

## **Cultural significance of the Angami Naga taboos and superstitions ‘Kenyü’**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Taboos and Superstitions are global phenomena found across countries and cultures. In the context of Angami Naga, the term ‘Kenyü’ translated as ‘Forbidden’ encompasses the components of both taboos and superstitions. The research employs qualitative methods, drawing from primary and secondary sources, the study delves into the genesis and objectives of Kenyü. The study examines how taboos and superstitions, collectively referred to as ‘Kenyü’, reflect the cultural beliefs and practices of the Angami Nagas. By exploring the origins and functions of selected Kenyü phrases, the study identifies three cultural functions and purposes of Kenyü: Firstly, as an extension of religious and cultural beliefs; secondly, as a tool for teaching and preserving cultural values; and thirdly, as a mechanism of supervising behaviors within the community, suggesting a form of social control. Through a critical lens, Kenyü epitomizes the Angami Naga culture, offering profound insights into the intricacies that define and govern the community's way of life.*

**Keywords:** Kenyü, Superstition, Taboos, Angami

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Nagas, historically situated in the northeastern region of India, particularly in the Naga Hills, possessed a rich cultural tapestry. Tracing the history of the Nagas, before the British invasion and Christianity into the Naga Hills in 1876, the Nagas were preliterate tribal communities who lived an autonomous life secluded from mainland India. The Angami Nagas are one of the 18 recognized tribes of Nagaland and are considered one of the main progressive tribes of the Nagas. The Angami along with most of the other Naga tribes believed in Animism long before Christianity was introduced to them. Animism beliefs attribute spiritual significance to elements of the natural world, animals and geographical features that shaped the Nagas' worldview. The spiritual connection was not just a religious aspect, but an essential part of their daily lives, exerting influence on rituals, traditions, and interactions with the environment.

#### **Kenyü, Superstitions and Taboos**

Taboo and superstition are two cultural conditions originating from ancestors' beliefs and practices. To distinguish taboos and superstitions, it can be stated that taboo refers to inappropriate and prohibited actions or expressions of a particular culture. Whereas, superstition refers to illogical beliefs originating from human personal belief, faith in magic and luck and other similar supernatural events which have no scientific explanation. The key difference between Taboos and superstitions is separated in Western culture, where taboos are actions forbidden by a particular culture and superstitions are irrational beliefs. However, in the context of the Angami community, these two terms are not separated but are expressed under one single term ‘Kenyü’.

The word 'Kenyü' has a profound psychological impact on the Angami people that the word itself compels them to abstain from an action or behavior. The study identified 'Forbidden' as the closest translation of 'Kenyü', however, equating the two words does not embrace the totality of how the Angami would perceive Kenyü, as it has deeper and stronger weightage than forbidden.

Kenyü is a word that is infixed with phrases and statements. Kenyü is a lengthy list of forbidden statements or phrases that are imposed on its tribal community. Recognizing the challenge of equating 'Kenyü' as either taboo or superstition, the study opts for a simplified approach. Throughout the presentation, 'Kenyü' is used as a comprehensive term to discuss the various elements of taboos and superstitions within the Angami culture

### **Literature review on culture as a determinant of superstitions and taboos**

Superstitious beliefs are often downgraded as an illogical belief and farfetched practices with no substantial values. However, for many cultures, these practices and beliefs are still deeply rooted in their day-to-day life and continue to have a psychological impact on the minds of the cultured-inclined people.

The origin of superstitions varies across societies; however, most of its beliefs have been originated and influenced by religious beliefs, cultural beliefs and traditional practices of the people. Thompson (1932) in an elaborative work on folklore and superstitions covers multiple themes from birth to witchcraft and expounds 'Superstition' as an age-long tradition and beliefs that manage to survive and find relevance even for present-day generations as people consciously or subconsciously are still beset by fears of occult powers for which he/she has no logical explanations. Regardless of one's belief in religion, it is assumed that we all believe in something called good and bad luck. This characteristic of human instinct facilitates superstitious to persist and survive even today.

Bell (2018), illustrates how superstitions vary from culture to culture by citing that what is a bad omen for a particular culture is not so for other cultures. For instance, superstitious associations with Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> in Western culture do not have the slightest impact on others who do not follow their culture. On the contrary, for the Spanish, it is Tuesday the 13<sup>th</sup> that makes them anxious. The Chinese on the other hand are wary of the number 4 (four) associating the number with bad luck simply for the sound of the word that has a resemblance with 'Death'. Bell compiled works of different researchers and presented how superstitions can be culture-specific.

Habibullayevna (2022), study reveals significant cultural differences towards superstition perception, highlighting their intricate ties to religion and tradition, and sparking ongoing debates among scholars about their origins and functions.

Sharma et.al (2021), Taboos are integral components of tribal communities; taboos are not just mere restrictions but are a guide for the sustainability of the tribal people. The study was conducted in the higher reaches of Himachal Pradesh and concludes that adherence to taboos is regarded highly and defying these taboos is feared to invoke the wrath of Gods.

Hong (2024), attempts to find the answer to why human societies have so many culturally prohibited activities. Offering an extensive literature review in cognitive science and cultural evolution, Hong implies that taboos may arise from human constant demands for explanations that are attributed to misfortunes.

Though this account may not explain all cultural prohibitions in cultural societies, it gives valuable insights into the psychological and social mechanisms by which many taboos originated.

Omobola (2013), presented how the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria integrate taboos and superstitions and observe them in their daily life. Similarity can be drawn between this study and Angami Nagas, as taboos and superstitions are not understood as two different concepts by the Angami, but are integrated under one term.

Upon an analysis of related studies and research, it becomes evident that numerous taboos and superstitions within tribal societies are rooted in their cultural beliefs and practices. Kuolie (2018) comprehensively documents the cultural practices and beliefs of the Tenyimia people. Penned in Tenyidie, the indigenous language of the Angami Naga tribe, this publication offers an extensive understanding of Tenyimia culture. The author underlines the significance of Kenyü practices in religious beliefs, social behavior, and indigenous knowledge.

### **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to document and study the cultural practices and beliefs of the Angami Naga people. While there are existing books that document their oral literature, beliefs, and practices in Tenyidie language, there is a lack of comprehensive systematic analysis of their cultural practices.

### **Objective of the Study**

1. To document Kenyü of the Angami tribe.
2. To explore the cultural significance of the Angami Naga Taboos and Superstitions 'Kenyü'.

### **Research Questions**

The study addresses two main research questions:

1. What are the origins, evolution, and cultural practices surrounding Kenyü within the Angami tribe, and how do these practices reflect and shape Angami's cultural identity?
2. How do Angami Naga taboos and superstitions 'Kenyü', influence decision-making, societal norms, and cultural continuity among the Angami people in the face of modern influences and globalization?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

The study is qualitative research and used the Purposive Sampling method to select three well-grounded elderlies from Kohima Village, the largest village among the Angami Naga and also the second largest in Asia.

### **Tools and Procedures**

The interview was one of the primary tools used for the study. The study also collected Kenyü statements from scholars and students from the Tenyidie Department at Nagaland University and through secondary sources in the form of books that had documented Kenyü. Cross-verification was conducted to enhance reliability. Notably, the study recognized the reliance on oral literature due to the absence of written records before the introduction of Christianity among the Nagas.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the study unravels the genesis and purposes behind some selected *Kenyü* within the Angami Naga tribe. It is imperative to note that the narrative of *Kenyü* slightly varies across Angami villages, a distinction the researcher acknowledges. The presented insights are validated through cross-verification with reputable elders from Kohima village.

1. It is *Kenyü* to Consume meat of Stolen Cat Meat, Curse will come upon you.

Origin and Purpose: This particular belief originated from recurring incidents involving domesticated cats. Every household in the Angami community keeps cats and dogs as their pets. Cats by nature roam around freely in the village, entering every neighbor's home when it smells food. It so happens that people began to discreetly kill their neighbors' cats for food, eventually, a dispute erupted among the people and therefore elders gathered and decided to bind a curse upon this act. Henceforth, whoever steals their neighbors' cat will break like the egg that is used to bind the curse. To date, people are wary of the curse.

2. It is *Kenyü* to offend your aunt or uncle, you will be paralyzed for life.

Origin and Purpose: The culture of Angami gives high regard to elders, something similar to Chinese filial piety where one exhibits love and respect to parents, ancestors and elders. Showing respect to elders is an obligation for the Angami's tribal community; this important cultural practice is integrated into *Kenyü* and further extends to curses.

3. It is *Kenyü* to recline while taking your food; you will become promiscuous

Origin and Purpose: The connection between posture and respect during meals reflects a broader cultural understanding that extends beyond the physical act of eating. It serves as a reminder to approach food with mindfulness and appreciation, reinforcing the cultural values embedded in everyday practices.

4. It is *Kenyü* to point a pumpkin with your finger. The pumpkin will rot away.

Origin: This belief stems from the notion that specific individuals possess hands endowed with a curse, referred to as 'Dziemvü' translated as 'accursed hands' capable of bringing misfortune and ill luck to anything they touch. The genesis of this belief lies in observing unfortunate events correlated with the actions of these individuals.

Purpose: The specific *Kenyü* directive prohibiting contact with items touched by 'Dziemvü' serves a protective function. It aims to safeguard goods, particularly food items, from potential harm or deterioration. The fear that the touch or mere act of pointing by these individuals may rot or damage underscores the perceived potency of the curse associated with 'Dziemvü.'

5. It is *Kenyü* to mock disabled persons; your generation will produce disabled children.

Origin and purpose: Evolved to protect disabled individuals from mockery and ridicule. This belief is thought to have originated to protect people with disability. People still take this *Kenyü* with utmost seriousness and believe that if you make fun of disabled people, your generation will be cursed with the same deformity or disability.

6. It is *Kenyü* to eat conjoined banana; you will give birth to twins.

Origin and Purpose: If you eat conjoined bananas, you will give birth to twins. In the olden days, life was toilsome and having twins was considered a burden and less of a blessing, therefore, people are afraid to have twins. This superstition besides presenting socio-economic aspects of the Angami, intends to promote the virtue of 'Sharing', with this belief, one is compelled to share the conjoined banana in fear of conceiving twins.

7. It is Kenyü to steal anything from a house destroyed by fire accidents, your house will get burnt if you do so.

Origin and purpose: This particular Kenyü among the Angami Naga tribe originates from a profound cultural sensitivity to the hardships faced by individuals who have lost their homes to fire accidents. The superstition serves as a protective measure, discouraging actions that might compound the misery of those who are suffering significant losses. It reflects a communal understanding that additional afflictions, such as theft, could exacerbate the challenges faced by individuals reeling from the aftermath of a fire.

8. It is Kenyü to share a chili with someone, fights and disputes will occur between the two.

Origin: Chili is a hot spice, eating chili creates a sensation of burning and ignites the tongue. This superstition strangely associated the taste of chili and connotated it with hot character and temperament. It is believed that one should not share chili to avoid enmity between them.

9. It is Kenyü to go to your field after attending a funeral; death will follow you.

Origin & Purpose: Fear of spirit is one reason why this belief is told but in addition to that when you attend a funeral and mourn with those who lost their loved ones, your mind will be unsettled the whole day. It is possible that with an unsettled mind and unable to fully concentrate on one's work, you might get injured while working with a hoe or weeder. Therefore, it is ideal not to go to your field after you attend a funeral.

10. It is Kenyü to attend a funeral while your immediate family travels outside your village. Misfortune or ill-fated accidents might happen.

Origin: Originating from their animist beliefs, attending a funeral while immediate family members are away from the village is considered Kenyü, believed to invite misfortune or ill-fated accidents. This superstition discourages participation in funerals under specific conditions, emphasizing caution and aversive measures against potential negative consequences. Despite shifts in religious practices, the psychological impact of 'Kenyü' prompts sincere adherence, reflecting the enduring influence of traditional beliefs on behavior.

11. It is Kenyü to cover holes you will become deaf.

Origin and purpose: This statement is devised for the protection of animals. Considering that holes can be in an exit route for some animals. This Kenyü showcases an eco-conscious perspective, emphasizing the responsibility of humans to coexist respectfully with nature.

12. It is Kenyü for women to eat animals considered 'Mitemire'; they will pester and destroy belongings.

Origin and purpose: Rooted in Animism, the Kenyü tradition holds that certain animals known as 'Mitemire' are imbued with spirits. Women abstain from consuming these injured animals out of a belief

that it would disturb the spirits within them, potentially leading to disruptive consequences for the community's belongings. Moreover, there is a cultural belief that serving the meat of these animals to women, who are perceived as having lower status compared to men, could provoke the displeasure of these spirits, inviting further negative outcomes. This precaution is taken to prevent any harm believed to be caused by these spiritually potent animals. Examples of 'Mitemire' include squirrels, civet cats, and similar creatures.

13. It is Kenyü to feed your children with sparrows; They will become idle like the sparrow.

Origin and purpose: The sparrow, considered a bird that gets food without much effort, symbolizes a desire for an easy life without hard work. This Kenyü discourages feeding children sparrows to instill a strong work ethic.

14. It is Kenyü for a man to hop their feet over women while they weave, they will experience rheumatism.

15. It is Kenyü for a man to cross over women's weaving tools by jumping or hopping over them, enemies will overpower him in warfare.

Origin and purpose: Both beliefs discourage men from displaying unmasculine behaviors' and maintain a clear separation between the activities of men and women.

16. It is Kenyü for women to enter the sports arena of traditional wrestling.

17. It is Kenyü for women to wash their hair when a close family member participates in traditional wrestling. If they do so, they will not prevail.

Origin and Purpose: To avoid proximity with women especially when men are preparing for war or sports, Kenyü are forged to restrain men's relations with women forbidding women to do certain things and restricting their social life. It reflects cultural conservatism and highlights the intersection of gender and cultural practices.

18. It is Kenyü to get married in February; married life will be desolated.

Origin and purpose: Stepping into matrimony in February is believed to bring desolation to married life, aligning with cultural superstitions surrounding this particular month. Linked to the unfavorable weather conditions and cultural beliefs, this Kenyü discourages marriages in February, a month associated with darkness.

19. It is Kenyü to whistle at night, you might alert the evil spirit.

Origin and purpose: It is believed that whistling at night invites evil spirits and will disturb children, especially with nightmares. Therefore, one should not whistle at night.

20. It is Kenyü to cut your hair at night, you will have bad dreams.

Origin and Purpose: It is believed that your actions or work done at night might carry onto your dreams. Angami interprets cutting of hair in one's dream as a sign of possible embarrassment, therefore to avoid such dreams, it is advised not to cut one's hair after dark.

21. It is Kenyü to eat chili leaves, one who cooks and eats it will experience rectal bleeding.

Origin and Purpose: Chili leaves are believed to be a delicacy, however, if the chili leaves are plucked away, they will bear no chilies. Therefore, to make sure chili plants bear chilies, Kenyü is used to stop such practices.

22. It is *Kenyü* for men to move in groups of 7 members. The odd number perishes and brings misfortune.

Origin and Purpose: It is intriguing to note that many cultures have distinct lucky and unlucky numbers. For instance, the Angami people consider the number 7 to be unlucky, leading them to avoid forming groups of 7 members for activities such as hunting, fishing, or other collective endeavors. The origin of this belief is shrouded in mystery, but it has been an integral part of their cultural heritage passed down through generations. Hutton (1969) regarded this belief as a superstition of the Angami people.

### **The study inferred three primary purposes of *Kenyü***

#### 1. Extension of Religious and Cultural Beliefs:

Embedded in Animism, the term '*Kenyü*' serves as a cultural vessel deeply rooted in Animism, where the Angami believe in the spirits inhabiting various aspects of their environment. The study identifies specific instances within '*Kenyü*' that reflect this belief system, such as attributing spirits to animals, birds, forests, and even certain months or numbers. These elements are blended with '*Kenyü*,' making it a profound extension of religious and cultural practices.

#### b. Inculcating cultural values.

Cultural values, such as respecting the elderly, demonstrating compassion for the differently abled, showing good manners, and exhibiting empathy towards others, are conveyed through the concept of *Kenyü*. Many of the *Kenyü* mentioned in this paper are related to the code of social conduct. It is believed that elders would employ the term '*Kenyü*' to instil fear and ensure that the younger generation adhered to instructions, to impart good manners and respectable habits.

#### c. Supervising behaviors of its community

Preservation of traditional practices, *Kenyü* is not merely a set of restrictions but a means to preserve traditional practices and behaviors. For instance, '*Kenyü* to cover holes' is simply a prohibition to protect animals as holes can be inlet and outlet for animals. Many statements enlisted under *Kenyü* restrict both men's and women's behavior. These prohibitions are initiated to ensure that the traditional practices are not disturbed. In the Angami traditional society, a man must embody men's responsibility and behavior expected of a man likewise for women.

### **Conclusion**

Taboos and Superstitions are integral parts of the Angami tribal community and exist under the broader term -*Kenyü*. The cultural practices and beliefs of the Angami Nagas should not be misrepresented or misunderstood through the lens of Western cultural standards and beliefs of superstitions and taboos. In the olden days referring to pre-Christianity in Nagaland, people observed strict adherence to *Kenyü*, the intention was more towards preserving and promoting cultural behavior and values, this should not be understood as irrational cultural practices.

Is it possible that some of the beliefs and practices associated with *Kenyü* are outdated or no longer relevant in modern society, and if so, how should the community navigate these changes while still preserving its cultural heritage? The study acknowledges the changing landscape influenced by Christianity and modern education. It raises the possibility of certain '*Kenyü*' beliefs becoming less relevant over time. However, it also recognizes the resilience of some beliefs, suggesting that these cultural norms have a

unique ability to withstand external influences. The balance between tradition and adaptation is delicate, and the community seems to navigate this transition with wisdom. The study emphasizes the community's ability to interpret 'Kenyü' beyond blind adherence. It suggests that members of the Angami community view these beliefs not as irrational dogmas but as instructions guiding social life. The community, therefore, demonstrates a clear understanding of the context of these practices, showcasing a level of wisdom in navigating the intersection between tradition and modernity.

The study proposes relearning 'Kenyü' not as a set of archaic beliefs but as an indigenous knowledge system. By incorporating these beliefs into folklore studies and incorporating them into educational frameworks, the community can not only preserve its cultural heritage but also enrich its understanding of traditional practices. This approach promotes the idea that 'Kenyü' is not static but can evolve within the context of cultural preservation and education. The study underlines the ongoing oral transmission of 'Kenyü' within the close-knit traditional community. This highlights the importance of oral traditions in preserving cultural identity. While acknowledging the impact of modern influences, the study suggests that, for now, 'Kenyü' continues to play a vital role in maintaining the community's distinct cultural identity.

In conclusion, the study provides a detailed exploration of 'Kenyü' within the Angami community, emphasizing its multifaceted roles in religious extension, cultural transmission, and behavioral supervision. The findings illustrate the intricate layers of 'Kenyü,' interwoven with cultural, social, and ethical dimensions. The study acknowledges the importance of recognizing variations in 'Kenyü' narratives among different villages and emphasizes the cultural significance inherent in these prohibitions and superstitions.

#### **Theoretical and practical implication**

The theoretical implication of the study is preserving indigenous and tribal knowledge systems for their cultural sustainability. The study highlights how these systems regulate community behavior and transmit societal values through cultural beliefs and practices, essential for maintaining social cohesion and identity. The practical implications include the community benefiting from this documented cultural knowledge and further using the study to assist educational policies for preserving culture by incorporating traditional knowledge systems as a subject into formal education.

#### **Areas for further study**

Documented in indigenous language publications, hundreds of Kenya phrases offer abundant study material. Systematically exploring these phrases aids in interpreting indigenous knowledge systems, thereby significantly contributing to the documentation and preservation of culture.

#### **Conflict of interests**

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