

Sacred Landscapes: Understanding Pre-Christian Beliefs and Eschatology of the Nagas of Northeast India

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Abstract: This article is basically an ethno-archaeological and ethno-historical study largely based on the author's fieldwork conducted in some Naga villages in Nagaland and Manipur during the years from 2005 to 2012 as well as my continuous research efforts. It analyses a few landscapes located in a few Naga villages in the states of Nagaland and Manipur (Northeast India) in an attempt at understanding pre-Christian Naga beliefs and eschatology and the changes and resilience of those beliefs and practices in the present Christianized Naga society. An attempt is made here to understand the centrality of certain landscapes and features of landscapes in the religious life of pre-Christian Nagas.

Keywords: Landscapes, land of the dead, eschatology, guardian spirits, pre-Christian beliefs, exit gates of the dead, "celebration of death"

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INTRODUCTION

Landscapes refer to cultural spaces wherein histories, myths, legends, tales, beliefs, traditions and socio-political practices of the associated society are embedded. Every society has its own ways of perceiving nature, geographical spaces and topographical features and all beings therein. Pre-literate or pre-scientific societies perceived, shaped and protected certain geographical spaces and topographical features, physically or through their sense of places, memories, histories, legends, tales, myths and beliefs. They often designated certain geographical spaces and topographical features as sacred realms and separated them from the profane realms. Such sacred realms were identified as abodes of certain guardian spirits, gendered as male or female, all within the framework of their belief systems. In this sense, landscapes were intimately connected to humans through their perceptions, beliefs and thoughts, ideas and knowledge, structured and re-structured over centuries or millennia. They were witnesses to many preceding human generations and events involving humans and nature. In other words, landscapes were not passive and static backdrops to events and processes of socio-religious and historical phenomena; they were part of people's lived experience in historical time. They lay at the heart of the socio-cultural formations and histories of the concerned societies. In other words, landscapes are phenomenal and culturally constructed phenomena (Schama 1996: 10, Ashmore 2007: 256, 260; Atkins *et al* 1998: 219). Indeed, landscapes are repositories of symbolism and meanings

concerning the associated societies. As Wendy Ashmore puts it, "human involvement distinguishes landscape from environment" (Ashmore 2007: 256). Human involvement in shaping environment into landscapes can be physical or mental. For instance, a rocky precipice may not be accessible, and therefore, bears no scars of human activities, yet it might have played pivotal roles in the belief systems and social life of the associated societies. Close human-nature relationship turns certain geographical spaces and topographical features into cultural spaces and humans into cultural beings (see Meinig 1979). Indeed, landscapes are both the mediums and products of relations between human culture and nature. It is in this sense that a few landscapes in some Naga villages in Nagaland and Manipur states are analyzed here.

SACRED LANDSCAPES: ABODES OF GUARDIAN SPIRITS

Naga villages in Nagaland and Manipur are pockmarked with a diverse range of landscapes, like lakes, rock caves, hillocks, rocky precipices, including megalithic sites and megalithic structures. These landscapes are cultural spaces created through human actions or perceptions and accessible or inaccessible. They played important roles in the beliefs and imaginations of pre-Christian Nagas who revered certain landscapes as abodes of powerful guardian spirits capable of affecting their lives, and were neatly interwoven into their social and religious lives. As abodes of certain guardian spirits, such landscapes were, and are still, revered as sacred spaces. A fascinating cultural aspect of pre-Christian Nagas is their belief in the dynamism of nature. An old Tangkhul Naga saying goes: "Humans are not older than nature." This wisdom formed the bedrock of their pre-Christian beliefs, social systems and customary laws. Beneath this lies their organic view of nature. Nature was perceived as a living organism capable of affecting the lives of humans. Many of the pre-Christian Naga religious edifices and practices had been destroyed following the coming of Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet, the beliefs and philosophy beneath the pre-Christian edifices and practices linger resiliently among the Christianized Nagas. As Rahul Karmakar has rightly observed, 'despite Christianity, many in Nagaland still respect their ancestral gods' (Karmakar 2008). Many landscapes and features of landscapes in some Naga villages in Manipur and Nagaland, once revered as dwellings of powerful guardian spirits, continue to retain their pre-Christian status and still influence the minds of Christianized Nagas. A few such landscapes and features of landscapes are perused here to elucidate the nature of pre-Christian Naga beliefs and practices.

There is a fascinating landscape in Longkhum village in Mokokchung district of Nagaland. Locally called *Longlangba* (lit. stone laying), it is a long natural assemblage of stones and rocks, comprising more than 300 stone slabs of variable sizes and shapes (see Fig. 1). Adorned with a few wonder-striking features, this landscape is held as the abode of a guardian spirit, *Longlangba Tsungrem* (lit. spirit of *Longlangba*).

Interestingly, pre-Christian beliefs, myths and legends of Ao Nagas are intricately woven into this landscape. Some rocks at this landscape bear small natural holes that appear to have been the works of human hands, but are believed to have been caused by *Longlangba Tsungrem* as he danced and pierced his spear at the boulders in a fest of celebrating his victory over the *tsungrem* (guardian spirit) of Waromung (another Ao Naga village in Mokokchung district, Nagaland). Another intriguing feature at this landscape is a rock bearing a few grooves attributed to Jina (an Ao Naga legendary hero). It is believed that the grooves were caused by him as he used the rock as a whetstone for honing his knife. Equally fascinating is a rock with 'marks of the buttocks' of



Fig. 1: A section of the Longlangba, Longkhum village, Mokokchung district, Nagaland. Photographed by author in 2009.

Jina and his lover Etiben and cut-marks of Jina's knife left as he cut the stalks of flowers seated on the rock. There are also a few menhirs attributed to *Longlangba Tsungrem*, the guardian spirit of the landscape (see Fig. 2). The menhirs are natural outcrops, yet they look like handiworks of man. These menhirs significantly hint at pre-scientific people's beliefs in the dynamics of nature and their organic view of nature.



Fig. 2: Menhirs at Longlangba attributed to the *Longlangba Tsungrem*, Longkhum village, Mokokchung district, Nagaland. Photographed by author in 2009.

A lake, called *Süngkotenem Awatsung*, in Mophungchuket (an Ao Naga village in Mokokchung district, Nagaland) is another landscape of immense significance in understanding the belief systems of pre-Christian Nagas. The guardian spirit (identified as an old man), known to the villagers as *Süngkotenem Awatsung Tsungrem* (*tsungrem* means ‘guardian spirit’), is believed to be still active. The *Süngkotenem Awatsung Tsungrem* does not allow people to fish there without first paying a certain amount of money to the village authority which usually fixes a specific day for fishing there. Even after paying the amount, if the guardian spirit does not still favour anyone, he/she may not have many catches, and the few fishes caught may be demanded by the guardian spirit in his/her dreams. People visiting the lake dare not spit, chew tobacco, smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, speak ill of the guardian spirit or indulge in any immoral activities within the premises of the lake lest *Süngkotenem Awatsung Tsungrem* may be enraged and may retaliate. In the recent decades, there had been many instances when the guardian spirit furiously responded to human actions considered immoral or insulting to him or for polluting the lake and its surroundings. An important historical incident assigned to the Ahom period (c. 1228-1826 CE) is also related around this lake. The local collective memories recount that once the Ahoms (of Upper Assam) made an attempt to subjugate the village, yet as the invading Ahom warriors halted on the northern fringe of the village near the lake, they had an illusive sight of hundreds and thousands of Naga warriors in full arms ready to confront them; terrified at the sight of the Naga warriors, the Ahom warriors fled helter-skelter leaving their weapons (swords) around the lake. The villagers believe that it was the work of the lake's guardian spirits - viz., the old guardian spirit and a younger male spirit (who fled the lake not long ago). The villagers feel indebted to *Süngkotenem Awatsung Tsungrem* for the existence of the village. Thus, as the abode of supernatural spirits, this landscape has been intrinsically part of the social lives and belief systems of the villagers since time immemorial.

Another landscape closely associated with pre-Christian Naga beliefs and societal practices is the Mhozieke of Khonoma (an Angami Naga village in Kohima district, Nagaland). It is a densely wooded rocky mountain to the south of the settlement areas of the village. Perched on the shoulders of this mountain, a huge rock in the shape of a human face (shaped by nature) is believed to be the manifestation of *Chükhiu* (chief or guardian spirit of wild animals). In the earlier days, hunters intending to go for hunting would take a glimpse of *Chükhiu* for signs. If *Chükhiu* appeared to be smiling, it was a sure sign of successful hunting; and after getting a kill, a leg of the game would be left at the foot of the rock as a tribute to *Chükhiu*. On the contrary, overhearing the voice of *Chükhiu* was taken as a bad omen, signalling that no game would be killed on that inauspicious day. Thus, in the pre-Christian days, *Chükhiu* commanded a dominating association with the social lives of Khonoma's hunters. This has now become part of antiquity, yet the collective memories around *Chükhiu* linger among the older generations of the village. *Chükhiu* is a living memory and the Mhozieke remains an invaluable repository of memories about the past, especially pertaining to pre-Christian Naga belief systems, perception about nature and human-nature relationship.

Standing aloft in the heart of Ukhrul district (Manipur), the *Shirui Kashong* (lit. Shirui peak), is yet another landscape of immense significance for understanding pre-Christian Naga belief systems and pre-Christian Naga perception of nature and concepts of guardian spirits (see Fig. 3). This peak is famous for a flower that grows there – viz., *Lilium macklineae* Sealy, popularly known as *Shirui Lily* that blooms on this peak in the month of May every year. It was (and is still) revered as the abode of a female guardian spirit, lovingly called as *Shirui Kashong Philāva* (lit. ‘Princess of the Shirui Peak’) identified with the *Lilium macklineae* Sealy.



Fig. 3: The Shirui Kashong, Shirui village, Ukhrul district, Manipur. Photographed by author in 2006.

The *Chingjui Matha*, a mountain consisting of a ‘triplet-peak’, is another important landscape that has in store myths that throw lights on pre-Christian Naga belief system. Standing high at about 2422 metres above sea level, to the people of Chingjui and neighbouring villages, the *Matha* is no mere topographical feature but a landscape that played pivotal roles in their social lives and pre-Christian beliefs and practices which still live to a considerable extent in the collective memories and beliefs of the present Christianized generation. Visible from the surrounding villages, the *Matha* acts like a ‘natural barometer’ for forecasting weather by the villagers and people of the neighbouring villages (see Shimray 2007: v). A patch of cloud hovering above this triplet peak is taken as a sure sign of rain, even if the sky is clear; and on the contrary, even if dark and thick clouds form around the peak but beyond a visible proximity from the peak, it is taken as a sign of no rain (ibid). Such natural phenomena are considered as handiworks of *Aru Lani* (weather spirit or goddess of rain) who dwells on the peak (ibid). In pre-Christian days (before 1910), when rains failed to come in time, the village *sharva* (priest), on behalf of the entire village, would climb up the summit of the *Matha* and perform prescribed rites to propitiate *Aru Lani* (ibid). Such rituals, it is believed, never failed to cause rain (ibid).

Another landscape of historical and cultural importance is the Khorim, a densely wooded mountain in Khangkhui (a Tangkhul Naga village in Ukhrul district, Manipur). Inasmuch as it is revered as the abode of a powerful guardian spirit, it was a sacred space for the villagers in pre-Christian days. In the bosom of this mountain, it is said, is a huge and mysterious rock, called *Khuilung* (lit. ‘rock of bees’, named so as dozens of honey bee hives, owned by the guardian spirit of the mountain, hang on its side). The guardian spirit sometimes allows some people to locate the stone and taste the honey but never allows anyone to harvest the honey in bulks or to bring others to the place. So, whenever people stumbled upon the location of the *Khuilung* and took others to the place to collect honey, they would lose their sense of location and would never locate the *Khuilung*. Such incidents have occurred in the past few decades and freshly linger in the collective memories of the villagers.

Located at the foot of the *Khorim* mountain is a lime-stone cave complex, called Mangsor (see Fig. 4). It is another landscape of immense importance in understanding pre-Christian Naga beliefs, the dynamics of nature and human-nature relationship. A pioneering archaeologist of Manipur, O.K. Singh, had conducted a research at the Mangsor complex in 1969 and 1972. Based on the artefacts – stone tools and bone tools – recovered from this cave complex, Singh assigned the Mangsor to a ‘single period of the palaeolithic culture’ (see Singh 1993: 65, 69, 70). As per local myths, collective memories and tales preserved in a few old folksongs surviving with a few elders of the village, the *Mangsorwung* (‘Chief of Mangsor’) is believed to be a handsome man and a benevolent and romantic ‘spirit’; yet he forbids any unwarranted act of romance inside or within the premises of the cave (Zephyrin 2008). It is said that sometimes he appears to people on the way to paddy fields, woods, etc., wearing a *Luirim* (a Tangkhul Naga traditional shawl worn by noblemen) or in the form of a giant serpent or a deer. Such illusive sights are considered as bad omens, for they are sure signs of death, and truly people don’t live for long after such incidents. As per the collective memories of the villagers, during Kuki intrusion in the late 19th century and early 20th century, the *Mangsorwung* saved the village from Kuki onslaughts by appearing to the marauders as a deer (as the Kukis considered the sight of the deer as a bad omen). To this day, Tangkhul Nagas consider seeing the deer in dreams as sure sign of failure of any planned venture. As an octogenarian of the village (named S.C. Shimnaohei) recalled (in 2006), during the World War II, people of Khangkhui village took refuge in the cave for four to five days. Therefore, the Mangsor and its guardian spirit had closely and dearly connected to the beliefs and social life of the villagers.

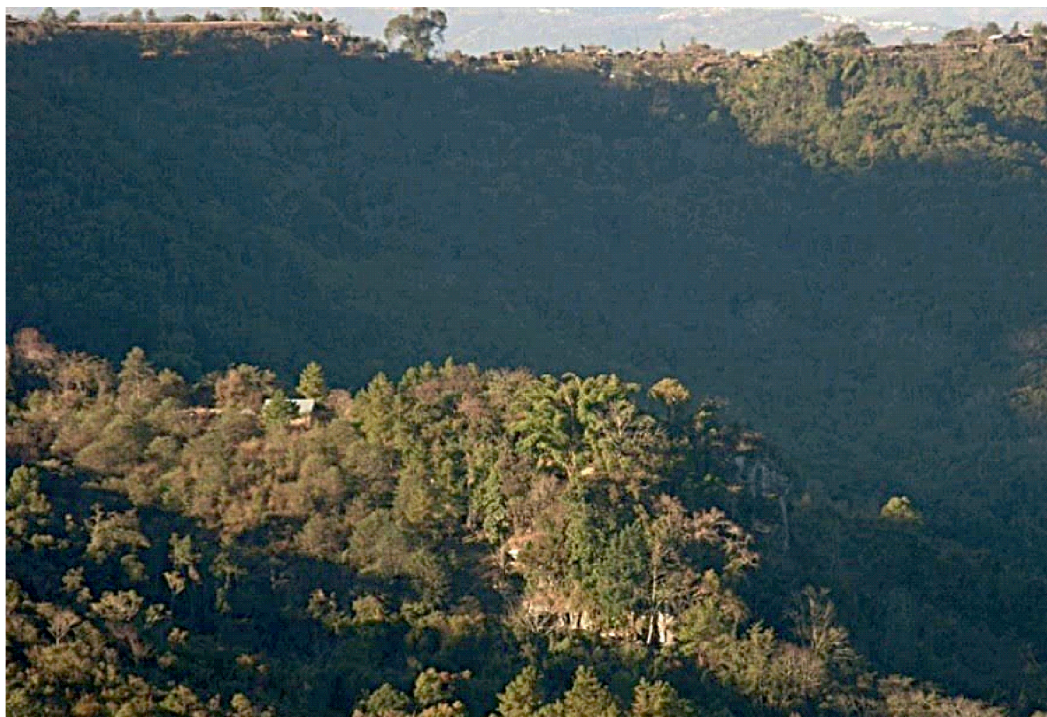


Fig. 4. The Mangsor Cave, Khangkhui village, Ukhrul district, Manipur. Photographed by author in 2006.

Unknown to the outside world, but of immense significance in understanding pre-Christian Naga beliefs, dynamics of nature and human-nature relationship, is a rock caves in Hungpung village (Ukhrul district, Manipur) known as Movā Cave. Perched on the bank of a river called *Nungshāng Kong*

(Nungshāng River), the cave is has a spacious interior chamber with two openings facing the river. A matter of cultural significance noteworthy here is the local people's beliefs woven into this landscape. The villagers revere the cave as the dwelling of a generous, kind-hearted and protective 'guardian spirit'. It is said that lest he is held responsible, no human or animals swept away by the currents of the river are allowed to cross a waterfall located upstream. This is how the Movā cave guardian spirit lives in the social life of the people of Hungpung and neighbouring villages since time immemorial.

UNDERSTANDING PRE-CHRISTIAN NAGA ESCHATOLOGY THROUGH LANDSCAPES

To pre-Christian Nagas, entering the Land of the Dead' (*Kazeiram* in Tangkhul, *Asuyim* in Ao, etc.) was as important as entering Heaven is to Christians. So, settling the souls of the dead in the Land of the Dead was a responsibility of the living. This belief occupied a pivotal place in the eschatology of pre-Christian Nagas and their feast of expulsion of the dead (*Thisām* in Tangkhul). Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas believed that a strong animal was required for the soul of the dead to break through the gate of *kazeiram*, and that the thin ghosts (souls) cannot themselves force a way to *kazeiram* as *Kokto* (guardian of the Land of the Dead) "is fain to keep them all out, . . . and so, it is incumbent on the living to provide a buffalo for the burial feast in order that its mighty ghost may open the massy gates of *kazeiram* (Hodson 1974: 160). This necessitated the festival of *Thisām*, which was in all its essence "a celebration of death" compulsorily celebrated at the end of year, for the souls of the dead had to be sent off to, or settled in, *kazeiram* lest they became sinister elements and malevolent beings always bothering the living. Among pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas, this belief lingered till the early 20th century (see Hodson 1974: 160). To pre-Christian Nagas 'Land of the Dead' was real and tangible as much as it is intangible. Pre-Christian Rengma Nagas and Sema Nagas believed that life in the next world is just a repetition of the life on this earth (see Mills 1937: 170; Hutton 1968: 212). Pre-Christian Ao Nagas believed that, except marriage and social organization, life in *Asuyim* (lit. village of the dead) was not so much different from life in this world (see Ao 1980: 64, 65). Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas, on the contrary, held marriage as possible in the 'land of the dead' also; and they called it *kazei rasa / rasut* (lit. afterlife marriage). These beliefs frequently resonate in their folktales (Luikham 2006).

To Nagas, certain landscapes within their territories are no mere geographical spaces but cultural spaces wherein religious ideas and beliefs of their pre-Christian forefathers are embedded. While landscapes gave pre-Christian beliefs tangible and cultural spaces, pre-Christian beliefs gave durability, cultural meanings and historical significance to the landscapes. Thus, many such landscapes persist as part of both the pre-Christian past and the Christianized and scientific present.

In pre-Christian Naga eschatology, 'Land of the Dead' was largely believed to be located beneath the world of the living and spirits (see Hutton 1969: 184; Hodson 1974: 160; Mills 1937: 169-70), and so, it was intangible and inaccessible for the living. Yet, in some cases, it was also believed to be tangible, real and accessible. Different villages or regions identify different places with *kazeiram* or with passages and transits to *kazeiram*. This is best epitomized by a landscape in the deep woodland of Chamu (a Tangkhul Naga village), known as *Kazeiram*. This landscape has four important features associated with the dead - viz. (i) a small stone with a flight of steps, locally called *Kazei Keirāk* (ladder of the dead), (ii) a pond referred to as *Kazei Rakhong* (lit. pond of the dead), (iii) a site called *Kazeinao Shimpam* (lit. settlement of the dead), and (iv) an upright stone called *Kazei Khairālūng* (lit. whetstone of the dead). Some sections of Tangkhul Nagas believed that the souls of the dead would go to "the

east" – "to the eastern world" towards the direction where the sun rises (see Horam 1977: 45; see also Hutton 1968: 211). Coincidentally, Chamu is located at the eastern corner of Ukhrul district near the India-Myanmar border. It is still believed that the souls of the dead walk down the *Kazei Keirāk* on their way to the to the *Kazeiram*. It is believed that until a deceased person's soul (*manglā*) had crossed the ladder of the dead, it could be called back to life. This belief in the existence of *Kazeiram* still persists strongly among Tangkhul Nagas even after more than hundred years of Christianity. The *Kazei Khairālun*, bearing two grooves, is yet another astonishing feature of the *Kazeiram* of Chamu. It is held that one of the grooves is for honing men's tools and weapons, and the other groove is for honing women's tools. If the groove for honing men's tools and weapons shows any sign of fresh rubbing, the deaths of male members of the village would outnumber those of women that particular year. If, however, the other groove shows any such sign then the result would be the other way round. So, by meticulously observing the two grooves of the *Kazei Khairālun*, people of Chamu are able to foretell the fortunes and misfortunes of the year concerning the village. It sounds superstitious, yet it is mysteriously true according to my informants from the village. Till date, none of the village folks and those of the nearby villages dare to fell trees within the *Kazeiram*, for it is strongly believed felling a tree within the *Kazeiram* is tantamount to finding wooden planks for one's own coffin. The fear psychosis and strong beliefs around this landscape unambiguously hint at pre-Christian beliefs and eschatology of Tangkhul Nagas.

Significantly connected to pre-Christian Naga eschatology is a landscape in Phungcham village (one of the oldest village in Tangkhul Naga territory in Manipur). Locally known as Makhorshet (see Fig. 5), it is a small and low grassy hillock with slightly plain surface and situated at the foot of the hill on which the village settlement is perched. At one corner of this landscape is a small depression, rectangular in shape much like a *phak* (bamboo or cane mat for drying paddy in the sun or over the kitchen hearth suspended from roof truss). This mat-like turf was meant for the dead to display their shares of meat as they gathered there before leaving the village territory on the last day of *Thisām* (soul expulsion feast) when they were sent off to *kazeiram*. This last rite of passage performed after a feasting involving slaughter of animals by the families in which death had occurred in the year. It is remembered that on the northeastern side of the landscape, a narrow trail or path of the dead to *kazeiram* heads towards the east traversing the *Shara*, a peak in Loree Kaju (a Tangkhul Naga village to the east of Phungcham). In pre-Christian days, the Makhorshet, thus, served as the 'exit gate' of the dead in Phungcham. Similar in function to the Makhorshet of Phungcham village and closely associated with pre-Christian Naga eschatology are two other landscapes located in two different Tangkhul villages in Ukhrul district, Manipur. One of them is a low hillock in Marem village, called Wokre Shamphung, and the other is in Hungpung village and locally called *Kazei Ngalet* (lit. resting place of the dead), also served as an exit gate of the dead. This landscapes functioned as exit gates of the dead from the villages to *Kazeiram*. It is believed that as the dead moved out of the village on their way to *Kazeiram*, after they had been sent-off from the village on the last day of *Thisām* (soul expulsion feast), they would gather at such exit gates to display their gifts before they finally leave the village for *Kazeiram*. Interestingly, in all the three villages – Phungcham, Marem and Hungpung, there is only one exit gate in each village.

Besides, there are places for the final disposal of the *kazeimei* (lit. 'fire of the dead', usually pine torches). The number of such torches was commensurate with the number of the dead in the village in a year. As per traditional Tangkhul Naga calendar, the last month of the year falls between the



Fig. 5: The Makhorshet, Phungcham village, Ukhrul district, Manipur. Photographed by author in 2008.

latter part of December and the first part of January of the Gregorian solar calendar. It was during this month that the twelve day long *Thishām* (soul expulsion feast, when the dead were sent-off together to *Kazeiram* on the last day) was celebrated. In both Phungcham and Marem, the places for the final disposal of the fire of the dead are located at vantage points, a few hundred yards away from the village settlement areas. It is testified to by the few remnants of the pre-Christian days that after the disposal of the pine-torches of the dead at the specified place on the final and twelfth day of *Thisām*, the living would watch the dead leaving the village and transiting the ‘exit gate’ tending their respective animals (killed in their honour by their families at *Thisām*) as they headed towards *Kazeiram*. The living, it is recounted, could see the dead in the form of flickering fires heading towards the *Kazeiram* transiting the exit gates of the dead, and as the grieving family members yelled out the names of some of the deceased, the flickering fires representing them would stop. This mysterious phenomenon is vividly encapsulated in R. Brown’s observation on Tangkhul Naga *Thishām* (quoted in Hodson 1974: 160):

... the spirit of the departed appear at a distance from the village in the faint moonlight wending their way slowly over the hills, and driving before them the victims they may have slain or the cattle stolen during their lives, and also animals slaughtered for them at the feast; the procession disappears over the distant hills amidst the wails of the villagers.

This sounds mysterious and fictitious, yet, as testified to by a few remnants of the pre-Christian days, such sight indeed really occurred. In pre-Christian days, the aforementioned landscapes must have served as meeting points between the living and the dead through the medium of *Thishām*, celebrated every year in honour of the dead. The *Thishām* festival was in all essence ‘a celebration of death’ that equally benefited both the dead and the living, in that such feasts or, in the words of Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf (1980), “celebrations of death” not only honoured the dead and helped them enter the ‘land of the dead’ or settle at their respective memorials, but equally honoured the living and released them from the possible ‘haunting ghosts’ of the dishonoured dead.

Associated with the concepts of the land of the dead, exit gates of the dead and the expulsion of the souls of the dead at the *Thishām* are certain landscapes which may best be interpreted as transits to the land of the dead. The Shara Peak of Loree Kaju village (Ukhrul district, Manipur) was a transit to the land of the dead for Phungcham and Marem villages in pre-Christian eschatology. Situated to the east of Phungcham and to the south of Marem with no obstacles in between, the Shara peak commands a beautiful sight from the exit gates in Marem and Phungcham. This suggests the eschatological significance attached to this peak. Surprisingly, the places for *kazeimei kaphar* (rite of disposing the fire of the dead) the exit gates of the dead (in both Marem and Phungcham villages) and the Shara peak form straight alignments from both Marem and Phungcham. Similarly, in the case of Hungpung also, the *Kazei Ngalet*, the *Kazei Lākhui* and the site of the village chief's house (where pre-Christians used to perform the *kazeimei kaphar* ritual) are located in a more or less straight alignment.

The *Kazeiram* of Chamu, the *Wokre Shamphung* of Marem, the *Makhorshet* of Phungcham and the Shara Peak of Loree Kaju have now become picnic spots¹, and the *Kazei Ngalet* and *Kazei Lākhui* of Hungpung have become insignificant in the religious realms of the Christianized local population. Yet, past memories around these landscapes linger till date. At the *Kazeiram* of Chamu, the Christianized generation is reminded of the pre-Christian past and the significance of the landscape in the pre-Christian belief systems by the landscape's haunting nature and occasional inauspicious sights of "flickering fire of the dead" passing through the heights of the mountain towards the *Kazeiram*. Such illusory sights are taken as sure signs of death; and the *Kazeiram* landscape, a tangible and accessible space on earth, is still held as the land of the dead.

There are yet two more landscapes closely associated with pre-Christian Naga eschatology. One of them is in the Ao Naga village of Longkhum in Mokokchung district of Nagaland, and known as *Mongzu Ki* (lit. eagle's holes), and the other is in the Lotha Naga territory in Wokha district of Nagaland. The *Mongzu Ki*, believed to have been where eagles have been nesting for centuries, is situated on a rocky precipice to the south of the settlement area of the village. According to Ao mythology, eagles are manifestations of the spirits of the dead. In pre-Christian Ao Naga belief system, every man possesses three souls, called *temhila* in Mongsen Ao Naga and *tanela* in Chungli Ao Naga dialects (Imchen 1993: 38). The first soul, it was believed, resides in the eyes and escapes from the body on the death of the person and travels to the land of the dead; the second soul lives in the form of an animal (tiger, wildcat, locust, rat, etc.) and dies or escapes from the body on the death of the person; and the third soul is identified with a hawk (or eagle) which flies to the land of the dead on the death of the person and acts as a messenger between the dead and the living (ibid, p. 39). The *Lazasupu* (lit. 'girl-cloth-spreading') or *Layasüphu* (lit. "girls-clothes-drying"),¹ is located to the east of the Ao Naga village of Longkhum (Mokokchung district, Nagaland). Identified with a line of white rock on mountain located to the east of Longkhum, the *lazasupu/layasüphu* is held as the entrance to the 'World of the Dead', and the line of white rock is believed to be a collection of dead men's clothes laid out by their dead girl friends (see Mills 1973: 227). An informant from Longkhum said that at times people have illusive sights of traditional Naga shawls being spread out on the *Lazasupu*, and such sights are bad omens for those who had such illusive sights, for often people die following such inauspicious sights. Sometimes the illusive sights may be a sign of death for someone else other than those who had the illusive sights, and in such cases, they said, a man dies if the shawl being spread is men's shawl and a woman dies if it is women's shawl. With such beliefs and fear psychosis around it, the *Lazasupu* still plays a vital role in the Ao Naga people's imagination of the next world and their

life. It is worth noting here that the Mongzu Ki ('eagle's hole') and the Lazasupu ('land of the dead') are situated facing directly to each other, and my guide emphatically pointed out this aspect as significant in treating the Mongzu Ki as part of the pre-Christian Naga eschatology. Coincidentally, the Nagas of Poumai Koide village (Senapati district, Manipur) still regard the eagle as 'one of the spirits of the villagers' (Pou 2010).

CONCLUSION

Pre-Christian Nagas of what are today Nagaland and Manipur in Northeast India revered natural landscapes as abodes of powerful spirits capable of influencing their social and religious lives; and such landscapes, by virtue of the guardian spirits, held religious significance in the pre-Christian past. The religious significance attached to them lingers to some extent in the Christianized Naga society. The survival of the collective memories around the landscapes reflects the Naga people's deep connection with nature and their beliefs and practices. Pre-Christian Nagas believed in the existence of a tangible "Land of the Dead" where souls were destined to live after death. Certain landscapes were associated with eschatology and played crucial roles in the "celebration of death," where the dead were sent off to the "Land of the Dead". Pre-Christian Nagas held it responsibility of the living to ensure safe passage of the dead to the "Land of the Dead". With such pre-Christian beliefs firmly rooted, these landscapes still evoke memories of the pre-Christian past and continue to influence the beliefs of the Christianized Nagas. Around such landscapes are woven myths, stories and beliefs in guardian spirits who are still revered in many cases, and thus influence human life and people's traditions. A perusal of certain landscapes and features of landscapes and the myths, beliefs and practices associated with them, thus, reveals that, with a deeply-rooted organic view of nature and the universe, pre-Christian Nagas were closely connected to nature. Believed to be governed by supernatural beings capable of influencing their lives, nature to them is alive and nurturing. So, landscapes are not lifeless and passive repositories of natural resources (minerals, flora and fauna) that can be indiscriminately exploited with no ethical restraints. As abodes of some supernatural beings or powerful guardian spirits, landscapes were perceived as powerful forces that could protect or harm humans. In that sense, a river is no mere current of water, but a life-giving force controlled by a guardian spirit. This belief applies to other kinds of landscapes. Pre-Christian Nagas revered them as sacred spaces, and were, therefore, given pivotal places in their social and religious lives. This is suggestive of the prevalence of some kind of belief very close to hylozoism - i.e., the belief that all things have life. Interestingly, such beliefs linger pervasively in the present Christianized Naga society.

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