The present thesis is my modest attempt to understand the culture and religion of the Zeliangrong Naga tribe as it should be from a neutral point of view in an honest way particularly from philosophical understanding.

The first chapter attempts at giving an introduction of the thesis; about the people, philosophy, philosophy of culture and religion and the like in relation to the Zeliangrong culture and religion.

The Zeliangrong tribal Naga inhabits in the present state of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur forming a major tribe among the Nagas. Zeliangrong Nagas are ancient community and are one of the major tribes of the present North-East India having distinct identity of their own. The world did not notice their very rich cultural heritage as it should be. Systematic and philosophical exposition of their culture and religion is the first and foremost requirement for any comprehensive understanding of their worldview. Their culture and religion are almost dying out now with the encountering of many ethnic groups and religions to some extent. Culture and religion are expressions and ways of life. Exploration of some of the relevant definitions, theories and concepts for the understanding of cultures becomes essential. So far, the study has been made mainly by the sociologist, anthropologist, historian and folklorist. The main discussion here is centered on the philosophical aspects.

Philosophy of religion was at one time generally understood to mean religious philosophizing in the sense of the philosophical defense of religious convictions. But philosophy of religion need not be taken from a religious standpoint at all. It emphasizes on the study of the concepts and belief systems of religions as well as the prior phenomena of religious experience.
and the activities of worship and mediation on which these belief systems rest and out of which they have arisen.

There are several approaches to the study of religion like anthropological, sociological, psychological and philosophical approach and so on. To have a better understanding of religion, we may also consider the nature and origin of religion advocated by various thinkers. Attempt is made to inquire whether religion should be understood from a pluralistic point of view or whether we can see a common root in all the religions or any religion is unique and sui generis that it will have to be understood from its own context as it is held by the relativist. Whether culture and religion can be understood from pluralistic point of view or whether absolutism or universalization is to be preferred is a big issue. However, it is to be understood in terms of family resemblance (burrowing the term from Wittgenstein) otherwise a thing cannot be called a culture or religion. Whether culture is subjective or objective or both are also another interesting quest in this search. Where do Zeliangrong culture and religion stand in this scientifically advanced age? Their culture and religion can contribute to the welfare of various disciplines of learning and to the present human society at large.

The second chapter delved into some of the definitions, conceptions and approaches for the understanding of cultures. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy says, “Culture in its broadest sense is that which is socially rather than genetically transmitted”. It is that which children learn by virtue of their being brought up in one group rather than another, and, in its totality, it is that which distinguishes one human group from another. To human culture belong language, customs, morality, types of economy and technology, art and architecture, modes of entertainment, legal systems, religion, systems of education and upbringing, and much else besides; everything in other words, by virtue of which members of a group endow their activities with meaning and significance. Even from the brief list of elements comprising a culture, it will be evident that there is no clear criterion for identity in the case of human
culture. Cultures are characteristically permeable, evolving, open to influence from outside and inside in unpredictable ways, liable to be divided into subcultures, and to generate offspring with their own lives and development. And while individuals from a given culture are formed by it in all sorts of ways, conscious and unconscious, theoretical and practical, individuals are not prisoners within their cultures, but can affect them, react against them and contribute to their development. While most of the social thinkers agree upon the indispensable importance of the concept of culture no single definition has yet won universal acceptance. It is very difficult to give an agreeable definition of culture because it includes so many concepts and phenomena which are of very different nature. On the one hand it involves things like music, dance and other phenomena which are of aesthetic importance, and on the other it also involves values of social life which are extremely important in giving a structure to the community.

According to the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the important development of the concept of "culture" took place between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries mainly from both English and German social thought. Broadly, the concept of "culture" was developed in four ways, all of which still affect its meaning. Firstly, "culture" came to mean a general state or habit of the mind, with close relations to the idea of human perfection. Secondly, it came to mean a general state of intellectual and moral development in society as a whole. Thirdly, it came to mean the general body of the arts and intellectual work. Fourthly, it came to mean the whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual, of a given society. This complex development represents an attempt to think in new ways about man's social, moral, and intellectual life at a time of profound and many-sided change. In one important respect it was a part of a general reaction against the mechanistic philosophy and against what were regarded as its social consequences in the merging industrial civilization.

There are two senses of culture, first in wider sense, it consists of ideas, literature, language, customs, beliefs, taboos, codes, tools,
techniques, institutions, work of art, music, dances, religious rituals, ceremonies and other related components. It covers all aspects of the human life leaving behind literally nothing. Secondly in a narrow sense, culture is refinement in general and refinement of values in particular. It is this sense of culture which is humanistic and we are more concerned about.

In order to understand any concept clearly, and here, particularly, "culture" we need to examine from both the sides; that is, the concept and the critical evaluation of it. We need to consider the **varieties of Critical Discourse about Culture** from a historical and conceptual overview.

i. The Liberal Humanism of the Enlightenment Era,
ii. The Romantic Reaction Against the Enlightenment: Hermeneutics,
iii. Demystifying Romantic Attitudes: Materialist Critique,
iv. From Society to Psyche: The New "Science" of Psychoanalysis,
v. Semiological and Structural Critique: The New Science of Signs in Society,
vi. Cultural Critique Between the World Wars: The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory,
vii. New Attacks on Liberal Humanism: Poststructuralist and Postmodernist Critiques,

Like continental poststructuralism, cultural studies does not refer to a single doctrinal position but to a more loosely related set of attitudes and approaches toward cultural criticism.

As the most recently developed critical discourse, cultural studies has both drawn on and furthered three significant developments in the current intellectual landscape. After more than a century of intense debate about appropriate methods of cultural critique, cultural studies has shared in the shift of emphasis away from further theorizing and toward more substantive analyses of concrete mode and sites where issues of power and dominance are contested in contemporary society. In doing so, its attitude toward
methodological issues has been very open. Rather than defining itself in
terms of one or another methodological orientation, cultural studies has very
explicitly "poached" on other traditions of critical discourse, borrowing such
analytical and critical tools from one another as seem most appropriate and
useful for the subject matter under consideration. Finally, given the broad
notion of culture which this discourse assumes, its various topics cut across
the more traditional fields of inquiry, making it necessarily interdisciplinary. It
is a matter of heated debate both within cultural studies circles and academic
institutions at large, whether this critical discourse will or even should take its
place alongside other recognized discipline; or whether it should remain a
sort of "parapraxis" operating at the margins of other disciplines.

The third chapter emphasized on some of the definitions and
concepts for the understanding of religion from philosophical point of view
through sociologist, anthropologist, psychologist and other views. For most
people, beliefs in God and in afterlife are the essential ingredients of religion
because these are prominent elements in the many major religions of the
world. But if we include these in a definition of religion, we shall find
ourselves committed to excluding many primitive and some advanced
religions. In Buddhism, for instance, there is neither a personal god nor
personal immortality. Then we can only say of what is essential to religion is
(1) belief in supernatural powers, which may be thought of either as persons
or impersonally, as "forces; (2) appropriate emotional attitudes, a sense of
the sacred or numinous or uncanny, and an attitude of humility or reverence
in its presence; and (3) rites, ceremonies, and other religious duties. Where
the supernatural is thought of as a person or persons, theses duties are
either thought of as duties toward supernatural persons or as enjoined by
them, usually as both.

All the major religions of the world hold religion to be the path or way
of divinity. The first and foremost important part of the religion is
metaphysics. Every religion has its own metaphysics. Religion unites man
with divinity. Religion promises man to provide him something divine,
something higher, something which man does not possess, something which man needs. It deals with righteousness of action and issues moral code of conduct. Religion also deals with divinity which is understood to be beyond the realm of general human understanding or intellectual knowledge. So, generally religious knowledge of divinity is based on religious experiences which are of the mystic characteristics. In this way, it may be said that religion is the way to lead a life which goes towards divinity as its goal. This spirit of religion is found in almost all the major religions of the world. To understand the real nature of religion we must discuss the essential parts of religion.

There are several approaches to the study of religion like the anthropological, philosophical, psychological, sociological, phenomenological, theological approach and so forth. The study of religion is mostly based on descriptive, phenomenological and theoretical but it should contribute to a global understanding. But it does not mean making all religions the same but stressing their complementary values to give us knowledge or understanding of what we called 'Religion'. The philosophical investigation of the nature and grounds of religious beliefs is one of the oldest and most persistent areas of philosophical endeavor. The classic problems in the philosophy of religion center on the grounds for belief in God, the immortality of the soul, the nature of miracles, and the problem of evil, origin of life, man, world, including eschatology, sin and suffering, efficacy of prayer, salvation, myth and ritual. It is also concerned with the issues of whether religion is an offshoot of morality or morality is an offshoot of religion. What is important now is the hermeneutic aspects of interpreting even the primitive religion into some meaningful statement by delving deeply into the beliefs and practices of religion.

Some of the well known theories of the origin of religion from socio-anthropological studies are like: 1. Animism (E.B. Tylor), 2. Ancestor-Worship or Ghost-Theory (Herbert Spencer), 3. Animatism, 4. The Concept of the Numinous (Otto), 5. Totemism (W. Robertson Smith, F.B. Jevons),

An increasingly important aspect is to interpret major trends in the religious, intellectual and political life of various faith communities and to consider the future of religion and inter-religious relations. The inter-religious relations promotes contact between communities of various faiths primarily through multi-lateral and bi-lateral dialogue with partners of other faiths that is aimed at building trust, meeting common challenges and addressing conflicting and divisive issues. It suggests strongly that many "classical" theological presuppositions and convictions need to be informed and challenged afresh by the realities of our times but whether it is possible or not is a difficult issue.

The fourth chapter is concerned with the exposition of Zelangrong culture and religion. The topics that are of philosophical interests and which had been covered here are: Clan System, Absence of Caste System, Pronouncement of Judgment or Conflict Resolution, Democratic form of Government or polity of the Zelangrong people, Inheritance, Marriage System, Adultery (Nou Soumei), Bride Price (Maan), Widow’s price (Maiguang maan), Bone price, Dormitory System (Morung), Head hunting, Festivals, Songs and Dances are connected with ritual, festivals or imitating nature and wild life and so on, Feasts of Merit, Construction of Individual House (Kaisu kadaimei), Joint Family (Inkouh kai), Position of Women, Costumes, Dress and Ornaments and other laws like Theft, Murder, Practice of Black Magic/Witchcraft.

In the religion section, the following topics are studied to understand the concept of Zelangrong Religion: Polytheism, No Animism, The Concept of Single Supreme God, Malevolent Spirit (Imbiuh Ra/Imbiuh Chagaimel) Benevolent Spirit (Ra Gai,) Tutelary Spirit (Bambu Ra), Stone Fetish (Asuang or Nsuang Ra), Divine Teachers, No Worship of Nature, Presiding Deities of Villages, No direct Ancestor Worship,
Forms of Worship, Rites and Ceremonies, Differences between Supreme God and Lesser Gods, Concept of God, Concept of Soul, Beliefs in Life After Dead and Land of the Dead, Concept of Sin, Concept of Heaven, No Concept of Hell, Code of Social and Moral Conduct, Genna or Neihmeih, Taboo or Nuhmei, How the God or gods are addressed at Ceremonies, Agency of Religion, Priests (Muh), Shamanism, Festivals, Creation Myth of The Zeliangrong Tribe Creation of The Earth, Creation of Man.

There are other categories of worship besides worshipping the Supreme God:  

i. Lan kaomei (invoking or worship of the God of wealth),  
ii. Nap kaomei (invoking or worshiping the God of paddy),  
iii. Bu kaomei (calling the soul),  
iv. Dampa khonmei (worship of the goddess Dampapui, the creator of the human child in the womb of the mother),  
v. Taroi Jaimei propitiation of the god of the land of the dead.

Priests and Priestess:

Muhjung (main Priest) is the main priest chosen by the village to perform the duties of priest in the village. There are other priests or priestess as well.

a. Kagong gamei muh (priest who cut the throat of fowls and animals for sacrifice).  
b. Daansaanh muh (Priest who reads and foretells omen, sign etc.)  
c. Mang muh (Priest who dreams or interprets dreams):  
d. Pu muh (priest or shaman who treats people with sacrifice or medicine after enquiring from the gods):  
e. Rakhan muh: This priest who tells what spirit or god or goddess is behind the sickness and telling what should be done.
Rites, Rituals and Sacrifices: Among the many rites, rituals and sacrifices, the following are important.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the rites /rituals/offerings</th>
<th>For what</th>
<th>To whom</th>
<th>What things</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><em>Pum khaangmei</em></td>
<td>Sanctification of Individuals/family</td>
<td>Supreme God</td>
<td>Rooster/cock without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><em>Pum kanmei</em></td>
<td>To save the soul and body (this is also individual as well as family’s sacrifice)</td>
<td>Supreme God <em>(Ragwang)</em></td>
<td>Spotless rooster Cock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><em>Pum thokmei</em></td>
<td>Substitutary offering made for the soul and body of sick man or family</td>
<td>Supreme God <em>(Ragwang)</em></td>
<td>He-goat</td>
</tr>
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<td>4.</td>
<td><em>Nap kaomei</em></td>
<td>To bless the crops and to give plentiful harvest (mostly performed at a time of sowing and harvesting/when there is unusual or abnormal growth of the plant/when landslide occurs in the field)</td>
<td>God of paddy</td>
<td>Pig</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td><em>Racham sumei</em></td>
<td>When an oracle or message is received from</td>
<td>Supreme God</td>
<td>Boar</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td><em>Tampi thousumei</em></td>
<td>To invoke the spirits of the dead men of the family to bless them in the form of prolificacy, handsomeness and beauty</td>
<td>Souls of the dead men from the family</td>
<td>Boar, Pork, ginger chutney, rice beer etc is offered.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td><em>Reih thaakmei</em></td>
<td>When there is epidemic like choler or small pox in the nearby villages to ward off the diseases.</td>
<td>Supreme God</td>
<td>Fowl</td>
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The fifth chapter is concerned with the critical analysis of the Zeliangrong culture and religion. One cannot understand the in-depth of any practice, theory or concept clearly without really analyzing critically. The various sub-headings that had been exposed in the fourth chapter are critically analyzed from philosophical point of understanding.


The main features of Zeliangrong religion consisting of the following;
(a) Belief in spiritual world of power or beings superior to man himself,
(b) Belief in the concept of a single supreme God above all powers,
(c) Belief in the existence of numerous spirits/lesser gods around them,
(d) Belief in the immortality of the soul of every human individual,
(e) They depend much on dreams, visions and myths,
(f) They use ritual as a means of communication between the world of spirit and the world of the living or between God and lesser gods and man,
(g) Prayers and offerings to the Supreme God and to the lesser gods or deities featured prominently in the rituals,

(h) Priest/priestess played important role in the society,

(i) Offering of sacrifices to the supreme God and lesser gods were usually in the form of animals' blood even if at times they use vegetables, paddy and drinks( mostly for the forgiveness of sins, animals' blood were shed in times of offerings),

(j) Medicine men (Shaman) and priest/priestess played important role in the society in as far as culture and religion is concerned.

In the concluding chapter after considering the many sidedness aspect of Zeliangrong religion it is hard to say that religion exist for social cohesion alone as many socialist would held. It is also not possible to say that religion arouse out of human psyche for wish-fulfillment for in their religion, religious rites, rituals were not practice simply out of selfish motives for material gain or simply because of the wish to go on living forever. For, in their belief whether good or bad, after dead all are going to the same world and live in the land of the death. Their religious practice is neither to free them from past karma or for liberation because they have no concept of karma system in the strict sense of the term even if they believe that good man will always be rewarded while bad man will or sinners will have negative reward in this life or in the next life in the land of the dead. Marxist's ideas too don't go well with this religion because in this society, there is not much of economic disparity among this people. No one is landless and no one is extremely rich. There is no class distinction between the rich and the poor but the strong kinship system is applied to keep up love and respect amongst the various clans as marriage institution is based strongly on inter-clan and not intra clan. Intra clan marriage is a taboo from socio-religious point of view of the Zeliangrong tribe. There is no doubt that the people highly regard God as a morally perfect being who judge each one with his just scale. Then a question may be asked whether religion exist to keep up
man's morality which is quite distinct from any other animal. But a counter
question may be raised here again like "what is being so moral in offering
annual offerings to the Supreme God acknowledging his supremacy as the
Zeliangrong people use to do?" Here not all religious acts seem to fit into a
moral category alone. Morality is just one aspect of religion. Their attitude
towards religious practice is not always with the motive to gain something all
the time. Religion is much beyond all these aspects. It is not being practiced
for gain alone. It is expressed acknowledging the awesome supremacy of
the Supreme God above everything. Therefore, it is concluded that religion is
a spontaneous way of life of the people springing forth from within and
without.

From the critical analysis, it is found that their culture and religion
though it had been a way of life and had contributed so much for the proper
functioning of social, political and religious life, yet, there are so many flaws
both from theoretical and practical point of view as well as inexplicable
element. It is also found that if the citizen or member of the community or
society does not respect and keep the rules, laws, practices and tradition,
then the whole system will collapse. This is an important feature of a
Structural-functionalism theory (Talcott Parson, Bronisław Malinowski, Alfred
Radcliffe Brown, Durkheim, Weber, Herbert Spencer and so on). It has more
to do with the sense of civic, etiquette, tradition, morality, and responsibility
toward one another and respect for the people and the law and so many of
their cultural practices cannot be coerced. If few members disrespect it, then
the whole society will be in a chaotic state. Their culture and religion greatly
depend on how the people adhere to it. Many of their religious practices are
quite reasonable but some are based on superstitions. It is obvious that their
religious and cultural practices sometimes were propounded by few people
so as to guide people and do things on time and not sanctioned by god or
religious priests or prophet. As for instance, soon after the priests throw
away the hoe or implements signifying tools for planting or sowing, no one is
supposed to sow anything again or else they believe they will get hurt or
wounded while working. This is purely a superstition and human make-up obligation so that people will do things on time like sowing seeds in the field in olden days. People are now planting and sowing different varieties of plants and by supplying the essentials for the plant so that people are getting to eat fresh things the year round in season and in out of season without getting hurt or wounded.

The Zeliangrong are religious people and culture dies hard with these people. Their culture and religion are closely intertwined and even many activities cannot proceed without religious initiation. Religion has great impact on their culture. Their cultural and religious tradition is as refined as the present major religions and accepted cultural norms and values of the world. Their culture and religion are worthy of respect yet at the same time many issues remain unsolved as is with other culture and religions of the world in relation to modern empirical science.
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