As their religion is concerned they believed in a number of deities and spirits.

**Social Structure**

The society of the people of Arunachal Pradesh is patriarchal and primogeniture is the fundamental law of inheritance though variations are not very uncommon. The father is the head and exercises authority over all members of the family. When the father becomes old his authority automatically passes on to the eldest son. The female members have no authority except the right of management of the household affairs. A family consisting of the father, the mother and their children transforms into extended family when the sons get married and stay under the same roof forming a bigger household.

In the Adi society descent is traced through the father and the property devolves on the male line and the children belong to the father’s clan. If a child born in an extra martial relation is a boy, he belongs to the father's clan and if it is a girl, she belongs to mother’s clan. The elder son generally set up their separate house-holds even while the father is alive though on principle. They have equal shares on the parent’s property. They do not dispute
with the youngest brother who stays with the parents and inherits the ancestral house by common consent. The widowed mother is considered a special responsibility of the eldest son, but in practice, she prefers to live with the youngest under the roof of her deceased husband's home.

Primogeniture is the general rule applicable to the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh in matters of inheritance and succession. The eldest son is the sole heir of the property and office. Properties, both movable and immovable, such as cultivable lands, bamboo groves and palm leaf gardens, livestock, granary, utensils, ornaments, hatchets and guns are held in common by the family. The father as the head of the family is the sole owner and exercises authority over the property. The authority of the father is inherited by the eldest son after his death.9

The female members have no claim over the family property. The articles given to a girl in her marriages are, however, her personal property. Even at the time of establishment of separate household by the married sons, other than the eldest, family property is not distributed.10 The sons cannot demand or claim any part of the family property. In Wancho society, a girl is entitled only to the ornaments, clothing, one basket, one scraper, one iron stick, one hatchet and rain shield made of grass, which are given to her at her marriage. Even in her husband’s house she cannot claim authority over the property of the husband.

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10 ibid
The Kebang: Indigenous Political Institution

The *kebang* is an indigenous political institution of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh. This institution administers village affairs, manages and conducts day-to-day problems of the village. It regulates laws and issue ordinances for the well being of the society. All important decisions of political and social matters as well as the disputes among the members of the community are tried and settled by the Kebang.\(^\text{11}\) The various kebangs are Bane Kebang, Bango Kebang, Bogum Bokang Kebang and Atek Kebang.

In Bane Kebang all the male members of the village can take part and express their opinion freely. Bango kebang consists of the head *gams* of the number of villages and it has one secretary and also some funds to manage. It mainly deals with inter village disputes and development problems. Atek Kebang is for the settlement of particular cases of disputes. The Bogum Bokang Kebang is a federal organization-its jurisdiction extends to the whole district of Siang. The social customs and relations of inter village, inter-bango disputes, political and economic changes affecting their lives are discussed in this Kebang. The Bogum Bokong adopts resolutions and recommends measures to the government for meeting them.

There is no code of conduct or rule to elect or select members to the village council. Age, sex, experience, oratorical powers are main qualities required to become a member in the Banggo Kebang and Bogum-Bokang Kebang. In the past slaves were excluded from the membership of any type of kebang, but to the present day there are no slavery system in the society. There is no hindrance except lunatics and disabled persons. As such any person

\(^{11}\) Interview with Oshong Ering (IAS Retired) in April, 2009 in Pasighat, East Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh. Even to the present day, the Kebang remains the most powerful political institution in Adi society.
can be a member of the kebang. Representative from every hamlet or a village is included in the council. There is gradation system in the village council.\textsuperscript{12}

Judiciary is one of the main functional aspects of the kebang. It receives complaints from people, tries them, judges them and disposes off all the cases, civil or criminal.\textsuperscript{13} The kebang do not sit regularly but meet occasionally as and when needed. Generally, the council sit from January to the mid of May as a schedule time for the meeting. Yet the council sit other than schedule time on the occasion like for disposal of dead body, natural calamities, famine, and epidemic. Generally, the plaintiff initiates the proceeding of kebang. The accused and the other members are to give patient hearing to the grievances expressed by the aggrieved party and then the defense argument given by the accused. The kebang judgment then begins with a preamble narration of the ancient history and glory of the Adis. The verdict of the kebang is binding on both contending parties. The kebang neither impose capital punishment nor imprisonments but penalizes the convict to pay fine or compensations depending upon the gravity of the crime. The main aim of punishment is to make the convict become a useful member of the society.

The kebang is the sole organ to run day-to-day administration of rural Adis. It can lead all the able bodied male members of the village to war. It regulates and advises the villagers on any activity concerning the village. It leads the people in social and cultural activities like constructions of village path, bridges, and dwelling houses, establishment of


new villages, celebrating of festivals and performing of cultural activities.\textsuperscript{14} The kebang as a democratic institution is as real as the terminology of democracy stands for. Adis are traditionally republican democratic in spirit and socialists in aspiration. This is reflected through the constitution and practices of the kebang. The kebang does not rule out capitalistic economy, but they attach more importance to the socialistic ideology of distribution of wealth and opportunities.

The kebang directs all village activities according to their traditional laws and customs of which it is supposed to be repository and it punishes those who deviates from the right path in any way and watches over of the welfare and wellbeing of the village. All matters of common interests are place before it and nothing can be done without its approval and sanction. The opening of agricultural plots, building of new houses, settling of new comers, punishing wrong doers and whatever else that concerns the village either individually or communally is discussed and decided in it, and it is the chief judiciary in the villages and all the cases of disputes are brought before it for judgment.\textsuperscript{15}

The kebang is the only policy-making body in Adi society. It can make any law on any affairs, matters, problems and welfare relating to Adi society. It can promulgate and propagate laws concerning the well being of the Adis. It can issue ordinances from time to time. It can declare war and make treaty. Before declaring war, it can also make alliances with other village republic to fight jointly in war. The kebang also does not neglect cultural activities. It takes keen interest in the cultural activities. As the society loving people, Adis

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p. 54.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 55.
keep themselves engaged in various social activities. To streamline all such activities, the kebang guides the villagers in cultural activities.

For the purpose of governing the tribal traditions democratically the Panchayat Raj system of local self government has been introduced under Regulation 3 of the North East Frontier Agency Panchayat Raj Regulation, 1967.\textsuperscript{16} A three tier system of self governing bodies has been introduced through the regulation. These are Gram Panchayat at village level, Anchal Samity at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. These self governing bodies have been empowered to formulate and to execute some developmental plans in addition to the implementation of various welfare activities.

The Panchayat Raj and traditional village council both are socio-political agencies to establish democratic decentralization of powers. So, theoretically there is no difference in concepts about these two political agencies. Only the difference, the Panchayat Raj is introduced and traditional village council is crystallized in the soil of the society as a part and parcel of day to day social life. The introduction of Panchayat Raj system has not affected the functioning of the council rather it has strengthened the functioning of the village council. The Gram Panchayat members, the Anchal Samity members or the Zilla Parishad member may also be the member of the village council since the provision for duel membership is there.

The form of the traditional political system of the Nyishi may be ascertained by the total mode of living and the result of the interaction among the nature-man-spirit complex. The Nyishi word ‘Nyoku’ or ‘Gangda’ denotes the territory or land, and while ‘Aathu’

means the male owner and ‘Aayu’ for female owner; and the whole meaning was the owner or lordship of particular territory.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, in the traditional village-state, political institution is centered on the institution of \textit{Nyele} (council of elders). The institution of Nyele is the highest decision-making body of the Nyishi tribe.

The Nyele performed political and administrative functions. This is strengthened by bodies of \textit{gingdung} or \textit{bungring bungte}.\textsuperscript{18} The decision of Nyele is guided by customary laws and practices, which prescribe the nature of punishment and material, are to be compensated. Though it is not based on structured institutionalized system, yet Nyele is a unique mechanism to deal with the varied issues of the society with certain degree of administration of justice.\textsuperscript{19}

To the present day, the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh are undergoing a process of transformation in the socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic spheres. In spite of the changes, the significance of traditional village institutions is largely felt and considered within their specific jurisdiction. The traditional village councils are still considered to be important in the socio-cultural system.

\textbf{Festivals of Arunachal Pradesh}

Festival forms an integral part of tribal societies. One of the important objectives of celebration of festival is to appease different gods and goddess, deities and spirits for socio-

\textsuperscript{17} Tana Showren, \textit{The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh: Brief Ethnographic Outline} (Itanagar: All Nyishi Students’ Union, 2007), p. 22.
\textsuperscript{18} These are persons who are delegated an authority to negotiate the dispute for formal Nyele and act as a judge in between.
\textsuperscript{19} Tana Showren, \textit{The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh: Brief Ethnographic Outline}, op.cit, p22.
cultural and socio-economic betterment. The festivals have socio-religious significance. Most of the tribes in Arunachal Pradesh generally celebrate numerous festivals in a year on different occasions in a proper manner and with enthusiasm and devotion. Each tribe has a distinctive cultural pattern of their tradition. The prime objective of the celebration is to seek blessing for the welfare and prosperity of men and animals at large from the different gods and spirits.

There are beliefs that if benevolent gods and spirits are not appeased from time to time they may cause harm. Entertainment and interaction are some of the factors associated with the celebration of the festivals. The tribes who profess Buddhism celebrate purely religious festivals with traditional prayers and offerings. These are usually organized in the religious temples like Gompas and Buddha Vihars. The Lamas and Bhikshus play prominent role in the celebration. Worships are made at the permanent altars by offering various items, and lighting of lamps. Recitation of religious hymns and performing pantomime dances form special feature of the celebration. The festivals are organized on schedules as per the Buddhist calendar. Festivals related with agriculture and agricultural activities are also celebrated with full sincerity and gaiety. The number of new year festivals are comparatively less to other categories, due to the fact that new year has generally been considered with new agricultural season and hence considered under the categories of purely agricultural festivals.

Different rites and ceremonies are connected with various stages of agricultural operations. Each community celebrates a festival either at the advent of the new

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21 Ibid, p. 140.
agricultural seasons or at the time of harvesting and often at midseason between transplantation and ripening either at village level, or by a group of villages or on community basis at the place nearer to the local administrative headquarters. The other rites and ceremonies are performed clan-wise as well as village-wise often in the field itself. Individual performances of such rituals are also often done on specific occasions. The objectives for such celebrations are mainly a successful cropping and good harvest. Sacrifice of animals and birds form an important part of these festivals. Similarly services of the priests are invariably necessary for the ritual part of the festivals. The main priest is assisted by one or two assistant priests and a few man having experience in the line.\textsuperscript{22} The elected priest should wear a special kind of attire. The priest recites hymns and continues for days.

Varieties of traditional songs and dances are performed during festivals where people irrespective of age and sex participate. There are some dances to be performed in specific festivals. The elders generally discuss the various mythological stories with the taste of drink and smoke. Generally, community feasts with meat of the sacrificed animals are organized on the concluding day of the festivals. The festivals are also marked with colorful processions, games and sports, community hunting, and fishing.

The Nyishis celebrate number of festivals round the year and their major festivals are Nyokum Yullo, Boori Yullo and Lungte Yullo. These festivals perpetuates worshipping gods and goddesses to ensure that the entire humanity is well safeguarded against all evils—both natural and man-made thereby, creates a balanced and congenial environment to provide sufficient materials of self-sustenance to the mankind including food grains and

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, pp. 140-141.
animal husbandry. These festivals represent the cultural extravagance providing sustenance to it, and ultimately promote continuance of custom, tradition and culture.\(^{23}\)

The Lungte Yullo, in other words, is also known as the Solung festival. It is celebrated every year at the advent of a new agricultural season in the month of *Lecherpolo* (April), the first month of their traditional calendar based on lunar months. Both the terms Longte (protection) and Yullo (rite or ceremony) or Solung (erection of fencing) are popularly used by the people to signify a festival which is mainly concerned with the erection of a fencing by wooden posts on the principal path leading to the village, generally at the boundary line or at a place where their forefathers used to close the path. A rite or ceremony is also performed near the fencing, where the villagers seek blessings from the Donyi-Polo and spirits and deities such as *Yajang*, *Yapum*, *Chen-Mane* and *Jamdu-Duwadu*.\(^{24}\) They are propitiated for bumper crop and good harvest, welfare of the people and their livestock. Therefore, the Lungte Yullo or Solung may be considered as new year-cum-agricultural festivals of the Nyishis.

**Brief Account of Zeliangrong Nagas**

The Zeliangrong Nagas are one of the various groups of Mongoloid race with distinct culture, laws and customs. According to some linguists and anthropologists, the Zeliangrong Nagas belonged to the Tibeto-Burman family and sub-families of the Tibeto-Chinese race. The Zeliangrong Nagas inhabit the compact and contiguous geographical area which has been fragmented into the states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland in India.

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In Assam, the north-east of North Cachar Hills district is the ancestral Zeliangrong homeland. They are also settled in Cachar valley of Assam. In Manipur, Tamenglong district is the ancestral homeland of the Zeliangrong people. They are also settled in western Sadar Hiils, Tadubi sub-division of Senapati district, Loktak Project area of Churachandpur district, certain villages in Bishnupur district, and about seventy villages in Imphal valley of Manipur. In Nagaland, Peren district is the ancestral homeland of the Zeliangrong people. They are also settled in Dimapur district and Kohima district.

Historically, the Zeliangrong territory covers the great Barail range and its southern branches from the Tamaki (Dhansiri) river in the north to the confines of the Chin Hills of Myanmar including some parts of the present district of Churachandpur in the south. The Bhuvan Hill range, Jiri River and Haflong Plateau are the western boundaries. The range protruding from Koubru Mountain to Laimaton range including the central valley of Manipur constitutes the eastern boundary.

The Zeliangrong territory covers nearly 12,000 sq. km. The steep mountains, deep gorges and the river valleys made the region physically isolated from the outside world. The Zeliangrong region has high mountain peaks like the Mt. Pauna and Mt. Angola in Nagaland, Asalu-Laisong spur of the western Barail in Haflong of Assam, and the Makuilongdi range to Koubru Mountain & Laimaton range in Manipur. The main rivers in the region include the great Ahu/Agu/Mbeuki (Barak), the Alang (Irang), and the Makhu (Makru).

The Dzukou/Doidirekie valley, Khoupum valley and Jalukie valley are the main valleys in Zeliangrong country. The Barak waterfalls and the Zeilad lakes are the natural
heritage sites. Jalukie valley in Nagaland is where all sections of the Zeliangrong people live. It is the model-township of the integrated Zeliangrong society, where everyone speaking different dialects lives in harmony in the village and participates in the social, economic and cultural life.

Therefore, the Zeliangrong people are an ancient community of North-East India who has been in occupation of a compact and contiguous geographical area which has been fragmented into the states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. They have a long history where they have inherited rich cultural heritage. They have great attachment to their ancestral homeland and have transverse a long period of history from their ancient period at Makhel and Makuilongdi to the present generation. The Zeliangrong geography covers a compact and contiguous area of Tamenglong District, Western Sadar Hills, Mao West, Loktak Project area in Manipur, Haflong sub-division of North Cachar Hills District of Assam, and Peren District of Nagaland.

**Family, Clans and Permutations**

Family is the oldest institution known to men, and without doubt it is the first social unit. Among the Zeliangrong Nagas, it has been observed that the family tie is an important integrating factor. The Zeliangrong follows patrilineal system, in which, husband is the head of the family. The father is, therefore, the head of the family and as such has certain duties, responsibilities and powers. As the head of the family, he provides basic necessities, look after and maintain the position of the family. An intelligent, brave and eloquent head

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of family is respected even outside this small circle and these very qualities may entitle him to an important position in the clan, village and community.

The head is also the family priest and performs his duties during festivals and other ceremonies. He worships at the family altar and placates the family deity. He distributes among the different household of his clan, the meat and animals killed or sacrificed for his family during the festivals. He must take a leading part in the marriage of his sons and daughters, his clan assisting him greatly. He must portion out his lands between his children and make a will in the customary form to provide for his wife in the events of his death. Besides performing the above duties within the family he represents his family in the clan meeting and in courts.\textsuperscript{26} Joint family system is least favored by the Zeliangrong, yet found rarely and only when there is no alternative because of poverty, and physical handicapped. The general practice is that as soon as a son marries and becomes the head of his family he goes and sets up a home of his own.

The clan or kinship is passed down through the paternal side in Zeliangrong society. Clan comprises a group of consanguineous families descended from a common ancestor by whose name the clan is known on the patrilineal and exogamic line.\textsuperscript{27} Then members of clans (combined together) compose a well-defined village occupying a definite, permanent area independently. The head of a clan would naturally be the same as the head of the first family from which they are permutated, the sons and paternal cousins joined to form the clan. The principle of primogeniture is observed in regard to succession.\textsuperscript{28} The eldest surviving son succeeds to the clan as headmanship. In case of the devoid of son, the eldest

\textsuperscript{26} ibid., P.45
\textsuperscript{28} M. Horam, \textit{Naga Polity}, op.cit, p. 50.
surviving brother of the erstwhile chief automatically becomes the next head of the clan. The head of the clan which settled first in a village would automatically become the first head of the village and in case the headmanship of the village was hereditary the same clan would always provide the chief whose selection would be based on the simple principle of primogeniture. 29

The Morung (Dormitory)

The morung or the dormitory system, now relegated to the past, is existing in its original form only in few villages. Morung used to be an essential part of Zeliangrong life. The morung originally was a training center, a dormitory around 20 m long and 10 m high, where young people were instructed on the necessary subjects. The Zeliangrong culture, customs and traditions which were transmitted from generation to generation through folk music and dance, folk tales and oral traditions were conveyed to the young people in the morungs. The morung served many purposes. It acted as the meeting house where weapons and prizes of war were stored. The morungs were usually located at the village entrance or on a spot from where the village could be guarded most effectively. Many villages had morungs for unmarried men to live. The morungs were thus adapted as guard houses, recreational clubs and sometimes centers of education, art and discipline.

Separate dormitories are constructed for men and women, and in some of the villages, women entry in men’s morung is strictly prohibited. Morung is considered to be an important educational, political and social institution. 30 All the unmarried boys and girls in the village, at the attainment of puberty up to the time of their marriage attained the

29 ibid, p. 51.
dormitory. They learn manners, discipline, art, stories, songs, war tactics, diplomacy, religions, customary rites and ceremonies living in it. In other words, it has been a school for the young people to learn the art of livelihood, responsibility and co-operation before the Zeliangrong people came in contact with the modern education and life. It is also used for the observation of ‘taboos’ or other religious customs.

**Head Hunting**

As a practice, headhunting has been the subject of intense discussion within the anthropological community as to its possible social roles, functions, and motivations. Contemporary scholars generally agree that its primary function was ceremonial, and that it was part of the process of structuring, reinforcing, and defending hierarchical relationships between communities and individuals. Some experts theorize that the practice stemmed from the belief that the head contained soul matter or life force, which could be harnessed through its capture. Themes that arise in anthropological writings about headhunting include mortification of the rival, ritual violence, cosmological balance, the display of manhood and prestige.

Head-hunting occurred throughout the world from ancient times into the 20th century. In Europe, it flourished in the Balkans until the early 20th century. The practice often has magico-religious motives. Head-hunting tribes usually believe that there is soul matter concentrated in the head; taking the head of an enemy not only adds to the totality of soul matter in one's community, it also weakens the power of the enemy. As a particularly gruesome symbol of victory, such trophies may also intimidate enemies and potential

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31 ibid.
enemies. In addition, heads are secured as tokens of courage and manhood. In many societies, young men are allowed to marry only after they have taken their first head, and for each trophy they may wear a distinctive feather or special tattoo. In some parts of the world, notably among the natives of North America, the scalp alone was taken, and the hair was often used in the making of amulets. Heads may be mummified in various ways, as in New Guinea, where both skull and skin are preserved, or among the Jívaro of South America, where the skin alone is preserved to produce a so-called shrunken head.

Head-hunting is one of the beacons of the traditions of distinct Zeliangrong identity, and known to have practiced since time immemorial. In the old days, when the different Naga tribes were at war with one another, or with other neighboring tribes, they used to indulge in their favorite sport-head-hunting. In short, the necks of victims are chopped off using dagger (traditional hatchets) and the heads are brought back to the village as trophies. These heads are hung in front of the warrior's house revealing his status in society. During those days, it was quite difficult to find a bride for a young man who had not brought back an enemy's head as a trophy. The practice of head-hunting also envisaged that a vital and creative energy resided in a human head, which when brought back to the village, granted fertility to life and agriculture. The elders in the Zeliangrong villages today are the sole repositories of this surprisingly rich tradition, and through their testimonies, this investigative compilation documents what is known about those ancient customs, which governed their former way of life.

All heads were not equally valuable, the head of children’s and women’s chopped from often heavily shielded security of men are considered as more precious. But, head hunting in undeclared war is considered as an offence. The offensive weapons used in the
head-hunting were only spear, dao, and a shield. Head of an enemy is a laurel to the success of the battles. According to Elwin, a young man who had taken an enemy’s head in the war was highly honored and deeply respected in his own village. The head of an enemy was an invaluable and highly priced trophy.\(^{32}\) The Zeliangrong Nagas preserved the heads taken as memorials of ferocity and vengeance. Some houses of the head hunters were like ‘golgothas’.\(^{33}\)

**Zeliangrong Polity**

In the pre-colonial days each Zeliangrong Naga villages occupied its own specified territories which were independent and has its own administration.\(^ {34}\) In this way, the village assembly alone rather than any other body, developed as the apex organization among the people. As J. P. Mills notes, “as with all Nagas the real political units of the tribe is the village.”\(^ {35}\) The village was thus the highest form of organization that represented political, social and religious bonds. Therefore, the traditional political systems developed in the context of communities are families, extensions of families and different language groups. They belong to the same kinship group sharing a common culture, common descent and a common territory. Due to a constant state of hostility these communities tended to be isolated from each other and fostered strong local traditions.\(^ {36}\)

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The political institutions developed over the ages are based on the relationships of the members. Political institutions have their roots in the need, for social order. Zeliangrong society provides for the maintenance of social order through their system of kinship. Kinship plays such an important role in that it has withstood severe strains of social change. It has also posed a difficult problem in political development for the new state. Each village-state pursued an independent policy and implements its own customary laws on all walks of life of its citizens. Administration was indigenous and independent. Its economy was local and self-sufficient.

For every Zeliangrong villages, which had chiefs, chieftainship certainly constituted the important element in their polity. Any influential and powerful person in a village could not just become a chief. Although in normal course, the leader of the first settlement should become the chief of the village. Ancient beliefs, traditions and custom prevailing among them required that he should have the sanction of the gods before assuming his chieftainship; otherwise people would refuse to obey him. Besides the chief, every village has a council. It is the principal organ of the village. The members of the council are either elected or appointed. Women do not have the right to be elected as councilors.

Normally the eldest of the clan is nominated to represent the village council. At the time of electing a new council the chief fixes a time and place for the election. It is preceded by either closed-door or open meetings of each clan. It is at these meetings that

38 ibid, p. 17.
39 ibid, p. 84.
40 ibid, p. 21.
41 According to M. Horam, election is not quite an apt term in such cases as the whole process is one of selection.
nominations are received for the post of village councilors. As already mentioned, the clan head is the first man of the clan. He is, therefore, naturally its unanimous choice as representative in the village council. If, however, he is old, infirm or otherwise incapacitated, he may suggest the name of another able and young man.

**Festivals of Zeliangrong**

The Zeliangrong Nagas regard their festivals sacred, and participation in the celebration is considered as a blessing. Most of their festivals are related to the creation and life situation of the people, especially agriculture which is their main occupation. The predominant theme of the festival is offering of prayers by the chief priest and villagers. A religious and spiritual sentiment in the form of sacred prayer or chant is offered in order to please the Supreme Being. All their festivals are based on the different stages of agricultural operations; pre-operation and post-harvest.

*Helei N’gi* is the first festival of the year. It is celebrated before the commencement of any plantation to invoke the blessings of God. It is a seed-sowing festival. It is celebrated in the month of March/April, and the date of celebration varies from village to village as decided by the respective *paiki* (traditional political institution). The *Helei N’gi* is celebrated for three days. The first day of the celebration is a day of prayer; the second day is a day of big festival; and the third day is the concluding day of the festival. The *kelumki* (house of worship) is open during the festival so that people can offer prayers in the *kelumki*.

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42 Interview with the leaders and commoners of the Zeliangrong people in North Cachar Hills of Assam in the month of April, 2011. These festivals are narrated by both the Heraka and the Christians. It is worth mentioning here that even Christians celebrate most of the festivals with certain modifications.
The *Nchang N’gi* is the post-seed sowing festival. This festival marks the end of plantation work for the year. It is a small festival compare to the seed-sowing festival. It is celebrated in the month of May. The *Puakpat N’gi* is a harvest festival. It is celebrated by offering the first produce to *Tingwang* (God) in the *kelumki*. The offerings are used for the community. It is celebrated in the month of September/October for three days. *Nsim N’gi* is the festival of the youth. It is also a post-harvest festival where people make merry with the produce from their plantation. It is celebrated for three days, and no prayers are involved in this festival. Boys and girls celebrate in their respective dormitories with songs and dance competition. There are also high jump, long jump and shot put completion.

But, the *hega n’gi* is the biggest festival of the Zeliangrong Nagas. The hega festival is celebrated after the harvest and before the ensuing sowing season. The festival begins by performing the rite of making fresh fire called *mlei-nlap* or *mlei-teu*. Therefore, some villages called this festival *mileingi* named after the process of making fresh fire. The word ‘*hega*’ is derived from the word ‘*kehega*’ meaning gratify, solace, and pleasure. It is a time of self sufficiency even for the poorest of the farmers. It is also a time to enjoy, share, and celebrate on their hard earned crops of the whole year.

Hega is also a festival invoking the almighty God to shower his blessings upon the people for the whole year. The festival is associated with the rite of purification and setting of new foundation for all aspects of life. The menfolk maintain chastity, and women are restricted from their day-to-day activities such as weaving, spinning, and sewing till the end of the festival. The games, songs, entertainment and all festive activities undertaken during the festival are related to the rite of prosperity, security and well being of the people. The nature of the dance and song simultaneously are a call to follow and adhere to the style.
of life, skilful works and rites of the year. The *Hega N'gi* is also a post-harvest festival. When the granaries are full, the landscape is dry, the whole village is free from all agricultural works, and people turn to celebration, festivity and worship of God. This festival is described as a New Year festival as it marks the end of the year and beginning of the New Year. It is a festival heralding the New Year.

**Tribal Religion: An Overview**

Tribal religion and practices are the reflection of the existing socio-religious system of a society which emerges in certain given conditions of life within which people strive for securing their material existence and for finding answer to their ideological queries. It has a special connotation so far as the tribal people are concerned as it provides rationale for their existence and makes intelligible and acceptable the world within which their social system operates.

The genesis of the practice of religion, when traced to its roots in primitive tribes and societies is often found to rest in some form or manner of ‘animism’. Every traditional society attempts to explain, predict and control its environment through religion. They believed the existence of supernatural being and their providence. They expressed their basic patterns of beliefs affecting individual and collective behavior, in the religion they practiced. In its broadest sense, animism implies the attribution of a living soul to inanimate objects and to natural phenomenon, as the belief in the existence of soul or spirit as distinct and apart from inert matter. It is interesting to note that the word ‘animism’
comes from the word ‘*anima*’ which in its original connotation meant ‘breath’ ‘life force’ or ‘soul’. Thus in formal definitions, animism is spoken of as the belief in the phenomenon of animal life as produced by an ‘immaterial’ anima. Sir Edward B. Taylor, in his book ‘Primitive Culture’, contends that animism is the origin of religion and the beliefs of primitive people. Anthropologically, he was the first to use the term for beliefs, based on the universal human experience of dreams and visions, in ‘spiritual beings’, comprising of souls of individual creatures and other spirits.

In every religious system, there exist three characteristics or components. Firstly, there is philosophy, which presents the whole scope of that religion setting forth its basic principles, the goal and the means of reaching it. Secondly, there is mythology, which is philosophy made concrete. It is the abstraction of philosophy concretized in the more or less imaginary lives of men and supernatural beings. Thirdly, there is the ritual. This is still more concrete, and is made up of forms and ceremonies, various physical attitudes, flowers and incense, and many other things that appeal to the senses.

In most of the Western writings, the approach to traditional or tribal religion is pre-conditioned by popular ideologies that create a sense of inferiority outlook. Material backwardness is considered as yardstick to signify that the tribal religion is primitive. In most of the tribal societies, religion is an integral part of the whole component where sociological, psychological, philosophical, ecological, economical, cultural and political

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44 ibid.
aspects are inter-woven into a complex whole. Therefore, understanding specific aspect
needs a holistic approach to study the tribal society.

The tribal section of the Indian population is characterized as distinct in ecology,
demography, economic, politics, religion and other social behavior from other ethnic
groups. Their religion contains a number of elements which combine to produce a picture
of tribal life. An environment of supernatural beliefs and rituals influence and modify their
belief and practices. Their religious life plays an important role in the shaping of their
culture. Experiences of certain day-to-day sudden happenings, of misfortune, and death
have led them to believe in the existence of supernatural power. According to Pankaj
Debnath ‘tribals have established a close relationship between themselves and the power
adjusting themselves to supernatural power in two ways: first, by controlling or
overpowering the spirit through enchanting or practicing some techniques and canalizing
the power for good or bad; secondly, by offering puja or worship to propitiate the
superhuman power for acquisition of the desire.’

Tribal religion, in many ways has been misinterpreted by anthropologists, Christian
missionaries, and scholars of comparative theology as animism. The concept of animism
was first propounded by Edward B. Tylor in his paper entitled “Religion of Savages” in the
Fortnightly Review (1866) in which he conveniently used the term ‘animism’ referring to
the primitive religion, which is endowed with the phenomenon of nature. Though, it is
generally accepted that animism is a belief that all natural objects have souls, but Tylor’s

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_Tribal Religion: Change and Continuity_, op.cit, p. 285.
animism is more a spiritism, dealing with an unempirical world of the spirits. It is the minimal definition of animism, the belief in the spiritual being.

Andrew Lang (1844-1912), a Scottish folklorist theorized that the primitive tribes believed in a high god, a creator of the universe and often a legislator of a moral order as found among the tribes who had been explored both by the Christian missionaries and anthropologists. He pleaded for the existence of primordial monotheism. Wilhelm Schmidt in his “Origin of the Idea of God” (1912) discovered a high god among the primitive religion and confirmed Andrew Lang’s primordial monotheism. In his words, “tribes have a memory of a high god, a benign creator, a father-god who is no longer worshiped because that god is not feared”.47

In India, administrators and ethnographers were instructed by the then British government of India to use the term ‘animism’ to describe the religion of the tribals or indigenous communities. They were also directed to use the term in the census of India since 1901. In the North East, the government of Assam published anthropological monographs from 1906 onwards, like the Khasis by P.T.R. Gurdon, the Garos by A. Mayflair, the Meitheis by T.C. Hodson, the Kacharis by Rev. S. Endle, the Naga tribes of Manipur by T.C. Hodson, the Lushai Kuki Clans by John Shakespeare, the Sema Nagas by J.H. Hutton, the Angami Nagas by J.H. Hutton, the Ao Nagas by J.P. Mills, the Lothas Nagas by J.P. Mills, the Thadou-Kukis by William Shaw, the Lushai Crystals by A.C. McCall, and the Lakhers by P.N. Perry. These powerful writings have described the tribal religion as animism.

However, tribes are not animistic per se, as their system of religious beliefs and mode of worship of the god does not present a picture of degenerated religious practice. Rather it has been suggested that due to the loss of contact with prophets and religious seers, they had degenerated to polytheism, worship of many gods. Commenting on the tribal religion, especially on the religious systems of North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), Elwin attributed five qualities which are fundamental to the tribal religion:

(1) There is a very general belief in a Supreme God who is just, benevolent and good. For example, Doini-Pollo, the Sun-Moon god of all the Adi groups, is regarded as the great witness in the sky, the upholder of truth.

(2) In the second place, there is in tribal religion a genuine emphasis on the spiritual realities behind the life of everyday. The belief in a circumambient unseen world, in which gods and men, the quick and the dead; are one great family; the faith in kindly tutelary spirits, to whom priests are married; the emphasis on the spiritual cause of tragedy-these things do at least point the way from a merely material and temporal estimate of life, and lay the foundations for a development of higher values.

(3) Then tribal religion is built up from an elaborate mythology. Myth is regarded as representing metaphorically a world-picture and insight into life generally and may, therefore, be considered as primitive philosophy or metaphysical thought.

(4) Tribal religion is associated with a social ethic that unites the tribe in its discipline and undoubtedly makes for a certain nobility of conduct. The great tribal virtues are discipline, devotion to work, generosity and hospitality, truth, kindness.
(5) Finally, tribal religion gives the people the power to reconcile themselves to the eternal emergencies of life. It has been said that fear is the father of religion and love its late-born daughter, and it is true that there is an element of fear in all primitive religion.\footnote{Verrier Elwin, \textit{A Philosophy For NEFA} (Itanagar: Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2006), pp. 210-14.}

Elwin opines that it is hard to approach the subject of tribal religion with complete objectivity. In his words, “the Hindu, despite himself, considers whether the tribal religions cannot in some way be brought within the all-embracing tolerance of Hinduism; the Christian cannot help regarding them as rivals to his own universal faith; the agnostic looks on all religions, tribal as well as others as bound to collapse before the spread of scientific knowledge”.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 214-15.}

Religion permeates all aspects of life in tribal societies. It is basically a community religion. To be truly human is to belong to the whole community, including the ancestors and creation. To do so involves the active participation in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. Another distinctive characteristic of tribal religion is that it doesn’t have sacred scripture or scriptures like other world established religions. The religious ethos is contained in the people’s hearts, minds, oral history and rituals. Tribal religion does not have a historical founder(s) or reformer(s). Their religion is instead centered on earth/creation. In the tribal worldview, one cannot make a clear-cut distinction between the sacred and secular, between religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and material areas of life. There is a sense of cosmic oneness. In other words, all things are seen to fundamentally share the same nature and same interaction with each other-rocks and forest trees, beasts and serpents, the living, the dead and first ancestors are all one.
Tribal Religion in North East India

(a) Arunachal Pradesh

The religious belief system of tribal societies are expressed in their traditional oral literature in the form of myths, legends and folklore, transmitted from generation to generation. For an instance, the Nyishis of Arunachal Pradesh have three different theories relating to the origin and evolution. Firstly, ‘those who believe in Jingbu Pabu Abu as creator: secondly, those who name the creator as Korium-Kolu: thirdly, those who believe that the creation was through Poyi-Nyai.\textsuperscript{50} However, all the three theories accept the notion that an extra-ordinary spirit called Chene Rulom Dola was used to create the universe and its components. The origin of Adi religion is shrouded with numerous myths and tradition which are as old as the tribe itself. From the narrations contained in the\textit{ abangs},\textsuperscript{51} it is known that the Adis believed; all beings and things of the universe have been created by a super-natural power or a creator who is called Sedi by the Padam-Minyongs and Jimi by the Galos. It is believed that Sedi created number of gods and goddesses who in turn, gave birth to numerous invisible spirits who control the various spheres of the nature. It is through the\textit{ abangs}, that is described, the universe as physical embodiment of Sedi.

According to the\textit{ abang}, “in the beginning there was no shape or form but only darkness everywhere-and Melo (sky) and Sedi (earth) lay close together, and not as now far apart. Out of the union, things were born: light emerged and landscape as we see today

\textsuperscript{51}\textit{Abangs} are ballads invented by the tribals of Arunachal Pradesh since olden days in their quest and curiosity to know the creator and controller of the natural phenomena. It is a way of explanation in the form of myths embodied in the ballads.
with mountains, land and water and all life came into being”. The *abangs* also mentioned that *Sedi* has a pair of searching eyes with which He keeps vigil on the humanity. The two eyes are interpreted to be the *Donyi* (the Sun) and *Polo* (the Moon). However it is interpreted, *Donyipolo* conveys certain ideas having direct bearing on the spiritual and physical life of the people.

As to the religion of the Adis, nothing concrete has been written so far. The early writers on the Adis seem to have failed to penetrate into the depth of Adi religion. It is perhaps, natural for the early writers to dwell on the periphery of this aspect of the Adi life since there are neither written scriptures of Adi faith nor a definite form of worship easily visible to the outsiders. E.T. Dalton, who visited the Adi area in the fifties of the last century, for an instance, came to know an incident of loss of an Adi boy from an agricultural field and the way the Adi searchrd for it in the jungle with the belief that the boy was possessed by *Epom*, a spirit. Then he wrote, “the religion of the *Abors* consists in a belief in these sylvan deities (*Epoms*) to each of whom some particular department in the destiny of man is assigned”\(^53\). In the words of Danggen, ‘though superstition is the basis of religion this sort of belief in some spirit cannot constitute a religion. A religion, should provide an ultimate solace to the human mind’.\(^54\) Besides the sylvan deities, the Adis acknowledge and adore Supreme Being as the father of all.

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Another writer, G.D.S. Dunbar, in the first quarter of this century, while observing Adi religion wrote, “his (Abors) untutored mind sees a demon everywhere, in the sun, and the thunder, the earth and the water. It is a spirit of evil that takes life from all things that have breath, that smites with sickness, that, in the questionable shape of a kinsman from some distant village, lures the unfortunate to his doom in the dark recesses of the forest”.\textsuperscript{55}

It is true that Adis see spirits in every object around them. But, to say that the present religion of the hill-tribe is poly-demonism is not necessarily agreed by many scholars. Nonetheless, Dunbar acknowledged that Adis undoubtedly belief in a great and benevolent spirit who is all powerful. A more refined one was propounded by V. Elwin. He observed that Adis belief in a Supreme God, who is just, benevolent and good, i.e Doini-polo, the Sun-Moon God of all being. He also dealt with the Sun-Moon position as natural phenomena attributing with divine qualities without however, referring to the evolution of other heavenly bodies.

In the sixties, J.N. Chaudhury and Sachin Roy penetrated into the essence of Adi religion. There began a comparison between some aspects of Adi religion with those of vedic religion of the Hindus. Similarities may be of co-incident, there is less chance of similarity of tribal faith with those of Vedic faith. In reminiscent to Elwin, this approach dwells more on the historic nature under which the Adis weave their mythology depicting the different phenomena of nature as malevolent spirits. Mythology as such with many stories may be the basis of religion, but cannot be necessarily be a religion. Among the writers, J.N. Chaudhury had come to the point when he mentioned Doni-Polo as one spirit to whom the Adis turn for seeking truth and justice.

Donyi-Polo is the indigenous religion of Arunachal Pradesh. According to this religion, there is an unseen Supreme Being with Super Power who created the universe, the plants, life elements like heat, light, air, water and earth. Physically this Supreme Power is represented by Donyi (The Sun) and Polo (The Moon) to preserve and maintain the law of nature for existence. Spiritually, this Supreme Being is the source and end of all living beings. Ideologically, Donyi-Polo is the truth, beauty, love, peace and is believed to be omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. Since it is an indigenous religion with no written records, interpretation of the Donyi-Polo philosophy varies. For some people, Donyi-Polo is the embodiment of justice. The Sun and Moon are believed to the eyes of powerful God. When Adis are in trouble or in distress, they invite Donyi-Polo to be their witness. They invoke the guidance of Donyi-Polo in chaos and confusion. To others, Donyi-Polo is an enlightened beauty where oath taking is done in the name of Donyi-Polo. Though, they believe in spirits, they never worship Donyi-Polo.

On different occasion, Donyi-Polo means truthfulness, wisdom, enlightenment, blissfulness, right conscience, compassion, love, peacefulness, selfishness, friendliness and other virtuous qualities that lead man to attain perfection. From tradition, truth is the cream of Donyi-Polo faith and culture. It is the light and beauty that attract the Adis all the time. It has commanded the people to cultivate wisdom and enlightenment.

By Donyi-Polo, ‘it also means prevalence of peaceful co-existence. Due to certain misunderstanding and disagreement over issues, human beings sometime come into conflicts and engage themselves in warfare and senseless destruction. In such situation, Donyi-Polo or peace ultimately overcomes man. Peaceful atmosphere gives man the opportunity to understand tolerance, restraint and co-existence. Human progress and
prosperity is possible under peaceful atmosphere. That is why the Adis regard a man who pleads and champions the cause of peace as Donyi-Polo Ami or a man of peace.\textsuperscript{56} Radiating and reflecting warming rays and kindly light through the sun and the moon, Donyi-Polo also teaches human beings to be kind, compassionate, selfless and loving in conduct.

The Nyshis do believe in Donyi-Polo but their notion is somehow different from the Adis. The Nyshis attach more importance to the Donyi than to the Polo, whereas among the Adis, the two words are synonymous or treated as same word. Since time immemorial, the Donyis were the well-wishers of the Tanis. There were many instances where the Abo Tanis called upon Ane Donyi for help and even to save them. In such one instance, the Abo Tani called upon Atu Polo (moon) to save them. But the Atu Polo refused, and instead charged the Tanis of being mischievous. But the Ane Donyi came and save them. That is why the Nyshis do not treat Polo as benevolent. But by virtue of usefulness for counting time, month, season and year, Polo is also given importance. At the same time the word Polo is used as suffix to the word Donyi so as to add more meaning or weightage to the Donyi.

Nevertheless, in the midst of innumerable traditional myths and beliefs in benevolent gods and goddesses, it becomes difficult to explain the concept of Donyi-Polo in concrete terms. The spiritual and philosophical doctrines of Donyi-Polo published by the

Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang are worth mentioning. It is considered as the authoritative treatise and text on Donyi-Polo religion:

1) It (Donyi-Polo) is the supreme governing power of the universe.

2) It is the ever probing power.

3) It is the supreme judge of the highest court of eternal law.

4) It is the source of life and energy of the living beings.

5) It is the divine light, wisdom, knowledge, truth and brotherhood.

6) All living and non-living objects are creation of Donyi-Polo.

7) Purity, openness, truthfulness, love, peaceful co-existence and eternal laws.

8) Right, justice, kindness is path to Donyi-Polo.

9) Equality, fraternity, self respect, and self reliance are the qualities and qualifications of Donyi-Polo faith.

10) Mercies, apology with understanding are divine qualities of Donyi-Polo faith.

11) Theft, lies and hatred are against Donyi-Polo faith and therefore they are sins.°

The believer of Donyi-Polo, particularly, the Adis adopted and applied faithfully the practices of Donyi-Polo in their day to day life to bring nearer to oneself and seek divine help from Donyi-Polo to stand as witness of truth and justice in respect of dispute and allegation.

Role of Priest

In every religion, there exists the institution of priesthood. In a tribal society, a priest offers himself as a liaison between the human being and the world of unseen powers. In the words of Choudhury, “they are the shamans par excellence with the knowledge and power of negotiating with the spirit world. Their services are sought after during sickness or other misfortunes, when they prescribed the necessary rites or sacrifices for propitiating the inimical or orams”. The priest, being a dynamic person plays vital and multi-facet roles. When a person is ill, he is called for diagnosis; he is consulted to save crops from damages and enables the farmer to yield rich harvest; he ensures the protection of livestock and makes them to thrive; he also ensures the safe journey and assures a comfortable life even when a person departs from this world; he forecasts impending disasters and averts them; and above all he has been the refuge, the solace to the people living in darkness of evils surrounding them. For the Nyishis, a priest is neither inherited or appointed nor imparted any formal training. He is inborn and has imbibed himself a divine vision to become a priest.

A priest carried out his services through various modes and methods of divination, which are spiritually evolved out of conventions and practices. For the Nyishis, “it is Chene Weyi (spirit through which a child is conceived and nurtured) who decides the future of a child even when he is still in the womb of a mother. The priest is also decided well before the birth of a child. With Chene Weyi guiding a person, brings up enthusiastically on the

lines of priesthood. When a person becomes mature enough, he will see a typical dreams relating to the life and work of the priest. A prospective priest shall perform an appropriate ritual. With this he enlightens himself and achieves the miraculous power to heal and cure the sick person through different processes”.

However, Nyishi priest does not occupy deserved and distinguished position in the society, as there is no separate class or status for them. Moreover, Nyishi women do not become a priest. In the pre-colonial days, in most of the tribal societies, the role of a priest is confined to some religious ceremonial functions, and all other powers and functions were vested with the village chief and his council.

For the Adis, a priest is known by different names, Nyibo or Nyibu or Miri. A priest performs all sorts of religious rites and ceremonies of the tribe. He is the mouthpiece of the people to communicate their grievances and sufferings to request spirits for redress. Thus, he is the intermediary between the spiritual world and the human world. Besides, the priest performs divination, offers sacrifices and invokes blessings of the spirits on behalf of the people. Like in the Nyishi religious tradition, there is neither election nor selection for a priest in Adi society. Rather it is the early proof of one’s inherent qualities and talent or god’s will that one determines one’s real qualification for the eligibility of priesthood. However, in the Christian-Judaic religious tradition, for an instance, priesthood in the Old Testament is inherited by a tribe called Levi, and other tribes were not sanctioned by the law for priesthood.

Besides, priests among the Adis do not enjoy any special privilege, except at the time of his invocations and sacrifices in society. They lead a common life with his fellow villagers distinguished in no way from them except during the performance of religious

60 Ibid, p. 29.
ceremonies when they put on special dresses and ornaments. For their work, priests collect fee where the amount depend on the type of sacrifices made. For instance, if it is a mithun, a Galo priest gets a portion of its neck. Beads, old dishes and at present, money are also given in addition to meat.

Rituals and Ceremonies

The Adis perform number of rituals and socio-religious festivals. Some of them are, Togu or Sobe Panam, Yojir, Hurin, Ampir, Peka or Kaji-Pomji, Pago-Palek, Mopin Diri, Mari, Ampu-Yulu and Potor-Nyogom. Besides, taboos are observed to avoid bad luck, sickness, epidemic or anger of the spirits. Taboos denotes prohibition, which could mean a forbidden activity, something that is not permitted, something stands against social approval and also disallowed by religious norms of a given society. In other words, it is a restriction established to guard against supernaturally evil and dangerous things like plants, animals, and objects or even the persons especially those believe to have been possessed by evil spirits.

Therefore, tabooed objects or things are not to be seen, touched, heard, smelt or tested, the violation of which will automatically invite the wrath or anger of the supernatural power and the evil spirits. For the Nyishis, taboos are of two types, namely, the conventional or customary taboos and the taboos pronounced by the priest. Incest is strictly prohibited in Nyishi society. A couple who commits incest is immediately excommunicated or driven away from the village for the fear that their sin will be visited by divine curse to any one of the villagers.
In the same way, while going for hunting or fishing, people often abstain from physical contact with their own wives; otherwise the mission would be a failure. A youth is tabooed to take the meat of wild animal like bear, deer or boar killed by him for the first time, on the ground that he will lose his hunting acumen. Generally, a husband is restricted to kill animal, bird, insect and snake, when his wife is at advanced stage of pregnancy. He must also abstain from joining a funeral ceremony. If he violates, it is believed that the child in his wife’s womb will be affected in different ways. Thus, a taboo is an integral part of every ritual and sacrifice without which it is treated as incomplete.

(b) Zeliangrong Nagas

The Zeliangrong indigenous religion was historically evolved and based on various customs and tradition from the past. The religion has no founder but there were number of law givers, prophets and diviners who made revelations of God’s message to man and society. The Zeliangrong people believe in the eternal existence of one Supreme God, who is the creator of the universe, gods, men and all living beings. He is the regulator of the universe, giver and source of life, dispenser of plenty and justice. Nobody except Him can give life. He is named Tingkao Ragwang (the Universal God or the King of gods). In other words, He is also called Tingwang (Lord of Heaven). He is the Sky God and High God, who is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent.61

Besides the one Supreme God, the Zeliangrong people also believe in other gods. There are community and individual forms of the worship of God and deities. While prayers are usually chanted, sacrifice and offering accompanied by the ritual hymns are the

main form of the worship of the God and deities of the Zeliangrong pantheon. The form of worship ranges from a small offering of water, grass, leaves to the great sacrifices of Maku-Ballu and Taraang. The worship of Supreme God, Tingkao Ragwang is through prayer and sacrifice, based on the concept of worship and charity to the community. The people pray to God with folded hands and by kneeling down.

The Zeliangrong people also believe in ancestor worship. There is a concept of the eternity and permanence of the soul of man which can be created with the power of Tingkao Ragwang. There is a belief in birth, rebirth and incarnation of human soul. The human soul does not die. The souls of the ancestors are not separated from the family but they remain as protectors of the particular household, family or lineage. They are worshipped by the concerned family. The ancestors are in general known as Kairao. Ancestor’s worship which appears to be more a form of honoring the living dead is a strong feature of the Zeliangrong religion. Offerings are made to the spirits of the ancestors almost every day, at every ritual or religious ceremony and during the festival. There is a set of rituals for the worship of the ancestors.

**Mode of Worship**

The tribals have no system nor particular time and place for regular worship. They have no congregational service and no recitation of any kind since they don’t have religious literature. There is no confession, and they worship the Supreme Being only in times of distress and sickness. Certain places, however, are given due reverence. Sometimes the_
tribals pay reverence to certain trees which are believed to be the abode of a supernatural power.

The first spiritual form of worship and prayer is called *neihmei*,⁶³ which is the prayer of the community and individuals to Tingkao Ragwang by abstaining from any work in the village. *Neihmei* is the collective form of worship of Tingkao Ragwang by the whole village community or individual families on the occasion of the beginning of various agricultural operations. People are to abstain from the performance of work like weaving, sewing, cultivation, wood cutting, house making, and going out from village. *Neihmei* is observed for the granting of plentiful harvests. It is observed to ward off any danger from natural calamities due to earthquake, hailstorm, fire, and attack by pests, insects and rodents in the paddy fields. It is also observed to ward off unfortunate deaths like still birth, and death at delivery. The second mode of worship is known as *kalummei*⁶⁴ (prayer or worship) of the Supreme God, the gods of the Zeliangrong pantheon, the village deities and the ancestors. The third mode of worship is known as *rakhangmei*⁶⁵ which means propitiation to deities and lower deities not to disturb human kind in the performance.

**Rites and Ceremonies**

Rites and ceremonies are performed to worship the Supreme God, the gods of the Lower Realm (earth) and specific deities. The great sacrifices of *Ballu* and *Taraang* and other smaller ceremonies are offered to Tingkao Ragwang for salvation of soul and for going to Heaven after death. *Tingkao Ragwang Kalummei* is the worship of the Supreme

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⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 20.
⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 20.
God. *Raren Loumei* is the worship of all the gods of the Zeliangrong pantheon including Ragwang and his seven brothers.66 *Kairao Kalummei* or worship of ancestor is performed by the individual families. There are also other deities worshiped: *Ran Kaomei* (calling or worship of wealth), *Nap Kaomei* (calling or worship of Goddess of paddy), *Bu-Kaomei* (calling of the soul), *Dampa Khonmei* (calling of the Goddess of creation). There is also a practice of the propitiation of spirits not to disturb humans. This is called *Ra Khaangmei.*67

**Priesthood**

The priest plays a very important role in the religious life of the community. The priest is known as *Tingkupeu,* which means the one who invoke or call on Tingwang (God). Priesthood in Zeliangrong religion is not hereditary but depends on the quality of a person. There are criterions to become Tingkupeu such as humility, obedience, righteousness, love, holy, kindness, faithful, etc. The Tingkupeu performs rituals and prayers on behalf of the village in *hejuadekung* (the sacred altar), as the intermediary between God and men. The duties of the priests are offering prayers, and sacrifice making libation on behalf of the community.

The Tingkupeu is the permanent priest of the village. He is assisted by one junior priest. Whenever the Tingkupeu is ill, his assistant performs rituals and prayers in the village. If the Tingkupeu fails to perform his duty well, the villagers can remove him from priesthood. He can be also removed if his morally corrupted. If he remains good and faithful, he can remain as priest for his lifelong. Besides, the Tingkupeu can step down from priesthood if he is too old, and finds it difficult to carry out the rituals, prayers and

67 Ibid, p. 70.
ceremonies. Every Zeliangrong village has one Tingkupeu with one junior assistant. Every matters relating to the Tingkupeu, like selection or removing him from priesthood are decided by the villagers in their respective council. The council decides and governs the institution of priesthood.68

Nevertheless, the Tingkupeu is the head of the village. He plays a leading role in all religious activities of the village. He is regarded as a commune with God. So, he is respected by all as Divinity. The priest is selected to the oldest male from amongst the villagers who has courage enough and experienced in worshipping to control his villagers and having fanatic childlike minded person.

Concept of Soul/Rebirth

The Zeliangrong Nagas believe that there is life after death which leads them to the theory of the transformation of the soul. There are actually two theories. According to one, on the very day of burial the departed soul goes on a hazardous and risky journey to the abode of the dead where all the spirits meet together. There is the uniting of couples, friends remain friends and enemies continue as enemies as before. The departed soul allegedly continues to visit the family’s house and associates with the family. Hence, food and drink are placed in the tomb for the period of a month. The second theory is that of incarnation and reincarnation for seven times. After death an honest man becomes a star or a spider web is found linking heavenward to the tomb, the animists believe that the man had a strict and honest social life. In the same way all other people will go through the

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stages of incarnation and reincarnation. Though both theories have their own perspective, one thing is certain and that is that the soul survives after death.

The Zeliangrong people believe that it is the Supreme God (Tingkao Ragwang) who gave soul to mankind. Since the soul emanates from God, the goal of the soul is God himself. Though the soul resides in the body, it sometimes moves out of the body and meet several experience. The soul who is outside the body can be summoned back to return. Since the soul comes from the God, the soul is presumed to be holy. However, as the soul resides in the body of man, it is subjected to the good or bad effect of the action, thought and mind of the physical man. The soul enjoys or suffers the effect of the good or bad action of the man he lives.69

The Zeliangrong people believe in the permanency of the human soul. The soul is born and reborn in different forms of life; human, animal and plant. The concept of rebirth is based on the belief that doers of good or doers of bad will get divine salvation or retribution. The holy, uplifted and blessed soul of a person who is righteous and who perform his moral and spiritual duties towards God, men and community will go to heaven. Once he goes to heaven he will not be reborn. Those who are sinners and evil doers are punished by sending them to the land of living to be reborn according to his bad or good action. Those who are sinners and evil doers who are born again and again die again and again and who are beyond redemption will be sent to thuntadijang which is a stage of degenerated form of life almost equivalent to the extinction of life.