

**TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE
OF THE SÜMI: A SOURCE OF IDENTITY,
CREATIVITY AND DIVERSITY**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PART FULFILLMENT OF THE
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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This section summarises and gives conclusion to the thesis. The topic of the thesis covers a broad subject, therefore though efforts were made to cover all the Sümi region, the main focus area was on the ancestral villages in the Southern Sümi region due to the discovery of the research gap wherein though the Sümi migrated from the Southern Sümi villages, proper documentation has so far not been made in these areas. Therefore, the researcher focused on this region.

Cultural heritage when discussed from the general purview doesn't seem to do justice to the cultural heritage of the indigenous people. Since the Sümi is also an indigenous group of people, efforts have been made to define cultural heritage according to what is being defined from the Indigenous People's perspective.

The Sümi cultural heritage has gone through periods of changes due to the encounters with the outside world. The Sümi before their encounters with the outside world lived in seclusion and independence. Each village was an independent political unit and the villages were often engaged in inter village wars and headhunting. In spite of this, they had a rich cultural heritage and the people lived a life deeply embedded in their tradition. But all these changed not because they wanted this change to come but it was forced upon them by various forces. Starting from the encounter with the British administrators who brought about changes in the administrative system by incorporating their system into the already existing system which might have looked like they didn't interfere in the native system but on closer scrutiny, it is observed that they started interfering into the administrative affairs of the villages and vested their control indirectly over them. This was the start of the change that penetrated in the culture of the Sümi. One finds the tendency of the British administrative officers referring to them using terms like 'savages'. But it is also without doubt that the British didn't want the Nagas to adopt other culture and way of life.

The next group of people who left a deep impact on the life and the culture of the Sümi were the American Baptist Christian missionaries. The Sümi like all other Naga tribes were animist and their life was that of insecurity and hardship as they depended entirely on agriculture and with the rampant practise of headhunting, there were often hardships and fears in the minds of the people. In such a scenario, Christianity brought a message of hope, life and love. But the drawback about the coming of Christianity and the Sümi converting to Christianity was the price they had to pay in the form of giving up their traditional way of life totally. Christianity demanded the total giving up not only the tangible aspects of their culture but also the intangible aspects too. A person who converted to Christianity had to give up his traditional way of life, wearing colourful traditional clothes and ornaments on the personal front and as a society they had to destroy the traditional houses with traditional decorations as all these were labelled to be of the devil and not part of a Christian life. In this manner the cultural heritage of the Sümi suffered irreparable damage because the more people that converted to Christianity, the more the destruction of the cultural properties. It is also without doubt that Christianity brought about many positive changes for instance, the end of the headhunting practise, beginning of education and healthcare to name a few. But when we look from the cultural perspective, the damage resulted in the loss of cultural properties which can never be recovered.

However, the most destructive encounter happened in the 1950's during the Indian army operation wherein in their search for the Naga Undergrounds who were fighting for the freedom of the Nagas because the Nagas were never part of India. It was only when the British brought the Nagas under their administration that Nagas were included under the aegis of India and the betrayal of the British led to the unfolding of untold miseries and hardships on the Nagas. The Sümi also suffered during this period. During the course of the field work, it unfolded that many villages were burnt down by the Indian Army not once or twice but eight to nine times too. The physical and mental hardships and the atrocities that were inflicted on the people are still felt raw among the elders who lived through this period. Most of the villages were grouped together and they were not allowed to go back to their villages for months and years. This was done in order to stop the villagers from supplying ration to the undergrounds. Those who were in the grouping villages suffered due to the unhygienic condition as well as the constant beatings and those who

went hiding in the forests suffered from sicknesses and starvation. Women were raped and even the holy places like the church were desecrated by the Indian Army. This period witnessed not only the torture and loss of human lives but a huge loss of the cultural materials of the Sümi. As told by the people during the course of the field work, they would be forced to abandon their villages and the villages would be burnt down along with the granaries. In such a scenario all the cultural materials were lost. When they were freed from the groupings, their villages would be covered by thick shrubs and weeds and in many cases it became unsuitable to rebuild therefore they had to set up their villages in new locations. This period witnessed a loss not only of the cultural materials i.e. tangible cultural heritage but also the Intangible cultural heritage which resulted due to the loss of human lives. Generations of people who had knowledge about the cultural heritage of the Sümi died which resulted in the creation of the gap in the passing on of memory of the cultural heritage from one generation to the other.

These encounters led to the loss of the Sümi cultural heritage but as gleaned from the field work, all is not lost though it is a matter of worry that the elders who possess knowledge about the cultural heritage are passing away therefore the need for proper documentation which was attempted through this thesis.

The standard definition and categorisation of Tangible cultural heritage doesn't fit the tangible cultural heritage of the Sümi because like all other indigenous people, such standard categorisation is not suitable but attempts have been made through this thesis to categorise them. Tangible cultural heritage of the Sümi has been categorised under Buildings and structures wherein the most important building during the Forefathers' days which is still being rebuilt from memory is discussed in detail. The Morung or the *Apuki/Iliki* as it was called in Sümi was the most important building in the village and it was decorated with the King post and all other ornamentation. It had to suffer the impact of Christianity and the Indian Army operation. understanding the deep cultural significance of the *Apuki/Iliki*, many Sümi villages have started building this structure in their villages which stands as a testimony of the rich cultural heritage of the Sümi. Artefacts though less in number have also been documented – charm stones, thunderbolt, etc which had disappeared with the coming of Christianity and the burning of

houses during the Indian Army operation were found in possession of a man. The rites and rituals connected and the significance of these materials throw light on the belief system of the Sümi.

Megalithic erections and stones is another category under the tangible cultural heritage. The Sümi forefathers believed in the supernatural powers of the stones. They believed that these stones whether big or small had the ability to give birth and multiply as well as the ability to grow tall/big. Such stones found in almost all the villages have been documented. These deep connection with their natural environment showcases the awe as well as the fear that the Sümi had towards the mysterious in their natural environment. Traditional clothes and ornaments have also been included in the tangible cultural heritage as they are the identity markers of the Sümi. The Sümi are experts in handicrafts and these knowledge have been passed down from their forefathers. Handicrafts such as basket making, wooden plates have been documented.

Usually the household articles are not given importance but when we look at the Sümi cultural heritage the household articles like the spoon for rice carries narratives which are useful in understanding the cultural heritage. Therefore the old household articles and materials recovered from one ancestral village have been documented.

The chapter on Intangible cultural heritage categorises it into oral tradition and expression where topics like origin and village formation, Sümi traditional political system and folktales have been documented. These are important source to understand the rites conducted in the formation of villages and from these oral tradition and expression, one gets an idea about the life of the Sümi. Legends from different villages have been documented which has mythical stories regarding certain trees, stones, etc in the villages which give one an idea about the belief system. Festivals is also another important aspect of the Intangible Cultural heritage. In the forefather's days these were not festivals but performance of rites and rituals after which feasts were held. These rites and rituals spanned throughout the year. Two of these rites and rituals which have evolved into popular festivals have been elaborately studied. Performing arts covers folk songs and its origin. Other categorisation of the Intangible cultural heritage like the social practices, rites and rituals

covers the rituals of sowing and harvest as basically the Sümi depended on agriculture for their livelihood and as such majority of the rites and rituals were centred around agriculture. The feast of merit which was an important status conferring feasts as well as an opportunity for the rich to share their abundant wealth with all the members of the village in the form of feasts is another important intangible cultural heritage that has been documented focusing on its origin and how this was performed in different villages. Though the practise is same there is slight variation in its execution according to region and village. The Sümi marriage is also another important aspect wherein the practise of the bride price has been highlighted. Important components of the intangible cultural heritage of the Sümi like the belief and religion, death rituals, genna, taboos and customary laws, phenomenon of people's soul turning into animals, and seers have been documented. All these practices throw ample light on the Sümi forefather's deep bond with their environment and their belief in the supernatural.

This categorisation on both tangible and intangible cultural heritage have been attempted for the first time and effort has been made in this regard in order to understand the various components of the cultural heritage in a more lucid manner so that one understands the value of each and then develop the need for preservation.

In order to understand the significance of the Sümi cultural heritage, the critical assessment of the Sümi cultural heritage have been made by analysing the characteristics of the Sümi cultural heritage. The Sümi cultural heritage has a dual characteristic and the reason behind this occurrence has been analysed through comparisons with other Indigenous communities across the world who also had encounters with Christianity. This characteristics has enabled the Sümi to take pride in their religious identity as a Christian as well as their cultural identity as a Sümi. The other significant characteristics that has been analysed is how the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Sümi are interconnected with each other. Like all other indigenous people's cultural heritage, the two components Sümi cultural heritage is deeply connected with each other. The intangible cultural heritage gives voice to the tangible cultural heritage and vice versa as a result of which in the absence of the other, it becomes difficult for the other to thrive. In such a scenario it is important to preserve both and to look for ways to make sure both the

components of the cultural heritage survive through the ages as if one is lost, the other loses its voice and significance too. Cultural heritage is the source of identity, creativity and diversity of the Sümi, therefore it is necessary to make sure both the tangible and intangible survive through the passage of time. The Sümi being dependent on oral source to derive their history, cultural heritage is a very important component of every aspect of their identity as a people. When we observe the Sümi, both the tangible and intangible give voice to their identity as a people who have a rich cultural heritage and this in turn diversifies their identity and cultural heritage becomes a source of creativity for them as through the various facets of the cultural heritage, the creativity of the Sümi as a distinct people with their own creative ways of doing things is exposed. If the Sümi loses their cultural heritage then they in turn lose their identity as a Sümi.

The case of the Sümi of Upper Assam is a case study on the significance of maintaining a balance between the tangible and intangible cultural heritage in order to safeguard one's identity. Over the years, due to intermarriage has resulted in many Sümi even giving up the practise of speaking in the Sümi language. Language is the basis of any culture and for the Sümi it is even more so because their identity is based on their language. The name of a group of people as belonging to a tribe called Sümi may exist but if they no longer speak the language then every aspect of their intangible cultural heritage will be lost because without the language, it isn't possible to understand one's roots and practices. In the long run, they will also lose their connection with the tangible cultural heritage too because without the intangible, the tangible cannot survive. Attempt was made to understand the root cause of the problem through the questionnaire that was distributed to young people between. Therefore the need for preservation arises.

Understanding the significance of the cultural heritage for the Sümi, various preservation techniques and methods employed by indigenous groups across the world has been analysed. The government of countries with Indigenous people have made certain measures in their law making process to make sure the indigenous people's culture are protected and they do not lose their voice and identity.

The attempt to bridge the knowledge gap was made throughout the work of the thesis and the questionnaire has also thrown light on the attitude and perspective of the Sümi towards the

cultural heritage. An imbalance of knowledge between tangible and intangible cultural heritage was observed but the good thing observed was the desire to learn about the Sümi cultural heritage which in the long run can bridge the gap that has arisen and lead to stronger rooted knowledge directed towards the path of preservation.

The topic of the thesis being very broad and covering a wide range of topics, challenges was faced in the course of collecting data as well as during the documentation process. Since the research gap was the lack of proper documentation of the Sümi ancestral villages in Southern Sümi region, the first ancestral villages along with other important villages was covered during the course of the field work. Field work was also carried out in Upper Assam and also in the other regions of the Sümi. During the course of the field work, the main challenge was the inability of some of the elders in remembering the oral history either due to their old age or because people from their age group had died which resulted in them not being able to share or talk about such knowledge. Another problem was the middle aged men and women who were in dilemma in some villages over the fact that they only had knowledge of few aspects of the cultural heritage. For instance, they would start narrating stories and would get mixed up in between or in some other cases they would mix up one story with the other. In such case scenarios, the reason they cited was due to their inability to mix with their elders in their youth and also the elders not passing on such knowledge to them. Another problem was the different narratives over the same cultural material by the same person over different visits. For instance in one village, the researcher visited four times and during such visits the narratives kept changing so the dilemma faced was to authenticate the narrative which elongated the process of documentation. A common problem faced in almost all the villages covered was the lack of connection of the young people with their cultural heritage. It was often mostly people who were above 40 years who had some knowledge about the cultural heritage. The common complaint was the young people not giving enough time and interest towards learning about the cultural heritage. But it is also to be noted that most of the young people doesn't live in the village due to the need to pursue education or employment. In villages where there was presence of the Christian denomination that was against the use of cultural materials as well as performing folk

dances and songs, there was the problem of willingly giving up various aspects of the Sümi cultural heritage.

One aspect of the field work was along with the collection of data through interviews, the researcher stressed upon the need for preserving the tangible as well as intangible cultural heritage. In some villages the cultural materials from the olden days were left to rot without any care. The following are the pictures of cultural materials from olden days left abandoned in some villages.



An old wooden mortar sculpted and carved out of centuries old tree is cut into two citing lack of place to keep inside the house. (Ighanumi Village)



The remains of an old king post used to protect the wall from the rain water (Ighanumi Village)



An old King post (Ighanumi Village)



The remains from an old Chief's house which has been left abandoned (Natsumi)



Remains from an Old Chief's house left abandoned (Natsumi)



An original hand woven indigenous cotton shawl used to cover the chicken coop (Mukalimi)

These are just some instances of cultural materials being left to rot. The reason behind this is many do not find any connection of these materials with their lives at present as these were all part of their old ways of life. Therefore finding no significance in holding on to these materials they have been left abandoned. The researcher in all these cases requested them not to expose these materials to the elements but the village community should come together and select one place where all these materials could be kept for a start and then plan on building a mini museum in the village to display and to preserve these cultural materials which are their heritage. Understanding the significance, most of them agreed to do so. But the challenge faced by them is often the financial aspect. There is hope that the Government would look into these matters and assist the villagers to preserve the cultural materials which are the cultural heritage of the people as a whole.

Since cultural heritage in itself is a broad theme, there is lots of scope for further research. The need for further research is urgently required because most of the elderly are either losing their memories or passing away. When the researcher initially started the field work there were some elders who had very good knowledge about the cultural heritage but after a year or two when the researcher came back to meet and supplement the data, unfortunately some of these elders were no more. With each passing year the elders are passing away therefore there is great need to document the knowledge for the future generations. Further research can be conducted on each aspect of the cultural heritage and comparative studies can be made between different regions as well as detailed and thorough studies can also be conducted by making comparative studies between different villages. The reason is especially in Southern Sümi villages, there are variations in language and the various practices. For people interested in linguistics, the Southern Sümi region will be a treasure trove and it can contribute a great deal towards understanding the origin of the Sümi. But while the scope is huge, one also needs to keep in mind that along with the elders there are also some middle aged people who are aware about the cultural heritage but one needs to be cautious because some tend to give their own interpretations, therefore it is very important to authenticate by way of interviewing people older and who possess such knowledge because one tends to get carried away. There are also some villages who tend to focus so much on some aspect of the oral tradition that the knowledge about other aspects of the cultural heritage is weak.

The politics of who is first is a huge challenge while conducting research on the Sümi cultural heritage, therefore one needs to avoid such claims as far as possible as when it comes to research, one cannot be biased. One should be ethically grounded and well aware of the scenario in order to separate oneself as a researcher and the people one is researching on because if one isn't careful, it is very easy to get embroiled in such scenarios and producing quality research work will become a problem. No matter what the claims maybe, such can be proved only through scientific dating and unless one is in that area of research, one should avoid boosting the morale because it is because of such acts, the imbroglio is further deepened and to separate truth from claim leads to the issue of the inability to garner authentic information about any aspect of

the cultural heritage. There were many such instances the researcher came across while conducting the field work but the researcher has avoided including such narratives.

As a whole, every efforts were made to cover all aspects of cultural heritage but it is undeniable that there were limitations and such can be carried forward in the future research work. Nonetheless, this work can be used as a base for future research works as cultural heritage is a broad subject and there is need for further research that needs to be done in documentation process. The idea that needs to be inculcated in all future works is that there is deep connection between the tangible and the intangible cultural heritage and in order to carry on any future works in this area, one needs to start from the understanding of interconnectedness between these two as one cannot do without the other.