International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research
www.socialsciencejournal.in
ISSN: 2455-2070
Received: 08-02-2026, Accepted: 09-03-2026, Published: 25-03-2026
Volume 12, Issue 1, 2026, Page No. 415-419

Negotiating faith and tradition: Indigenisation of Christianity and cultural plurality among the Sümi Naga

Dr. Ngutoli Y Swu
Assistent Professor, Department of History, Dimapur Government College, Nagaland, India

Abstract
The Sümi are one of the major Naga tribes inhabiting the state of Nagaland in North-East India, with an estimated population around 300000. Prior to the late nineteenth century, the Sümi lived in relatively isolated village republics characterised by animistic religious beliefs, head-hunting traditions, and a highly structured communal life centred on institutions such as the *morung*. The advent of British colonial administration and American Baptist missionary activity in the late nineteenth century introduced Christianity and Western cultural frameworks that significantly transformed traditional Sümi society. Many indigenous practices were labelled taboo or pagan, leading to the abandonment and destruction of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Nevertheless, over time the Sümi community developed a form of cultural plurality in which elements of indigenous traditions and Christian practices coexisted and were reinterpreted within a new social framework.
This paper examines the processes through which the Sümi negotiated the encounter between indigenous cultural traditions and Western Christian influence. First, it analyses pre-colonial and pre-Christian cultural structures of Sümi society, including political organisation, ritual practices, and communal institutions such as the *Apuki* and *Iliki*. Second, it explores how Christianity, initially perceived as a foreign cultural system, gradually became indigenised within Sümi society. Finally, the study discusses contemporary efforts among the Sümi to preserve cultural heritage while maintaining Christian identity. Drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives from anthropology, history, and indigenous studies, the paper argues that the Sümi experience represents a dynamic process of cultural negotiation in which indigenous identity is not erased but reshaped through adaptation and reinterpretation.

Keywords: Sümi, indigenous, christianity, culture, naga, identity, colonialism

Introduction

The Naga tribes of North-East India represent a diverse cluster of indigenous communities characterised by rich cultural traditions, distinct languages, and historically autonomous village polities. Among these tribes, the Sümi occupy a prominent position in terms of population, cultural influence, and historical development. Primarily inhabiting the Zünheboto district and surrounding areas of Nagaland, the Sümi today constitute one of the largest Naga communities, with an estimated population exceeding 300,000.

Prior to colonial contact in the nineteenth century, the Sümi lived in relatively isolated village communities governed by customary laws and traditional institutions. Their worldview was deeply rooted in animistic beliefs, ritual practices, and communal systems that regulated social life. Cultural institutions such as the *morung*, known in Sümi as *Apuki* for men and *Iliki* for women played a central role in socialisation, education, and the transmission of cultural knowledge.

The arrival of British colonial administration and American Baptist missionaries in the late nineteenth century marked a significant turning point in the history of the Sümi people. Missionary activity introduced Christianity, literacy, and Western education, which profoundly transformed indigenous cultural practices. Many traditional customs were condemned as pagan or satanic, leading to their gradual abandonment. However, rather than completely replacing indigenous culture, Christianity eventually became integrated into the cultural life of the Sümi.

This process reflects what scholars describe as indigenisation, whereby external cultural influences are adapted and reinterpreted within local cultural frameworks (Bevans, 2002) [2]. In the case of the Sümi, Christian beliefs and practices gradually became embedded within indigenous social structures, resulting in a unique form of cultural plurality.

This paper explores the historical and cultural processes through which the Sümi negotiated the encounter between indigenous traditions and Western Christianity. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Examine the pre-colonial and pre-Christian cultural practices of the Sümi.
2. Analyse the transformation of Sümi society under colonial and missionary influence.
3. Investigate how Christianity became indigenised within Sümi culture.
4. Discuss contemporary efforts to preserve Sümi cultural heritage.

Through this analysis, the paper argues that the Sümi experience illustrates a dynamic interaction between indigenous identity and external cultural forces rather than a simple process of cultural replacement.

Historical and Cultural Background of the Sümi

The Sümi are one of the major tribes within the broader Naga ethnic group of North-East India. Historically, the Naga tribes occupied the mountainous regions along the Indo-Myanmar border, developing distinct languages and cultural systems while sharing certain socio-cultural characteristics such as village autonomy, warrior traditions, and communal institutions (Elwin, 1961) [4].

The Sümi traditionally inhabited regions that are today part of central and western Nagaland, particularly the Zünheboto, Dimapur and Niuland areas. Like other Naga communities, the Sümi lived in fortified villages situated on hilltops for strategic defence. These villages functioned as independent political units governed by customary laws and traditional authorities.

Unlike hierarchical societies characterised by rigid caste systems, Sümi society was largely egalitarian. Although certain individuals could gain prestige through achievements such as warfare, wealth, or the performance of communal feasts, social mobility remained relatively open. Leadership often rested with village chiefs known as *Akükau*, who governed in consultation with elders and community members.

Despite the absence of rigid social stratification, the Sümi maintained an elaborate system of social recognition based on merit and achievement. One notable example was the wearing of the prestigious men's shawl known as *Avikiyiphi*, which could only be worn by individuals who had performed the *Aphiküsa*, or Feast of Merit. Such practices reinforced social cohesion while rewarding generosity and communal contribution.

These institutions formed the foundation of Sümi cultural identity prior to the arrival of colonial and missionary influences.

Pre-Colonial and Pre-Christian Cultural Practices

1. Village Republics and Political Organisation

Before colonial intervention, Sümi villages operated as autonomous republics. Each village functioned independently, with governance conducted through customary institutions and the authority of the *Akükau* or chief. Decision-making was typically communal and involved councils of elders who deliberated on matters such as land use, conflict resolution, and warfare.

The political structure emphasised collective responsibility and community participation. While the chief held symbolic authority, governance was not autocratic; rather, it reflected a consensus-based system typical of many Naga societies (Hutton, 1921) [9].

2. Head-Hunting and Warrior Culture

One of the most widely discussed aspects of traditional Naga society was the practice of head-hunting. Among the Sümi, head-hunting was both inter-tribal and inter-village. It functioned not merely as an act of warfare but also as a ritualistic and symbolic practice associated with fertility, prestige, and community protection (Elwin, 1961) [4].

Successful warriors were honoured within the community and often gained social recognition that could enhance their status and marriage prospects. Although this practice has often been sensationalised in colonial narratives, anthropologists emphasise that it existed within a broader cultural and cosmological framework.

3. Feast of Merit (*Aphiküsa*)

The Feast of Merit represented one of the most important social institutions in traditional Sümi society. Through this elaborate series of feasts, wealthy individuals distributed food, livestock, and resources to the entire village. Such generosity demonstrated wealth, prestige, and commitment to communal welfare.

Completion of the Feast of Merit entitled individuals to display certain status symbols, including distinctive clothing such as the *Avikiyiphi* shawl. These feasts also involved rituals, communal celebrations, and architectural constructions that reinforced social solidarity.

4. Morung Institution (*Apuki* and *Iliki*)

The *morung* was a central institution in Naga societies. Among the Sümi, the men's dormitory was known as *Apuki*, while the women's dormitory was called *Iliki*.

Young men joined the *Apuki* after reaching puberty, where they received training in warfare, cultural traditions, folklore, and social responsibilities. The dormitory functioned as an educational institution that transmitted collective knowledge and values. Women were forbidden from entering the men's dormitory, reflecting cultural norms regarding gender roles.

For young women, the *Iliki* provided a similar environment for socialisation and learning. In some cases, village chiefs or wealthy families allocated a portion of their houses for this purpose.

The *morung* thus played a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity within Sümi society.

Colonial Encounter and Missionary Influence

The late nineteenth century witnessed the expansion of British colonial administration into the Naga Hills. Alongside colonial officials came American Baptist missionaries who sought to evangelise the region. Missionaries such as Edward Winter Clark were instrumental in introducing Christianity among the Nagas, beginning in neighbouring Ao areas before gradually reaching other tribes (Clark, 1911) [3].

For the Sümi, the introduction of Christianity represented both a religious and cultural transformation. Missionaries established schools, translated the Bible into local languages, and promoted literacy. These developments contributed significantly to social change by introducing Western education and new forms of social organisation.

However, missionary attitudes towards indigenous culture were often shaped by the theological and cultural assumptions of the period. Many traditional practices—including head-hunting, ritual sacrifices, and certain festivals—were condemned as pagan or satanic. Converts were encouraged to abandon these customs as part of their new Christian identity (Longkumer, 2010) [11].

As a result, many tangible cultural artefacts, including traditional ornaments, ritual objects, and ceremonial structures, were destroyed or abandoned. Likewise, intangible cultural practices such as myths, rituals, and traditional songs began to disappear.

While these changes brought significant benefits such as education, healthcare, and new social opportunities, they also created a rupture in the cultural continuity of the Sümi people.

Cultural Negotiation and Indigenisation of Christianity

Despite the initial rejection of indigenous cultural practices, the interaction between Christianity and Sümi culture did not remain static. Over time, the Sümi community began to reinterpret Christian teachings within their own cultural frameworks.

Scholars of contextual theology describe this process as indigenisation or inculturation, whereby Christian beliefs

become expressed through indigenous cultural forms (Bevans, 2002) [2]. Rather than adopting Western Christianity in its original form, the Sümi gradually integrated Christian practices into their social life.

For example, communal celebrations and feasts—previously associated with the Feast of Merit—were adapted within Christian contexts such as church anniversaries and jubilee celebrations. Similarly, communal solidarity and generosity, central values within the traditional feast system, found new expression within church-based activities and community gatherings.

One striking example is the integration of stone-pulling ceremonies during jubilee celebrations. In traditional Sümi culture, stone-pulling formed part of ritualistic ceremonies associated with the Feast of Merit. In contemporary contexts, this practice has been reinterpreted as a cultural activity accompanying Christian celebrations.

Some of the recent stone-pulling ceremonies organised by Sümi churches include: Tizu Island Union Baptist Church during its Centennial Jubilee (2026); Vishepu Baptist Church for its Centennial Jubilee (2025); Tichipami Baptist Church for its Centennial Jubilee (2025); Kichilimi Baptist Church for its Centennial Jubilee (2024); the Chishilimi Christianity Centenary (2022); and the Mishilimi Christianity Centenary (2019), among others. This traditional practice is often referred to as the 'Monolith Pulling Ceremony.' In contemporary Christian contexts, the ceremony typically begins with Christian prayers invoking the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, followed by traditional chantings associated with the customary stone-pulling ritual. Such practices illustrate the continuity of indigenous cultural traditions within changing religious frameworks (Hutton, 1921; Mills, 1926) [9, 12].

Another example of religious syncretism within Sümi Christianity is the church's recognition of the rite of separation—a ritual intended to symbolically separate the living from the dead after a person's death. In anthropology, such practices are generally described as mortuary rites or death rituals, forming part of the broader framework of rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960) [16]. Among the Sümi people, this rite is known as "*Akukho*" and is typically observed on the third day after a person's death. Although the original traditional rituals are no longer performed in their full form, the church continues to acknowledge the day by conducting a prayer service. This prayer symbolically creates a separation between the living and the deceased, allowing the spirit of the departed to leave peacefully without turning back, reflecting the social and symbolic functions of mortuary rituals in many traditional societies (Hertz, 1960) [8].

Sümi social life has traditionally been structured around agriculture, and the months of the year are closely associated with the agricultural cycle, corresponding to activities such as clearing, sowing, weeding, and harvesting. At the beginning of a new cultivation season, the village chieftain, together with the villagers, selects the area for jhum cultivation. After the site is chosen, a respected individual is designated to symbolically initiate the clearing of the field. This person is known as "*Asü Yekipheu*." Ideally, he should be an "*apu-amu*," meaning a prominent and respected elder of the village. The symbolic act of clearing the first portion of the field is believed to ensure protection from pests and insects through the authority and status associated with the individual performing the act.

Similarly, when the harvest season approaches, the village chieftain and the villagers appoint a prosperous and respected individual to initiate the harvesting of crops. This person is referred to as *"Ghile Hukipheu"* or *"Am Thakipheu,"* depending on regional usage. The selection of a well-to-do individual is intended to symbolically invoke prosperity and abundance, with the hope that the harvest will be as plentiful as the wealth attributed to the person chosen for the task. Traditionally, these agricultural practices were accompanied by animistic rituals intended to appease spiritual forces associated with nature and agricultural fertility (Shikhu, personal communication, March 20, 2026) [1].

Even after the widespread adoption of Christianity among the Sümi, many villages continue to observe these customary agricultural practices. However, the rituals have largely been reinterpreted and Christianised, and they are often carried out through prayer and communal decision-making in collaboration with both the church and the village authority.

Such adaptations demonstrate how indigenous communities can creatively negotiate cultural change without abandoning their identity.

The coexistence of indigenous traditions and Christian practices has produced a unique form of cultural plurality within Sümi society. Rather than viewing culture as static, scholars increasingly emphasise that cultural identities are dynamic and constantly evolving (Hall, 1997) [7].

For the Sümi, Christianity has become an integral part of collective identity. Today, the total populace of Sümi identify as Christians, particularly within the Baptist denomination. Churches play a central role in community life, shaping moral values, education, and social organisation.

At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the importance of preserving indigenous heritage. Cultural festivals, traditional attire, and oral traditions are increasingly celebrated as markers of ethnic identity.

This dual identity, both Christian and indigenous, illustrates the complexity of cultural transformation in post-colonial societies.

Contemporary Efforts to Preserve Sümi Culture

In recent decades, several initiatives have emerged to preserve and revitalise Sümi cultural heritage. These efforts include:

Cultural Organisations

Under the leadership of the Sümi apex body, the Sümi Hoho, organisations such as the Sümi Cultural Association and the Sümi Totimi Hoho (the apex women's organisation) have been actively engaged in preserving and promoting Sümi culture and traditions.

One of the major achievements of the Sümi Hoho in cultural aspect has been the research and publication of the recent book *Sümi Pu-asü Tiphimini eno Tüna-nanu* (Sümi Traditional Attires), which was sponsored by the Government of Nagaland. The present author served as a Researcher in this project.

The Sümi Hoho is currently working towards securing Geographical Indication (GI) tagging for Sümi traditional attires and ornaments. Achieving GI recognition would play an important role in safeguarding the tangible cultural heritage of the Sümi people, particularly by protecting

traditional designs, motifs, and craftsmanship from cultural appropriation and unauthorised commercial use (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2017) [17]. This author is also a member and a Researcher of this project.

Festivals and Cultural Events

In Sümi-inhabited areas, villages and churches annually organise two major festivals: Tuluni**,** celebrated in July, and Ahuna**,** observed in November. These festivals serve not only as occasions for communal celebration but also as important platforms for the preservation and transmission of indigenous culture. Cultural performances are increasingly incorporated into these events to showcase traditional practices and reinforce community identity.

During these celebrations, various aspects of intangible Sümi cultural heritage are transmitted to younger generations. These include narratives concerning the origin and significance of the festivals, traditional folk songs associated with the festivities, as well as indigenous knowledge relating to crops, vegetables, and seasonal cycles. Such intergenerational transmission plays a crucial role in sustaining cultural continuity and maintaining traditional ecological knowledge within the community (UNESCO, 2003).

Language Preservation

The *Sümi Tsaiko Mipi* (Sümi Literature Board), a statutory body established to oversee the development and preservation of the Sümi language and literature, celebrated its Platinum Jubilee in 2022**.** Since its inception, the organisation has actively promoted the Sümi language through literary initiatives, educational programmes, and support for Sümi Bible translation projects. Language preservation plays a vital role in sustaining cultural identity and maintaining the continuity of indigenous knowledge systems (Fishman, 1991) [5].

The organisation has also been responsible for overseeing the *Sütsa* (Sümi language) curriculum offered as a Modern Indian Language (MIL) subject in schools. In addition, the board through its Academic Council supervises seven Sütsa Academies, which offer diploma courses in the Sümi language. Under the leadership of the *Sümi Tsaiko Mipi*, an undergraduate programme titled BA Sütsa Honours is expected to be introduced under Nagaland University in the near future. The programme is expected to play an important role in promoting and sustaining Sümi traditions, language, and folklore within the framework of higher education.

Academic Research

Over the past decade, a number of Sümi scholars and researchers have undertaken efforts to document oral traditions, rituals, and historical narratives in order to preserve indigenous knowledge systems. Much of this documentation, however, has been carried out by students as part of their academic requirements and research projects. Consequently, only a limited amount of systematic documentation on Sümi society and culture has been produced through funded or institutional research initiatives.

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. Rapid processes of modernisation, urbanisation, and global cultural influences continue to pose threats to many traditional practices and knowledge systems. Scholars have noted that indigenous cultures often face pressures of cultural transformation when confronted with modern socio-economic changes (Sahlins, 1999) [13]. In this context, further academic research on the origin and migration of the Sümi people, as well as on their tangible and intangible cultural heritage and processes of enculturation, is essential. Such research would contribute to developing a balanced understanding of the interaction between postmodernity, Sümi cultural traditions, and Western Christianity.

Challenges to Cultural Continuity

Several factors have contributed to the gradual decline of traditional cultural practices among the Sümi. While Christianity brought significant social and educational transformations to Sümi society, it also contributed to the decline of certain indigenous cultural traditions. Early Western missionaries often regarded many local customs and ritual practices as incompatible with Christian teachings, sometimes characterising them as pagan, uncivilised, or morally undesirable. As a result, many early Sümi converts abandoned several traditional cultural expressions that had previously served as important markers of community identity and heritage.

Even today, traces of this tension between Christianity and indigenous cultural practices remain. For instance, in some areas a particular Christian denomination continues to discourage or prohibit the performance of traditional folk songs and dances within church premises and also restricts the use of certain traditional ornaments during church-related events.

In addition to religious influences, several contemporary social factors have also contributed to the erosion of traditional cultural practices. These include a lack of cultural awareness among younger generations**,** the growing influence of globalised culture and mass media**,** and increasing urban migration accompanied by changing lifestyles. Another major concern is the limited documentation of traditional knowledge, particularly oral traditions, ritual practices, and indigenous ecological knowledge systems. Scholars have observed that when such cultural knowledge is not systematically documented or transmitted across generations, it becomes increasingly vulnerable to loss (Smith, 1999) [14].

Without deliberate and sustained efforts toward cultural preservation and documentation, many indigenous cultural practices face the risk of gradual disappearance. Therefore, greater scholarly attention, community participation, and institutional support are essential for safeguarding the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Sümi people.

Conclusion

The historical experience of the Sümi Naga demonstrates a complex and dynamic process of cultural transformation shaped by colonial encounter, missionary activity, and indigenous adaptation. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, Sümi society was characterised by vibrant communal institutions, animistic religious beliefs, and an elaborate system of social practices that regulated political organisation, ritual life, and community identity. Institutions such as the *Apuki* and *Iliki*, the Feast of Merit, and agricultural rituals reflected a worldview in which social, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of life were deeply interconnected. These cultural systems provided the foundation for social cohesion and the transmission of collective knowledge across generations.

From an anthropological perspective, the Sümi folk religion, often broadly described as animism, functioned as the central organising framework of social life prior to the encounter with modernity. Animistic cosmologies typically emphasise the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm, shaping everyday practices, agricultural cycles, and ritual obligations (Elwin, 1961) [4]. In the case of the Sümi, this religious worldview governed virtually all aspects of life, including village governance, agricultural production, and communal ceremonies. However, with the expansion of British colonial administration and the arrival of American Baptist missionaries in the late nineteenth century, this traditional religious system encountered powerful external forces that introduced new forms of belief, literacy, and social organisation.

The spread of Christianity brought profound transformations to Sümi society. Missionaries established schools, translated religious texts, and promoted new moral frameworks that significantly reshaped local cultural practices. While these developments contributed to improvements in education, literacy, and social mobility, they also resulted in the abandonment or marginalisation of many indigenous traditions. Early missionary interpretations often framed local customs as incompatible with Christian doctrine, leading many converts to distance themselves from practices that had long defined their cultural identity. As a consequence, both tangible cultural artefacts and intangible traditions such as rituals, myths, and oral narratives experienced significant decline.

Despite these disruptions, the interaction between Christianity and Sümi culture did not result in the complete disappearance of indigenous traditions. Rather, over time the Sümi community engaged in processes of cultural negotiation and reinterpretation. Through what scholars describe as indigenisation or inculturation, external religious ideas were gradually reinterpreted within local cultural frameworks (Bevans, 2002) [2]. Communal values embedded in traditional institutions such as generosity, solidarity, and collective participation found new expression within Christian community life, particularly through church activities, festivals, and social gatherings.

This process illustrates that cultural change is not simply a process of replacement but one of adaptation and synthesis. Cultural identities are dynamic and continuously reshaped through historical interactions with external influences (Hall, 1997) [7]. In the Sümi context, Christianity has gradually become integrated into local cultural life rather than remaining a purely foreign religious system. Today, the total populace of the Sümi population identifies as Christian, and churches play a central role in shaping community values, education, and social organisation.

At the same time, there is an increasing recognition among the Sümi of the importance of preserving indigenous heritage. Contemporary initiatives such as cultural festivals, documentation of oral traditions, language preservation programmes, and academic research reflect a renewed commitment to safeguarding both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These efforts highlight a growing awareness that cultural identity can be sustained even within changing religious and social contexts.

In this regard, the coexistence of Sümi cultural traditions and Christian faith offers the possibility of developing a meaningful worldview that remains relevant in contemporary society. Rather than viewing indigenous traditions and Christianity as mutually exclusive, many communities increasingly recognise the potential for constructive dialogue between the two. A thoughtful integration of Sümi cultural values and Christian ethical principles may contribute to a worldview that both uplifts and enlightens the community while remaining responsive to the challenges of postmodernity.

Ultimately, the Sümi experience demonstrates that cultural transformation does not necessarily entail complete cultural loss. Instead, it can lead to the emergence of new forms of cultural plurality in which tradition and modernity coexist within evolving frameworks of identity. By negotiating the relationship between indigenous heritage and Christian faith, the Sümi people continue to redefine their cultural identity in ways that honour their past while engaging with the realities of the present.

References

1. Yekheto Shikhu. Awotsakilimi village. Date of interview: March 20, 2026.
2. Bevans SB. Models of contextual theology. Orbis Books,2002.
3. Clark EW. The evangelisation of the Naga tribes. American Baptist Mission Press,1911.
4. Elwin V. Nagaland. Oxford University Press,1961.
5. Fishman JA. Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages. Multilingual Matters,1991.
6. Government of Nagaland. Nagaland statistical handbook. Directorate of Economics and Statistics,2011.
7. Hall S. Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices. Sage,1997.
8. Hertz R. Death and the right hand. Free Press, 1960.
9. Hutton JH. The Angami Nagas. Macmillan, 1921.
10. Hutton JH. The Sema Nagas. Macmillan, 1921.
11. Longkumer A. Reform, identity and narratives of belonging: The Heraka movement in Northeast India. South Asia Research,2010:30:151–167.
12. Mills JP. The Ao Nagas. Macmillan, 1926.
13. Sahlins M. What is anthropological enlightenment? Some lessons of the twentieth century. Annual Review of Anthropology,1999:28:1–23.
14. Smith LT. Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples. Zed Books, 1999.
15. UNESCO. Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2003.
16. Van Gennep A. The rites of passage. University of Chicago Press, 1960.
17. World Intellectual Property Organization. Geographical indications: An introduction. WIPO, 2017.