

Feast of Merit Holds the Thread of Unscripted Naga Social Class

Wewulhi Lasuh

M.A. History

Banaras Hindu University

Abstract :

Naga ethnics are found in the Northeastern part of India and North western part of Myanmar. This indigenous community has observed various kinds of social practices since ancient time. Their existence couldn't be traced from literary sources due to the absence of written records. However, they have a culture of mnemonic system of passing down the history which further engraved their social structure in the material forms. Given this consideration, material remains are the bloodline in understanding human behavior, experiences, and social status of the Ancient Naga society. Therefore, the proposed research article is related to the existential material remains among the Naga tribes, particularly Nagas in India. These materials were directly associated with the *Zatho* (Feast of Merit). There was a system of erecting a *ZathomiTso* (stone monument), *Kecukie* (horn house), and *Elichura* (shawl) after offering *Zatho* to the whole community. Thus, the objective is designed to understand the nature of indigenous community who have practiced *Zatho* which acted as the thread of unscripted Naga social class.

Keywords : Agriculture, Material Remain, Naga, Social Class, *Zatho*.

Introduction :

The Naga ethnic community is currently scattered in the states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in the Union of India. They have been isolated from direct contact with the advanced civilization due to unfavorable geographical terrains and the absence of kingship. Which, they confined themselves within their regions till the advent of Ahom in the 13th century. From the 13th century AD onwards, the Naga warriors for the first time encountered the outside invader (Ahom) which came from Burma in around 1228 A.D. Though they have directly marched down to Brahmaputra Valley and founded the Ahom Kingdom in Assam. In Ahom 'Buranjis' it mentioned the resistance on their way down to Brahmaputra valley in Assam. This laid the initial stage of documenting Naga's history. As Nagas did not develop a written script till the advent of British colonial power in the 19th century onwards. The late 19th and early 20th centuries, anthropologists, archaeologists, missionaries, administrators, seculars, and militaries of the Western countries began to explore the regions and have

extensively written down the Naga history. Notwithstanding, their works were mainly confined to the surface as they spent a short period collecting cultural remains and leaving the region. Thereafter, the research works in the region were greatly compromised due to the Indo-Naga conflict after 1947 till the cease-fire agreement was signed between the Government of India and Naga Nationalist Groups. Despite the immense potential for historical research, empirical research toward an understanding of technologies, material cultures and emergence of a village settlement is still marginal. It is through this gap, *Zatho* materials are going to explore in the article.

What is *Zatho*? The word *Zatho* is derived from two words, *Za* means earn and *Tho* refers to the fixture of the date. The literal meaning could be understood as the social status earned through the fulfilment of community-set norms to achieve a higher status. Thus, *Zathomi* is referring to an individual family who has accumulated an abundance of wealth (paddy and animals) and has offered a feast to all the village community in return for earning social status from her fellow community. By providing a feast to all the villagers, community members rendered their physical labours of dragging a huge piece of stone and erected either on the way to paddy field or the common footpath. The community then recognized the entitlement of having a *Kecukie* (two big planks of wood, in the form of an X or horn were raised in front of the house) and *Elichura* (shawl engraved with various symbols bearing different meanings) that could be easily differentiate from the common shawls.

The primary area of the research paper has been limited to “Feast of Merit”. The paper has extensively made use of both primary and secondary sources. Varied methods of data collection have been adhered to. Direct field observation, archaeological data, and interview methods were implied at the time of grabbing the data. Thus, the sources used for the study come from varied fields, and in short, this study is interdisciplinary.

Research Objectives :

1. To specifically emphasize the Naga ethnics who have practiced this culture.
2. To examine the geographical factors of erecting *Zathomi Tso*, *Kecukie* and *Elichura*.
3. To find out the economic surplus which enabled them to offer *Zatho*.

Altogether the Naga's cover an area of about 47,000 square miles (Nuh, 2002,17). These ethnic groups are an Indo-Mongoloid and speakers of Tibeto-Burman language family (Driem, 2002), divided into over a dozen of major tribes, speaking languages and dialects more than double number of tribes (Alemchiba, 1970,1). Anthropologist Hutton reported the existence of different size of monoliths that bear various social meanings in the Angami and Lotha Naga (Hutton, 1921, 48-49). He extensively recorded all the stages of *Zatho* till the erection of a megalithic monument (Hutton, 1922). Later archaeologist Schnitger analysed and compared the cultural similarities of the *Nias* and *Nagas* monoliths. It concluded by stating that their social life is deeply connected with the megalith's institution and the necessary feasts and ceremonies involved by them (Schnitger, 1939, 162-163). In their study, Hutton and Schnitger have brought the system of *Zathomi Tso* under the Megalithic Monuments. The builders of the megalithic remains were utterly illiterate and have left no written records of their

INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN (0): 2584-2862

Vol.-3, Issue-I, 2024

erection, nor are there any legible inscriptions on the more important monuments which would afford any hints to the enquirer. Though “they stand, but stand in silent and uncommunicative majesty” (Fergusson,1872,2). Bradley argued that the building of Neolithic monuments was directly related to the economic surplus provided by farming(Bradley,1998, xi).

Nagas have 68 tribes at present (Nuh,2006,26), however, the practice of *Zatho* were not common to all the indigenous. It has been confined to some specific tribes of *Angami, Khuzhami, Chokri, Poumai, Maram, Moa, Sema, Rengma* and *Lotha*. According to oral history, all these tribes have once settled at *Maikhel* (presently in Manipur) and dispersed to different places. With their dispersal, several things have changed but the practice of *Zatho* remained intact till they were converted to Christianity. Since then, some of them settled in the foothills while others settled on top of the hills. Their surroundings were covered with thick tropical forest and gets an average rainfall every year. In favour of this pleasant geographical terrains both the agriculture of shifting and terrace were extensively practiced. Although the practice of terrace cultivation was limited only to these tribes, the evidence of shifting cultivation was commonly found among all the Naga tribes which was proven with the archaeological excavations.

The Villages :

Naga villages that practice *Zatho* culture are mainly located at altitudes between 1000 and 2000m above sea level. This location provided a natural defence in time of head-hunting. Not only that, it is situated in the middle of both shifting and terrace farmland which enables them to protect the village and farmland from raids. *Edzukhu* (spring well) is surrounded by all the corners of the settlement. The best location of the settlement has been allotted to Mewu (village head as well as a priest) and *Morung* (dormitory house of the youth). This place was surrounded by the villagers. Each corner was assigned to different clans to defend the village gate. Due to high altitudes and the availability of stones, huge stones were erected for defence which remain standings at the original village gate till date. However, with time the settlement began to expand from the original demarcation leading to intermixing of the clans.

White analysis showed that domestication of agriculture and animals was not a sudden discovery. Its discovery was gradual, as mankind knew of all this for thousand years ago before the domestication of plants began. Mankind intimately lived with the flora and fauna but the relationship between man and his wild-plant transformed due to increase of population pressure. In which agriculture is a matter of cultural control over the lives of plant species (White,959,83-86). Similarly, the cultural practice of *Zatho* emerged on the surface only after the domestication of plants and animals. Folklore became the living fossil to understand how this practice have come into being. Accordingly, *Medanyi* (person name) instructed the method of domesticating of plants to two of his daughters-in-law. In the process, the plant seedlings that the elder daughter-in-law received come from warm place while younger daughter-in-law plants come from a cold region. Gradually, the younger daughter-in-law's plants became more suitable to the environment which yielded a good harvest. The younger son became more prosperous, therefore, *Medanyi* instructed the unbearable norms to his daughter-in-law

and a way to spend all the accumulated wealth in the form of a big feast by pulling a monolith which later came to be known as *Zatho*. Consequently, the practice of *Zatho* was instilled as a part of culture and regarded as the highest social achievement. It was the most respectable deed because it was not only a way of spending the surplus but the fulfilment of all the restricted social norms and taboos, showing the patience of an individual that few people could bear. Till today, the village elders do transmit it to the younger generation in the house of *Morung*. Even in the ancient period, *Morung* is the only institution that looks after the political, religious, social, economic, and cultural practices of the indigenous. Therefore, an individual who decided to offer *Zatho* has to fulfil all the age-old procedures.

Feast of Merit Stone :



Fig.1. Zathomi Tso (Feast of Merit Stone)

Naga groups erected stone monuments for both the dead and feast of merit givers. Normally, the monuments (fig.1) for feast of merit are far bigger in size compared with the dead monuments. *Zathomi Tso* was erected on the main path and infamous place in the village. It is found not only here, but also found near the terraced paddy fields. An individual has offered the feasts and erected several merit stones. It was a custom to drag a single stone at once due to a lengthy process of custom, also only once was allowed to offer in a year. Apart from that, implements to cut the huge stones were very primitive which took a month to make it into shape and movable. Primitive stone implements were the most prevalent tools in the regions, iron implements were very limited to some specific region like Wui village. Iron tools were possessed by only the wealthy family members due to expensive and hard to procure. After the dispersal from *Maikhel*, tribes like *Sema* began to replace stones with wood. The reason of adoption of woods in place of stones was the availability of wood and the scarcity of mega stones. Never the less, the replacement of materials didn't change the norms and taboos.

Kecukie :

INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN (0): 2584-2862
Vol.-3, Issue-I, 2024



Fig.2. Kecukie (Horn House decorated with Mithun horns)

From the first stage of collecting the house materials till the completion of house, different skilled labours were invited according to the demand of the work. The invitees rendered free service but were later invited for special gathering (local wine, rice, meats and other items would be served) by *Zathomi*. Felling down of trees and splitting the trunks of the tree, the strongest males in the community provided their service. For designing the horns, carving the head of Mithuns and others, only highly skilled labours were invited. This was followed up by pulling all the heavy materials, the whole *Kedo* (Khel) or sometimes inviting the whole villagers if required. The actual construction began to commence in the month of dry season and had to finish before the rainy season. In front of the house, the Mithun heads, human heads, and horns were raised which stand unique and highly respected by the village community. This design of house elevated the social status of the owner.

Elichura :



Fig.3.Elichura Shawl

INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN (0): 2584-2862
Vol.-3, Issue-I, 2024

The above shawl has been engraved with different symbols; the meaning has been explained below.

Mithun : The host of *Zatho* preferred this animal to other animal species. It is the most commonly reared animals. This animal is valued due to less requirement of human efforts to take care. Also, the size of the animals is mammoth and could feed a large number of the population. Despite this, the meat usually remains intact when cooking instead of becoming smaller or shrink like other animal which is perfectly suitable to feed large number of people. It is a tradition to decorate the house with skulls that portray the richness of the individual and a sign of *Zathomi*. Thus, the symbol of Mithun in the shawl represents the prosperity and wealth.

Elephant : The elephant in the shawl was used to refer to the metaphor of *Micu-miso* and abundance of meat. *Micu-miso* refers to people who consumed less, elephant is huge in size but eat quite less compared to its size. It indirectly portrays that only *Micu-miso* people in the community could save the wealth. It indicates their perseverance of controlling themselves from living a lavish lifestyle. Therefore, the elephant on the shawl symbolizes individual virtues and determination to acquire wealth from the surroundings.

Animal Head : It refers to the status of *Zathomi*. The skulls on the shawl indicates *Zathomi*. As carrying a shawl is more convenient for roaming around the village and to the neighbouring villages. The community members enable the *Zathomi* to show their status not only from Monuments and houses but also from their cloths. It is Kenyi to any individual to possess all the above material until he offers *Zatho*. Animal head, therefore, signifies the legacy of one's achievement.

Star : It has been used as the metaphor for the image of the village and the happiness of the people during the partaking of the feast. Inter-village trade was practiced since time immemorial and *Zathomi Tso* has mainly placed beside the route which could be notice by all the travellers. The more they have *Zathomi Tso*, it indicates the wealth and prosperity of the village. In other words, the village wealth is judged according to the number of *Zathomi Tso*. On the other hand, Nagas was very fond of merry making and all the village's active members zealous partake in it. Thus, the star represents not only the image of the village but jolliness of the participants at the feast.

Peacock : Like unique colour of the peacock among the birds, the symbol of the peacock has been emblemmed on the shawl to depict its uniqueness among different existential shawls. It is also believed that the symbol of the peacock will add more beauty to the entitled holder.

Flower : The flower signifies the peaceful individual achievement. It represents the difference from the head-hunting individual achievement. Head-hunters wore unique attires to portray their bravery and a symbol of a warrior. However, *Zatho* was an act of peaceful achievement through hard work. Thus, on the day of the feast, all the partakers of both poor and rich put on their best clothes to observe the event. Which, the flower on the shawl indicates happiness and peaceful achievement.

Butterfly : It signifies a good spirit and stage of accumulating wealth. Like butterflies came out from a stage of evolution, young married couples went through several years to accumulate sufficient

INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN (0): 2584-2862
Vol.-3, Issue-I, 2024

wealth to offer *Zatho*. Therefore, *Zatho* were mainly offered by an individual who was in their prime stage of life between 35 to 55 years of age. After offering the *Zatho*, the couples were highly respected by their fellow community and regarded as the best example of life contentment.

Sun/Moon : The stone, house, and shawls that have been earned could be passed down to the next generation even if their lineage is extinct, it is taboo to collapse the monument. Thus, it resembled their achievement are for eternity.

Pleats : It depicts the stage of *Zatho*.

Agriculture :

Agriculture was the main occupation of the people. Paddy rice was the common medium of exchange. Rice is the most valuable goods which is considered a person's wealth. Varieties of millet, rice, beans, jobs tears, yam, spices, and others were found richly cultivated. In the field of shifting land, multiple items of seeds are normally sown together at once while in terrace fields mono crop is mainly planted.

Shifting Cultivation (SC) :



Fig.4.Melulo (Shifting Cultivation Farmland).

It is believed to be the first phase of the domestication of rice, millet, and other plants. Asia is one of the hotspot practices of SC. SC is the most common mode of production in the hills of Naga. Gourou outlines four most distinctive features : SC is practiced on very poor tropical soils, it represents an elementary agricultural technique which utilizes no tools but the axes, it is marked by a low density of population and it involves a low level of consumption (Gourou, 1956, 336-349). On the other hand, Ruthenberg argued the highly skilled of adapting their cropping practices to the environment in which they are working (Ruthenberg, 1971, 24-25). Primitive stone and stick implements were executed in the cultivation land. Manual labours rounded all the stages as there was no possibility of replacing them with animal powers due to hilly terrains. Though it is laborious in nature, this mode of procuring foods became more reliable enabling them to store the surplus of production.

Terrace Farming (TF) :



Fig.5.Kedaloand Ketsholo (Wet and Dry Terrace Farming Field).

Hudson pointed out; that terrace farmland was owned by individual (private property). He further described due to long and assiduous labour in jhum field, a terrace field must be carved out in the hills to reduce the physical works with a practical engineering skill (Hudson,1911,50). All these fields either located near the streams or spring wells. The place where irrigation on land could not construct, bamboo pipe irrigations were introduced. Hutton documented the shape and size of terrace fields, irrigation channel and used of cow-dung as a natural fertilizer of the Angami Naga tribe (Hutton,1921,72-76). In this case, Aymara (South America) community lie fallow for 10 years between planting (Tschopik,1951,156). While Donkin emphasised that central Mexico used human, animal and green manure were used in house garden and on the terrace field (Donkin,1979,2).Thus, those indigenous have the knowledge of scattering natural fertilizers to supplement the farming soil. Consequently, besides primitive farming tools, they were able to yield good harvest.

Animal Farming :



Fig.6.Mithun (Bos Frontalis)

INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN (0): 2584-2862
Vol.-3, Issue-I, 2024

According to folklore and oral history, animals and human beings' close relations were portrayed. Mithun, cock, and dog had the most common beings at the time of searching for new settlement. Hutton and Mill's study shows the domestication of Mithun, cows, cattle, pigs, dogs, cats, fowls, chicken, and bees. Mithun was considered a form of wealth and highly valued among the domestication of animals.

Conclusion : Zatho is the product, collectively created by the community and passed down the practices in different forms, means, and modes. Morung acted as the archive of preserving all the age-old generation values. This institution guided the generations to fulfil all the criteria to earn social status in the community. These standing materials became the only source to understand the past social strata of a Naga society. The community-dwelling near the vicinity of the ancestral sites, still practicing the same culture has thrown sufficient information of the remains. In an examination of all this, standing megalithic monuments in the region raised it with the surplus of economic production. Since then, the people who could accumulate more wealth continuously offered Zatho and ultimately occupied the zenith position of the social strata. Therefore, the people who have practice both SC and TF laid the culture of erecting different material values.

The prehistoric Zathomi Tsos should be given the importance of preserving from the developmental works. Many of them have been affected and displaced due to road construction, no efforts have been shown to preserve it by the individual, village, and government. Several monuments were left on the ground beside the roads. The village and government should initiate to preservation of all those displaced monuments by selecting a common place to raise them again. Such legacy must be preserved as a heritage, it should be placed where such developmental works won't affect the future again. Though only a few indigenous archaeologists in the regions, however, subject experts should collaborate with the indigenous and government for a workshop to enlighten the significance of those monuments.

References and Recommended Reading :

- Alemchiba, M.A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland. Kohima: Naga Institute of Culture, 1970.
- Bradely, Richard. The Significance of Monuments: On the Shaping of Human Experience in Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Donkin, R. A. Agricultural Terracing in the Aboriginal New World. Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1979.
- Driem, George van. The Naga Language Groups within the Tibeto-Burman Language Family, Hudson Hill Press, 2009.
- Fergusson, James. Rude Stone Monuments in All Countries: Their Age and Uses. London: John Murray, 1872.

INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN (0): 2584-2862

Vol.-3, Issue-I, 2024

- Gourou, P. *The Quality of Land and Use of Tropical Cultivators*. Chicago Press University, 1956.
- Hudson, T. C. *The Naga Tribes in Manipur*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1911.
- Hutton, J. H. *The Angami Nagas*. London: Macmillan & CO. Limited, 1921.
- Ibid. *The Meaning and Method of the Erection of Monoliths by the Naga Tribes*. JRAI of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 52, 1922.
- Nuh, V. K. *The Naga Chronicle*. New Delhi: Regency Publication, 2002.
- Ruthenberg, Hans. *Farming System in the Tropics*. Clarendon Press Oxford, 1971.
- Schnitger, F. M. *Forgotten Kingdom in Sumatra*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1939.
- Tschopik, Harry. *The Aymara of Chucuito, Peru*. New York: Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, 1951, Vol. 44, Part 2.
- White, Leslie A. *The Evolution of Culture: The Development of Civilization to the Fall of Rome*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959.
