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## **Khiamniungan Naga Folklore: Traditional Knowledge through the Role of 'Ein' and 'Mehou'**

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**Abstract:** *Folklore is the foundation of every society's historical and cultural contexts. The behaviors and activities of humanity are explained by folklore, in this sense of people's identity and sense of belonging. Within this understanding of human behavior and pursuits involving the expression of life and happiness, there were selected members of the community and tribal people who were meant to act as a bridge between life and death, or between the two worlds. They heal people, and impart traditional knowledge to them. These individuals are either local priests or shamans, both male and female. These two Shamans are known as Mehou and Ein, respectively, in Khiamniungan Naga. Both the Mehou and the Ein play a significant part in folklore that deals with belief systems and rituals. The function of the Shaman as a healer and communicator was examined in this paper to highlight the ancient customs, beliefs, and practices of the Khiamniungan Nagas.*

**Keywords** *Mehou, Ein, Shaman, rituals, belief system, Khiamniungan Naga Folklore.*

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**Introduction:** The Khiamniungan Nagas are indigenous people found in Eastern part of Nagaland in India, as well as in Myanmar. They were separated by Indo-Myanmar Border and settled along the Mt.

*Khulia Range*. The Khamniungan Naga tribe is a major and one among the 17 recognized tribes in Nagaland. Noklak, the 12<sup>th</sup> and "Frontier District" of Nagaland is a home to the Khamniungan Nagas. Despite their geographical divisions into two different countries, India and Burma (Myanmar), they share the same culture and traditions inherited from their ancestors.

Like the rest of the other Nagas communities, the Khamniungans are known for their distinctive culture and traditions of belief system, rituals, social customs, festivals, and language. They speak seven varieties of languages, viz. Thang, Wolam-Ngio, Nokhu, Pathso, Peshu, Wui, and Ponyu, and practice agriculture as their main occupation, besides mini-farming and rearing Mithuns for their livelihood.

**The Khamniungan Naga Folklore :** Folklore deals with the stories and culture that belonged to a particular group of people or community. As such, the Khamniungan Naga folklore consists of folktales, myths, legends, folksongs, proverbs, rituals, belief system, customs and festivals. In each of these various genres of folklore, the rituals and belief system reflects the past stories and culture which at present day society, the advent of Christianity and recognition of their one and only true Almighty God, the rituals and belief system turns only a matter of storytelling and narrative.

Folktales, myths and legends are important aspects and formed the essence in Khamniungan Naga folklore. The Khamniungan folktales comprises fables, nature, and human characters that portrays the lives of our progenitors, their cultural activities, and depicts the sense of one's culture and identity. For instances, the fables like, *The Wild Boar and the Lion* 'is an oral narration often told to children to be wary of the values of one's traditional attire (17)' and tales such as *The Cow and the Mother Frog* taught us to where people should not do things beyond our capacity. These are tales which literary portrays the real life situations of human at the present day society. Animals like, "Wild Boar", "Lion", "The Cow", and "Mother Frog" are not mere animal creatures, but a representation of human characters, their activities and behaviours. In the same way, the Khamniungan Naga tale of birds, of stones, and various other natures like the tales related to historical places, natural's calamities of thunder and lightning are part of belief system and culture of respect and honour according to its own confrontations. The supernatural birds

like *Khaopipitso*, *Hoopoe*, *Kiamijoi*, *Kutkūloi*, and *Hongwai* illustrates about the harbingers of adversity, as well as the prosperity to humankind. Each of these supernatural birds were honoured and preserved during the days of our progenitors. However, in this modern era, much human activities have been done to destroy the beauty of nature, including the wild animals and birds that often tell us in a village story today.

**Importance of the Traditional Knowledge:** Traditional knowledge among the Khamniungan Naga people is a vital component of their cultural identity, social cohesion, and sustainable development. Rooted in centuries of history, this knowledge encompasses various aspects, including agriculture, medicine, crafts, traditional governance, and kinship systems. Understanding its significance reveals the depth of the Khamniungan Naga culture and its resilience in the face of modernization.

At the heart of the Khamniungan Naga traditional knowledge is a rich tapestry of myths, oral histories, and rituals performed by the *Mehou* and *Ein* in Khamniungan Naga folklore. This traditional knowledge is passed down through generations, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. The importance of traditional knowledge among the Khamniungan Naga extends beyond cultural preservation; the insights derived from Naga traditional knowledge can offer valuable lessons and contribute to community well-being.

**'Ein' and 'Mehou':** In the traditional past, the role of *Ein* and *Mehou* were important part of human life reflecting their belief system and rituals. In Khamniungan Naga folklore, it depicted the early lives of people who have sacrifices and rendered their selfless being for humanity. *Ein* is a female shaman who was used as a great messenger of native people. She was one peculiar woman among the ordinary women, endowed with supernatural forces and worked through magical way. As compared to male shaman rituals, she was given minor rituals of offering a prayer in agriculture based activities. It was during a local festival known as "Bi-am," one among the prominent festivals of Khamniungan Naga celebrated in the month of August. Each ordinary housewife was allowed to hold the keys of the granary and performed the rituals of worshipping deities by invoking divine blessing upon their varieties crops to welcome them in the month of October after the celebration of "Tsukom" which

marked the season of harvest to the people of Khiamniungan Naga. Notwithstanding the rituals assigned to perform by every mother in a family, the role as the “Great Spirit” and people’s messenger was a sacred and it was only practiced by a designated female shaman.

*Mehou* is also known as *Meson* and *E-pou*. It refers to a male shaman in a village or community. The villagers used to call him to perform the major rituals related to war or village head hunting expeditions, healing, and rituals such as marriage vows, and naming a new born child. In this paper, both the roles performed by ‘*Mehou*’ and ‘*Ein*’ were studied in the following folklore that deals with various rituals and beliefs. The following are some of the folklores that specifically explains the role of *Mehou* and *Ein* as healer and communicator.

#### **The Role of Ein as Communicator in E-Touhaichi and Thatai:**

The primitive people relied on their self-sufficiency and self-sustainability in their village lifestyle, which was isolated from other villages and communities. In addition to carrying out their customs, ceremonies, and belief systems, they were deeply engrossed in the spiritual idea of having faith in gods and the paranormal. They were ignorant of the existence of their one real God. The role of the female shaman, known locally as *Ein*, evolved in this concept of their belief system regarding the existence of “someone powerful” and the “Great Spirit.” In order to venture out in the realm of the dead, the living villagers used to approach this *Ein* to communicate with the death, mostly the relative spirits, and serve as their messenger.

*E-touhaichi* and *Thatai* are closely linked with the significant role played by *Ein* as a communicator. For instance, the *E-touhaichi* was a sacred ritual practice of tracking and following the ways of the death spirits. *E-tou* refers to dead soul, and *Haichi* means the tracking or following. It was performed whenever the crisis between two groups of people—families, villages, clans, or communities—arises in connection to land disputes and to the legacies they inherited from their ancestors. A certain group of people who were involved in the conflicts would approach an *Ein* as their communicator to follow their ancestors who had the answers to their conflicts.

Similarly, in *Thatai* ritual, *Ein* used to send to the land of the dead to communicate the representative of the death’s spirits to approach him (the leader of the death’s spirits) about the causes of death of a particular

person who recently passed away. The word *Tha* stands for 'basket' and *Tai* means 'keep,' and the word *Thatai* means 'keeping basket,' a giant basket 'filled with food and ornaments gathered by its kin members who recently died.' Following the collection of food and ornaments they wanted to send to their loved ones who just parted from them, *Ein* was made ready to precede her ritual.

Physically, *Ein* would stay home at one corner of the house covered with bamboo or cane-woven mats. She would then invite the supernatural being to carry her out to the land of the dead. As a result, her spirit would find herself on a journey to the land of the dead. The bereaved family members then watched her walking on her way, and on reaching the land of the dead called *Sikehan*, the people at home listened to her in having a conversation with the leader of dead spirits. Subsequently, the one who represents the death spirits would let the bereaved family know that their fellow or beloved ones died of the curses he or she inherited from their great-grandparents or even because of his or her behavior against the sacred culture and traditions.

**The Role of Mehou as healer in Waitthoko- An:** Rituals such as *Waithoko-an* were prevalent in the past. It is a healing ritual, practiced whenever a *Mehou* or *Meson* is invited by the sick man's relatives. *Waitho* is a word that refers to a *chick*, and *Ko-an* means 'slaying,' which in literary means 'the slaying of chickens.' During the process of ritual, *Meson* was made sure; he kept chicken in contact with a person who was lying in his or her sick bed. Then it was followed by observing the chicken's legs. It was their belief system that if the right leg of a chicken stops before the left, it is a negative sign and will take time to heal. However, if the left leg of the chicken stops before the right leg, they believed that was a positive result, and eventually the recovery of a sick person would follow.

Most of the rituals in Khiamniungan Naga folklore were performed by *Mehou*. The responsibilities and role of *Mehou* were a sacred thing to do. They communicate with the spirits and bring healing and peace for mankind from any kind of disease. In this light of renunciation, apart from giving *Mehou* title to one of the oldest among the villagers, in order to become a *Mehou* one has to also go for a trial and selection. The process of conducting a trial or selection was used by the village elders through the prophetic significance. With the village elders observation, if

that particular person was found to have good moral conduct and behavior, he was chosen to be a *Mehou*.

*Mehou* being one spiritual man and for the sacrifices of his selfless services to humankind was respected and acknowledged by everyone in a village. He used to perform the significant events and rituals practiced in times of headhunting raids. For example, in a Khamniungan historical and legendary village like *Wui*, when the warriors returned to their respective village from head-hunting expedition, *Mehou* was said to have waited in front of his village fence, usually sat beside the village gate, and shouted:

*Oh...hi... (3x)*

In response to his exclamation, the warriors used to shout back:

*Oh hi... (3x)*

In addition to expressing the significance of culture and customs that call out for bringing home the glory, the voices of the *Mehou* and warrior team also signify the potent uses of language as their identification.

The role of *Mehou* in Khamniungan Naga folklore was remarkable as it highlighted the impact of culture and traditions with respect to the rituals of healing performed by *Mehou*. It was the responsibility and sacred task of *Mehou* to conduct the healing and last ride rituals whenever someone passes away from the village. Furthermore, *Mehou* or *Meson* as a healer also performed the rituals of naming a new born child, initiating the traditional marriage vows, and offering prayers before the commencement of any significant events in a village and in the community.

**Conclusion:** *Mehou* and *Ein* in Khamniungan Naga folklore are such essential human characters featured in community stories that explain the old traditions of rituals and belief systems. Their role as a healer and communicator performed the most significant part of people who lived for centuries. It brings back the bygone cultural practices of giving selfless services to its community. *Mehou* and *Ein* had a crucial role in connecting the two distinct realms, particularly as messengers. Additionally, they are distinct from other common villagers because of their custom of calling forth and invoking the supernatural entity they employed to transport them to the realm of death throughout retrieval procedures. Therefore, it is important that *Mehou* and *Ein*'s roles in Khamniungan Naga legend reflect the distant past and the cultural identity of modern civilization while also depicting the traditional limitless services to humanity.

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