

Nchui-Ngi, The Zeme Naga Ritual of Final Adieu to the Souls of the Year's Dead

NAKAULANG NRIAME

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Rangia College, Rangia, Assam. E-mail: nnriame08@gmail.com

Abstract: The *Nchui-Ngi*, also known as *Herui-me-Ngi*, meaning the 'festival of the dead soul', takes place just before the Hega-Ngi, the year ending and the most important festival. This ritual marks the symbolic separation between the living and the dead, signifying the final departure of the souls of deceased family members of the year. According to Zeme beliefs, the spirits of the dead of the year are thought to linger in their former homes until they are properly sent off. The *Nchui-Ngi* ensures that these spirits do not cause harm to the living, fulfilling an important cultural duty. Worship and reverence to the spirit of ancestors and other dead members of the family is one of the ancient Zeme Naga traditions, which also shares commonalities with practices across various cultures worldwide, including those in Africa, China, South East Asia and India, where ancestors are believed to influence the lives of their descendants.

Keywords: *Nchui-Ngi*, Zeme Naga, Rituals, Ancestor Worship, Dead soul.

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INTRODUCTION

The Zeme Naga is a community in North East India, considered part of the greater Naga group¹. Their native regions span across three states: Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. Specifically, they inhabit areas in Dima Hasao district of Assam, Tamenglong and Senapati districts of Manipur, and Peren district of Nagaland. The Zeme population is estimated to be around 300,000 people. Before the arrival of Christianity in the 20th century, the Zeme people practiced a polytheistic belief system, honoring various deities rooted in their cultural traditions and experiences with nature. Their religion did not have a specific name but was a closely linked to the natural world and agriculture. The arrival of Christian missionaries in the early 20th century coincided with a religious reform movement within the community. This movement eventually led to the emergence of *Heraka*, a reformed faith that blended traditional beliefs with new religious ideas. In the 20th century, a new name was imposed upon the pre-reformed religious practices, and they were referred to as *Paupaise*². Nevertheless, the term *Paupaise* has been widely used in recent times to describe the pre-reform and pre-Christian religious traditions. For the sake of convenience and clarity, the term will be used in this article as well as previously mentioned. In the Paupaise tradition of the Zeme Naga community, many deities are venerated during

various occasions. Some of the key deities worshipped include Tesuang, the village deity; *Hera-Nsia*, *Chiprai*, *Makhang*, and *Lhu*. There are also many other deities known to them, though they are rarely venerated, such as *Kechingpeu*, *Mishnu*, *Hechawang*, *Nrak*, and *Kecha-kau*³. Almost every peak, large or small, in the Zeme area has its own deity, and villagers in nearby areas occasionally invoke these deities. The Paupaise people are also significantly influenced by omens, magic, and divination. As the Zeme community is primarily agricultural, their festivals, rites, and rituals largely revolve around the various stages of agriculture. However, aside from agriculture-centered rites, there are many other rituals of great importance to them.

Among the many aspects of Paupaise religious beliefs and traditions in the Zeme Naga community, the belief in the afterlife and the associated rituals hold significant meaning. According to their traditions, the soul of the deceased lingers in their old home until it is ready to leave. Therefore, food and drink are offered daily to the spirit of the deceased throughout the year, until the ceremonial separation is completed at the end of the year⁴. In addition, ancestor spirits are sometimes invoked in times of misfortune, such as when a family member falls ill. This paper, however, will focus on the annual rituals of bidding farewell to the souls of the dead, as well as the belief in the influence of ancestors on the lives of the living.

TRADITION OF ANCESTORS WORSHIP ACROSS THE GLOBE

The tradition of reverence for the dead and the worship of ancestors is a worldwide phenomenon, deeply rooted in diverse cultures across the globe. This practice has been observed for millennia, often linked to a belief in the enduring presence of deceased family members' spirits, who are thought to influence the living in various ways. For instance, in many African cultures, ancestor worship is a central aspect of spiritual life. This belief is based on the idea that ancestors, as spirits, act as protectors of their families. However, there are also malevolent spirits that may need to be appeased through offerings or sacrifices to prevent harm⁵. Many African tribes also hold that deceased members continue to interact with their families, often appearing in dreams, where they offer guidance or assistance during difficult times. In China, ancestor worship is closely tied to both spiritual and familial practices. While the African tradition emphasizes divine protection from ancestors' spirits, Chinese customs involve the careful recording of family lineages and the maintenance of genealogies. This practice serves not only to honour the dead but also to strengthen family unity and uphold moral values. The Chinese hold family gatherings at the graves of their ancestors to pay respects, reinforcing the importance of both spiritual and social connections⁶. Similarly, in Vietnam, ancestor worship has been a tradition for thousands of years. The Vietnamese believe that the spirits of their ancestors can affect the fortunes of the living. As a result, they offer food and other tributes to honor their ancestors and seek their blessings⁷. Across these varied cultures, the reverence for ancestors and the belief in the continued influence of the deceased on the living world show the profound human desire to maintain a connection with past generations, ensuring that their wisdom and protection are not lost to time.

In India, the Hindu society observes the tradition of *Shraddha*, a ritual performed to honor and offer appreciation to deceased family members. This tradition dates back to the Vedic period, with the earliest references to ancestor worship found in the *Rig-Veda*⁸. According to Vedic beliefs, ancestors bestow wealth and success upon those who venerate them⁹. Typically, a *Shraddha* is performed between the 11th and 31st day after the death of a family member. However, for parents, this ritual becomes an annual observance, held on the death anniversary of the parents each year. While the basic

principles of the ritual remain consistent, there are regional variations. For instance, Bengali Hindus observe a special occasion known as *Pitru Paksha Amavasya*, which is the first day of the *Durga Puja* festival. On this day, they honor and remember their deceased parents and ancestors, paying their respects with offerings and prayers. Through these customs, Hindu society expresses reverence for the deceased, reinforcing the belief in the continued presence and influence of ancestors in the lives of their descendants.

In Assam and Northeast India, ancestor worship is a significant practice among various ethnic groups. One notable example is observed by the Ahoms of Upper Assam. Every year, they celebrate *Me-Dam-Me-Phi*, a ritual dedicated to honoring their ancestors. The term *Me-Dam-Me-Phi* is derived from the combination of three words *Me*, meaning offerings; *Dam*, meaning ancestors; and *Phi*, meaning God. Therefore, the ritual involves offering oblations to the deceased ancestors and sacrifices to God¹⁰. Among the hill tribes of Northeast India, where many have now converted to Christianity, ancestor worship was traditionally widespread. For instance, the Kuki, a prominent hill tribe, used to honor their ancestors, believing that the spirits of the deceased assist the living in obtaining blessings from the supreme God, *Pathen*¹¹.

THE ZEME TRADITION OF REVERENCE TO ANCESTORS AND DEAD

The Zeme people also practice a tradition of reverence for their ancestors, as seen in many other cultures. In situations like the prolonged illness of a family member or frequent misfortune, the Zeme may invoke the spirits of their deceased ancestors to seek blessings. In the past, they were often influenced by prophecies, fortune tellers, and spiritual leaders, who would sometimes advise families to call upon their ancestors' spirits to help alleviate misfortunes or illnesses¹². One significant tradition among the Zeme Naga is the annual ceremony marking their parting from the spirits of deceased family members. Unlike some other communities that observe similar rituals at different times, the Zeme perform this rite at the end of the year. One of the most important festivals for the Zeme community is *Hega Ngi*. Before the celebrations begin, each family performs rituals to bid farewell to the souls of those who have passed away during the year. This practice ensures that the spirits of the deceased are respectfully acknowledged and released, paving the way for the New Year's celebrations¹³. As mentioned earlier, *Hega-Ngi* is one of the most important festivals of the Zeme Naga people. The name *Hega-Ngi* is derived from the Zeme Naga word *Hega*, meaning 'luck stone', a festival of boon and it is regarded as the last festival of the year, marking the transition into the New Year. Life for the tribal people in ancient times was far from easy. In addition to natural challenges like sickness or poor health, they faced constant threats from external forces, such as enemies, headhunters, and wild animals. Surviving an entire year was considered a significant achievement and a sign of good fortune. *Hega-Ngi* thus symbolizes the end of the past year and the beginning of a new one. The festival is seen as a celebration of luck and survival, acknowledging the challenges of the previous year and welcoming the opportunities and blessings of the year to come. This is why the festival is referred to as the "festival of luck" or "festival of fortune," reflecting the community's deep appreciation for life and the hope for a prosperous and safe year ahead¹⁴.

NCHUI-NGI¹⁵

As mentioned earlier, the Zeme Naga people believe that the souls of the deceased linger in their old homes until they are properly sent off. Since *Hega-Ngi* marks the beginning of the new year, the Zeme

ensure that all the debts and responsibilities of the past year are settled before the new year begins, starting the year on a clean and positive note. Before the *Hega-Ngi* festival begins, the Zeme perform a "ceremonial separation" of the deceased souls¹⁶. This final separation ceremony takes place over a single day, but the preparations and related rituals span about a week, leading up to the actual *Hega-Ngi* celebration. These intervening days are called *Nchui-Ngi* or *Heruime-Ngi*, the "festival of the dead."

DAY ONE OF NCHUI NGI

The *Nchui-Ngi* begins with *Hechitra Day*, a ceremony in which the villagers appeal to *Chiprai*, seeking his protection for the village during the *Hega-Ngi* celebrations. The Zeme believe that if *Chiprai* is not properly appeased, the village could be vulnerable to epidemics or misfortunes, especially after the harvest period. To avoid such calamities, the villagers observe a day of abstention from normal household work, marking their surrender to the authority of *Chiprai*.

DAY TWO

Following *Hechitra Day* is *Megauchakpe*, a ritual marking the completion of the agricultural cycle. With the harvest of the crops and the granaries filled with new stock, the Zeme cultivators observe a day of rest to signify the end of the farming season. After *Hega-Ngi*, the new agricultural cycle will begin once again. The day after *Megauchakpe*, the *Tingkupau* (*Head Priest of the village*), or village elder, instructs the villagers to chew the seeds of *nchui*; sesame. The Zeme believe that the souls of the dead sometimes carry away their loved ones during the final separation ceremony. Eating the *nchui* seeds is thought to act as a protective shield, preventing such incidents from happening and ensuring that the living are safe from the spirits of the deceased during this time.

DAY THREE – HEMEUPIA

As mentioned earlier, the Zeme people believe in life after death and maintain a symbolic connection with their deceased ancestors by continuing to offer food and drinks to them. As the "ceremony of final separation" approaches, the old barricades around the graveyard are removed, and the necessary materials for the next world are placed on the graves to be buried with the body. These items include *nsung* (cane baskets), *hetia* (wooden paddles), *hekuak* (wooden plates), and matches, among other items. This occasion is called *Hemeupia*. It is a day observed by the family members who have lost someone during the year along with *Hemei-me*, a married female member of the family and their husband, while other family members may go about their daily work¹⁷. After sunset or the following day, the materials placed at the grave are taken back by the *Hemeime*, married female members of the family from the father's side.

HENGI-PA

The two or three days following *Hemeupia* are called *He'ngipa*, a period of rest between the rituals and ceremonies. This interval is crucial for the host family, as it allows them time to gather the necessary materials and prepare for the next phase of the "separation ceremony." This pause ensures that everything is in order before the final rites are completed, maintaining the flow and sanctity of the rituals.

RESUMPTION OF CEREMONY AFTER A GAP – THE HEKAKTAM DAY

After an interval of two or three days, the ceremonies are recommenced. The first day following this break is called *Hekaktam*. In the weeks leading up to this day, the members of the host family

are busy preparing for the final “separation ceremony.” They search for cattle to sacrifice and for a suitable stone slab to place on the grave of the deceased. On *Hekaktam*, the entire male population of the village comes together to drag large stone slabs. In cases where there have been multiple deaths in the year, the villagers divide the work accordingly. Since Zeme villages are typically situated on hilltops or slopes, transporting and dragging the heavy stone slabs is both risky and requires significant manpower. While the younger men carry the stones, the older members of the community focus on other tasks, such as chopping the meat prepared for the ceremony.

THE *KERING-NGI* DAY

The next day is *Kering’Ngi*. The stone slabs are placed over the graves, and the final resting places of the deceased are repaired and decorated. This marks the beginning of the celebration. Throughout the day, all the men in the village, along with other male relatives, participate in a grand feast. As night falls, the women and children retire to bed, but the men stay awake. They enjoy rice beer, sing songs, share stories with the older generations, and play traditional instruments such as the violin and flute. The hosts’ parents, too, remain awake throughout the night, as it is considered a bad omen to dream of the deceased during this time.

THE *HEKAK NGI* DAY

The final day of separation from the spirit of the deceased is called *Hekak-Ngi*, which occurs the day after *Kering Ngi*. It is believed that on this day, the world of the dead opens its doors to admit new members, and those who have passed before rise to welcome their loved ones. Up until this point, the dead are thought to remain within the family’s household, still partaking in the same hearth and sharing in the family’s life. However, during the ceremony of *Hekak-Ngi*, as they are sent to the lower world, they are transformed into alien beings, no longer part of the living¹⁸. After this separation, their return to the upper world is seen as a cause of grief and misfortune for the living, as it is believed to bring harm to those they visit. Thus, ancestors and the dead are not seen as benevolent beings who continue to watch over their descendants. For this reason, they are not invoked or called upon to help or guide their kin¹⁹.

Apart from the ‘separation ceremony’ for the dead, a special ritual is also performed for those suffering from chronic diseases or illnesses during *Hekak Ngi* Day. These ceremonies are led by the *Tingkupau* (Head Priest of the village) and *Kebaizame* (*Subordinate Priest*). At the break of dawn, those who wish to participate in the rituals observe a fast until the ceremonies are over, which typically occurs by the afternoon. As the sun rises, the *Tingkupau* (Head Priest of the village) and *Kebaizame* (Subordinate Priest), assisted by selected youth, go from house to house to gather ritual materials—such as chickens, goats, and beers—from the homes of those for whom the rituals will be performed. These individuals remain in the village, fasting until the rituals are complete.

All those involved gather in one place. The rituals are performed one by one, with each ceremony varying depending on the nature of the illness or disease being addressed. Once the rituals are over, the *Tingkupau* (Head Priest of the village) and his subordinates share a meal, typically consisting of meat from the animals sacrificed during the ceremonies. By noon, after all the ceremonies and meals are completed, the *Kebaizame* (Subordinate Priest) announces the end of the rituals and warns the villagers to close their doors.

It is believed that the living soul could become trapped in the crowd of departing ghosts, so as a precautionary measure, everyone shuts themselves indoors. The *Tingkupau* (Head Priest of the village)

then proceeds to close the upper gate of the village and walks down the now-empty street, bidding the ghost of the year's dead to take their grave goods and depart. The chant goes: "*Hekak ting changdelei, kechaimpekilamtettu, kering me ailia, herachitkanneumedu, herei chit kanneumedunneutalau, herei du gada, hera du gadelei,*" meaning "The occasion of Hekak is over, oh! You dead! Go to your own place and leave the living here. O! All you dead! It is time to part. Let the living stay back and let the dead go."

Meanwhile, the families of the deceased prepare for the final parting. Relatives bring out delicious dishes and rice beer, placing them in the backyard for the last time. The mournful cries of the parents and relatives fill the evening air in the Zeme village, creating a somber and eerie atmosphere. These offerings are later taken away by *Hemeime* and kept for the spirits. After the Tingkupau (Head Priest of the village) reaches the lower gate and closes it, he returns to the village and announces the end of the ritual. At this point, those who have been fasting may finally break their fast.

THE HERAGUABE-MAI – A FINAL DAY OF CLEANING THE VILLAGE OF ALL THE DUES OF BYGONE YEARS

The next event following *Hekak Ngi* is *Heraguamai*, an occasion dedicated to driving away evil spirits and further cleansing the village of supernatural forces²⁰. Early in the morning, the Tingkupau (Head Priest of the village) and Kebaizame (Subordinate Priest) gather at the upper gate of the village, accompanied by a sniffer dog. After closing the upper gate, they move down the village street, throwing wormwood in all directions while chanting: '*Herambai, herambai, aramtesangjeimelei, nkiherajeimelei, nkimeramperagabe ram mbetet du lau,*' meaning 'Go away, you ghost! Go away, you ghost! We will no longer entertain strangers. Go to your proper place.'

Before this, the villagers are warned by the *Kebaizame (Subordinate Priest)* to stay indoors. As the procession moves down the street, the householders also scatter wormwood inside their homes, starting from the back door and moving to the front, with the intention of driving out any lingering spirits²¹. Since the upper gate is closed with stakes tipped with wormwood, any spirits driven from the houses are swept down the village street (before the line of elders) and out through the lower gate, which is then closed in the same manner. At the conclusion of the day's rituals, the Tingkupau (Head Priest of the village) sacrifices a pig, and the ceremony is complete. The village is strictly closed to strangers and outsiders until the following morning.

THE END OF NCHUI-NGI

The Nchui Ngi ritual ends with *Herapuimai*. After that, the actual *Hega-Ngi* (for the living) begins. There may be a gap of two or three days between these two significant festivals, allowing villagers time to attend to urgent matters before the next round of ceremonies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Zeme Naga community's *Nchui-Ngi* ritual, as part of their annual *Hega-Ngi* festival, is a profound expression of reverence for the deceased and the cyclical relationship between the living and the dead. Through intricate ceremonies such as the ceremonial separation, feasts, and offerings, the Zeme people ensure the respectful parting of souls from the living world, acknowledging the profound impact of ancestors on the community's well-being. These rituals are deeply embedded in their agricultural and spiritual practices, symbolizing not only a farewell but also a renewal of life and

fortune for the coming year. With the transition from traditional beliefs to Heraka, a reform sect and Christianity has influenced the Zeme's spiritual landscape as they discontinued many of such intricate rituals, the ancient practice of ancestor worship in the form of *Nchui-Ngi* no doubt reflects the role of their ancestors' spirits in their lives, both in terms of blessings and protection.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Nagas are one of the major tribes in North East India. They consist of many sub-tribes, such as the Ao Naga, Angami Naga, Thangkul Naga, Rengma Naga, Chakesang Naga, Lotha Naga, and Zeme Naga, among others.
2. The term 'imposed' is used here because the name was coined in the 20th century. Christianity was an alien religion to the forefathers, and some new elements absent in the earlier religion were included in the reforms of the Heraka sect. Hence, to distinguish the earlier religious practices from the reformed sect (i.e., Heraka) and Christianity, a new name, Paupaise, was given, or rather imposed, in the 20th century.
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12. Oral interview with Late Ibuing Newme of Bamdi Village, Dima Hasao, Assam on 01.11.2012
13. *Ibid*.
14. *Ibid*.
15. The account of the festivals and other rituals from here onwards are mainly based on Oral interview and discussions with Late Ibuing Newme of Bamdi Village, Sri Haijerangbe Nriame of Laisong Village and Smt. Miheuliale Nriame of Hejaichak Village of Dima Hasao, Assam during the course of my field visits in 2012.
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21. Ibid.p-173.