



Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Climate Resilience in Eastern Nagaland

Insights

FROM THE EARTHKEEPERS PROJECT



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TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE IN EASTERN NAGALAND

Insights from the Earthkeepers Project 2023—2025

Kevide Lcho, Saktum Wonti, and Tümüzo Katiry



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FOREWORD

Drawing on three years of sustained field research, this report presents the work of three Canada–Myanmar IDRC Research Fellows—the Earthkeepers team—based at The Highland Institute. The research was supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada) through its Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar (K4DM) initiative.

At the heart of the report is a substantial and detailed body of material on Indigenous ecological knowledge and local understandings of climate change, generated through sustained collaboration between village communities in two districts of Eastern Nagaland and the Earthkeepers team. Community members were not simply respondents but active contributors, shaping the focus, priorities, and form of what was documented. The material reflects extensive field engagement, careful documentation, and close attention to local perspectives, practices, and ways of expression. Taken together, it represents a significant research output and a strong return on the investment made in this project.

Rather than a final synthesis, the report should be understood as a first analytical phase. While the documentation is rich and comprehensive, time constraints did not allow for the full depth of interpretation, comparison, and thematic analysis that this material merits. The report, therefore, provides a robust descriptive and evidentiary foundation from which further analytical work, reflection, and publication can follow. Building on this foundation, The Highland Institute intends to seek additional support to extend the research through deeper analysis, co-authored outputs with community partners, and future publications.

Eastern Nagaland, where market expansion has been uneven and partial, remains a significant repository of traditional ecological knowledge. In a period of rapid social, economic, and environmental change, the material documented through this project highlights both the urgency and the potential for continued collaborative and village-based research on Indigenous knowledge and climate change impacts. This report is intended not as an endpoint, but as a platform for further work across the eastern districts.

The Earthkeepers team undertook this work with a strong awareness of the history of colonial and extractive research in Nagaland. Considerable effort was made to work collaboratively and to move beyond more conventional research approaches. This commitment also shaped the writing of the report, which is intended for multiple audiences, including village partners, policymakers, activists, and academic readers. In places, the language used by community elders has been retained in transcription and translation, reflecting its rhythm and expressiveness rather than being recast into standard academic English. We hope this approach conveys something of the voices and perspectives that shaped the work, and encourages others to continue refining practices for collaborative, respectful, and non-extractive research.

Catriona Child
Earthkeepers Project Co-ordinator
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AUTHORS' PROFILES

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Kevide Lcho is a Canada-IDRC Myanmar Research Fellow at The Highland Institute in Kohima, Nagaland, and a member of the Earthkeepers Project team. He holds a Master's degree in Agricultural Extension Education and Communication, with training in participatory research, community engagement, and rural communication. His work on the project involves close collaboration with farming communities and contributing to field-based research on Indigenous ecological practices and farmers' experiences of climate change along the India–Myanmar border. Through sustained engagement with local communities, he supports documentation and research initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable livelihoods, environmental conservation, and community-based development.



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Tümüzo Katiry is a Canada-IDRC Myanmar Research Fellow and a Research Assistant at the Highland Institute. He holds a Master's degree in Anthropology from Kohima Science College, Jotsoma. His research interests include environmental issues, border studies, Indigenous ecological knowledge, research ethics, and religious studies. During his undergraduate and postgraduate studies, he conducted research on tourism, the impacts of COVID-19, village economies, and Indigenous religion and medicine. He has also supported exhibition development at the Highland Institute through data collection, analysis, and academic writing. He is currently engaged with the Earthkeepers Project, where he works on documenting traditional ecological knowledge and community understandings of climate change in the Myanmar–Nagaland border region, with a focus on climate justice and food security through community-centered research.

Saktum Wonti

Saktum Wonti is from the Khamniungan tribe of Nagaland and is a Canada-IDRC Myanmar Research Fellow based at The Highland Institute, Kohima, Nagaland. She holds a Master's degree in Anthropology. As part of the Earthkeepers Project, she contributes to research that brings together Indigenous environmental knowledge and farmers' lived experiences of climate variability in the Indo–Myanmar borderlands. Her research interests include border and transboundary studies, material culture with a focus on World War II artefacts, traditional Indigenous knowledge systems, and the intersections between climate change and Indigenous environmental science. Through her work, she seeks to strengthen community-based perspectives in environmental research and deepen understanding of Indigenous responses to ecological change.



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Under Meluri District, we extend our sincere thanks to the Lephori Village Council, Lephori Baptist Church, Reguri Village Council, and Reguri Baptist Church for their cooperation and hospitality. We are also thankful to Lateing, Village Council Chairman of Akhen Village; the Government Middle School in Reguri; and Atsopu Pfithu and his colleagues at the school for their assistance and support during our fieldwork.

In Noklak District, we express our sincere appreciation to Buhiu Lam and Hangthing for their support and active engagement in this study. We are also grateful to the Choklangan Village Council and its Chairman, the Government Middle School in Choklangan, the Dan Village Council, the Dan Students' Union, the Wui Village Council, the Wui Students' Union, and the Peshu Village Council for their cooperation and willingness to engage with the research. We are especially thankful to Thangsoi of Choklangan for generously providing us with a place to stay during our field visit.

We are particularly indebted to our guides and translators, Puhan Lam of Wui Village and Lemdumong Shiu of Choklangan Village, whose local knowledge, linguistic skills, and dedication were invaluable to the successful completion of this project. Reaching across the border, we would like to extend our gratitude to community members of the Ho Nagas (Somra Tangkhul Nagas) for their contributions to our research, despite the challenging political situation and related security concerns.

Above all, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the respondents who generously shared their time, knowledge, and experiences with us. We are deeply thankful to everyone who welcomed us warmly into their villages, making the fieldwork both meaningful and memorable.

Editorial Note

This report benefited from limited AI-assisted support for language editing and stylistic consistency. All research design, fieldwork, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Earthkeepers Project

Supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, and based at The Highland Institute in Nagaland, India, the Earthkeepers Project aimed to build local research capacity through a combination of training and practical fieldwork. Under this initiative, which ran from March 2023 to December 2025, three Indigenous postgraduate Canada–Myanmar IDRC Research Fellows documented traditional ecological knowledge and perceptions of climate change in communities in two study areas along the Indo–Myanmar border.

The project formed part of IDRC’s Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar programme (K4DM), which sought to nurture a new generation of leaders to promote inclusion and gender equality in Myanmar. Under K4DM, partner institutions were provided with resources for research fellowships, training, and opportunities for discussion with local, national, and international scholars and policymakers.

Collaborative Methodology.

Mindful of the history of colonial and extractive approaches to research in the region, and in keeping with the ethical stance of The Highland Institute, the Canada–Myanmar IDRC Research Fellows adopted a collaborative methodology, working in partnership with communities to record Indigenous knowledge systems related to environmental management. Their experience in developing a community-led approach forms a crucial part of this report.

A key element of this collaborative approach is that the Earthkeepers team will make their data available to the participating communities in two forms. Raw data will be securely housed at The Highland Institute in Kohima and remain accessible in perpetuity, subject to appropriate safeguards, while analyzed material is presented to communities, policymakers, and other interested parties through this report.

Study Locations and Communities

The Earthkeepers Project is based at The Highland Institute, an independent research centre in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, India. The project focused on two districts—Meluri and Noklak—located along the Indo–Myanmar border (Map I). These districts were selected for two primary reasons. First, the project formed part of a broader initiative connected to Myanmar, making proximity to the international border essential. Second, Nagaland is characterised by exceptional linguistic diversity, with more than sixty dialects

spoken across the state; research sites where the Earthkeepers team possessed linguistic and cultural familiarity were therefore prioritised.

Fieldwork in Noklak District, dominated by the Khamniungan people, was supported by Saktum Wonti, who comes from that community, while work in Meluri District—home to the Pochury and Ho peoples—was facilitated by Tümüzo Katiry, who has links to both communities. Kevide Lcho, from the Angami Naga community, provided additional support and conducted interviews in Nagamese, a widely used pidgin blending several Naga dialects and Assamese. Neither the Pochury nor the Khamniungan communities are confined to Indian territory; in both cases, ancestral lands extend across the international boundary into Myanmar. Yet the depth and extent of this transboundary ancestral presence are significantly greater among the Khamniungan. The study area, therefore, reflects cultural and ecological continuities that predate the modern nation-state.\

Environmental Context

Nagaland lies in the far northeastern region of India and is bounded by Myanmar to the east, Arunachal Pradesh to the north, Assam to the west, and Manipur to the south. Except for a narrow strip of plains along the Assam border, the state is predominantly mountainous. Parallel hill ranges and deep valleys run roughly north to south, with elevations increasing from west to east. Altitudes range from approximately 200 metres in the western lowlands to over 1,830 metres in the eastern hills. Mount Saramati, located along the India–Myanmar border, rises to 3,826 metres and is the highest peak in the state. This rugged terrain strongly shapes settlement patterns, agricultural systems, climate variability, and access to natural resources.

Climate, Rainfall, and Environmental Change

Nagaland lies within the humid subtropical climatic zone and experiences a monsoon-dominated climate with pronounced spatial variation driven by elevation and topography. Lower elevations experience warmer subtropical conditions, mid-altitude regions are temperate, and higher elevations approach montane or alpine climates with cold winters and occasional snowfall. The southwest monsoon, extending from May to September, accounts for most annual precipitation, with rainfall ranging from approximately 1,000 mm to over 3,000 mm across the state (India Meteorological Department [IMD], 2019).

Recent analyses indicate significant shifts in rainfall patterns across Nagaland. Using long-term station data and machine-learning techniques, Pathak et al. (2024) identified substantial spatial and temporal variability, including declining monsoon rainfall and increased interannual variability in several districts. While some northern and northwestern areas have recorded modest increases, many districts—particularly those experiencing urban expansion and deforestation—show declining annual and winter rainfall. Regional assessments further corroborate these trends, documenting delayed monsoon onset and

persistent rainfall deficits across Northeast India, with declining winter precipitation posing serious risks to rain-fed agriculture and rural water security (Down To Earth, 2023).

Urban centres such as Kohima and Dimapur have experienced sharper declines in rainfall and groundwater recharge than surrounding rural districts, a pattern associated with deforestation, surface sealing, and infrastructure expansion. In contrast, rural and forest-dependent communities experience climatic shifts primarily through disrupted agricultural cycles, soil erosion, reduced streamflow, and declining reliability of seasonal indicators.

Climate projections for the period 2020–2050 indicate an increase in average annual temperatures of approximately 1.6°C to 1.8°C across Nagaland, with southern districts expected to experience slightly higher warming than northern districts (Government of Nagaland, 2024; Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change [MoEFCC], 2017). Rainfall is projected to increase overall but unevenly, alongside greater variability and declining winter precipitation (IMD, 2019; Pathak et al., 2024).

Biodiversity

Nagaland forms part of the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot, one of the most biologically diverse regions in the world. Despite its relatively small area (16,579 km²), the state supports ecosystems ranging from tropical and subtropical forests at lower elevations to temperate forests at higher altitudes. Consolidated assessments by the Botanical Survey of India and the Nagaland Forest Department indicate that the state supports more than 2,400 species of flowering plants, including approximately 360 orchid species, along with extensive bamboo, cane, and lichen diversity (Botanical Survey of India, 2012; Nagaland Forest Department, 2020).

Faunal diversity is similarly high, with records of more than 500 bird species, over 60 mammal species, and numerous reptiles, amphibians, and fish, including endangered and endemic taxa (Nagaland Forest Department, 2020). Community-owned forests play a central role in biodiversity conservation, as much of the state's forested land is managed under customary institutions rather than formal protected areas.

Forests

Forest cover has declined rapidly. Forest Survey of India assessments show that Nagaland experienced an overall forest cover reduction of approximately 17% between 2001 and 2020, one of the fastest rates of decline recorded nationally (Forest Survey of India [FSI], 2001, 2021). District-level data indicate continued forest degradation in areas now comprising Meluri and Noklak, driven by shortened shifting cultivation cycles, infrastructure development, and settlement expansion (FSI, 2019, 2023).

Livelihoods

Environmental changes directly affect livelihoods. Steep terrain, monsoon dependence, and forest cover have historically supported shifting cultivation (jhum), terrace farming, and forest-based subsistence. Increasing rainfall variability, rising temperatures, shortened fallow periods, and forest loss now place additional pressure on these systems, particularly in border districts where access to markets, irrigation, and state support remains limited.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Environmental Context

For Indigenous peoples in Nagaland, survival has long depended on living in close relationship with the land, forests, and seasonal rhythms. Over generations, communities have developed and refined resource-use strategies through sustained observation and adaptation to environmental change. These practices form what is commonly referred to as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), a cumulative and place-based body of knowledge embedded within cultural practices, belief systems, and everyday livelihoods.

There is now broad recognition that such knowledge can contribute meaningfully to climate change adaptation and resilience strategies (Abdullah, 2024; Das, 2023; UNDP, 2024; Witharana, 2025). Because TEK is grounded in long-term engagement with specific environments, it captures changes in rainfall, temperature, soils, vegetation, and animal behavior that may not be immediately evident in short-term scientific datasets.

In this report, TEK is used to describe the knowledge documented during research in Meluri and Noklak districts. Given the absence of a universally accepted definition (Whyte, 2013), the study adopts Berkes's (2017) formulation of TEK as "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment." Importantly, for many Indigenous communities, TEK is not merely informational but constitutive of social life, spiritual relationships, and moral obligations to land and non-human beings (McGregor, 2004).

Indigenous observations recorded during fieldwork closely align with scientific assessments of environmental change. Elders and farmers in Meluri and Noklak described delayed monsoon onset, shorter periods of steady rainfall, and an increase in intense but brief precipitation events. Changes in bird movements, flowering cycles, insect emergence, and stream flow—key indicators within TEK—were frequently cited as evidence of shifting climatic conditions. These place-based insights corroborate meteorological data and enrich understanding of climate impacts at local scales.

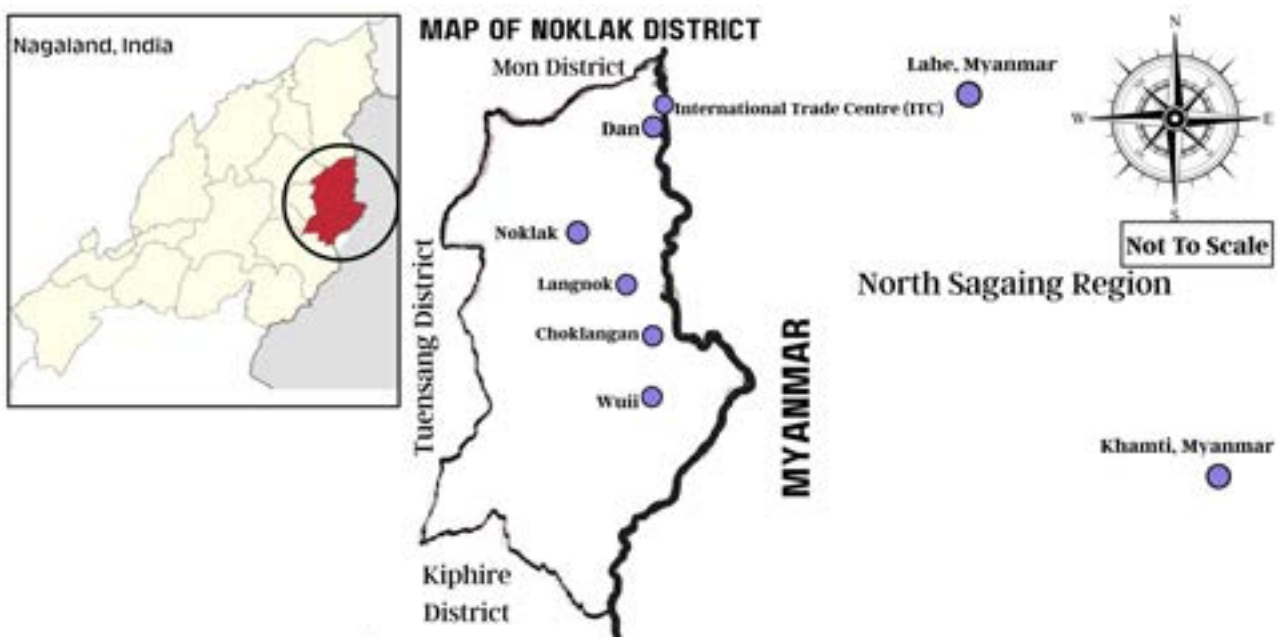
Integrating Knowledge Systems

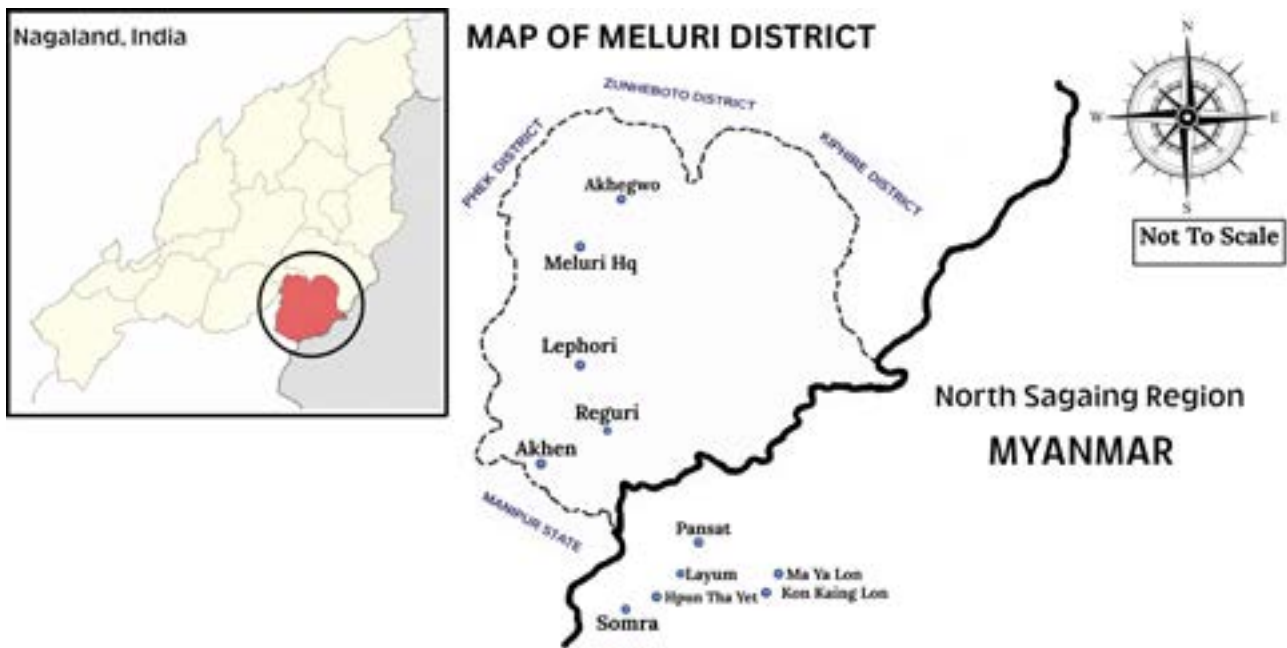
Rather than treating Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Western science as competing systems, this report approaches them as complementary ways of understanding environmental change. TEK provides long-term, qualitative, and relational insights rooted in lived experience, while scientific approaches contribute quantitative analysis and predictive capacity. When integrated through ethical collaboration, respect for Indigenous authority, and attention to epistemic plurality, these knowledge systems together offer a more robust basis for interpreting climate change and supporting locally grounded strategies for resilience.

In the context of Nagaland, sustaining TEK is not only essential for environmental adaptation but also for cultural continuity, historical responsibility, and epistemic justice. The land and environment of Nagaland thus form both the material and epistemological foundation of this study.

Primary Study Areas

This study identifies two primary study areas: Noklak District and Meluri District in eastern Nagaland. While both districts were initially selected for research, the empirical material presented in this report is drawn predominantly from Noklak District (see map), where immersive fieldwork was conducted with local communities. In the Meluri District (see map), the tribal body formally disallowed independent research activities within its jurisdiction, limiting the scope of data collection. Nevertheless, short-term engagement took place in selected villages, where the research team assisted in the video documentation of a community festival in Lephori village and facilitated activities related to community forest conservation in Reguri village. These engagements did not involve systematic ethnographic research but constituted collaborative contributions.





In addition, the study includes oral historical material from the Ho Naga or the Somra Tangkhul Naga of the Sagaing Region, Myanmar. Although fieldwork was not conducted in Myanmar due to ongoing political instability, oral histories were recorded in Meluri District through an elder of Ho Naga origin residing as a citizen in Meluri District. This elder is widely recognized for his knowledge of Ho history and traditions, and his narratives provide transborder historical and cultural perspectives relevant to the study. As such, the research material draws from three interconnected contexts: immersive ethnographic engagement in Noklak District, limited collaborative engagements in Meluri District, and diasporic oral historical accounts relating to the Ho Naga community of Myanmar.

In Noklak, the study was conducted among the Khamniungan Naga community, an Indigenous Naga group inhabiting the easternmost part of Nagaland, India, along the Indo–Myanmar border. Khamniungan settlements extend across present-day international boundaries, with a substantial number of villages located on both the Indian and Myanmar sides. Fieldwork was carried out primarily in Wui, Choklangan, Dan (Pangsha), and nearby settlements in Noklak District, an area characterized by mountainous terrain, dense forest cover, and limited infrastructural connectivity, like many other remote parts of Nagaland.

The ethnonym Khamniungan is a compound term derived from three lexical elements in the local language: *kham*, meaning “water”; *niu*, meaning “great”; and *ngan*, meaning “source.” Taken together, the term Khamniungan may be translated as “the source of great water” or “the source of a great river” (District Administration Tuensang, 2025). It is aptly named because water often seeps from seemingly random locations in the Noklak region. The important rivers in the district include the Zungki, Leaniu, Chokla, and several smaller tributaries.

The communities of the Indo-Myanmar borderland in the Eastern Nagaland and the Northwestern part of the Sagaing Region in Myanmar, like any other Naga communities, are primarily agrarian, with livelihoods centered on shifting cultivation, wet-rice cultivation, foraging, hunting, and small-scale animal husbandry. Rice, millet, maize, vegetables, and forest products form the basis of subsistence.

During the colonial period, British administrators referred to the Khamniungans as Kalyo Kengyu (or Kalyo Kenyu), meaning "men who live in stone houses," and were known for their slate roofs and skilled metalwork (GlobalSecurity.org, n.d.). The name was imposed externally and not rooted in local self-identification. This colonial designation continued to appear in official records and administrative usage into the early decades following Indian independence. The community leaders rejected the term "Kalyo Kenyu," asserting that "Khamniungan" is the correct ethnonym, which led to a significant shift in political and cultural self-definition (District Administration Tuensang, 2025). This rejection formed part of a broader movement across Naga communities to reclaim Indigenous names and identities that had been distorted or misrepresented under colonial rule.

The Indo-Myanmar border profoundly shapes the everyday life of the communities living in this region. In several villages, agricultural fields, forest resources, and kinship networks extend across the Indo-Myanmar boundary. Villagers often cross the border to cultivate fields, visit relatives, or attend social and ritual events. Recent changes in border governance, including restrictions on movement, have disrupted long-standing patterns of mobility and access to land, intensifying local concerns related to identity, belonging, and sovereignty.

An imaginary line marked by border pillars 139 to 146 separates the Khamniungans in India from their relatives in Myanmar. There are approximately 200 Khamniungan villages in total, of which about 50 are located within Noklak District, India, while approximately 150 are situated in the Sagaing Region of Myanmar (Katiry et al., 2023). In Meluri context, the Pochury community shares an international boundary with the Naga communities of Myanmar, such as the Ho and Makury communities. All communities on both sides of the border express the inconvenience caused by the border, which undermines Indigenous boundaries.

In summary, the study area is situated within the Indo-Myanmar borderland, with a primary focus on the Khamniungans and the Ho Nagas. Although we also visited and collaborated with other communities such as Zhavame in Phek District and Lephori and Reguri in Meluri District, we did not conduct immersive ethnographic fieldwork in those villages. The fieldwork took place in the context of complex cross-border community ties in the remote region of Nagaland, which borders the North Sagaing Region of Myanmar.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework guiding the study. The Earthkeepers project aims to understand climate change perspectives in the Indo-Myanmar borderland by documenting oral histories, songs, proverbs, indigenous ecological knowledge, and farmers' perceptions of climate change. To understand Indigenous world-making, relational epistemologies, and lived engagements with the landscape, we employ a decolonial ethnographic methodology grounded in immersive participatory practices. This approach emphasizes local ontologies, values Indigenous ways of knowing, and positions the researcher as an active participant within ongoing relationships rather than as a detached observer. The goal is to not only describe cultural phenomena but also to engage with the community in ways that honor their autonomy, narrative sovereignty, and epistemic authority. For this reason, we adopt a community-led approach, where the communities we collaborate with become an integral part of the research process and knowledge production. Thus, this report emerges as the product of the researchers' interaction with Indigenous communities, who share a common goal of promoting ethical and consensus-based Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).

Ethnographic Immersive Participatory Research

The central focus of this project is the Indigenous ecological knowledge of the communities in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands. Under this, we explore Indigenous cosmologies, oral histories, kinship relations, festivals and ceremonies, agricultural practices, and people's interpretation of the changing climate and its impact. We employ ethnographic and immersive participatory methods in our research as the cosmological ideas we aim to understand are deeply embedded in everyday practices, narratives, and embodied relationships to land. TEK cannot be accessed solely through texts; it requires life histories, oral narratives, and long-term presence.

Scholars such as Ingold (2000), Jackson (1998), Stoller (1989), and Desjarlais (1992) have shown that knowing is an embodied, sensory, and situated process—emerging through active engagement, movement, and bodily attunement rather than through disembodied cognition. Immersive participation offers a pathway into the lived experiences of people whose ways of knowing are situated in a lifelong, embodied relationship with the landscape. It also strengthens rapport and mutual trust, which is crucial in Indigenous communities where knowledge is produced and transmitted relationally. Most importantly, it aligns with Indigenous pedagogy, where knowledge is acquired through embodied experience and “being there” rather than learning from spaces removed from its context.

The primary methods of data collection include semi-structured interviews, ethnographic conversations, immersive participation, and observation. We utilized an interview guide and recorders to document key information, including stories, folktales, songs, and other oral narrations that serve as the basis of our report. Elders of the communities, who are considered the authoritative figures in TEK, inform the theoretical and epistemological foundation of this study. While the situatedness of the interview is paramount, we also consider the comfort and autonomy of the elders to ensure the documentation of rich ethnographic data. Therefore, some interviews and ethnographic conversations are conducted in the homes of the elders, while others are situated in the context of the subject, such as in the fields, morungs (traditional boys' dormitories), at the border, and at cultural and historical sites. This allows TEK bearers to maintain agency with minimal intervention from researchers in either the narrative or theoretical construction.

The immersive participatory method is inherently linked with observation, necessitating the involvement of researchers in the daily activities of the villagers. This includes participating in their festivals, fishing, and engaging in farming activities. In the Noklak district, we went fishing with the youths of Dan village and engaged in sowing paddy with the Choklangan farmers. While it strengthens community bonds, it provides insight into and experiences of the community's relationship with the landscape and its elements in the context of climate change.

Akin to Malinowski's (1922) formulation of participant observation, this method shares certain ethnographic commitments but deviates from its conventional practice in important ways, owing to our positionality as Indigenous researchers rather than adherence to a prolonged, year-long fieldwork model. It is essential to recognize that we all come from different cultural backgrounds, which complicates our ability to access other communities and build trust regarding how their culture and traditions are portrayed in a document that will be available to a global audience.

Given the complexity of the Naga social and political structure, our positionality remains dynamic. This shifting relational positionality arises from the interaction of our identities with social structures and reflects our methodology, which aims to amplify Indigenous voices in knowledge production. In each district, one of our team members becomes an insider, while the rest remain outsiders—a setup which Miguel Zavala (2013) refers to as “outsiders-within” (p. 61). However, Beverley Mullings (1999) argues that the boundary between the insider and outsider binary is highly unstable and overlooks the dynamic

nature of positionality, which is a reality experienced by Indigenous scholars within complex social structures. In addition, a Naga identifies themselves by village rather than tribe—village identity resonates stronger than a tribal one (Woodthorpe, 1881; Wouters, 2017). Thus, a Naga researcher in another village of their own tribe will still partially remain an outsider. Even so, insiderhood is partial, situated, and unevenly distributed by clan, gender, age, and other social statuses.

Recognizing that our positionality varied across different field sites, we adopted a consciously non-authoritative approach during our engagement. Even when one of us shared tribal affiliations with the host community, we entered the village as newcomers rather than as insiders with special knowledge. It is indeed true that we are new to the Indigenous terms and concepts as individuals from the younger generation, stripped of traditional ecological knowledge in pursuit of Western education, and have hardly reconnected to the land. This methodological choice was designed to acknowledge the community's equal authority in shaping the research process and determining what knowledge could be shared.

Decolonial Research Orientation

Decolonial methodology challenges Eurocentric assumptions about knowledge production and rejects extractive modes of fieldwork. Following Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) critique of disciplinary coloniality, the research positions Indigenous participants as co-theorists whose insights shape both the interpretive direction and the conceptual language of the study. Indigenous epistemologies play a crucial role in guiding the ethical and ontological commitments in our research. They emphasize the importance of reciprocity, relationality, and the co-production of knowledge. Our positionality as Indigenous researchers, shaped by Western academic training, has been a significant aspect of our reflective engagement throughout this research. Together, these theoretical foundations create a critical yet constructive framework that supports a decolonial and community-led approach to knowledge production.

As a decolonial project, we attempt to untangle the assumptions of the colonial epistemic stance that continue to shape Naga society in every aspect of our lives. We have to dissociate colonial epistemologies from the Indigenous ways of knowing, where the former still impose a hegemonic chokehold on the latter due to the persistence of colonial institutions in the postcolonial states. This also includes the disentanglement of insider authority from epistemic humility—our status as Indigenous researchers does not mean we represent our community, nor do we claim the knowledge produced during our research as solely our own. We highlight the collaborative creation and production of knowledge, facilitating its documentation and organization for a broader audience, while acknowledging all biases and fallibility.

Representation is partial, risky, and politically charged, especially in Indigenous societies like that of the Nagas, due to our complex colonial and political history. It is never a neutral act of description but a form of power that produces meaning, fixes identities, and enables governance (Hall, 1997; Cohn, 1996). Tribe, as we see today among the Naga communities, is a colonial construct; the British reified fluid, heterogeneous societies into bounded, governable units to rule more efficiently (Devalle, 1996; Damodaran, 2006). Scholars have demonstrated that even well-meaning acts of representation can perpetuate colonial violence by speaking for Indigenous peoples, translating localized knowledge into authoritative academic language, and silencing marginalized voices (Spivak, 1988; Clifford, 1986). In light of this, it is necessary to untangle representation from responsibility. Instead of claiming sole responsibility for representing Indigenous experiences, this study emphasizes relational accountability, reflexivity, and the limitations of representation, acknowledging that knowledge is co-produced and historically situated.

Another misconception is the association of decolonization with cultural romanticism aimed at recovering the pure past, freezing tradition, or defending everything ‘Indigenous’ as inherently good. Misconstruing decolonization as a return to a “pure” past risks reinstating the very colonial hegemony that fixed Indigenous cultures and traditions within a hierarchical model of social evolution. Similarly, labeling Indigenous resurgence movements as “inauthentic” reproduces the same problem of asserting epistemic authority over Indigenous knowledge systems (Clifford, 2013). This compels us to tread carefully while dealing with certain cultural elements that are suppressed or encouraged within the community.

Bearing all these in mind, we have established that research in the Indigenous context is not an activity—it is a relationship. Western conventional methods prioritize consent forms, interviews, and data ownership to justify and legitimize research. Of course, these are important to research, but Indigenous ethics prioritize trust, kinship, long-term accountability, and reciprocity. Even as Indigenous scholars, we spent a year building trust with the communities we aimed to collaborate with. While access to the community could have been facilitated through formal administrative channels, such an approach was deliberately avoided. Relying on bureaucratic authority for entry risks creating a form of forced collaboration, where participation is shaped by hierarchical power relations rather than voluntary engagement. Given the colonial genealogy of bureaucratic governance in the region, such mediation may also reproduce asymmetries of authority that contradict the ethical principles of decolonial research.

Language, Meaning, and Interpretation

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1987) accurately identified language as a site of epistemic violence, recognizing it as a vehicle for cultural identity, memory, and knowledge that can serve as an entry point for hegemony. He rightly pointed out that the colonial education system

alienates indigenous languages, and using colonial languages as the standard to represent indigenous realities leads to the internalization of epistemic dominance by indigenous communities. This critique is essential for guiding research towards the goal of indigenous intellectual sovereignty, situating knowledge production within the epistemic frameworks of the communities involved.

Indigenous researchers must critically examine their own position to reflect on how their formal education may influence or limit their understanding of TEK. However, this reflection is challenging in regions like Nagaland, where the legacy of linguistic imperialism, perpetuated by post-colonial state structures, continues to shape their cognitive frameworks.

Colonial writers such as J. H. Hutton (1921a, 1921b), J. P. Mills (1922, 1926, 1937), Fürer-Haimendorf (1939), and James Johnstone (1896) wrote about Indigenous societies in the Naga Hills, but they did so in a crude and extractive manner by constructing ethnographic representations of Naga lifeways. As Naga scholars emerged, they widely criticized these approaches for misrepresenting their cultures, and the ethics and methodologies of the colonial researchers faced significant scrutiny.

In Nagaland, similar issues can arise due to the region's linguistic diversity and the internalized interpretation of our culture through a colonial lens. Although Nagamese is a common pidgin language that facilitates communication, translating native languages into Nagamese and then into English often proves inefficient for conveying complex ideas, as important semantic and cultural nuances are frequently lost in the process.

During the transcription and translation process, we noticed that certain words had distinct meanings across the Naga languages. For instance, the word "naa" was used by a Ho elder to mean "to govern," while in Ho Naga it signifies both "child" and "to nurture." This difference, though seemingly minor, highlights the relational ethics embedded in Indigenous language systems, where governance and care are linguistically connected.

Paying attention to such linguistic nuances became central to our interpretive method, as meaning in oral tradition is often conveyed not only by words but also through their relationships to other words and forms of expression. These subtleties demonstrate how Indigenous political thought is rooted in the grammar of kinship and reciprocity, presenting an epistemological alternative to Western notions of rule as hierarchical control.

In Wui village, located in the Noklak district, elders recounted an instance in which a researcher misgendered a character in a local folktale. Further inquiry revealed that the interviews had been conducted in Nagamese, a pidgin language that lacks gendered pronouns. This made misidentification a plausible outcome of translation rather than

simply a mistake by the researcher. Additionally, several Naga languages do not use gendered pronouns, making gender attribution highly context-dependent. While such errors may seem minor, they highlight a broader and more significant issue: the challenge of translating Indigenous concepts into English when no equivalent terms exist. In these situations, translators must approximate meaning using the closest available English vocabulary. This process can lead to epistemic distortion, as Indigenous concepts are often forced to fit into Western understanding and frameworks. The cumulative effect is a failure of epistemic justice, where alternative ways of knowing are subdued and colonial hierarchies of knowledge are unintentionally reinforced.

Even today, dominant translation practices continue to influence how Indigenous concepts are interpreted and understood in village contexts. This often occurs through local guides and community members themselves. A common example is the use of the term "Satan" to refer to spirits. This practice can be traced back to the specific dynamics of Christian proselytization in Nagaland. This use of terminology is not just a matter of convenience; it reflects a deeper transformation in which the Indigenous concept of "spirit" is systematically demonized to align it with a Christian worldview. Conversely, names of feminine spirits or deities are sometimes used to refer to the Christian God, who is typically envisioned as male (Thong, 2012). This produces an additional disconnect between Indigenous beliefs and the theological frameworks that have been introduced.

Furthermore, some Nagas refer to their ancestral religion as "demon worship," which is a term introduced through proselytization efforts aimed at discouraging traditional practices. This framing is consistent with colonial and missionary representations of Indigenous religions, as noted by various scholars (Balcomb, 2021; Lovejoy, 1994; Nweke, 2022; Tamang & Pegu, 2025). In our fieldwork, we observed that some people view the animist tradition as belonging to the dark ages, while they regard Christianity as a belief system that has brought them into the light. Others distinguished between the "Spirit Era" and the "Christian Era" to describe the shift in religious paradigms. Understanding this perspective is crucial for grasping the dynamics of religion and the epistemological transformations that have occurred as a result of colonialism.

The consequences of this shift in understanding are not only semantic but also material and ecological in nature. Communities have abandoned songs, rituals, and offerings associated with spirits as they strive to become "civilized Christians," seeking salvation and protection from the very spirits of the land with whom they once established reciprocal relationships. For example, in Noklak, farmers traditionally sacrificed chickens, pigs, or mithun (*Bos frontalis*) to the spirits of the land before starting their cultivation. This practice was intended to ensure abundant harvests and prevent misfortune. The displacement of such practices by Western Christian theology has unintended consequences of spiritual severance from the land.

The reorientation of value regimes allows people to clear forests and cultivate land without fear of retribution for actions that, in their ancestral religion, would have been considered transgressions. While various factors influence contemporary resource exploitation, it has intensified alongside a significant moral and ontological reorientation of Indigenous perception of the local ecology. As a result, land is now viewed not as a spiritually relational entity but as inert and readily available for use. However, this should not be understood as a total reconfiguration of the epistemic landscape; rather, traditional ecological knowledge endures in a syncretic form entangled with modern values, a condition that can be easily misread or oversimplified.

Additionally, the perception of Indigenous religious practices as "demon worship" presents a significant methodological challenge, particularly when our research depends on translators who may inadvertently use language influenced by missionary perspectives. Our ongoing focus on language is not merely a procedural issue; it is also an epistemological effort. Although the influence of proselytization is not homogeneous across different communities, we aim to resist the epistemic dominance of colonial influence, seeking to reconstruct TEK on the communities' own terms.

To reduce the likelihood of epistemic distortion, we conduct interviews in local languages and use both audio and visual tools to enhance communication. Nagaland's linguistic diversity poses challenges even for Indigenous researchers, which is why we collaborate with local organizations such as Students' Unions and schoolteachers. It is crucial to reevaluate findings through visualization and contextual reconstruction, particularly when discussing ancestral rituals that have been abandoned and become unfamiliar to our cultural upbringing.

Decolonial research is not confined to fieldwork alone, but extends into the processes of translation, transcription, and analysis. In this report, elders' narratives are preserved as closely as possible to their original form. As a result, Indigenous terms and edonyms are retained alongside English translations wherever necessary. For example, edonyms are preferred over exonyms, especially when referring to the Ho Naga, including village names, unless the elders themselves explicitly employ an alternative usage. This practice acknowledges Indigenous self-naming as an epistemic choice rather than a stylistic one or the researchers' endorsement in the context of internal toponymic politics.

At times, zero derivation (or conversion)—where a word shifts grammatical category, such as from noun to verb, without formal modification—is cautiously employed to mirror the poetic and performative qualities of storytelling. While such usage remains limited in this report, it offers a way to resist the embedding of Indigenous expression into rigid English grammatical forms.

The retention of local terms also serves another purpose: to preserve layers of meaning that are otherwise lost in translation. Directional verbs, for instance, function as a semantic core in Naga languages and are an integral part of everyday conversation. In the Ho language, *tla* denotes movement toward a lower elevation, *ka* refers to movement toward a hilltop or peak, *chhan* indicates uphill movement, *set* signals eastward movement, *tu* westward movement, and *vang* expresses movement toward home. These verbs operate specifically within the context of travel; in cases of short-distance movement, their meaning is shaped by context and the speaker's position. These distinctions are not only grammatical but also represent a way of orienting oneself in a landscape-embedded world.

Attending to these nuances requires more than linguistic competence; it demands ongoing collaboration with the communities involved. For this reason, this decolonial project demands a community-led approach in which Indigenous interlocutors play a central role in interpreting narratives and shaping analytical outcomes. Knowledge production, in this sense, is understood as a collaborative process rooted in relational accountability, as opposed to an extractive interpretation.

Community-led Approach

This section explains the role of communities as partners in our research and the ethical considerations that arise from this approach. It also outlines the methods and procedures used in the field, as this approach is essential for explaining how fieldwork is conducted. In a community-led approach, community members contribute not only logistical support but also actively shape the epistemic, ethical, methodological, and political aspects of the research.

Their involvement spans co-defining research questions and ethical boundaries to interpreting findings, exercising the right to refuse participation, and governing the distribution of knowledge. Another justification for employing this approach is the prevention of the elite capture of community knowledge. As a result, the research becomes a relational and collaborative process, rather than an extractive one.

In Nagaland, each village operates as an autonomous entity in making decisions that impact the community. To access the community, it is crucial to obtain approval from both the tribal body and the village leaders. While we could seek permission from the district administration, this does not ensure community participation in the research. The social structure in Nagaland is distinct from the state administration, despite some similarities and overlapping functions.

This makes it evident that understanding this structure, along with the annual agricultural cycle, is essential for planning field trips. Due to the monsoon season, poor road

conditions, and the villagers' involvement in agriculture, there is only a limited timeframe for fieldwork. Maintaining constant communication with our contacts and stakeholders has proven invaluable for acquiring information and building trust. Creating such a supportive environment enhances the effectiveness of the data collection process.

The community-led approach revealed aspects of TEK that were not initially included in the project's scope. For example, concerns about border histories and relics and memories from the Second World War surfaced as significant issues for the community (Katiry et al., 2024). These topics provided a richer understanding of the everyday lives and historical awareness of borderland communities. The community-led approach is an effective strategy for shifting power to the people being researched. It acknowledges their agency and knowledge, promoting the co-creation of knowledge. This approach aids in the decolonization of research by emphasizing an epistemological perspective that highlights indigenous and marginalized knowledges.

In the context of analysis and writing, Roos (2024) highlighted that while researchers on climate and environmental issues stress the importance of co-writing with communities, few succeed due to challenges like publication pressures and logistical constraints. In the Earthkeepers project, limited fieldwork time and connectivity issues made full co-writing impractical. We discussed how to shape the report to resonate with both the community and academic audiences, but separate documents were not feasible because of time limitations.

In this report, we aim to preserve the poetic qualities of oral histories while following decolonial ethics by centering elders' voices and using long block quotations. Although formal co-authorship wasn't possible, the analysis was developed through ongoing conversations and shared decision-making. Some complex concepts required input from multiple community members, and we remained attentive to positionality, emphasizing respect and care throughout the process.

David-Chavez and Gavin (2018) conducted a global assessment of climate research involving TEK holders. Their analysis revealed that about 87% of studies used TEK in extractive ways, with limited community involvement or decision-making power. Only a few projects provided benefits or followed ethical protocols, ensuring community access to findings. In contrast, research developed in partnership with Indigenous communities showed stronger engagement. They emphasized the social implications of research design and offered guidelines for more equitable collaboration. Drawing on their framework, Table 1 presents an adapted scale for assessing Indigenous community participation based on degrees of authority within the research process.

Table 1

Levels of Community Participation in Research	
Level	Description of Community Role
Contractual	Community members are hired to perform specific tasks, while researchers retain full control over planning and decision-making.
Consultative	Community members provide input or feedback, but final decisions remain with the research team.
Collaborative	Researchers and community members work together throughout the project, although researchers still guide most major decisions.
Collegial	Community members and researchers jointly participate, with community members leading many decisions related to the research process.
Indigenous-led	Research is grounded in Indigenous worldviews and priorities; community members direct the process and hold primary decision-making authority.

Note. Adapted from David-Chavez and Gavin (2018), which in turn was adapted primarily from Biggs (1989) and Johnson et al. (2003).

Based on this scale, the Earthkeepers project would be categorized as “Collaborative,” where researchers guide decisions while working with community members. Due to time constraints, greater community participation was not feasible. However, the Earthkeepers experience offers a valuable blueprint for future non-extractive TEK research in Nagaland, with potential for increased community involvement.

The Earthkeepers project ultimately demonstrated that, despite structural and time constraints, it is possible to carry out Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) research that is both rigorous and non-extractive. This approach can serve as a foundation for more fully Indigenous-led methodologies in the future.

Access, Refusal, and Community Authority

Accessing Naga communities is complex and influenced by various historical and political factors. A significant aspect of this complexity is the legacy of exploitative research and ongoing concerns about how Naga societies are portrayed to outsiders. As a result, there is a strong skepticism toward academic research, especially when it is conducted by individuals or institutions viewed as external to the community.

Within the research team, two members belong to the collaborating communities—one from each community. This insider perspective initially made it easier to establish entry and engage in dialogue. However, access was eventually denied in one community, despite having an insider researcher. This refusal stemmed from a formal resolution passed by the community's tribal body, the Pochury Hoho, which limits research activities exclusively to community members.

In Zhavame under the Phek district, the Students' Union actively documents cultural heritage by producing books and booklets. This initiative promotes self-sufficiency within the community, reducing reliance on external researchers or funding. A common theme in both cases is the reclamation of the indigenous voice and the right to self-determination.

This refusal can be interpreted in two analytically distinct yet interconnected ways. On one hand, it signifies a sense of loss, especially considering that the number of elders who possess extensive TEK is declining. The inability to engage with this knowledge highlights the long-term consequences of extractive research practices, which have created a level of mistrust so profound that even a community-led approach—rooted in equality, collaboration, and shared authority—was insufficient to ensure participation.

On the other hand, this form of gatekeeping actively exercises community authority. By regulating who is permitted to conduct research and under what conditions, the community takes control over knowledge production, representation, and historical narration. From this perspective, refusal is not an obstacle to research; instead, it is a political and ethical act—an expression of self-determination and the right to write one's own history on one's own terms.

Narrative Authority

Oral histories and TEK require careful ethical consideration due to potential controversies surrounding details such as spellings, names, and variations in stories. Many individuals in the field expressed concerns about the implications of misrepresentation, highlighting the importance of reciprocal engagement to avoid distress. One key issue is narrative control, where certain individuals or groups claim authority over specific stories. Elders may hesitate to share tales they believe they don't have the right to narrate, especially in the context of oral tradition, which allows for variations.

Folktales often change over time due to their oral nature, which means that each member of the community may have a slightly different version of the same story (Kodesh, 2007). When recounting events in these stories, the tellers provide their own interpretations and explanations, either directly or indirectly (Cortazzi, 2001). Colonial documentation has historically shaped these narratives, often solidifying one version as authoritative.

The focus is on indigenous communities achieving consensus, but favoring a single narrative can undermine the creativity and fluidity of oral tradition. We do not seek to adjudicate between competing community narratives or to produce a unified account; instead, we emphasize plurality, contextualize disagreement, and resist the imposition of artificial consensus.

Narrative claims about origin, migration, and ancestral stories can be contentious due to their ties to land ownership and political power. Community engagement is essential in documenting these sensitive topics, and clear boundaries around story ownership are vital to avoid controversy. While descendants may claim rights to narratives about historical figures, clan affiliations can complicate ownership, especially regarding village foundations and tribal origins.

Elders participate in research with an understanding of narrative authority dynamics, and it is important to respect their trust, particularly with sacred and secret knowledge. In our group interview with elders in the Noklak district, we learned an origin story that remains confidential despite its richness. Our access was granted due to our connection through shared residence—although temporary—but it would be unethical to divulge or publish this story.

The impact of proselytization has shaped the understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of pre-Christian traditions among Indigenous communities. Many elders avoid discussing their past practices, believing that recalling them could lead to illness. For instance, an elderly man with headhunting tattoos abstained from sharing his history and past practices, which is a form of consecrating this knowledge. Such silence serves as a form of consecration, where the past is seen as powerful, dangerous, or unsuitable for casual narration. In this context, refusal represents an assertion of moral agency rather than merely an absence of knowledge. Documenting this information would enhance our research; however, ethical considerations regarding individual choice and community consensus take priority.

Fieldwork Design: Community Engagement, Consent, Collaboration, and Reciprocity

This project is designed as a three-year study (2023–2025), with fieldwork being conducted in a phased and relational manner instead of as a single, isolated event for data collection. Each phase builds on the previous one, in response to the ethical and practical requirements of a community-led research approach, particularly in contexts affected by historical epistemic injustices. The fieldwork schedule is shown in Table 2. In total, the fieldwork produced a substantial body of data comprising an estimated 2,500 photographs, 40 semi-structured interviews, approximately 50 hours of video recordings, and 70 audio-recorded narratives.

Phase I: Community Engagement and Relationship Building (2023)

During the first year of the project, we focused on establishing contact with the communities, building rapport, and gauging their interest in participating in the research. Our initial fieldwork aimed to develop trust and pinpoint areas where the communities might be open to a collaborative approach to knowledge production. This process involved making multiple visits, engaging in informal conversations, and signing MoUs rather than immediately collecting data.

Meluri and Noklak, two border districts of Nagaland, were the primary focus of this study. This choice was influenced in part by the fact that two members of the research team belong to tribes indigenous to these areas. While being insiders helped initiate conversations, it did not ensure access to the community. This highlights that community approval is a collective and political matter rather than an individual one.

Phase II: Stakeholder Engagement and Identification of Knowledge Holders

Where permission was granted, the research was conducted with close involvement from key community stakeholders. These included Village Councils, *gaonburas*¹, Students' Union leaders, and teachers. Their understanding of the research objectives and the potential benefits to the community was crucial in shaping the project's reception. We do not rely solely on stakeholders; we also engage in conversations with community members who are interested in the research's aims and objectives.

Stakeholders actively facilitated introductions, identified suitable knowledge holders and elders, and provided guidance on sensitive topics and ethical boundaries. Recognizing the urgent need to document TEK—especially given the decreasing number of knowledgeable elders—often motivated community participation and garnered collective support for the research.

Phase III: Data Collection and Interview Process

Data collection was conducted through interviews and conversations shaped by community norms and expectations. Informed consent was treated as an ongoing process rather than a one-time formality. Participants received full information in a consent form about the aims of the research and retained the right to decide what information could be recorded, how it could be used, and whether it could be made publicly accessible.

A lengthy interview can be a challenging experience for people in villages, particularly

¹*Gaonburas are village elders who uphold Naga customary laws and advise the Village Council. They represent the state government at the village level and hold certain administrative and judicial powers. Established during the colonial era, they bridge the gap between customary authority and formal governance (Wouters, 2018).*

when it is scheduled without considering their daily routines. It is essential to respect the interviewee's time and comfort, even if they do not voice their discomfort. For example, interviewing women in the presence of their husbands or elders may not yield effective results, as women often feel more reserved due to the prevailing social norms. The location of the interview should be chosen for the interviewee's convenience.

Importantly, the context in which an interview takes place can significantly influence the quality of the data collected. The mood of the respondents, their ability to demonstrate knowledge, and their spatial comfort can all be affected by the setting. For instance, we interviewed a farmer as he sat on a bamboo bench next to his hut in his field. This environment made him feel more at ease in front of the camera and Zoom recorders. One of us sat next to him, engaging in a casual conversation about his farming experiences. This interview was situated, as he could easily demonstrate indigenous farming practices and clarify any unfamiliar terms.

In this instance, the situatedness and embeddedness of the interview reduced spatial and temporal tension, although we still needed to be mindful of the interviewee's routine. We actively engaged in everyday activities, such as sowing paddy in the fields of Choklangan, attending church services, and fishing with community members in Dan. In February 2024, we attended the Apoksah community festival in the Meluri district and assisted in documenting the Nyavü Khü festival in Lephori at the invitation of the Village Council Chairman.

Additionally, we organized and took part in workshops and seminars in Reguri and Choklangan. We participated in forest conservation efforts in collaboration with Bano Haralu and the Wildlife Conservation Society of India in Reguri, Meluri district, by assisting the community in organizing a seminar and conserving the Tupukhasü forest. These experiences not only helped us build relationships of trust and mutual support but also allowed us to immerse ourselves in the community's daily life. This immersion provided us with a deeper understanding of how meanings are generated, shared, and negotiated in practice.

Sustained participation builds trust, reduces power asymmetries, and shapes research questions based on lived experiences rather than externally imposed agendas. This deep engagement grounds interpretation in shared experiences, facilitates ethical accountability through relationships, and supports decolonial research by recognizing that knowledge is situated, embodied, and collectively produced rather than owned by the researcher.

Phase IV: Data Storage, Reciprocity, and Long-Term Commitment

All data generated through the project are jointly owned by the communities and the Highland Institute, where the research team is based. Community members have the right to access the data at the Institute office in Kohima. In addition, data are typically returned to villages either as printed reports or in digital form (e.g., on hard drives). This shared-access model challenges extractive research practices by ensuring that knowledge circulates beyond academic spaces.

Reciprocity is a key component of the project's methodological design. In addition to data collection, the latter years of the study (2024–2025) will focus on verifying, distilling, and returning research materials to the participating communities. This process includes sharing findings, responding to community feedback, and ensuring that the research meaningfully contributes to local efforts in cultural preservation and historical documentation. Finally, a copy of this report will be given to the collaborating communities during the dissemination program in January 2026, where stakeholders from all these communities will be present.

Such reciprocal arrangements are essential for sustaining long-term partnerships with communities that have experienced epistemic injustice and have consequently developed justified suspicions toward research initiatives. This research distinguishes between academic success, typically measured by publications, and community accountability, which is rooted in ongoing responsibility to the involved communities. The study prioritizes ethical obligations to participants over academic productivity, recognizing that not all knowledge from fieldwork is meant for publication. This distinction reflects a decolonial commitment to relational accountability rather than extractive scholarly validation.

Table 2: Fieldwork Schedule, Events, and Locations (2023–2025)

Fieldwork Phases	Dates/Month	Location	Purpose / Nature of Engagement
Phase I & II	March 2023	Kohima	Fieldwork Planning: Contacting stakeholders and community leaders
	April 7-14, 2023	Noklak District	Preliminary Fieldwork
	April 8, 2023	Dan Village	Meeting with Stakeholders
	April 10, 2023	Wui Village	Meeting with Stakeholders
	April 10, 2023	Peshu Village	Meeting with Stakeholders
	April 11, 2023	Langnok Village	Meeting with Stakeholders
	January - February, 2024	Phek & Meluri District	Preliminary Fieldwork
	January 25-28, 2024	Zhavame Village	Audio & Video Documentation in collaboration with Ekologos (Anna Ziya and Sholu Movi)
	January 29-30, 2024	Reguri Village	Meeting with Stakeholders
	February 4, 2024	Apoksah Area	Chyangthakhu Festival
February 7-10, 2024	Lepthori Village	Video Documentation of Nyavü Khü (festival) in collaboration with Ekologos (Anna Ziya and Sholu Movi)	
Phase III	November 2024	Reguri Village	Meeting with Stakeholders
	Phase I & II	Akhen Village	Interview with an elder
	November 20, 2024	Reguri Village	Participated in the School Annual Feast and Farewell Program
	March 24, 2025	Reguri Village	Climate Change and Forest Conservation Seminar
	April 2025	Noklak Village	Fieldwork
	April 5-15, 2025	Choklangan & Wui	Fieldwork
	April 14, 2025	Choklangran Village	Young Guardians of Nature: Climate and Wildlife Conservation Workshop
	April 16-22, 2025	Dan Village	Fieldwork
Phase IV	May-June, 2025	Kohima Village	Organisation, distilling, and review of data by the communities, Data analysis, Dissemination of data to Lepthori
	January 19, 2026	Kohima	Dissemination Program at the Highland Institute

CHAPTER 3

THE KHIAMNIUNGAN NAGA: FROM ANCESTRAL PATHS TO CHANGING CLIMATES

Settlement, Mobility, and Historical Memory among the Khamniungan

Introduction

This section traces early settlement, migration, and historical memory among the Khamniungan, focusing particularly on Wui village. Drawing on oral accounts shared by elders, it examines how patterns of mobility gradually gave way to more permanent settlement, how language and village identities formed, and how practices such as iron extraction, agriculture, and warfare shaped relations between villages. These narratives highlight the close connections between land, history, and social life, and reveal how the past continues to inform present understandings of identity and place.

Early Settlement and Migration

Elders in Wui village consistently situate their history within a longer period of mobility and gradual settlement. According to their accounts, the forefathers of the Khamniungan were not permanently settled in one place for extended periods, and as a result, much of this early history is remembered only in fragments. Elders explain that it was in and around the present-day Noklak area that their ancestors first



View of Choklangan Village, Noklak District

began to remain in one location for longer periods, marking the beginning of more stable settlement. From this period onward, people began speaking what is now identified as the Wui dialect. While elders associate the emergence of the dialect with settlement in Wui, they emphasize that its precise origins remain unknown and that no single origin story exists. Rather, the dialect is understood to have developed gradually over time as people lived together in this place.

Among the Khamniungan villages, Wui is linguistically distinct to the point that its language is largely unintelligible to speakers from other Khamniungan villages. In fact, it

is considered entirely different. Elders in Wui note that speakers from nearby villages such as Panso and Nokhu may partially understand the Wui dialect, although comprehension remains limited. There was never an effort to promote the learning of the dialect beyond the village. Instead, elders recall that other villages held strong beliefs about the dangers of learning it. A widely shared story suggests that anyone who learns the Wui dialect will die. Within oral histories, this belief is sometimes linked to earlier inter-village hostilities. Whether understood as fear, rumor, or social boundary-making, these beliefs contributed to the linguistic isolation of Wui and reinforced distinctions between villages.

In conversations with elders, Wui village is repeatedly described as one of the oldest settlements in the region, a place where land, history, and identity are deeply intertwined. The village's historical significance is closely associated with iron extraction and early craftsmanship. Elders describe a site known locally as Malai De Lagai, where iron ore was once extracted. Although the quantity of metal obtained was limited, it was used carefully, primarily to forge daos for clearing fields and agricultural work. Elders emphasize that at a time when neighboring villages were still cooking in bamboo containers, the people of Wui had already begun making clay pots for everyday use. Blacksmithing and dao-making are said to have originated in Wui before spreading to other villages such as Choklangan and Langnok, where these practices continue today.



The Earthkeepers team and local guides at the ore site in Wui

Oral histories also recall tensions surrounding the ore site. Elders recount that people from the neighbouring village, believing that Wui would become wealthy due to access to iron, became jealous and deliberately blocked the extraction site using animal waste. Following this incident, villagers say that ore could no longer be found in the same way. The site itself was once a deep hollow filled with water, where people swam and bathed. During winter, when water levels dropped, the depth of the hollow became visible, and the mud collected from the area felt unusually heavy, reinforcing beliefs that it contained metal. Over time, however, the site became exhausted, particularly after geologists extracted material, and villagers now say that no usable ore remains.

The area still fills with water, turning red only when it dries, while remaining clear during the summer months. Elders note that the outlet of the water source lies underground and that the sound of flowing water can still be heard beneath the surface. Multiple and sometimes contradictory stories circulate about the site. Some elders claim that daos were made from metal extracted there, while others deny that any metal was ever obtained. Another commonly shared belief holds that only those with good fortune could find long pieces of metal, while others would find only short fragments. These varied accounts reflect the layered and contested nature of memory surrounding Malai De Lagai.

Today, iron is no longer sourced locally. Metal is brought from Tuensang, and daos are often made from recycled materials, including vehicle springs from pickup trucks. Yet the memories associated with iron extraction, settlement, warfare, and language continue to shape how elders understand Wui's past and its place within the broader Khamniungan landscape.

Origin stories also link Wui to neighboring villages. Elders in Choklangan recount that the Khamniungan first emerged at a place called Lāngnyūngan², where a Nyuk-thang³ still stands. According to these accounts, Choklangan was established on land granted by Wui, given by the Wui Pao⁴. Before settling there, their forefathers lived in Nokhu village, later moving outward as the population increased. One Wui narrative explains that the Chokla River was once called Choklamong, named after a stag (chok) that was swept away by its waters.

In Dan Village, an elder mentioned that the origin of the Khamniungan people can be traced back to their ancestral village, which was known as Tsuwao, or Khamngan. It is from this place that the Khamniungan people began their journey.

Headhunting, Warfare, and Inter-Village Relations

A distinct set of social and ritual practices governed headhunting and warfare among the Khamniungan. Headhunting was never undertaken on personal impulse; it was reserved for serious and socially sanctioned reasons. Elders explained that such actions were appropriate if demands were ignored, enemies initiated conflict, or disputes involved matters beyond a single village. Minor offenses, such as theft or small quarrels, did not justify headhunting.

²*The Lāngnyūngan river is a major river in Nagaland's Noklak district, crucial for local agriculture and fishing.*

³*Nyuk'thang is composed of two words: nyuk, meaning "village," and thang, meaning "place." Together, the term refers to a place associated with the village or a place of origin.*

⁴*Pao means "owner." In this context, Wui Pao refers to the recognized owners of land or territory associated with Wui village.*

Following a successful headhunting expedition, strict rituals and periods of purification were observed. If someone had killed a human being, they would isolate themselves in the morung (bachelor's dormitory) for three days. In the case of taking an enemy's head, the isolation period extended to ten days. Additionally, a person who crossed over to what is now Myanmar (Burma) to acquire a head would not return directly home.

Instead, the head was temporarily hidden by the roadside, then buried under sand near a riverside, and finally tied to a thorny tree called khela pai, usually located near the *morung*⁵. After completing these rituals, the individual observed the required period of seclusion and purification. (personal communication, Dan Village elder, [17/04/2025]).



Skulls from the headhunting era, stored beneath a tree root in Choklangan village

During this period, relations between villages were characterized by a combination of conflict and cooperation. Elders recounted frequent warfare, especially during the headhunting era. Both Wui and Choklangan villages were reportedly attacked by Sanglao village, prompting them to form a pragmatic alliance against a shared enemy. Such alliances were based on immediate necessity rather than enduring trust. Honour, bravery, and reputation were central values, with warriors seeking recognition through their deeds. Those who achieved the most kills were remembered as the most courageous.

Elders described two primary forms of killing. The first involved stealth attacks conducted quietly while villagers were working or sleeping, followed by a rapid retreat. The second involved open warfare, in which warriors organized and marched openly into enemy territory. In both cases, no distinction was made based on age or gender—children, women, elders, and young adults were all vulnerable to attack. Elders recounted these events with solemn gravity, emphasizing that these practices were highly regulated and socially embedded rather than arbitrary acts of violence (personal communication, Wui Village elder, [11/04/2025]).



A Morung in Choklangan Village

⁵A Morung is a traditional Naga (Northeast India) youth dormitory, a vital socio-cultural institution serving as a school for life skills, cultural transmission, community defense, and social bonding for unmarried young men (and sometimes girls).

Belief, Ritual, and Cosmology

The Khamniungan Nagas of Wui village historically understood the world as inhabited by both visible and invisible forces, where human actions, natural cycles, and supernatural events were deeply intertwined. Cosmology, ritual, and social authority were closely connected, guiding agricultural practices, communal life, and moral conduct. Central to this worldview are stories of Gin Pai, or the “Mother of Darkness,” which recount periods of extraordinary environmental disturbance linked to human transgression and the restoration of social and ecological balance. These narratives illuminate how the community interpreted climatic anomalies, structured ritual authority, and maintained moral order before the advent of Christianity and modern governance. The following section examines these stories, the roles of ritual specialists such as the Meyo, and how ritual practice regulated agricultural and social life.

Khamniungan Cosmology and Moral Order

Gin Pai (“Mother of Darkness”) as Cosmological Memory

An elder in Wui village narrated the story of Gin Pai during a focus group discussion held one afternoon in his kitchen. The account situates cosmological belief within histories of mobility, conflict, and settlement, offering insight into how moral transgression, ritual authority, and environmental disorder are understood in Khamniungan thought.

According to the elder, Wui village was highly isolated in earlier times, and its dialect differed markedly from those of the surrounding villages. Because of frequent conflict, the people were unable to remain settled in one place for long. Villages were established temporarily and abandoned due to warfare or forced displacement. This history of movement, elders explain, accounts for why some narratives resemble those of neighboring communities while others remain distinct.

Approximately a hundred years after Wui’s initial settlement, a group of villagers traveled eastward toward what is now Myanmar in search of enemies. During one raid, they defeated another village and captured an elderly woman, remembered by some as Shaplo Pai. She was described as physically different, with fair skin and unusual hair. Rather than killing her immediately, they brought her back to Wui.

Each day at sunrise and sunset, the woman faced the sun and chanted unfamiliar sounds. Villagers could not determine whether she was praying or invoking a curse. Over time, fear grew that her actions were bringing misfortune upon the village. Eventually, the decision was made to kill her.

Near the present church site stood a large stone. A pit was dug beside it, and the woman was instructed to step inside and remove the remaining mud. Aware of her fate, she

reportedly said calmly, “I know you are going to kill me. It is alright; I will go in and take out the remaining mud.” As she entered the pit, villagers rolled the stone over her, burying her alive.

Elders recount that blood flowed from beneath the stone, an event interpreted as a powerful omen. Soon after, an extraordinary phenomenon occurred: darkness enveloped the land for three days and three nights. This event is remembered as Gin Pai, meaning “Mother of Darkness.” During this period, even dry firewood sprouted leaves and turned green. Only the houses of wealthy families and hunters, who kept animal and mithun (*Bos frontalis*) skulls, retained dry firewood, forcing others to rely on them for cooking. When villagers fetched water, they unwound thread along their path to ensure they could return home despite the complete darkness.

Desperate for the sun’s return, elders gathered at Nyangaitachi on the road toward Choklangan and called out repeatedly to the sun. After many failed attempts, the final call was answered, and the sun reappeared. Believing the settlement to be cursed, the villagers relocated, but a plague followed, killing many. Eventually, they returned to the original site.

During the darkness, only one man, *Pomai*⁶, possessed dry firewood, making his house a daily gathering place, particularly for women who came to pound rice. Over time, Pomai sexually harassed and assaulted several women. Fear prevented them from speaking until one woman arrived late to gather firewood and disclosed her experience to the others. Other women then admitted similar abuse, and together they informed their husbands.

Although enraged, the men did not kill Pomai directly, acknowledging his role in sustaining the village during the darkness. Instead, they devised a ritualized execution. Pomai was told he would be honored with the making of a rice-pounding plate and was asked to wear his ceremonial attire and lead the pulling (of the wooden beam), a role traditionally reserved for the owner. As villagers pulled the beam, they sang a call-and-response song

⁶*Pomai was the Meyo of the village at the time. The Meyo, chosen from the Meyo clan, is a traditional ritual authority responsible for conducting ceremonies related to agriculture, protection, and village well-being, acting as an intermediary between the community and the spirit world.*

⁷*The Meyo clan is regarded as a distinct clan in some villages, while in others it functions as a sub-clan under the Shiu. Not all members of the Meyo clan possess the authority to assume the role of priest; only certain individuals within the clan are recognized as having the ritual knowledge and legitimacy to perform these duties.*

debating revenge. At the final response, the rope was released, and the beam struck and killed Pomai. The site came to be known as Thamatalok.

Pomai's children, Alathai and Zebanthai, left the village for the Myanmar side, refusing to remain where their father had been killed. Following their departure, Wui's harvests declined. Elders explain that without a *Meyo*⁷, a ritual leader, agricultural cycles could not flourish.

The villagers later sought Pomai's children to restore ritual balance. The elder child declined due to an injured hand, sending the younger brother instead. The villagers brought a mithun as compensation. Guided by their sister's instructions, the younger brother identified a specific black mithun through ritual signs involving gooseberries and the sun's position. Upon accepting this mithun, he was installed as the new *Meyo*, after which agricultural productivity returned.

The stone associated with the woman's death was not believed to be cursed, but it was treated with respect. It was kept dry and handled carefully. Elders note that many such practices, including restrictions on food, drink, ritual objects, skulls, sacred trees, and stones, were abandoned with the arrival of Christianity. Log drums were discarded, traditional attire rejected, and sacred objects destroyed. Over time, pieces of the stone were broken off until little remained.

This narrative continues to be passed down as an account of moral transgression, cosmic disorder, and ritual restoration in Wui village.

Omens and Supernatural Transformations Associated with Gin Pai

Elders also recount other supernatural events linked to the Gin Pai period. At Nok Takia, a pine grove now maintained by the Student Union, a dog is said to have barked continuously into the darkness. After the light returned, the dog was found turned into stone.

In Choklangan, elders point to a wooden plate that is believed to have transformed into stone during the same period. These sites reinforce the memory of Gin Pai as a time when the boundaries between human, animal, and material worlds were altered.



A dog believed to have turned into stone during Gin Pai in Wui.



A wooden mortar, believed to have turned into stone in the fields of present-day Choklangan.

Ritual Authority and Clan Roles in Communal Life

Elders explain that ritual authority in Wui was organized around three clans: Lam, Shiu, and Meyo. While Lam and Shiu had sub-clans, Meyo did not. Leadership was not hereditary but based on capability and ritual competence. The Meyo did not hold administrative power but functioned as a priest-like figure responsible for initiating key communal acts.

All major activities, including festivals, sowing, woodcutting, and harvesting, began with the Meyo. During harvest season, typically around September, the Meyo cut the first tree, followed by communal celebration and collective labor. Wood was not cut in summer due to termite damage; seasonal timing was guided by observation of the sun.

Although the Meyo led ritual acts, elders clarify that knowledge of lunar and solar movements was not exclusive to him. Any capable individual could observe celestial cues, and decisions were made collectively. The Meyo's role became essential at moments requiring ritual legitimacy. He performed the first sowing, built his field hut three days later, and only then did others follow. These practices coordinated labor and reinforced moral and ecological order.

Festivals, Kinship, and Social Bonds

Among the Khamniungan Nagas, social life is deeply intertwined with agricultural cycles, forest ecology, and ritual practice. Festivals, oral narratives, and communal activities structure both daily life and the wider seasonal calendar, reinforcing kinship ties, moral values, and collective memory. In Choklangan and Wui villages, elders recount how these practices guide sowing, harvesting, hunting, and social interactions, highlighting the relationship between humans, the forest, and unseen forces.

Traditional Calendars and Seasonal Knowledge

Months are remembered through ritual events rather than numerical sequencing. In Dan village, an elder narrated the names of the traditional calendar months in the local language. We were told that these names are not standardised and may vary across regions, even within the Khamniungan community itself. In contemporary explanations, elders often attempt to align the traditional calendar with the Gregorian calendar to aid understanding. For this reason, the months were explained to us beginning with the period that roughly corresponds to January; however, in this account, only the names of the traditional months are recorded.

- **Phonglih / Eiophonglih**

A period dedicated to cutting and clearing of forests in preparation for new jhum (shifting cultivation) fields.

- **Pephelih**
A period when rice stubble and remaining crop residues from old fields are cleared in preparation for sowing millets.. In certain am-thang (places of worship) within the fields, a ritual feast is prepared. The Mason pao (a priest-like figure) eats first to ritually cleanse the fields of harmful spirits.
- **Eiophaolih**
A month focused on cleaning field paths and areas believed to be inhabited by malevolent spirits. Sacrifices are made as acts of exchange to ensure protection and balance.
- **Miulih**
Observed for six days, this month is dedicated to seeking blessings for crops and human health. Marriages also commonly take place during this period.
- **Chikhaikanlih**
A worship or festival conducted to chase away tangkoyoun (an insect that feed on millets) in preparation for harvesting and transporting millet from the fields. After this month, marriages are not allowed nor are building of houses allowed.
- **Amhei lih**
A ritual observance lasting four days, following the initial harvesting preparations.
- **Jitaplih**
A celebration marking the consumption of the first harvested millet. After pounding and cleaning, the millet is shared among family members, neighbours, and friends, reinforcing social relationships through food exchange.
- **Paihinlih**
A month when rice paddy grows tall in the fields. A worship ceremony is performed for chi-ouhn (the spirit of the rice), seeking prosperity for the crop and blessings for successful hunting in the forest.
- **Bi-amlih**
A seven-day worship and celebration held in the granary to thank the spirits for agricultural abundance. During this time, kin and clan members gather to seek blessings, longevity, and well-being.
- **Tsokumlih**
A major harvest festival observed to give thanks for a bountiful harvest. Whatever restrictions was given in Chikhaikanlih are lifted in this month.

- **Thanyamliah**

A period devoted to identifying locations for new fields, granaries, and field huts. The process of selecting new fields is traditionally initiated by the Meya clan.

- **Oulih**

A month associated with death, when the remains of the deceased, once laid on the groves, are gathered and reinterred in designated resting places.

- **Hokalih / Hok-ah lih**

A month of rest marking the completion of the annual cycle. Celebrated over eight days, this festival gives thanks for the year's labour. Households count their members, commemorating new births and remembering those who have passed away, thereby ritually closing the year.

Choklangan Village

Agriculture among the community is closely tied to a cycle of festivals and rituals that mark different stages of jhum cultivation and seasonal change. An elder in Choklangan spoke of many such observances, including Lokthang-tai, Iu-liam, Yakhiu-khe, Paoshungliu, Shemai (also known as Tsokhum), Hok-ah, and Bei-am (personal communication, Choklangan village elder, [07/04/2025]).

Lokthang-tai is observed after the forest has been cleared and burned in preparation for jhum fields. This period marks the transition from clearing to settlement in the fields. During this time, villagers begin building field huts, a practice referred to as Lokthang-tai, marking the place (athang) for cultivation. Food known as *apan*⁸ is prepared and shared with neighboring fields, friends, and fellow cultivators, reinforcing cooperation and mutual support.

Another important festival is *Iu-liam*⁹, during which villagers take whatever meat is available, such as dog or pig, to worship the field spirit. The meat is then shared among friends and relatives. This ritual affirms the relationship between people, land, and the unseen forces believed to protect the fields and crops.



Jhum fields in Choklangan village

⁸*Apan is a traditional dish, usually prepared as a chutney made from shredded boiled meat mixed with vegetables, chili, and ginger.*

⁹*Iu-Liam means looking/searching for field.*

Seasonal planning continues into the eighth month of the modern calendar, a time associated with preparations for future cultivation. During this period, villagers begin looking for new fields to till in the coming years and observe Paosopou Shemai (Tsokum festival). Celestial cues played an important role in these activities. The moon was consulted when selecting new fields, while the sun was observed during Phe-phe, the cleaning of weeds after harvest.

Following Iu-Liaam comes the Miu festival, which marks the beginning of plantation. In the past, Miu was closely associated with headhunting practices. After a successful raid, the heads of enemies were hung on a tree, and the entire village observed strict ritual silence. A ritual specialist from the Meyo clan, known as the Meyo-pou, performed the ceremonies.

Tiger-related rituals were also conducted during the Miu festival. When a tiger was killed, it was never brought through the fields or into the village. Separate cooking pots were used, and villagers washed before returning to the settlement.



Field huts in Choklangan village



Village sowing in Choklangan village

The festival known locally as *Paosopou Shemai*, increasingly referred to as Tsokum, marks a significant moment in the agricultural calendar. It is a week-long festival celebrated to invoke blessings for a bountiful harvest.

Following Paosopou Shemai, the Hok-ah festival is observed after the completion of all harvesting activities. Although Hok-ah is commonly described as a festival of rest, its significance extends well beyond physical recuperation from agricultural labour. The festival marks an important social moment during which relationships within the community are renewed, reaffirmed, and newly formed.

Paosopou translates as "ancestors," while *Shemai* (italise) refers to "festival"

One of the most significant practices associated with this festival is Liamkie, a ritualized form of exchange through which friendships are formally established and existing relationships are repaired. In the practice of Liamkie, half of the animal slaughtered is given to the person or group with whom one seeks to create or mend a bond, whether between individuals, families, or neighbouring villages. This act is not merely symbolic; it represents a formal commitment to reciprocity, mutual care, and long-term social responsibility. Through this exchange, friendship is transformed into a recognized and socially binding relationship.

Once Liamkie is performed, the relationship obliges both parties to support one another during moments of happiness, illness, death, injury, or crisis. This obligation is enduring and extends beyond the individuals directly involved. The responsibility associated with Liamkie is transmitted across generations, with descendants expected to honour and maintain the friendship established by their forebears. In this way, Hok-ah and its associated practices embed social responsibility, reciprocity, and collective care within broader kinship and community networks.

Wui

Among the Khamniungan of Wui village, the festival of Tsokum is locally known as Sumai and marks the beginning of the annual cycle. Elders explain that the counting of twelve months begins from Sumai. While Tsokum is now officially observed in October by the wider Khamniungan community, elders in Wui recall that their forefathers celebrated Sumai earlier, in September.

Following Sumai, the months progress as Lapechizo, Takanchezo, and Kokchezo. Kokchezo holds particular significance, as it was traditionally the only period during which communal dancing took place. In recent times, dancing has also been incorporated into Sumai, reflecting changes in ritual practice over time.

Wui village is traditionally organized into three clans: Shiu, Meyo, and Lam. Each clan historically maintained three morungs (traditional dormitories), making a total of nine morungs in the village. Clan affiliation is not determined solely by present residence. Individuals continue to identify with their ancestral clan even when living in another clan's area. Over time, however, clan boundaries have become increasingly mixed, with members of different clans residing across village sections.



Interview with the village elders in Wui Village

During Lapechizo, all three clans and all nine morungs celebrate collectively. Takanchezo that follows is oriented toward agricultural labour, during which people move between home and fields in groups, spending time together before and after sowing millet. Kokchezo then becomes the primary moment of communal celebration, bringing the clans together through dance, ritual preparation, and shared feasting. While Kokchezo was once celebrated separately by each clan, it is now organized jointly to reinforce unity and strengthen social bonds.

During Kokchezo, two clans take responsibility for dancing, while the third prepares and serves rice beer using traditional bamboo cups. While three morungs actively participate in dancing, the remaining six focus on preparing attire, ritual objects, and food. Men perform dances at designated locations, while women carry provisions and necessary items. After the performances, food is gathered and shared in a communal feast. Elders recall these practices as deliberate efforts to renew relationships among clans.

Elders also speak of earlier internal tensions within the village, including disputes related to land and inter-clan marriages. Festivals such as Kokchezo played a key role in restoring harmony and reinforcing cooperation. Social practices surrounding marriage have likewise changed over time. In earlier generations, families received little support when daughters were married, whereas contemporary practices emphasize shared responsibility and mutual assistance.

Marriage rules further reflect the importance of clan structure. Traditionally, marriage within the same clan was strictly prohibited, even between distant branches, as it was believed to bring misfortune. Although this belief has weakened in recent times, the rule remains an important marker of earlier social organization and moral order within the community.

Embodied Relations with the Forest in Song and Dance

Headhunting had already ceased by the time of the present generation, and while no one alive today has witnessed it firsthand in the village, memories of this past continue to circulate through stories, songs, and ritual performances. These oral narratives function as a form of cultural memory, allowing the community to recall a time when masculinity, bravery, and social status were closely tied to warfare, hunting, and engagement with the forest.

This remembered past is actively performed through a traditional dance-fight practiced

among the villages of Sangbu, Di-nung, and Mimi. The performance reenacts symbolic warfare, recalling inter-village conflict in a controlled and ritualized form. An elder explained, “Although other Khamniungan groups may not fully understand the words or gestures involved, community members stress that every movement carries deep meanings” (personal communication, Wui Village elder, [11/04/2025]). Performed annually in December, either before or after Christmas, and during major festivals, the dance brings together the village’s three khels¹⁰.

Through repeated enactment, the performance transforms historical violence into embodied memory, allowing younger generations to engage with ideals of courage, endurance, and masculine identity without actual warfare. The framing of the conflict as “brothers fighting” underscores both rivalry and kinship, highlighting the tension between competition and unity that shaped earlier social relations.

Traditional songs also form an important part of this cultural memory. Songs such as Melo-liang-da, Kha-bo-ho, and Osa-ho reference animals closely associated with the forest. In Osa-ho, the term osa refers to the wild pig, while in Kha-ho-sa, the lyrics evoke tiger teeth worn proudly by dancers, symbolizing courage and prestige. These lyrical references situate masculine identity within the forest landscape, where skill in hunting and the ability to confront powerful beings were central markers of adulthood and honor.

Material culture reinforces this symbolism. Traditional attire incorporates hornbill feathers, associated with vitality and status, and red-dyed goat fur attached to daos, produced through careful processes of boiling and coloring. These objects link the body of the dancer or warrior to the forest, making masculinity visible through animal-derived materials. Together, songs, dances, and dress function as mnemonic devices that encode social values, transmitting ideals of manhood, bravery, and respect for the forest across generations.

With the spread of Christianity, many of these expressive forms gradually declined or were reinterpreted, leading to the fading of certain songs and ritual practices. Yet even in their partial absence, they continue to shape collective memory, offering insight into how identity was once forged through intimate, symbolic relationships with the forest and its beings.

Oral Narratives, Forest Beings, and Moral Lessons

Many oral narratives among the Khamniungan are deeply entwined with the forest and its animals. These stories function not merely as entertainment but also as moral lessons,

¹⁰*Khel refers to a traditional socio-spatial division within a Naga village, often translated as a ward or a clan-based section.*

warnings, and reflections on the dangerous intimacy between humans and the forest world. Elders often recount such narratives to explain past ways of living, hunting ethics, and the thin boundary between human and non-human beings. A story recounted in Dan Village illustrates these principles.

Long ago, there lived a man named Tokhao, known throughout the village as an exceptional hunter. It was said that he never returned from the forest empty-handed; each time he went out, he came back with a deer. Near the forest where Tokhao hunted was a large water source called Thakhekhai, which elders note has now dried up.

The Story of Tokhao

Tokhao's nephew, curious and admiring of his uncle's success, once asked him, "Uncle, how do you always catch a deer in your hunt? Please take me with you." Tokhao refused and replied firmly, "No, you cannot come with me." Unknown to the boy and others in the village, Tokhao possessed the ability to transform himself into a tiger.

The nephew persisted, asking repeatedly to accompany him into the forest. Each time, Tokhao warned him, "Do not come with me. You will be terrified." Eventually, worn down by the boy's insistence, Tokhao agreed. "Alright then," he said, "but you must be brave."

They went deep into the forest to the water source. Nearby stood a tall tree. Tokhao asked his nephew to climb the tree to the pou lah and sit there. "Do not be afraid," he told him. As Tokhao climbed down, he quietly removed the outer bark of the tree's trunk. Tokhao then entered the water and began to swim. Slowly, before the boy's eyes, he transformed into a tiger.

The frightened nephew cried out, "Uncle, you have turned into a tiger!" The tiger attempted to climb the tree to reach the boy, but each time it tried, it slipped and fell. Tokhao had removed the bark, knowing that in his tiger form, he would be unable to control his urge to devour the child. Failing to reach his nephew, Tokhao went into the forest, hunted a deer, and returned. He re-entered the water, transformed back into his human form, climbed the tree, and brought his nephew down.

Though Tokhao had resumed his human shape, the boy was overwhelmed with fear. He could not bring himself to eat the venison. On the journey back to the village, the nephew fell ill and eventually died. Elders recount this story as a cautionary tale, illustrating the perilous power of the forest and the dangerous closeness between humans and animal spirits. The narrative reflects a worldview in which hunting skill, transformation, and the forest itself are imbued with moral consequence (personal communication, Dan Village pastor, [20/04/2025]). Such stories endure as reminders that the forest is not merely a resource but a living, potent space that demands respect, restraint, and fear.

The Tiger and the Wild Boar

Another story from Choklangan recalls a time when animals spoke, remembered, and carried the marks of past encounters in their bodies. An elder recounted, “Long ago, a tiger and a wild boar once met in the forest and challenged each other to a fight. They agreed to prepare themselves and fixed a day for the encounter. The tiger wrapped its body with canes for protection, believing this would shield it from harm. The wild boar, however, rolled itself in mud, let it dry under the sun, and repeated this process until its body was fully coated.

When the day of the fight arrived, the wild boar struck first, snapping the tiger’s cane armour with its teeth. The tiger retaliated fiercely, but with every blow, only chunks of dried mud fell away. The boar remained uninjured. Mistaking the falling mud for wounds, the tiger believed it was winning, only to realize too late that the boar had suffered no harm at all.

Defeated and humiliated, the tiger uttered a final curse: ‘May your teeth be curled.’ From that moment on, the elders say, the wild boar carried curved tusks as a lasting trace of that encounter” (personal communication, Choklangan Village elder, [08/04/2025]).

Communal Hunting and Farming as Practices of Social Bonding

In Choklangan village, a hunter explained the customary distribution of meat after a hunt. Game obtained from the forest is not kept within a single household but shared among neighbors and relatives as part of an important village custom. The hunter cooks and distributes the head and pelvic portions of the animal. This practice is rooted in mutual care and responsibility. If a hunter fails to return from the forest, neighbors and relatives will notice his absence and say, “He always cooked and fed us. Why has he not returned from the forest?” Because of this shared bond, they will go out to search for him. Sharing meat thus ensures that the hunter is remembered and looked for if he goes missing.

These hunting practices situate the act of hunting within a broader social context. Hunting is not viewed merely as an individual activity of obtaining food but as a collective responsibility that strengthens social ties, reinforces mutual dependence, and affirms belonging within the village.

There are also rules governing the consumption of meat; one such rule states, “People should not walk around while eating hunted meat. It must be eaten inside the house. It is believed that failing to follow this rule will result in unsuccessful hunts in the future.”

During communal hunting, the person who shoots the animal receives one leg portion. The head and pelvic portions are cooked and shared among members of the same sector, meaning village divisions, as well as relatives. Everyone contributes to the meal by

donating items such as chilli, rice, or whatever they can afford. The rib portion of the animal is given to the church, while the chest portion is offered to the owner of the forest. The remaining meat is then shared equally among all who participated in the hunt. It should be noted, however, that practices of sharing hunted meat vary from village to village, even within the same community.

Before the arrival of Christianity, only the forest owner received a ritual share of the hunt. After the conversion, an additional portion began to be given to the church. Today, whatever is hunted, a share is always set aside for the church. Birds are also offered, especially when a large number is caught or when it is the first hunt of the year (personal communication, Choklangan hunter, [13/04/2025]).

Borders, Politics, and Identity

Borders are not merely lines on a map for the Khamniungan people; they are lived realities that shape social, economic, and familial life. Across generations, the presence of the Indo–Myanmar border has been deeply felt, influencing patterns of movement, cultivation, and kinship. This section explores how the border affects everyday life, local governance, and identity among Khamniungan communities, drawing on interviews, participant observation, and oral testimonies.

The Impact of the Indo–Myanmar Border

In nearly every interview, and even during casual conversations over evening tea by the hearth, the issue of the Indo–Myanmar border repeatedly emerged. Its constant presence in everyday talk reflects how deeply the border affects people’s lives and how strongly it is felt across generations.



An abandoned border structure at Dan village

The Khamniungan country is divided by an imaginary line drawn without the consent of tribal villages, a boundary that arbitrarily cuts through ancestral lands and kinship networks. More than 70% of Khamniungan villages, about 160 villages, now lie on the Myanmar side of this border, requiring many people to cross daily to meet their kin and tend to their agricultural fields. In Dan village, one of our primary field sites, much of the cultivable land falls under Myanmar’s jurisdiction, compelling villagers to cross the border each day to work fields they consider theirs ancestrally and to grow food for their sustenance.

Four northeastern Indian states—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram—share a 1,643-km border with Myanmar. In Nagaland, the districts of Mon, Phek, Kiphire,

and Noklak lie along this boundary, which cuts through indigenous homelands and divides communities with shared histories and kinship ties. In the Noklak district, this boundary is physically marked by border pillars numbered 139 to 146, which separate Khamniungan communities in India from their relatives in Myanmar. In 2017, an attempt by the Indian and Myanmar governments to fence this section of the border was met with strong opposition from local communities (Morung Express, 2017). Village councils argued that the proposed fencing would cut off access to approximately 3,500 acres of agricultural land and threaten the livelihoods of nearly 10,000 villagers living on both sides of the border (Business Standard, 2017). Following sustained protests, the Government of India halted the fencing project (The Indian Express, 2017). Today, near Dan village, the abandoned concrete structures remain, standing like jagged remnants across the hillside and leaving a visible scar on the landscape.

An International Trade Centre (ITC) was established on land belonging to Dan Village by the Government of Nagaland, with initial support from local communities, to develop it into a major trading hub along the border. However, the project failed due to internal local disputes as well as violent clashes between the Indian Army and various militant factions operating in the region.



The head Ggaonbura of Dan Village standing before the commemorative international trade Centre (ITC) monolith, Dan

Cross-Border Mobility Changes and the Free Movement Regime

Despite formal state boundaries, the border remains porous. However, the scrapping of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in early 2024 and ongoing talks about building a physical fence along the border have generated widespread anger and anxiety among Naga communities. The FMR, which formerly allowed residents within a defined distance on either side of the border to move freely without visas, was ended by the central government as part of broader security measures and border management policies. Local groups strongly opposed this move, arguing that it undermines centuries-old patterns of movement, cultivation, and kinship across the border and disregards local histories and lived realities.



A signboard at the Indo-Myanmar border, Dan village



A Border pillar seen at Dan Village

Elders' Perspectives on the Border

In the border village, community elders expressed strong disagreement with enforcing a rigid boundary between India and Myanmar. They emphasized that their relationship with the land predates the formation of both nation-states. As one elder explained, “Since the time of our forefathers, that land has been ours. We have cultivated fields there and made our livelihood from it”. According to elders, India and Burma came much later, while their people have lived, farmed, and moved across the area for generations.

Elders stressed that if a border must exist, it should be drawn fairly and with a clear understanding of local histories and land-use practices. Among the Dan (Pangsha) people, whose fields lie across what is now the Myanmar side, it is acknowledged by those living there that the land belongs to Pangsha villagers. These fields continue to be cultivated without interference, reinforcing the belief that “the land is rightfully ours, and we will continue to live and work there” (personal communication, Dan Village[17/04/2025]).

Economic and Social Effects

Economic and social exchanges have also changed as border restrictions tightened, particularly following the political coup in Myanmar. In the past, goods such as Burmese motorcycles and hunting tools regularly moved into the Indian side. Today, this flow has reversed, with villagers from the Myanmar side crossing over to purchase necessities such as salt and tea.

The border has also deeply affected family ties. One elder explained, “Because of the border, many of our people are now on the other side, and we are unable to cross freely” (personal communication, Dan Village, [17/07/2025]). In Choklangan village, respondents expressed similar feelings of sadness and loss. When asked about the boundary, one community member said, “We are one family. We are brothers and sisters. The border came between us. Otherwise, we are one.”



A border pillar seen in front of a shop in Dan Village.

He added that “no one is happy” with the division, a sentiment widely shared across villages (personal communication, Choklangan Village, [07/04/2025]).

Another interview emphasized how the border disrupts social, cultural, and kinship relationships. The respondent observed that without the boundary, “our people would be living together as one” (personal communication, Dan Village elder, [17/07/2025]). Similar tensions are reported in nearby Konyak regions, where opposition to strict border enforcement has led to public expressions of protest, including a rally held in Dan village on April 3, 2025.

Citizenship and Bureaucratic Challenges

The enforcement of the border has also resulted in complicated citizenship arrangements. Khamniungan people living across the border are often required to obtain Indian citizenship documents, such as Aadhaar cards, to reside on the Indian side. Similarly, those from India who wish to live on the Myanmar side must acquire Myanmar citizenship. These bureaucratic requirements create significant hardship for families who traditionally moved freely across the region (personal communication, Dan Village elder, [17/07/2025]).

Many elders expressed concern that a fully enforced border would transform familiar and ancestral land into “a different country,” separating brothers, sisters, and entire communities who share the same ancestry, history, and sense of belonging.

Changing Weather and Climate Perceptions

Environmental change is a visible and deeply felt aspect of life in the Indo–Myanmar border region. Among the Khamniungan communities, shifts in weather patterns, rainfall, temperature, and seasonal cycles have been keenly observed over the past few decades. These changes affect agricultural practices, water availability, and daily life, prompting villagers to interpret the phenomenon through both practical experience and cultural frameworks. This section explores local perceptions of climate change, the causes villagers attribute to these shifts, and how their knowledge and observations intersect with ecological, religious, and developmental understandings.

Local Perceptions of Climate Change: Indo–Myanmar Border Region

Among the Khamniungan, there is no specific local term for “climate change.” Instead, the phenomenon is described as *ah-ou-ahsheih phoklayan*, which literally means “changes in the rain and wind.” Across all villages visited during fieldwork, residents consistently reported experiencing significant and perceptible shifts in their local climate. The Indo–Myanmar border region, inhabited predominantly by the Khamniungan community, was once known for cold weather and regular winter snowfalls that blanketed the surrounding mountains. These climatic conditions have, however, altered considerably in recent decades.

Residents offered varied explanations for why they believe the climate is changing. During a preliminary field visit to Peshu village in 2023, village council members recalled first noticing a shift in the climate around August 2003, a year remembered as unusually hot. Several participants linked this change to the arrival of development in the village. As one elder reflected, “I think the climate has changed because of the road construction that reached the village, but we are not exactly sure why it is changing”(personal communication, Peshu Village elders, 10/04/2023).

In Wui, explanations for climate change were closely tied to visible changes in everyday material practices. An elder explained that earlier houses were built with thatch and banana leaves, which helped keep interiors cool: “Now, most houses are made with tin roofs, which trap heat and make it warmer.” He also noted the increasing use of electric lights and household appliances as contributing to rising temperatures. (personal communication, Wui Village GB, [10/04/2023]).

An elder in Choklangan Village reflected on this transformation as we sat under the scorching May sun:

“I’m not sure why it has become warmer. In the past, it was extremely cold. We didn’t have many clothes, so we would wrap ourselves in a single shawl and continue our work—it was a tough time. But it has become better now.” (personal communication, Choklangan fields, [08/04/2025])

Interestingly, the elder emphasized that the warmer climate has made life easier and improved agricultural productivity; in the past, villagers often trekked to distant settlements to buy food when their crops failed. In Wui, however, the narrative differs. An elder expressed concern that the climate had grown warmer and more unpredictable: “The rain comes and goes anytime. We used to predict rainfall based on the sunrise position beyond Mount Khelia, but now it is unreliable”(personal communication, Wui Village,[10/04/2023]).

Villagers throughout the region described rising temperatures and increasingly erratic weather patterns. Summers are unusually hot; winters are more severe, and winds are stronger and unpredictable. During winter, many local water sources now dry up, and small ponds that once retained water year-round no longer do so. In Wui, elders explained that there are two key water sources for terrace cultivation: Chopongletai and Wonphitai, which were observed to be drying up this year. One elder remarked, “We don’t know what happened, but the water is getting very low. That’s why I was just thinking to myself that maybe the world is coming to an end” (personal communication, Wui Village elder, [10/04/2025]). Snowfall has receded significantly, and rainfall has become irregular, sometimes even destructive, damaging crops and disrupting traditional agricultural cycles. Many residents explained, “The seasons have changed entirely.”



Traditional Kitchen ceiling in Wui village

They recalled a time when the sun was gentler, unlike the current “unforgiving” sun that pierces their skin as they work in the fields (personal communication, [10/04/2025]).

In Peshu village, however, villagers also demonstrated active experimentation in response to these changing climatic conditions. During fieldwork, we observed farmers adapting their agricultural practices by modifying sowing times and testing seeds across different seasons and locations. Elders and cultivators explained that because rainfall has become increasingly unpredictable, they no longer rely on a single planting period. Instead, they sow the same seeds at different times and in varied plots to assess which conditions yield better results. These practices reflect a pragmatic form of climate adaptation grounded in

observation, trial, and local experience rather than formal scientific intervention. Rather than perceiving climate change solely as a disruption, villagers in Peshu emphasized learning through experimentation, adjusting agricultural strategies to accommodate shifting weather patterns and environmental uncertainty (personal communication, Peshu Village elders, 10/04/2023).

In Choklangan, a young guide observed that snow had receded notably after 2005, remembering that during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, snow fell inside the village, which is rare. Elders in Wui Village also spoke of a warming climate and the disappearance of snow, recalling that in earlier decades both hail and snow frequently fell even beyond the village boundaries: “The weather was better in the past. Now, with the warmer climate, it has become unpredictable” (personal communication, Choklangan Village, [08/04/2025]).



A house with a tin roof and traditional architectural elements

Many shared vivid recollections from the early 2000s, when winter cold was far more intense.

An elder from Wui gave us this description: *“When we wanted to pierce our ears, we would collect water in a bamboo plate at night, and by morning it would freeze into ice. We used that ice to numb our ears before piercing.”* (personal communication, Choklangan Village, [08/04/2025]).

Older people recalled village grounds covered in frost each morning, and the Khelia Range remaining white with snow throughout winter. Years with heavier hail or snowfall were considered auspicious for millet cultivation, believed to enhance soil fertility. While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when these changes began, villagers in both Choklangan and Wui agreed the shift has been gradual.

An elder explained: *“Around 1995–96, there used to be heavy snowfall, though it varied from year to year. But over time, the snowfall gradually decreased. That’s when we began to realize that the climate was changing.”* (personal communication, Wui Village, [10/04/2025])

Another elder in Choklangan reflected: *“I don’t know exactly which year it was, but it was around the time when there was a*

Christian revival in the village; the crops became better, and the weather got warmer too.” (personal communication, Choklangan Village, [08/04/2025])

Our guide, Lemdumong, added that the Revival likely took place between 1990 and 1996.

Local Explanations and Ecological Knowledge

A considerable gap exists between global climate-change discourses and the lived experiences of rural communities. In the Indo–Myanmar border region, villagers have observed significant environmental changes; these shifts are not always interpreted through the framework of global climate science. Instead, they are understood through local ecological knowledge and immediate environmental experience.

An elder from Wui village explained:

“We don’t know the exact scientific reason behind this climate change, but based on our own observation and experience, we can see that things have changed over time. In the old days, people lived simpler lives. Houses were smaller and built with fewer materials, so we didn’t need to cut down many trees, especially not the big, old ones. People only took what they needed, and the forest was largely untouched. But these days, things are very different. Everyone wants to build big houses, and for just one house, a person might cut down 10 to 20 trees. Many are doing the same. This year, the water level is very low, and we’re wondering what has happened. We believe it might be because too many trees are being cut down. In the past, the forest was dense, and water sources didn’t dry up so easily. Now, with more trees being cut, especially the big ones, it seems like the water isn’t being held in the soil the way it used to be. So, we think deforestation is one of the main reasons why water is becoming scarce this year.” (personal communication, Wui Village, [10/04/2025])

Alongside environmental and developmental explanations, some villagers interpret climate change through religious and moral frameworks shaped by Christianity. A few elders suggested that, according to the Bible, the world is approaching the end times, and the changing climate may be a sign of this larger cosmic transition. One elder reflected, “*Maybe the climate is changing because the earth is getting old and the end time is near*” (personal communication, Choklangan Village Pastor, [07/04/2025]). Others expressed uncertainty about the exact cause of warming, suggesting simply that “*the world has become like that now*” or “*the earth itself is growing old*” (personal communication, Choklangan Village elder [08/04/2025]). These interpretations coexist with ecological explanations, reflecting the multiple ways people make sense of climatic change through faith, experience, and observation.

Implications for Adaptation and Policy

While these local explanations may not fully align with global climate science, they demonstrate a keen awareness of environmental degradation and its effects. The villagers' understanding is grounded in direct observation and intergenerational experience, reflecting an Indigenous ecological knowledge system that links forest health to water availability and agricultural productivity.



Traditional granaries in Choklangan Village

Despite these insights, institutional support for addressing emerging environmental challenges remains limited. Government interventions are sparse, and policies designed at national or international levels rarely reach or reflect the realities of these remote communities. Residents are therefore left to interpret, adapt to, and cope with climate-induced changes largely on their own.

This case from the Indo–Myanmar border illustrates the need for greater integration between global climate-policy frameworks and local experiential knowledge. Recognizing how rural communities perceive and respond to environmental change can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of adaptation strategies, ensuring that policies are not only scientifically informed but also socially grounded.

Hunting, Subsistence, and Forest Knowledge

Hunting in the Khiamniungan region has long been central to subsistence, healing practices, and everyday relationships with the forest. Elders often describe a clear contrast between earlier times and the present, marking a shift not only in animal availability but also in hunting ethics and forest conduct. What emerges from their narratives is an understanding of hunting as an activity governed by moral rules, ecological awareness, and social responsibility rather than mere extraction.

Hunting as Subsistence and Ecological Practice

In Choklangan village, hunters recall a time when they returned from the forest before sunset, often by four or five in the evening, carrying the day's catch. Today, animals are usually found only after darkness falls, sometimes as late as seven or eight at night. According to a seasoned hunter, this change reflects the increasing number of hunters

and the growing disturbance of forest habitats. As he explained, “*There are now too many hunters. The forest has been disturbed, and many animals have already been hunted down.*”

In the forested areas of Wui village, hunters continue to rely on deep ecological knowledge. They describe a watering place deep inside the forest where animals gather, and hunters set rope traps along the paths leading to it. Many camp near these water sources, waiting silently through the night. Hunting success is closely tied to moonlight; when the moon shines brightly, animals tend to visit the water over the following nights. Mountain goats, deer, porcupines, and other species arrive to drink, and the



Civet skin preserved above the kitchen fire

stag is believed to appear almost exactly at midnight. One hunter we talked to claimed to have killed around fifty to sixty large animals in his lifetime. The skulls of larger animals, such as deer, are hung in the kitchen, “*not for prestige,*” he said, “*but simply as a mark of a skilled hunter.*”

Hunting is guided by careful observation of animal behavior, landscape, and natural cycles. At the same time, elders note that such knowledge once operated within limits that discouraged excessive killing.

Forest Lore, Animals, and Moral Intelligence

Oral narratives passed down through generations reveal how the forest is understood as a space of moral engagement involving both humans and animals. These stories do not focus solely on animal behaviour but also on human conduct, leadership, and ethical judgment in relation to the forest. One well-known figure remembered in Wui village is Ali-ma-khao, meaning “*the brave one.*” He was a leader during times of conflict with other villages and was feared and respected for his courage. Elders recall him almost as a king, powerful, fearless, and commanding deep loyalty.

Other stories focus on animals that shape hunting strategies and forest ethics. Elders speak of the macaque, believed to act as a guardian of the forest. Whenever it spotted a hunter or a tiger, it would cry out loudly, alerting other animals. Once the warning echoed through

the forest, all animals would flee. Because of this, hunters learned to shoot the first animal they saw, fearing that a single call could empty the forest of game.

These stories position the forest as a domain where intelligence, communication, and moral awareness are shared across human and non-human beings. Hunters are expected to read animal behaviour, act decisively, and exercise restraint, while animals are understood as active agents capable of protection and warning. Through such narratives, ecological knowledge and ethical conduct are transmitted simultaneously, reinforcing a relational understanding of hunting rather than one based on domination alone.

Taboos, Rituals, and the Ethical Regulation of the Hunt

In earlier times, strict taboos governed hunting practices. Women were not allowed to touch a man's hunting equipment, as it was believed this would bring bad luck and result in an unsuccessful hunt. Although these rules are less rigid today, many women continue to avoid the tools out of respect for tradition. Their role, however, was crucial: they prepared food for the journey, carefully calculating supplies based on the number of days the hunter would be away. In the past, hunters commonly ate rice soaked in rice beer, stored in bamboo containers.

Before entering the forest, hunters once relied on ritual divination. A special leaf was torn into five pieces and interpreted by trained elders to determine whether the hunting path would be favorable. Only certain elderly individuals possessed the knowledge to perform this ritual. Today, this practice has largely disappeared, replaced by personal prayers for safety and success.

An elder in Choklangan expressed deep concern over what they saw as the erosion of these ethical constraints. One elder asked, "Where will they bring the animals back from? They have killed them all." He spoke critically of children using electric batteries to catch fish and of young men hunting with airguns and cartridges, staying in the forest through the night without restraint. Older people now enter the forest mainly to tend mithun cattle, while younger hunters continue to hunt intensively. For elders, environmental degradation is inseparable from the breakdown of moral discipline in hunting.

Tools, Craft, and Forest Knowledge

Hunting tools reflect an intimate knowledge of forest materials and techniques. Hunters often camp near watering holes and fruiting trees. They plant maize nearby and sometimes roast and scatter it to attract animals, who gather to feed "just like children when their mother gives them sweets," only to fall into carefully placed traps.



Spear handles are made from the soft inner part of the Caruota urens tree.



A hunter demonstrating a traditional trap used in forest.

The craftsmanship of hunting tools is equally significant. Spear handles are made from the soft inner part of the *Caryota urens* tree, locally known as lasang. The tree is so tough that even daos (machetes) can be damaged while cutting it. This same material was traditionally used to make fire by striking it against a special river stone called tai pai, which still lies submerged in the river today. Before the arrival of matches, the inner soft wood of lasang was carefully cleaned, dried, and used for fire-making. Spears made from this tree were used not only for hunting but also during times of war, particularly in the headhunting era.

Several stories further highlight animals' perceived intelligence. One account tells of a man who lost his hunting tools: wood, stone, ropes, and metal, when his bag tore open in the forest. A group of monkeys found the items, examined them one by one, passed them among themselves, and finally placed them back exactly where they had been found. Another story recounts how monkeys chased a tiger that had taken one of their own, returning later exhausted and distressed. Elders describe these animals as behaving almost like humans.

These narratives and practices reveal hunting as a deeply embedded system of ecological knowledge, moral regulation, and reciprocal relationships between humans, animals, and the forest. The elders' concerns about present-day hunting, therefore, reflect not only environmental loss but also the weakening of ethical frameworks that once sustained balance in the forest.

Indigenous Healing: Forest, Body, and Spiritual Knowledge

Among the Khamniungan people, health and healing are understood as deeply embedded within the forested landscape and social–spiritual worlds. Illness is not viewed solely as a biological condition but as an imbalance involving the body, environment, and moral or spiritual order. Historically, healing practices drew upon an integrated system of plant and animal medicines, spiritual specialists, and communal knowledge passed down through generations. While many of these practices have declined with the introduction of Christianity and modern biomedicine, elders continue to reflect on their effectiveness and express concern over the loss of Indigenous medical knowledge, which they associate with changing diets, environments, and ways of life.

Forest-Based Medicines: Plants and Animals as Healers

For the Khamniungan, the forest once functioned as a living pharmacy. Plants and animals were central to everyday healing practices, and medicinal knowledge was acquired through long-term observation and experience. In Dan village, elders recalled the widespread use of a plant known locally as koukhai hang. When someone suffered from headaches or physical injuries, the plant was chewed to relieve pain and accelerate healing. It was also administered to pigs infected with worms, reflecting a continuity between human and animal care practices and reinforcing the idea that health knowledge extended beyond the human body alone.

Animal-based medicines were equally significant. Wildlife functioned not only as a source of food but also as medicine and cultural wealth. Animals were embedded in local systems of healing, where specific body parts were believed to treat particular illnesses. Elders describe how the blood of the hoolock gibbon and the yellow-throated marten was once consumed to cure tuberculosis. Deer urine was used to treat ear ailments, porcupine bile was taken to relieve coughs, and burned porcupine quills were ingested for stomach pain and diarrhoea. Bear bile was especially valued for treating body aches and fatigue, and continues to be regarded as both precious and costly.

Beyond their medicinal use, animals also held significant cultural value. Tiger teeth, bear claws and furs, wild boar tusks, and hornbill feathers were prized as ornaments and markers of strength and status. Some practices have evolved over time; for instance, women today sometimes decorate their hair with porcupine quills, a practice that elders note did not exist in earlier generations. Such changes reflect how cultural expressions adapt even as their symbolic connections to wildlife persist.

An elder from Choklangan recounted a belief associated with soun nyiu (rhinoceros). Although he had never seen the animal himself, it was believed that consuming its meat or drinking its blood granted longevity and prevented premature ageing. Similarly, the Asian

yellow marten was said to cure malaria, further illustrating how animals were understood as agents with healing power within local knowledge systems.

The hoolock gibbon occupies a particularly poignant place in these narratives. Its blood was traditionally consumed to treat coughs and colds, and elders recall that gibbons were once abundant in the forest. Today, only a few are believed to remain; one elder noted hearing the cry of a gibbon just the previous day. In their youth, the forest was described as being full of gibbons, and they would even come to the village premises, where many were hunted for their sweet-tasting blood. Elders now reflect that this practice is one of the reasons the species has nearly disappeared from the area.

Spiritual Healing and the Role of the Thaamo

Healing among the Khamniungan was not limited to physical remedies. In Wui village, elders recalled the presence of spiritually powerful individuals known as Thaamo, who played a crucial role in diagnosing and treating illness. Comparable to contemporary prayer healers, the Thaamo were believed to receive divine or spiritual insight. When someone was gravely ill or near death, the Thaamo consulted a specific leaf to determine which healer or form of treatment might be effective. In some cases, it was believed that their words or prayers alone could drive away illness or even call back a wandering spirit.

Several respected Thaamo are still remembered by name, including Chi-nua-phi, Jhiliam, and Tamong. Elders emphasized that the spiritual gift of a Thaamo did not manifest at birth but appeared later in adulthood, often through behavior that resembled mental disturbance. Rather than viewing this as an illness, elders recognized it as a calling. Senior Thaamo would identify the individual as a future healer, sometimes referring to them as a “*Naga doctor*.” This process reflected the intergenerational transmission of spiritual authority and healing knowledge.

An elder from Dan Village also explained that healing rituals extended beyond the agricultural domain and into everyday life. In the past, when someone fell sick, there were no pastors or church prayers as there are today. Instead, a person believed to possess spiritual power was selected from the village to conduct healing rituals. This individual, known as Mason Pao in their village, would sacrifice a chicken, burn it, and consume it while performing specific rites intended to expel sickness from the body. For more serious illnesses, a pig was sacrificed, and in cases of extreme severity, a mithun was offered. According to the elder, recovery often followed these rituals, reinforcing communal faith in their efficacy and the spiritual authority of the healer.

With the spread of Christianity, the role of the Thaamo gradually declined. Healing rituals were replaced by church prayers led by pastors and priests. As one elder remarked, “We no longer have Thaamo now; people go to the church instead.” While spiritual

healing continues in a different form, elders view this shift as part of a broader erosion of Indigenous medical systems. Interestingly, however, the title Mason Pao continues to be used for church pastors, suggesting a striking continuity beneath apparent religious transformation. While ritual forms, sacrificial practices, and theological explanations have changed, the underlying expectation that certain individuals possess special spiritual authority to heal, protect, and intercede on behalf of the community persists. This linguistic and conceptual overlap highlights how the boundary between Indigenous spiritual systems and Christianity remains thin, reflecting processes of adaptation rather than complete rupture. This shift can be seen as part of a broader transformation; one that has reshaped, but not entirely erased, Indigenous understandings of illness, healing, and spiritual mediation.

Dietary Change, New Illnesses, and Medical Uncertainty

Elders frequently contrast past health conditions with present experiences, expressing concern over what they describe as the emergence of “new diseases.” Many associate these illnesses with dietary changes, particularly the growing dependence on store-bought foods. They often use the term *thsong-vei*—*thsong*, meaning “outsiders” and *vei* meaning “rice”—to express anxiety about imported food items such as sugar, powdered milk, and packaged tea.

Elders in Choklangan recalled discussions in which they urged one another to return to older ways of living: burning pinewood for light, drinking locally sourced tea leaves, and reducing dependence on market foods. Yet they also acknowledged the difficulty of abandoning these items. Modern foods tasted better, and complete withdrawal was neither practical nor desirable. As one elder explained, “*Their tea tastes better, their food is tasty, so we couldn’t give up on it.*”

Health complaints such as joint pain, fatigue, and weakness are now common, whereas elders recall that such ailments were rare in the past. Some attributed illness to contaminated water sources shared with cattle, while others referred to frequent diagnoses of typhoid during medical visits to Thang (Noklak). In Dan village, elders acknowledged that modern healthcare has improved access to treatment and hastened recovery, even as they reflected that earlier generations were stronger and less vulnerable overall.

Memories of life before electricity further highlight these contrasts. Elders recalled walking at night with burning pine splints, gathering glowing embers for light long before kerosene lamps or bulbs reached the village. These recollections underscore how changing technologies, diets, and environments are experienced not simply as progress but as trade-offs that reshape bodily strength, resilience, and well-being.

Indigenous Beliefs and Hunting Conservation Practices

Traditional hunting in the region is shaped by long-held beliefs that regulate how humans are expected to behave in the forest. As a hunter in Choklangan explained, these rules are not concerned solely with success in hunting but reflect broader ideas about balance, restraint, and respect toward forest beings. Hunting, in this sense, is governed by a moral order that links human conduct to ecological well-being.

One commonly cited rule warns that a hunter should never kill a red and a black animal on the same day—for example, a deer (red) and a bear (black). Such an act is believed to disturb the moral balance of the forest and bring misfortune in future hunts. When hunting in a group, however, two different men may kill one red and one black animal without consequence; the restriction applies only to the same individual. This distinction emphasizes personal accountability rather than collective blame, reinforcing ethical restraint at the individual level.



Skulls of hunted animals displayed on a kitchen

Practices following the hunt further articulate this ethic. Upon returning home, the skull of the animal is placed near the fireplace to dry, and the hunter refrains from entering the forest again until the process is complete. Returning too soon is believed to ensure an unsuccessful hunt. Once dried, the skull is hung on the kitchen wall, serving both as a reminder of the hunt and as recognition of the hunter's skill. Rather than functioning merely as trophies, these remains symbolize an ongoing relationship between the hunter and the forest.

Respect for animals continues even after death. Mocking a dead animal is strictly prohibited, as it is believed to offend the spirits of the forest and disrupt future relations between humans and non-human beings. For this reason, monkeys' heads are often removed and hidden from children, who might otherwise laugh at their faces. Such laughter is said to

cause a hunter's luck to vanish for months or even years. Together, these practices reflect a forest ethic in which hunting is governed not by domination, but by humility, careful conduct, and moral accountability to the forest.

Certain animals are associated with particularly strong beliefs. One such animal is the *thselatsip* (in Wui dialect), described as resembling a dog, with white upper legs, black lower legs, and a strong smell. It is said to resemble a mix between a dog and a monkey. If a hunter kills this animal, he is believed to fail in all hunting attempts the following day. Another animal, the civet, is said to allow only one chance at a shot; if the hunter misses, he will not be able to shoot it again. These beliefs function as implicit limits on hunting behavior, discouraging excessive or careless killing.

In Wui village, tradition also dictates that the head of any hunted animal must be cooked and eaten first. Only after hanging the head on the wall may the hunter return to the forest. Killing two animals in one day is believed to shorten one's life, which is why hunters traditionally returned home after their first kill. Elders note that these beliefs have

weakened over time. With the introduction of modern firearms, hunters often shoot more than one animal in a single outing. In the past, only arrows were used. According to village accounts, the first gun was introduced in 1975 by a village guard, heralding a significant shift in hunting practices.



A traditional fish trap in Dan Village

Villagers also speak of a monkey with a short tail, human-like features, and a striking red mouth, identified in English as a macaque. This animal is believed to be unsuitable for hunting, though some individuals, ignoring older teachings, continue to pursue it. Such actions are often cited by elders as evidence of declining respect for traditional rules.

The hoolock gibbon, known locally as *hobi*, carries particular symbolic significance. Elders explain that if the *hobi* calls before sunrise, it foretells the death of the owner of the forest. Normally, gibbons call only after dawn, once farmers have left for their fields. Their voices are most often heard around midday, between twelve and one. Males are described as black in colour, while females are ash-grey. These temporal and behavioral observations reveal how closely animal activity is woven into local cosmology and environmental awareness.

Today, hunting and fishing are regulated through community-enforced rules that reflect ongoing conservation ethics. Bird hunting is permitted only during five months—October, November, December, January, and February—under regulations established by the Students’ Union. Only air guns are allowed, and violations are met with fines, confiscation of equipment, and questioning. Repeat offenders are called in for explanations, and the fine is set at ₹15,000. Certain species, such as the hoolock gibbon, are entirely protected, with hunting strictly prohibited under Khamniungan jurisdiction. Fishing using batteries or explosives is also banned, though other traditional methods, such as diverting rivers or streams, are permitted year-round (personal communication, Dan Village elder, [date]).

Taken together, these beliefs and practices reveal a system of Indigenous conservation rooted not in formal regulation but in moral discipline, ritual accountability, and respect for non-human life. While many of these traditions have weakened under changing technologies and values, they continue to offer insight into alternative frameworks for understanding conservation, ethics, and human–forest relationships.

Spirits and Sacred Places

Among the Khamniungan, certain landscapes are understood to be inhabited by powerful non-human entities, including spirits believed to dwell in places associated with salt water, regardless of their geographic location. These sites are considered spiritually sensitive, and cultivating fields or undertaking other intrusive activities there is thought to risk provoking these beings. If the spirits are displeased, they may cause illness, misfortune, or even take human souls. To prevent such harm, ritual offerings were traditionally made. These included sacrifices of mithun, pigs, or chickens, intended to seek protection and restore balance between humans and the spirit world. Such rituals were locally practiced ceremonial rites, now often described using the Hindu-derived term *pooja*. Many elders emphasize that belief in the continued presence of these spirits persists, even though ritual practices have declined.

With the arrival of Christianity, understandings of protection and spiritual safety have shifted. Many villagers now believe that prayer alone is sufficient and that sincere Christian faith can safeguard individuals from spiritual harm. Despite this transformation, earlier cosmological ideas continue to shape how certain places are perceived and treated.

Elders in Choklangan also describe numerous small, unnamed sites scattered across the landscape that are considered spiritually dangerous or “*unclean*.” These places are not always clearly marked, and people may unknowingly enter them. Particular attention is

¹²*Khao toam* refers to the “place where a tiger was killed,” while *ee-thang* literally means “the place of death,”

given to locations where extraordinary or violent events involving animals have occurred, such as the killing of a tiger or instances where a mithun dies under unusual circumstances, including being struck by lightning or strong winds. In such cases, stones are erected to mark the site and warn others not to enter. These places are referred to as *khao-toam*¹² or ee-thang.

Through such practices, spiritual belief intersects with forms of environmental restraint. By identifying and avoiding spiritually charged locations, human activity is limited in certain areas, contributing indirectly to conservation and the protection of specific sites within the landscape.

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, Agriculture, and Forest Ethics

Agricultural and forest practices among the Khamniungan are embedded within a broader system of Indigenous ecological knowledge that links moral conduct, environmental balance, and livelihood sustainability. Rather than treating farming, hunting, and forest use as separate domains, community members understand them as interconnected practices governed by ethical restraint, ritual observance, and careful attention to environmental signals. This section examines how shifts in agriculture, responses to climate variability, and changing forest use reflect both adaptation to ecological pressures and transformations in long-standing conservation ethics.



A commemorative monolith erected in the terrace fields of Choklangam Village.

Agricultural Shifts and Crop Adaptation

Over the past two to three decades, the Khamniungan community has experienced significant changes in agricultural practices, most notably a shift from cultivating Job's tears and millets to rice. A farmer in Choklangam tells us that, historically, Job's tears were sown around March or April; however, repeated crop failures frequently resulted in food shortages. During such periods, villagers travelled long distances to neighboring Khamniungan villages, including Supao and Tsonkhao in present-day Myanmar, to procure food, carrying it back by hand. These recurrent hardships, combined with gradual warming and increasingly favorable conditions for paddy cultivation, encouraged a transition toward rice as the dominant staple crop. This shift represents both an ecological adaptation and a transformation of local food systems.

Agricultural change has also been shaped by intercultural exchange. Terrace cultivation, introduced through interactions with the Angami community, brought new techniques related to irrigation, soil management, and land stability. Before this, the Khamniungan relied primarily on jhum (shifting) cultivation, which required extensive forest clearing and long fallow periods. Elders recall terrace farming as a significant innovation that provided more reliable harvests, a memory often acknowledged explicitly: “It was the Angamis who came to teach us.” Such oral accounts highlight collaboration rather than isolation in the evolution of local agricultural practices.

Despite these changes, traditional ecological knowledge remains central to farming practices. Farmers continue to align planting and harvesting with lunar and solar cycles, observing celestial cues to determine appropriate agricultural timing. As one elder explains, “*We look at the sun and moon for the cue.*” Planting typically begins four to five days after the new moon, when conditions are believed to favor crop growth. In addition, different clans rotate responsibilities for sowing and harvesting each year, reinforcing social coordination and shared accountability. This integration of environmental observation with social organization illustrates the persistence of Indigenous knowledge systems alongside introduced agricultural innovations. However, ongoing climate variability and the growing reliance on standardized modern calendars are gradually reshaping these practices, leading to a partial shift away from celestial-based timing.

Climate Variability and Agricultural Uncertainty

Climate variability increasingly shapes agricultural outcomes in the region. While elders describe climate change as gradual over generations, they emphasize that weather patterns have become markedly more unpredictable in recent years. Extended periods of intense sunlight, irregular rainfall, and occasional extreme storms now disrupt traditional planting schedules. In the absence of modern irrigation systems, farmers remain highly dependent on natural conditions, making them particularly vulnerable to climatic fluctuations.

Villagers report adjusting sowing times in response to these changes. One farmer notes, “In the olden days, it wasn’t like this. Now, because of climate change, we are adjusting the timing for sowing.” Whereas crops were previously sown later and harvested in November or December, planting now often begins as early as March or April, with some harvests occurring by October. These temporal adjustments reflect pragmatic experimentation grounded in observation rather than formal scientific forecasting.

Crop yields remain uncertain. Some years produce abundant harvests, while others result in severe losses, reinforcing perceptions of climatic instability. Nevertheless, these ongoing adjustments demonstrate a form of climate resilience rooted in ancestral knowledge, collective decision-making, and continuous environmental monitoring.

Cultural Ethics, Ritual Authority, and Crop Protection

Agricultural practices are closely linked to cultural values, ritual authority, and ecological ethics. Pest infestations affecting beans, maize, and rice are often interpreted not merely as environmental problems but as signs of moral or ritual imbalance. In Wui, an elder shared that traditionally, the Meyo initiated the planting season through proper conduct and ceremonial observance. If the Meyo fulfilled his role with sincerity and villagers adhered to customary norms, crops were believed to be protected. Conversely, neglecting these practices was thought to invite pests such as mice, wild pigs, or birds.

This worldview embeds environmental stewardship within moral and social responsibility. By linking agricultural success to ethical behavior and ritual discipline, the community reinforces restraint, cooperation, and attentiveness to ecological limits. In this framework, farming is not solely a technical activity but a moral practice that sustains both social cohesion and environmental balance.



Kevide sitting on a section of a recently logged tree.

Forest Use, Deforestation, and Water Scarcity

Elders explain environmental change through everyday experience, contrasting earlier forest use—when smaller houses required minimal tree cutting—with current construction practices that demand extensive timber extraction. They link the widespread felling of trees for modern houses to declining water availability, recalling that dense forests once helped sustain water sources.

These observations reveal a locally grounded understanding of hydrological processes and forest ecology. Deforestation is not viewed as an abstract environmental issue but as a direct threat to everyday survival and agricultural sustainability.

Changing Forest Ethics: Restraint and Overuse

Reflections on forest change also emphasize shifting ethics of restraint. Respondents recall that during the 1990s, forests were richer in wildlife, with frequent sounds of birds such as jungle fowl. The decline in biodiversity is not attributed to religious conversion but to technological change. Earlier hunting relied on arrows, traps, and low-impact fishing methods such as diverting river flow. In contrast, contemporary practices increasingly involve guns, electricity, chemicals, and even explosives, despite community regulations.

Although the village has designated reserved forest areas and imposed seasonal hunting bans, forest degradation continues. Elders consistently emphasize that forests were better cared for in the past, when technological limitations reinforced ethical restraint. For the community, the environmental degradation is linked not only to population pressure or climate change but also to shifting moral relationships with the forest.

Disappearance of Key Species and the Silencing of the Forest

Elders across Khamniungan villages describe a marked decline, and in some cases complete disappearance, of wildlife species that once defined both the ecological and cultural landscape of the region. These losses are not narrated simply as biological decline but as transformations in forest relations, seasonal rhythms, and everyday sensory experience. Tigers, leopards, stags, pangolins, hornbills, and even the calls of hoolock gibbons are remembered as once-common presences that structured hunting practices, agricultural timing, and oral knowledge. Their absence today is widely perceived as evidence that the forest itself has changed.

Several elders emphasized that tigers are no longer seen at all. As one hunter reflected, “From my years of hunting, the only animal that we no longer see is the tiger.” Other large animals, including leopards, stags, and langou (described as a large wild *mithun*¹³), are also said to have disappeared entirely. While a small number of deer remain, elders describe them as “*very rare now*,” contrasting sharply with memories of abundance in earlier generations.

Community members stress that this decline cannot be attributed to hunting alone. As one respondent noted, “We don’t come across dead animals in the forest, nor is it because hunters have hunted all of them down. We don’t know the exact reason why, but it has decreased.” Instead, many link wildlife loss to broader ecological changes, particularly climate variability. Irregular rainfall and shifting seasons are said to affect fruiting trees that once sustained wildlife. Trees now wither just as they are about to bear fruit because “it doesn’t receive rain at the right time,” leaving animals without sufficient food and forcing them to migrate elsewhere.

The disappearance of certain species is also closely tied to forest degradation. A pastor from Dan village explained that pangolins and hoolock gibbons, once common locally, are no longer found there, although gibbons are still present across the Myanmar side. He recalled that pangolin skins were previously sold across the border for medicinal purposes,

¹³*Mithun (Bos frontalis), also known as the gayal, is a semi-domesticated bovine species Indigenous to Northeast India and adjoining regions. Among Naga communities, mithun hold significant economic, ritual, and symbolic value and are commonly used in ceremonies, exchanges, and as forms of compensation or wealth.*

contributing to their decline. Hornbills, too, have become rare, a loss he directly linked to deforestation: “*Hornbills live in big trees, but we don’t have big trees anymore.*” The depletion of valuable timber species such as lom pai, widely used for house construction and furniture, further underscores the interconnection between forest extraction and wildlife loss.

Some species are remembered only through ancestral stories. Elephants and *tenpieng*¹⁴ are said to have inhabited the region during the time of the forefathers, disappearing approximately “fifteen or sixteen generations ago.” These accounts situate biodiversity loss within a long historical arc, extending beyond living memory and reinforcing the role of oral tradition in preserving ecological history.

Local explanations for wildlife disappearance also include culturally specific understandings of disturbance and illness. One elder described a category of animal death locally understood as ah-in, referring to deaths that occur without visible injury or identifiable physical cause. Rather than being attributed to environmental or biological factors, such deaths are explained through a cultural framework in which harmful spiritual forces or disturbed non-human agents are believed to be involved. The expression “catching a bad wind” is commonly used to describe this condition, functioning as an idiomatic reference to unseen causes of death rather than to meteorological phenomena. Others recalled stories passed down about the arrival of aeroplanes before Indian independence. The loud, unfamiliar noise was said to have frightened animals deep into the forest: “The animals ran away at the sound of the planes; we don’t know where they ran off to.” While not framed in scientific terms, such narratives reflect how large-scale technological and environmental disruptions are interpreted and remembered locally.

Beyond the loss of animals themselves, villagers also mourn the disappearance of ecological soundscapes. Elders from Wui village spoke of the cha-nge (great barbet), a bird whose calls once structured the agricultural day. Morning, midday, and afternoon calls signaled rest, meals, and the time to return home from the fields. The absence of this bird today represents not only a loss of biodiversity but also the erosion of a sensory system that once synchronized human labor with the rhythms of the forest.

Although contemporary villages now enforce hunting bans during breeding seasons (regulations that did not exist in the past), elders emphasize that such measures have emerged alongside, rather than before, significant ecological loss.

¹⁴*Tenpieng is a local term used in the Khamniungan language. An exact English translation could not be identified.*

Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Climate Adaptation

For generations, the Khamniungan people relied on a complex system of environmental cues to regulate agricultural cycles and daily routines. This body of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) was grounded in the close observation of birds, animals, insects, plants, celestial movements, and bodily sensations. Long before the introduction of clocks, calendars, or meteorological forecasting, these indicators functioned as a locally embedded system for anticipating seasonal change, organizing labor, and responding to climatic uncertainty. Elders consistently describe this knowledge as emerging from sustained relationships with the forest and its rhythms rather than from abstract measurement.

Birds and Animals as Seasonal and Temporal Indicators

Bird calls constitute some of the most reliable ecological signals in local agricultural practice. One of the most significant in all the villages we visited is the tsempong/tsempiong bird (large hawk cuckoo). “When the tsempong starts calling, ‘Tsempong, tsempong,’ we know it is time to sow paddy, maize, and other early crops.” Farmers continue to recognize this cue as dependable, even as other timekeeping methods have become more prominent.

Other birds are similarly associated with seasonal transitions. Among the Wui, the Khundip (common cuckoo) is said to cry loudly before heavy rainfall. The calls of the *kiaopolo*¹⁵ and the cuckoo announce the onset of summer, while *tongma muchiu*¹⁶ marks the arrival of winter. Tsempong, the large hawk cuckoo, is also believed to foretell favourable weather for agricultural work when heard between March and June. Together, these bird calls form what elders describe as an “ecological calendar,” guiding decisions about clearing, sowing, and harvesting.

Hoolock gibbons (hobi in Wui dialect and saiu in Choklangan and Dan) once served as important natural timekeepers. Elders recall that their morning calls signalled the beginning of work, even before farmers left for distant fields. In the evening, gibbons calling closer to the village indicated that it was time to return home. Respondents note that these calls have become far less frequent and irregular in recent years, a change they associate both with ecological decline and the erosion of nature-based timekeeping practices.

¹⁵*Kiaopolo* is a vernacular term in the Khamniungan language. A precise English translation could not be identified during fieldwork.

¹⁶*Tongma muchiu* is a Khamniungan term for which no direct English equivalent was confirmed during fieldwork.

Insects, Plants, and Frogs as Indicators of Seasonal Change

Seasonal insects, amphibians, and flowering plants also play a role in environmental interpretation. In Dan, an elder said that the appearance of a mosquito known as Naithu thaipik signals the approach of summer and rising temperatures. Frogs calling after prolonged silence indicate the onset of rainfall. Certain plants—such as Khela poun (*Bombax ceiba*), Phin poun (*Bauhinia* spp.), and Ngukouthik poun—flower close to the sowing season and assist farmers in determining the timing of jhum clearing and planting.

Celestial Cues and Agricultural Timing

Celestial bodies, particularly the moon and sun, remain central to agricultural decision-making. Elders explain that planting typically begins four to five days after the new moon, a period believed to promote healthy crop growth. Lunar phases are also linked to crop form; for instance, chillies planted during a crescent or half-moon are said to grow long and straight, while those planted during a fuller moon tend to curl.

The disappearance of the moon once marked the period for selecting new jhum fields. During the day, the sun's position, especially in relation to Mount Khülio-King, served as a guide for estimating time, determining when to cook, rest, or end work. These observations structured daily life in the absence of mechanical timekeeping.

Bodily Sensations and Weather Anticipation

In addition to external environmental cues, bodily sensations were interpreted as indicators of impending weather change. Elders describe how pain from old injuries or fatigue intensified before rainfall and eased afterwards. Such sensations were treated as meaningful signals rather than incidental experiences, allowing people to anticipate short-term weather shifts and adjust their activities accordingly.

Ritual Practices for Managing Environmental Uncertainty

When environmental conditions became extreme, ritual practices were employed to restore balance between humans and the natural world. In Wui village, elders describe such practices as longstanding responses to prolonged drought or excessive rainfall. During periods of dryness, villagers gathered at a sacred site marked by three stones known as Longdakhok. Water was poured over the stones, and leaves were placed upon them in a symbolic act intended to invite rain. Elders recount that rainfall often followed these rituals, reinforcing their perceived effectiveness and affirming the stones' ritual potency. Another rain-invoking practice involved a performative ritual in which a person wore a raincoat fashioned from narrow bamboo strips and walked through the village while singing. Other villagers followed, splashing water using bamboo containers. Conversely, when rainfall became excessive, villagers lit fires on the same stones to call for sunlight.

Elders in Wui also recount narratives in which specific animals were understood to possess extraordinary environmental influence. One such story concerns an animal known as chialiam, a wild mithun. According to oral accounts, a hunter named Langthong once killed a chialiam that had been struck by lightning on the horns. After the hunt, Langthong reportedly kept the animal's horn near the household fireplace. Elders say that whenever the horn was placed there, the weather would turn sunny. During periods of intense dryness, the horn was instead taken to two rivers known as Achudai and Khekadakhai, respectively, where its placement was believed to bring rain.

TEK, Climate Change, and Gradual Transformation

Elders emphasize that while traditional ecological knowledge remains influential, it is slowly changing. Climate variability has disrupted the reliability of certain indicators, and increasing dependence on modern calendars and technologies has altered agricultural decision-making. Nevertheless, these practices illustrate a dynamic, adaptive knowledge system that continues to inform how people interpret environmental change. Rather than disappearing entirely, TEK persists alongside introduced systems, offering insight into locally grounded forms of climate adaptation rooted in long-term ecological observation and social coordination.

Food Security, Seasonal Change, and Shifting Diets

Elders and farmers frequently link changes in climate and agricultural practices to improved food security in recent decades. Many describe warmer temperatures and altered seasonal patterns as having enabled more reliable cultivation of paddy and vegetables than in the past. As one elder reflected, *“The times have changed now; it's not like the olden days. The climate has become warmer, and the paddy and vegetables started growing well.”* These observations are often framed in contrast to earlier periods marked by chronic scarcity, when hunger was a persistent feature of everyday life.

Historical accounts describe a time when rice was scarce, and households in some Khamniungan villages depended heavily on food supplies from other villages such as Tsonkhao, Supao, and Sanglao. During years of poor harvest, villagers from what is now Noklak District travelled long distances on foot to neighboring settlements, particularly Tsonkhao, now across the border in Myanmar, to procure food. Access to grain was secured through multiple forms of exchange, including barter. Baskets were woven and traded



Image: A traditional log drum in Choklangan

for food, livestock, such as cows, were bartered for grain, and animals were exchanged directly. These practices illustrate the precariousness of food access under earlier climatic conditions and the importance of mobility and social networks in mitigating scarcity.

Several elders recalled that extreme cold and heavy snowfall in earlier decades significantly constrained crop growth. One elder explained, “Back then, we were often hungry. The cold was biting, the crops didn’t grow well, and life was very difficult.” In contrast, many now emphasize that such hunger is no longer common. Improved crop yields and expanded rice cultivation have reduced dependence on neighboring villages for staple foods. As one elder stated succinctly, *“Now, we never go to other villages to buy rice.”*

Dietary practices have also shifted substantially over time. Some elders estimate that rice became a regular part of the local diet only around thirty years ago, following the migration of families from Nokhu village who introduced rice cultivation. Prior to this, households relied extensively on millets, Job’s tears, and wild and seasonal foods. Throughout the year, diets were carefully adjusted, with wild foods sustaining households during colder months and cultivated vegetables and crop greens becoming available from April through November. As discussed in earlier sections, this reliance on seasonal foraging formed part of a broader ecological knowledge system attuned to environmental rhythms.

Contemporary concerns about climate change complicate narratives of improved food security. During an early visit to Noklak, Hangthing, who hosted the research team at his guesthouse, expressed anxiety about changing climatic conditions and their effects on crops, as well as the disappearance of local grain varieties and livestock. He recalled that his father had described a time when terrace cultivation did not exist in the region, and farming was conducted entirely through jhum cultivation. When fields were left fallow for ten to twelve years, the soil regained high fertility. Today, increasing population pressure has reduced fallow periods to seven or eight years, raising concerns about soil exhaustion and long-term sustainability.

Hangthing also described earlier practices of food storage that reflected both environmental adaptation and values of security. Food grains were stored in granaries, known as pei, built like small houses raised on wooden pillars to protect them from insects and rodents. These granaries were constructed away from residential areas so that stored grain would remain safe even if a house caught fire. Having a full granary was once considered a sign of wealth and well-being. In contrast, Hangthing observed that wealth is now measured primarily in monetary terms, such as savings held in banks.

He lamented what he perceived as declining engagement with farming among younger generations, emphasizing that food security depends on practical knowledge and labor rather than formal education alone. “The soil is not lazy, so we shouldn’t be lazy,” he

stated, arguing that everyone should know how to farm, even on small plots or household gardens. In his view, reliance on textbooks and expectations of government employment have weakened practical skills that once ensured household resilience.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate that food security among the Khamniungan has long depended on a combination of cultivation, foraging, storage, mobility, and exchange. While recent climatic changes and agricultural innovations have improved food availability in many respects, elders remain concerned about ecological sustainability, cultural knowledge loss, and shifting values. Food security, therefore, emerges not only as a matter of production but as an outcome of evolving relationships between climate, land use, social organization, and moral responsibility.

Christianity, Modernization, and Environmental Change From Meyo-Led Ritual Cycles to Church-Centered Practices

Elders consistently describe Christianity as a turning point that reshaped ritual authority, environmental relations, and everyday practices in the Khamniungan region. Before conversion, the Meyo occupied a central role in regulating agricultural cycles, coordinating communal labor, and maintaining balance between humans, spirits, and the landscape. As discussed in earlier sections, the Meyo initiated sowing and harvesting, legitimized the agricultural season through ritual acts, and mediated relationships between ecological processes and social order. Today, this ritual authority has largely disappeared. Its functions have been transferred to church institutions, with pastors and deacons now leading prayers before cultivation, blessing harvests, and presiding over rituals related to illness, death, and communal crises. This shift represents not merely a change in religious practice but a fundamental reorientation of how environmental uncertainty and social order are managed.

Pre-Christian Ritual Landscapes and Environmental Ethics

Before the spread of Christianity, the landscape itself was understood as spiritually inhabited. Forests, fields, rivers, and stones were not neutral spaces but active domains inhabited by unseen forces requiring careful negotiation. As described in earlier accounts of hunting taboos and agricultural rituals, people believed that improper conduct, such as violating hunting rules, mocking animals, or ignoring ritual protocols, could result in illness, crop failure, or ecological imbalance. When villagers went to their fields, they often offered a chicken to appease potentially harmful spirits. Without such offerings, there was a fear that spirits might claim a human life in return.

Healing practices were similarly embedded within this ritual ecology. Individuals believed to possess spiritual power, referred to as Mason Pao or Thaamo in different villages, were consulted when illness struck. As discussed in the section on plant and animal medicine, sickness was not understood solely in biomedical terms but as a disturbance in relations

between humans, spirits, and the environment. Ritual healers performed cleansing rites, accompanied by animal sacrifice scaled to the severity of illness. Chickens were used for minor ailments, pigs for serious conditions, and mithun for life-threatening cases. These practices reinforced the idea that health, ecology, and morality were inseparable.

Christianity, Moral Reordering, and Environmental Change

With the arrival of Christianity, many of these ritual practices were abandoned or actively discouraged. Sacrificial rituals, spirit appeasement, and divination were replaced by prayer and pastoral authority. While elders acknowledge the benefits of Christianity, particularly in reducing fear of spirits and providing new moral frameworks, they also link its arrival to a weakening of ritual discipline and environmental restraint. Earlier sections documented how hunting ethics once limited overexploitation through taboos, seasonal restrictions, and moral accountability to forest beings. Today, although formal hunting bans exist, elders observe that modern weapons, commercial pressures, and weakened ritual sanctions have contributed to wildlife decline.

Similarly, agricultural and climatic uncertainties once addressed through ritual intervention, such as rain-invoking ceremonies at Longdakhok or ritual timing guided by birds, gibbons, and lunar cycles, are now approached primarily through prayer or modern calendars. Elders note that while people still recognize traditional ecological signs, their authority has diminished in practice. This shift parallels broader patterns of modernization, including reliance on market foods, chemical inputs, and biomedical healthcare, all of which elders associate with new forms of illness and environmental vulnerability.

Continuity, Loss, and Reinterpretation

Importantly, elders do not frame this transformation as a simple loss but as a complex process of reinterpretation. While ritual specialists like the Meyo or Thaamo no longer operate, many ecological understandings persist in altered forms. Beliefs about forest depletion, climate instability, and species disappearance continue to draw on moral explanations, even when articulated alongside Christian discourse. As earlier sections show, villagers still connect ecological decline to human behaviour, including overhunting, deforestation, and neglect of restraint. This suggests that older ethical frameworks remain influential beneath new religious forms.

Many ceremonies and healing rituals that were once embedded in animistic beliefs are now described using terms derived from Christian or Hindu lexicons. For example, traditional rites are commonly referred to as *puja*, and spirits that were formerly recognized as forest or ancestral beings are often reinterpreted as manifestations of Satan. Likewise, the sacrificial practices directed toward these spirits—such as offerings of chickens, pigs, or mithun—are sometimes described as “*worship of Satan*” in contemporary narratives.

Despite these reinterpretations, the underlying logic of these rituals persists. Elders recall that these rites were designed to protect individuals and communities from harm, misfortune, or illness, and to maintain balance between humans and the natural or spiritual world. In many cases, Christian terminology has been superimposed on pre-existing practices without entirely erasing their cultural significance. For instance, church pastors are still referred to as *Mason Pao*, echoing the earlier role of spiritual specialists who conducted healing and protective rituals.

This linguistic and conceptual overlay illustrates the subtle ways in which Christianity has interacted with Indigenous belief systems. While doctrinal content has shifted, the functional and social dimensions of ritual—healing, protection, moral instruction, and the mediation of unseen forces—remain integral to communal life. The reinterpretation of spirits as “Satan” and rituals as *puja* demonstrates both the transformative influence of Christian cosmology and the adaptive persistence of older animistic frameworks within modern *Khiamniungan* society.

Taken together, these changes illustrate how Christianity and modernization have not erased Indigenous ecological knowledge but have reshaped the institutions through which it is practiced and expressed. The transition from *Meyo*-led ritual governance to church-centered authority marks a shift from place-based, ritualized environmental management toward more abstract moral regulation. This reconfiguration has significant implications for how communities respond to climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental uncertainty in the present.

CHAPTER 4

REMEMBERING THE HO NAGAS: AN ELDER'S NARRATIVE

Introduction

This section presents a narrative account primarily drawn from one in-depth interview conducted as part of the Earthkeepers Project in Meluri District. The Somra Tangkhul Nagas or the Ho Nagas live in the Sagaing Region of Northwest Myanmar, bordering the Meluri district of Nagaland and the Ukhrul district of Manipur. As travel to Myanmar was not possible at that time due to political instability, the interviews were conducted in the border villages of Meluri. The community's name is politically controversial; it is viewed as a subgroup of the Tangkhul Nagas rather than a separate tribe.

While the term "Somra Tangkhul Naga" is also used, it is not widely accepted within the community, and the endonym in the local language is "Ho." In this report, the term "Ho Naga" is used as a working endonym for purposes of analytical convenience. However, this usage does not imply political endorsement or the resolution of ongoing internal debates regarding official self-designation, which remain unsettled within the community.

The encounter with the Ho Nagas reflects the social realities of Meluri, where multiple Naga communities coexist due to historical migration, inter-village relations, porous border, kinship ties, and shifting political and administrative boundaries. During preliminary field engagement, the Ho Naga elders expressed a strong interest in documenting their histories and perspectives; the community also indicated that these narratives were important to be included in the project record.

The inclusion of this material directly addresses community priorities. While the Earthkeepers Project primarily focuses on climate, environment, and Indigenous ecological knowledge, community members emphasized that environmental practices are closely linked to histories of migration, settlement, kinship, and village formation. Therefore, this section contains content that goes beyond climate and ecology, placing environmental knowledge within a broader historical and cultural context that the community values.

While several individuals contributed to understanding and interpreting the Ho Naga oral history, this section is primarily based on the account given by Lateing, an elder locally known for his exceptional knowledge of the Ho Nagas. The interview was conducted on 14 November 2024 at 12:28 PM in Akhen village. It was conducted in the Ho language with interpretation support and took place in a familiar, informal setting chosen by the interviewee.

In presenting this material, the elder's words have been translated and edited only minimally. The narrative is rendered as close to verbatim as possible to preserve the rhythm, structure, and style of oral expression. This approach differs from the analytical and thematic writing used in other sections of the report, such as the Methodology chapter, which is a deliberate choice. By retaining the elder's speaking style, the narrative reflects Indigenous modes of storytelling and knowledge transmission, rather than imposing a standardized academic voice.

Early Life and Migration of the Ho Nagas

The following is the elder's narration about the origin and early life of the Ho Nagas:

According to oral tradition, the lives of the Ho ancestors were harsh, and survival was uncertain, as they did not wear pants or mekhela and lacked tools such as daos (Naga machetes) or axes. They only had spears (categorically referred to as kazei that includes walking sticks). A tradition of ours is to wield one as we go to the field or anywhere else, including far-off places. Wildlife was always a threat to humans, and *spears and daos*¹⁷ remained the only hunting tools or defensive weapons available to them until the introduction of guns (meipun meaning “fire box”). It is said that even tigers were afraid of humans, as people could kill them with spears. Our ancestors could run over and break big thorny vines, snapping them against their bodies as their skin was so thick and calloused. They were no different from wild animals. To survive during those days, the *Swenmi*¹⁸ people hunted game and relied heavily on terrace cultivation. They would also use a buffalo's shoulder blade, fitted on a wooden handle, to plow the paddy field, as they did not have spades or hoes.

The succeeding generations began with the practice of iron smelting. They used termite-mound clay to adhere tiny metal pieces and heated them until they melted and proceeded to fuse. Dadrun refers to the clay found in the termite mounds that are abundant in the Naga Hills. Since it is very soft, tiny pieces of metal can be stuck onto it. As the clay is heated, the melted metal pieces begin to accumulate, and the charred clay naturally separates. Using stones and wood to cast metal, the people made farming equipment. With the advent of the state, they could acquire more metal with which they made spades/hoes, axes, dao, and many other tools. Metal made using the termite mound clay technique is called didrunree (dadrun means termite clay and ree means metal). Much later, they used kasaru, which refers to the larger-sized metal pieces that became available by trading with other people in India and Myanmar. Nowadays, with the advent of modern technology, spades and hoes are used less frequently.

¹⁷The older synonym of dao in the Ho language is raakhata: raa means war/battle, kha means to challenge. This implies that it was used to challenge enemies in the battle. The other more common term is kano.

¹⁸Swenmi is another endonym for the Ho Nagas.



A Ho couple, with the man holding a spear (left); Ho community members dressed in traditional attire pose together during a festival (right).

Origin and Migration

According to the elder, the Ho Nagas trace their origin to Manipur and recall the migration toward their present homeland in the Sagaing region of northwestern Myanmar, adjoining Nagaland and Manipur. Their attire and cultural traits resemble those of the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur, with whom they share oral and historical affinities. Interestingly, the elder could not recall any mention of the western Nagas of Nagaland in the Ho oral narratives. However, he mentioned that the Ho ancestors used to travel to Guwahati by walking from their villages to sell their products¹⁹. Dimapur was “like the garden” (meaning it was as close as their home garden). As they traveled to towns and cities, people would make space for them because they wielded spears and wore only a mekhala (khanyesupo, which is worn by men). In precolonial times, when the idea of a unified “Naga” identity did not yet exist, communities recognized each other through localized relations of kinship, exchange, and warfare.

Establishment of new villages and trading

Here, he gives an account of the history of the establishment of villages as they settled and dispersed in the present-day Sagaing Region:

To the best of my knowledge, the Ho Nagas migrated from the present-day Manipur.

¹⁹The distance from the Sagaing region to Guwahati is at least 500 km.

They sought settlement in the Ukhrul region and then dispersed to different areas. One of the groups migrated northward, and another group migrated down to what we call “Sejo”—in India, it is known as Chingjaroi²⁰ (under Ukhrul district in Manipur).

From there, they again dispersed and moved (tla²¹) to New Tusung. From there, some migrated (set²²) to Fwujemo, an old name for Pafunbou (Somra), from where they migrated (ka²³) to Nonrey. The third migration would be from Nonrey to (ka) Rarapora (Layum) and then to Reefonra (Pansat), from where they spread to other regions.

Initially, there were only two villages: Nonrey (Hpun Tha Yet) and Senjemi. From these two villages, people began to migrate and establish new ones. During those times, animals such as deer and stags were hunted with spears. While pursuing game in the area where Reefonra (Pansat) is located, the hunters discovered land suitable for cultivation. This discovery led some of them to settle in Layum before eventually moving (chhan²⁴) to Pansat, where there was enough water and arable land for settlement. This migration was driven by the scarcity of resources—land plots and enough cultivable land for everyone. This movement and the establishment of new villages are referred to as noprin. Even today, many empty land plots (rafun²⁵) remain in Layum. Before the migration, the village had about 500 households, and numerous plots of land now lie vacant. When people left to settle in a new village, they often transferred ownership of their land to their relatives.

After settling in Pansat, the people of Layum would hunt near Pansat village, while the hunters of Nonrey would also chase game in the area. This region has a large swath of cultivable land stretching from the riverbed to the top of the mountain. This is because there were very few trees growing in this region (meaning farmers would not spend much time felling huge trees). Between Pansat and Kon Kaing Lon, there

²⁰*Chingjaroi was originally known as Asinei/Asewnei/Swemi. It is interesting because Ho Nagas call themselves Swemi.*

²¹*This is to indicate the directional vocabulary used to visualize the topography. Here, the verb “tla” is used to indicate the movement toward a lower elevation.*

²²*Here, the verb “set” is used to indicate the Eastward movement as Somra is in the East relative to New Tusung.*

²³*The verb indicates the direction when the destination is at the top of the hill.*

²⁴*The verb indicating the movement is uphill.*

²⁵*Rafun refers to a land plot that is typically created by cutting into the hillside, as the Naga people usually prefer to settle on elevated terrain rather than in flat areas. Naga villages are often located on hilltops, so it is necessary to carve into the hillside to create suitable land plots for building houses.*

is a village called Raashabou, which is now called Payangbou (Ma Ya Lon). Soon, people began to realize that this area had cultivable land and they could settle there. That is how some people from Nonrey moved up to establish Raashabou village, now known as Payanbou.

In the past, they had to traverse the mountain, passing through Raasha, to go to Kon Kaing Lon. To go toward Shishi or Muguri inhabited areas for war, they had to pass that hilltop. That is why the Ho ancestors called it Raasha (raa means ‘war,’ and sha means ‘path’). Now, Raashabou village is called Payanbou. As the saying goes, after 50 generations, language changes. Similarly, Diraasha is shortened to Raasha. That was the path taken by warriors from Nonrey to go to war and to go hunting. Even hunting is like going to war (diraa²⁶), because if we don’t kill the animal, it will kill us .

This is the story of how Khanitlengbou (Kon Kaing Lon) was established. The people of Nonrey used to go hunting in an area called Nithrunya, which was a very dense forest at that time. Even today, the roots of large trees can still be found there, undecayed. For generations, people have been cultivating the land in terraced fields. Back in those days, a timber known as bonsum (Phoebe goalparensis), which was as large as a granary basket²⁷, was discovered. If only a few people ventured into the jungle, they would easily get lost. That is why they traveled to this region in large numbers. The area was home to many wild animals.

At that time, there was a man who had a very old father, and since he was very old, he could not go anywhere. The son would tell his father, “Father, when you look up there from here, you see a very dense forest. All the wild animals hunted, such as deer, stag, wild boar, and mithun, are found up there.” In the old language, Darasha is a pet name given to a child who is loved dearly by parents. The father said to his son, “Darasha, don’t show it to anyone. Strip²⁸ some ripe reementheitei²⁹ (seeds of darnel weed) with your hands from our field, sprinkle them on the margins of the stream where the soil is wet and soft in the forest where you mentioned that there are many wild animals.” The son did exactly as he was told. Then, after some time, the

²⁶Here, the term “diraa” implies fighting with both humans and animals. This observation reveals a semantic fluidity in which conflict and survival are not strictly human domains but part of a shared existential struggle. The term embodies a concept where the boundaries between human and animal agency are blurred, highlighting a relational perspective based on shared vulnerability instead of human supremacy.

²⁷Most of these baskets have a circumference of about three meters. They are used for storing paddy.

seeds sprouted, and the plants began to grow. He said to his father, “I did what you told me to do, and now the plants are growing well and healthy.” His father replied, “That is great. But this is not the end. Do not get carried away. When the plants bear seeds, hold them in your hand and check whether they are just husks or hard with seeds in them.” The harvest season arrived, and the son went hunting, bringing his father a ripe stalk of the plant that had turned red. The son said, “Father, the seeds that I sowed have ripened, red and have seeds in them, which are hard when I hold them with my hand.” “Darasha, that is where we can search for cultivable land,” replied the father. The old man shared this with the villagers, and they decided to establish a new village. However, before that, they must do “Mangsha Naayueh” (meaning to sleep and check whether their dreams tell a good omen; Mangsha means dream, naa means ask/inquire, and yueh means to sleep). So, they constructed a small hut in the area where they planned to settle. That night, they had to check if their dreams indicated a good omen. However, the next day, they went up to check it out and discovered that a tiger had dismantled the hut. At that time, the word for tiger was not saree; it was called raapoh. The tiger did not want people to settle there in Nithrungyan, as it was³⁰ its hunting ground.

They began to believe that they might not be able to settle there. However, they wanted to make another attempt by building a proper house this time. For the building material, at that time, a jungle rope called baway (pronounced as buh-kuh, with a throaty French R in the middle) was used as a fastening material because metal (nails) was not available. The house was made of kava (which is a plank of wood cut with a dao rather than a modern tool like a saw). However, that too was dismantled by the tiger. “Nonoubou (see footnote 15), even if we settle there, the tiger will despise us,” the villagers lamented. A few households attempted to settle there, but the tiger remained relentless and continued to destroy houses. There was a man called Shimwue. He said to his villagers, “Let me try to do something about this.” Since they did not have a hand plane, it was a common practice at the time to

²⁸The term used here is *paywi* which can be described as the act of collecting seeds by grasping the top part of the standing plant (the seed head) between the thumb and forefinger and pulling upward, so that the grains are stripped from the stalk into the palm, usually while the plant remains rooted in the ground.

²⁹*Reemen* refers to the crop, while *theitei* refers to the seed. However, in the Ho vernacular, only *reemen* is usually used; while *reemethete* describes only the seed. So, while translating into English, we can use *reemen seeds*.

³⁰In the Ho language, there are no gendered pronouns. The pronoun *bei* is used for both humans and animals. Sometimes, it is also used for things like stones or boulders which are believed to have spirits.

smooth a plank of wood using an axe by removing its handle. That is how he made a smooth plank of wood and used the oil extracted from pork to make it slippery. The wooden plank is very long and well-oiled, so much so that it could easily slip out of one's hands. At one end of the plank, he made a hole with an axe.

After setting up the trap, a huge tiger was trapped that night. It was said that the tiger was bigger than an adult mithun (*Bos frontalis*). The tiger stepped on the slippery plank, leading it right into the tip of the spear. The village was not established yet; therefore, the place did not have a name. So Shimwue said to his villagers, "I'm going up there. Later, if you hear my signal, follow me up there." When he reached the location, he discovered that the tiger had been killed after slipping onto the tip of the spear. Then he cut a tree and fashioned a piece of wood, which he used to strike a hollow log/tree as a signal to his villagers. Since it was not so far from the village, they all heard the bang and went up to the location. Only after killing this tiger could they establish the village, which is now called Kon Kaing Lon.

Headhunting Tradition and Warfare among the Ho Nagas

Here, he recounts an episode of inter-village warfare, highlighting the role of a third-party mediator and divinatory ritual used to anticipate the outcome of the battle. The narration places warfare within a broader social and cosmological order, where conflict is negotiated through rituals and relationships.

If two villages are engaged in battle, a third group, typically neighboring villages, observes the battle and acts as neutral mediators. They break small branches from a tree to signal both warring parties to cease hostilities when heavy casualties occur on either side. Waving these tree branches, they shout, "*Nononbou*³¹, *that is enough—too many generations have been lost!*" If the fighting continues even after this signal, the number of deaths will only double, worsening the situation. The tree branches (or any plant) used for the signal must be freshly plucked, not dead or dried out. The mediators give this signal even if one side has already suffered significant

³¹ *Nononbou* is a concept from the Ho Naga culture that represents the entirety of human existence. It goes beyond the narrow biological definition of being alive and instead captures the broader idea of "having lived a human life." This concept encompasses the psychological, social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of life, connecting both the living and the dead as part of the shared human experience. In the context of warfare, invoking *Nononbou* serves as a moral appeal to end violence, reminding combatants of the shared continuum of human life and experience that goes beyond mere survival.

losses. Once the signal is given, the winning side will sing a victory song, “Wo poh! Wo poh! Wo poh! Wo poh!” while raising their hands in celebration. This is called razen (war dance).

Singing “Wo poh!” represents victory in battle, symbolizing the act of headhunting. Warriors do not merely kill their opponents with spears; they also take their heads as trophies. These severed heads are placed upon the *raako kalān lun*³², a stone platform designated for this purpose. Once all the heads have been gathered there, the warriors perform a ritual act by thrusting their spears toward the heads, without making contact. It is said that individuals possessing exceptionally powerful souls may still show resistance—their severed heads gnashing their teeth, a sign of both anger at being taken by the headhunters and fear at the spears brandished before them.

There is a story of a battle between Rafunbou (People of Pansat) and Nonrey, where Layum acted as the mediator. When the Layum people heard the news, they performed a stick divination for both villages. However, the divination favored Pansat village. The people of Layum warned the Nonrey warriors, saying, “Ay, Nononbou, the stick divination does not favor you. Don’t go to battle.” The Nonrey warriors replied, “Later, we shall return to have lunch,” an idiom that threatened to kill the people of Layum as retaliation for their warning about the unfavorable outcome of the divination. The term “Nonrey” refers to a large village, with “Non” meaning village and “rey” meaning to grow or increase in size. This indicates that it had a larger population, which provided an advantage in battle.

The battle took place on a riverbank located between Layum and Pansat. The two parties—Pansat and Nonrey—stood on either side of the river and fought³³ on the *loyan*³⁴. During the battle, they primarily targeted the strongest warrior. Fu³⁵ Dapa of Pansat, standing on a rock, raised his muzzle-loading gun³⁶ and pulled the trigger, but the weapon misfired and failed to discharge. Seizing the moment, the opposing warriors began to charge forward, singing, “Mu Tapa ve kanwen bun phoye” (Tapa’s smelly container is cracked open). This song was intended to mock Afu Tapa by

³²*Raa means war/battle, ko means head, kalān means to keep one thing on top of another thing, and lun means stone/rock/boulder.*

³³*The term for a fight varies with the weapon used. Here, the word chen indicates the throwing of spears, and different terms are used for fighting with a dao or guns.*

³⁴*Loyan refers to flat terrain where paddy is cultivated, specifically terrace farms.*

³⁵*The respectful term used to address an elderly person is “Afu,” which can also refer to one’s grandfather. When used with a person’s name, it transforms to “Fu.” The narrator referred to him as “Fu Dapa” to show respect.*

implying he had a rather strong smell. Just then, a comrade of the shooter struck a match and touched it to the priming charge, and the gun roared to life. The shot struck down the strongest Nonrey warrior, Fu Ghung. The bullet hit his chest with tremendous force, causing him to stagger backwards before collapsing. However, he was strong and denied getting hit, insisting, “Didn’t get hit! Didn’t get hit!” and attempted to get up to fight again.

Since the strongest warrior had been shot down, the Pansat warriors charged forward and claimed about 11 heads of Nonrey warriors that day. As the Nonrey warriors carried the bodies of their fallen warriors without heads, they admitted to the Layum people, “We should have listened to you,” and requested assistance in carrying the bodies home. The Layum people replied, “Indeed, we warned you, but you did not listen.” Although the battle was between villages, there were relatives on both sides. Those from Layum who helped carry the bodies felt very sad about the battle’s outcome, saying, “You all did not listen to us. Nononbou, this is devastating.” The battle occurred long before my grandfather’s generation.

Belief, Ritual, and Cosmology

In this section, we present the narratives shared by a Ho elder concerning the cosmological order and the relational life between humans, spirits, and the land. The elder speaks of a time when the world was governed by spirits—an era before the coming of Christianity—when the spirits communicated directly with humans and participated in everyday life. His words reveal a world animated by *dirawu*, spirit forces that dwell in the valleys, the fields, and even within the households, each possessing agency and moral will. This account shows that the Ho cosmos is not based on a split between the sacred and the profane or between nature and culture. Instead, it is based on networks of care, giving, and receiving. Rituals such as *Yamaa*, *Wrewren*, *Sotso*, and *Danaoya* are not mere ceremonies; they constitute acts of maintaining balance between human life and the spirits who “nurture” or “govern” them (*naa*). Through these practices, people express gratitude, seek protection, and reaffirm their kinship with both human and nonhuman beings. The following is how he explains:

The spirits were very potent³⁷ back in those days because it was the era of spirits, and Christianity had not arrived. Spirits would communicate with people in person,

³⁶*During that time, guns were not common, but Pansat village had one, which one of the warriors used in the battle to target the strongest enemy warrior.*

³⁷*He used the word shi which could mean stern (personality), mischievous (animals or children’s behavior), and extreme (weather, unfavorable circumstances/news). In this context, I interpret it as stern or potent, as he is referring to spirits.*

just like humans do. They would stick their head through the door³⁸ to converse with people in their homes. It was a time when people did not know Christ, and the spirits were the dominant forces that took care of or nurtured us (the word used here is naa). Nowadays, we are under the care (naa) of Christ. Dirawu jiwa (spirit fear) means that when we go to places like the deep valleys, where spirits reside, we have to be careful because they can harm us.” The Ho Nagas do not have specific names for spirits, but in general, they are referred to as dirawu.

Every field has its rawumih (spirit owner) to whom they must offer yamaa before eating for every task they perform in the field. Yamaa is a ritual food offering to the spirits, involving throwing pieces of rice or spilling rice beer on the ground before eating. This is also offered to the house spirit. Several rituals are performed for the house spirit, including wrewren and sotso. In the wrewren ritual, the internal organs of a gilt (one that has not given birth to piglets) are offered. The meat is cut into small pieces and tied high up on the main post of the house, typically at the front end of the structure. Along with pork, chicken beaks and feet are skewered on a sharpened stick, wrapped in a leaf, and tied to the post. Similarly, in the sotso ritual, chicken beaks and feet are skewered on a stick, bound with a leaf, and tied to a tree known as sazakchhang (*Debregeasia longifolia*), which is named after this ritual.

On a bamboo plant (locally known as Kavuk), all leaves and branches arising from the nodes are removed up to the penultimate node, leaving the topmost node intact. The chicken and pork, as mentioned above, will be skewered in those branches arising from the node. If the owner of the house did not perform these rituals, the spirit would prey³⁹ on them.

Another ritual that involves the sacrifice of a cow is called nasa. During this ritual, the meat is eaten by family members and relatives, while the internal organs are offered to the spirits. The term “nasa” translates to “dinaya,” meaning ritual food. To perform this ritual, skilled butchers known as suranbou are called in to systematically butcher the cow. Once the meat is cooked, the suranbou hands over the liver to the elder overseeing the ritual. The elder does not eat the meat directly; instead, they pinch off small pieces of the liver and throw each piece onto the ground as an offering to the spirits. After this offering, the elder will eat a small piece of the liver themselves. Only after the elder has partaken can the rest of the family begin

³⁸*Naga homes usually have half doors that allow people to have a conversation without entering the house.*

³⁹*Here, the term used is zwenza, which applies to animals preying on humans and to other animals.*

to eat. This protocol is called *dinaya*, emphasizing that the elder must eat first. It is considered a *na*⁴⁰ for others to start the feast before the elder has conducted the ritual and taken the first bite. The elder chosen for this ritual must not be selected randomly. The elder must be an elderly person rather than a younger individual and should be knowledgeable about the ritual norms. While pinching off pieces of the liver, the elder offers them to the spirits, saying, “This is for you, this for you, and so on.” After completing the offerings, the elder will consume a tiny piece of the meat and declare, “My children, now you can eat.” At this point, family members and relatives gather to share the meal.

If one of our family members falls sick, they believe that the house spirit (*ruerapo*) is angry or unhappy with them. They shall have a discussion and proceed to buy a cow to do the *danaya* ritual in the name of the sick person. Children and youths nowadays wake up only when everyone has gone to the field. However, in those days, during this ritual, they had to wake up early to butcher the cattle. Poor families may not be able to afford a cow. Back in those days, the price of a cow was about 3 *shiji* (about 75 paise). For this reason, if they could not afford a cow, they could sacrifice a sow. If they don’t rear any sows, they could buy from others at the price of *pashak* 10 or *anak*⁴¹. If they couldn’t afford that, too, then they had to do the *saza* ritual, where they would all contribute and do the ritual—skewering the meat on bamboo sticks.

With the consolidation of Christianity and the expansion of the capitalist market, the complex ritual system that once structured social, moral, and cosmological life was effectively severed from daily routine. According to the elder’s narrative, this change was so rapid that during his lifetime, he experienced what Chang Kyung-Sup (2022) referred to as “compressed modernity.” This rapid social transformation prevents the previous generation from effectively passing down Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).

⁴⁰*This concept is common in Naga communities. The indigenous conceptual system of “na” refers to an act, event, or occurrence—whether natural or human-made—that is perceived as forbidden, improper, or socially dissonant, and which is believed to invite misfortune, divine retribution, or communal disapproval. The term designates actions that disrupt the moral, ritual, or social order, signalling a potential breach between humans, ancestors, spirits, or nature. While “na” may not always carry the full weight of a moral sin, it functions as a cultural marker of taboo, impropriety, and dangerous consequence, often met with laughter, ridicule, or avoidance in daily life.*

⁴¹*Due to the governance of the Ho Nagas by the British and postcolonial territorial ambiguity, the currency used at that time is confusing and complex. Pashak is equivalent to paise available in the denominations of 5, 10, 20, 25, and 50. The 25 paise is called Shiji, 50 is called Akha, and finally one rupee is called Taka. Although the usage of the term Anak is unclear in this study, conversation with the community members indicates that it refers to the denominations below one rupee in general. The term, Shiji-anak is often used to refer to lower denominations while describing lack of money in the vernacular.*

As mentioned above, children waking up only after their parents have gone to the field is not merely a generational social change but a ritual disconnect from the traditional cosmological order.

Spirits and Sacred Places

In the Ho Naga cosmology, the landscape is animated by moral beings who inhabit trees, boulders, springs, and liminal spaces. These formations are not just physical; they are social spaces requiring reciprocity between humans and spirits, rather than one dominating the other. Illness or death resulting from interactions with these places indicates a troubled relationship with the landscape, where spirits may show selective favor or hostility toward individuals. The role of mubou (shamans) emerges as a central, diplomatic intermediary to repair ruptured relationships with the landscape by negotiating and advocating for humans. In this worldview, the environment is considered a sacred place entangled with morality, personhood, and well-being, and where ritual knowledge provides a framework for interacting with the local ecology that is shared with powerful non-human agents.

This is how the elder elucidates:

If there is a huge tree, it is called a rakapo because it is claimed and owned by spirits. Wherever there is a huge boulder, a spirit resides there. So, whenever we are going to sleep or rest underneath a boulder/rock shelter, we must prop the spear between the ground and the underside of the rock, shoring up the rock overhang, to prevent the spirit from caving in the structure and trapping oneself underneath. This precaution is taken whether one is resting at night or during the day. In rocks, there are spirits, and in trees, there are spirits. Even in the forest, where water seeps out from the ground in the dark places, there are spirits. Therefore, we must offer food that we are carrying to the spirits whenever we come across those places.

The advice given to us was, “Never go to those places.” Even spirits have people whom they are fond⁴² of. This favoritism differs from person to person. If they don’t like certain individuals, they will kill⁴³ them. Such cases are apparent, like how the person dies: they could be fine as they go to those places, but as they return home, they would die without any visible symptoms of illness. If I go to the forest and encounter a spirit who I believe has touched me (interacted with ill intention), I must visit the shaman (mubou). They shall communicate with the spirits, saying, “This person has no ill intentions, and they are a good individual, you know that very well! Why did you do that to them?” Shamans are the messengers of the spirits, very similar to those

⁴²The term used here is “*prin*”, which could mean any one of love, care, and mercy. It is like the platonic and relational love and care that is expressed by parents, grandparents, relatives, and the community.

⁴³The word used here is used to describe being devoured (preyed on, killed, and eaten).

Christian prophets who get divine visions. “They are a good person; you know that very well! Undo the harm!” That is how they communicate with the spirits.

Shamanism and Communicating with Spirits

According to the elder’s narration, the shamanic power is defined by the ability to traverse ontological boundaries: between the physical and non-physical, the living and the ancestral, the human and the non-human. This capacity is demonstrated during the Shidayan Dwe (festival), where Shamans facilitate the exchange of tangible things between the living and the dead. The festival illustrates a cosmology in which the dead do not sever social relations; instead, they participate in a moral economy of exchange, desire, and relational maintenance. The “life” and “biography” of necklaces exchanged in this ritual, in Igor Kopytoff’s (1986) terms, extend beyond the living into the ancestral domain. Similar to Philippe Descola’s (2013) understanding of animist ontology, in the Ho cosmology, all beings have equal and morally symmetrical relations. Thus, the animist ontology shapes and defines the cultural biography of materials such as necklaces that are exchanged between the dead and the living, which is made possible by the shaman.

The following is the elder’s explication of the role of shamans in the Ho society:

A long time ago, there was a renowned shaman who was considered the most powerful in the region. They can stand on the tip of a spear planted in the ground, and can scoop up water from a bamboo basket (the one that is used for carrying chicken). This person will call the dead during the Shhidiyen Dwei at the early stage of the agricultural cycle, which is now known as Good Friday⁴⁴. Shhidiyen Dwei (literally means “arguing with the death festival”) is called so because on this day, we argue with the dead. This shaman will hang a traditional raincoat (Kanen) at the doorway to detect the entry and movement of the spirits of the dead. In the meantime, your child, my child, your mother, my mother, my father, your father— in the past, they put money (Pashak/coins) in each side of the cheeks and necklaces in the graves on the day they died —will be summoned if the deceased relative(s) ask for them saying “I want that particular relatives.” Then the dead will hand over the money to them. Even necklaces can be exchanged between the dead and the living, facilitated by the shaman. This is not a trick because the original necklace put in the grave is returned as it was. If the dead say, “I don’t want this particular necklace, I want a different one,” then they will inquire what type of necklace they are asking for, and the relatives will thread the beads and wait for the dead to hand over the necklace. Sometimes, if the living relatives do not want to take the necklace from the dead, they can hand over a new necklace to them, without exchanging.

⁴⁴*The Shhidiyen Dwei coincides with the Christian Good Friday and he appears to correspond the old traditional practice with the Christian tradition either to make me understand or is an evidence of reinterpretation of this practice in Christian lense indicating syncretism and continuity.*



Traditional raincoat (Kanen) hung in the doorway (left);

Even among the shamans, only the most powerful ones can communicate with them—only those who can exchange necklaces with the dead, scoop water in a basket, and sit on the tip of a spear (planted vertically on the ground). This is akin to the current roles in Christianity, where different people have different divine abilities, such as bone setters and prayer warriors. In those days, there were no medicines. If I get sick, it is believed that a spirit put stones in my stomach. Or it could also be a hair, or a stick. In that case, I have to consult a shaman (Mounpo) who will remove the object using their teeth. Since those were the days of the Spirit Era⁴⁵, I have witnessed stone-stick⁴⁶ objects being removed with my own eyes. I once saw an insect found in pig faces, which is hairy and black, being removed from a sick person's body.

⁴⁵*Spirit Era or Era of Spirit refers to the time when Christianity had not been introduced to the Nagas.*

⁴⁶*Here the term used is “kacchang-dilun” which means stick-stone referring to collection of things such as sticks, stones, leaves, or debris. In some contexts, it could also refer to resources or a collection of such objects.*

Spirits as Owners, Proprietors, Guardians, Punishers, and Negotiators

Spirits in the Ho cosmology are not abstract beings; they are owners, kin, moral agents, and juridical authorities. The elder's narrative clearly presents spirits as proprietors of land, trees, boulders, fields, and houses; guardians of households, crops, and property; punishers of trespassers or violators; and Negotiators who respond to speech, persuasion, and ritual communication. In the elder's words:

Your house spirit is also a member of the family, and my house spirit is part of my family as well. Since every family in the village has their own paddy fields, the spirit of each field becomes its field spirit. Each field has a spirit as the owner. Parents in the past used to tell us, "The land-owner spirit of that field is very *stern*⁴⁷, do not trespass, and do not vandalise or damage crops in that field. The spirit will scold you."

The spirits enforce cosmological ethics, where breaking rules is not just socially wrong but also causes cosmic misalignment. The house spirit represents household morality; the field spirit punishes trespassers. Here is a popular folktale about a thief caught by the house spirit, as narrated by the elder:

A long time ago, when the owner of the house was away, someone stole meat from a meat basket (a basket where meat is put to be dried, usually placed above the hearth). Then the house spirit trapped the thief, keeping him stuck there until the owner came home. The owner opened the door and saw what had happened, and said, "*Aung*⁴⁸! This person is not a stranger; they are our relative, let them go." Only after the owner said that, the spirit let go.



A photograph of a meat basket hung above the hearth

⁴⁷The term used here is "Shi" which could mean mischievous, bad (personality), or stern. In reference to the spirit, it is usually used to indicate sternness due to its severity in disapproval upon certain individuals.

⁴⁸"Aung" is a form of expression when one is surprised or shocked.

As humans share space with spirits, they coexist through ritualised negotiations where humans manage their vulnerability by maintaining constant communication with non-human agents. This becomes clearer in the elder's own narration:

While working on flat terrain is relatively safe, caution is necessary on steep terrain, especially when gardening, digging up pine roots, or walking into the forest, not only in the fields. If we accidentally rolled a rock down the hill, we have to say, "It was not me, it was a wild boar." They (spirits) are scared of wild boars, the one with long tusks, and they climb on the back of the animal to ride on them. As the rocks roll down the hill, we shout, "It was a wild boar, it was the wild boar!" That way, we interrupt the spirit before they take any drastic measures. That is how they will believe in us; they listen to us, too. We convinced them that wild boars dug up rocks and rolled them down the hills. Calling out the name of wild boars convinces the spirits.

Spirits are understood like persons with emotions, preferences, and partialities. They love some people, dislike others, choose to harm or help, can be reasoned with, can misunderstand human actions, and respond to shamanic mediation. The following passage from the elder illustrates this relationship vividly:

When we are in the forests and as we return home, we say, "Come, let's go home" to ourselves. For children and babies, parents do it for them, and they must be the last to follow the children while going home from the field or forest. While heading home, members carrying babies shall take the lead (followed by children, then parents), regardless of whose field they went to. "*Chwu*⁴⁹! We are all heading home. All our family members are moving out." Even today, we say this while coming back from the field or forest. When children are last in line, spirits put rocks in their baskets, making them very heavy. If people break the norms by visiting places where spirits reside, the consequences depend on the luck of the individual and the strength of a person's soul.

Healing and Soul-Retrieving Ritual

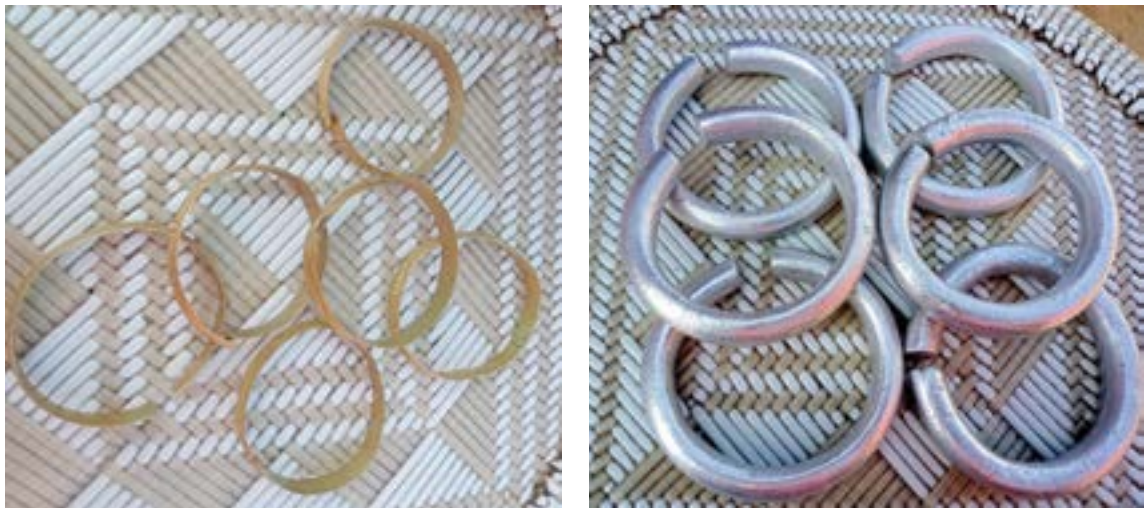
Healing practices in the Ho tradition reveal a broader cosmology of personhood, embodiment, spirit agency, and relational ethics. Illness is not understood as a physiological breakdown, but as an ontological disturbance—the soul has wandered, been taken, or has strayed from the body. The self is not singular but constituted by the unity of body, soul, and social relations. Health depends on the restoration of the cohesion of these components. With special roles played by the diviner (Prasabou), shaman, and friends of the sick, the healing process is a social act that requires the participation of these individuals. Materiality is seen as a medium of personhood, as several gendered items

⁴⁹*Chwu* is an expression calling people to move ahead or telling them to get ready to move.

are involved in the retrieval of the lost soul. These items act not merely as symbolic accessories, but as extensions of the person's identity, serving as active intermediaries between body and soul.

The elder articulated this in the following passage:

It is called "Munzaa," which refers to the act of calling [lost] souls to follow us home. Specialists known as "Prasabou"⁵⁰, would throw two sticks on the ground to determine the direction the soul went. If the person in question is a male, then they would need a men's shawl called "Labouchhee," and a women's draped wrap skirt known as "Chhanji" (mekhala) for a female. Additional items for females include



Women's armlets Kukrwey (left) and Kho (right)

a necklace and armlets (Kukrwey and Kho), which will be wrapped in the Chhanji. Two people will be involved in calling the soul: one will carry the items, and the other will take a white chicken with them. The Changji, which contains all the items, will be spread out and kept on the path where the person (or soul) went.

For example, since my name is Lateing and I am a man, one men's armlet and a dao (machete) will be placed on the shawl (labouchhee) spread on the ground, and [my friend will] shout, "Oh, Lateing, you are not supposed to be there, please come back home." When a friend asks, "Is he coming?" and if the other person confirms, they will quickly wrap the items with the shawl placed on the ground to capture the soul in the clothes and to prevent it from escaping. The person holding the white chicken shall spill some rice beer on the ground for the spirit, then pluck a feather from the chicken and place it in the same place. The owner (of the spirit) will lock themselves in the house, waiting for those people who retrieve the soul to come back.

⁵⁰Prasapo refers to those individuals, referred to as diviners, who can make probabilistic predictions.

Meanwhile, the retrievers shall pick up a rock on the way to throw it at the door of the owner who has locked themselves in. As soon as they hear the rock hit the door, they ask, “Has it come back?” and as their friends confirm, “Yes, it has come back,” they open the door. Then they shall do “Yaaraza,” which means they shall cook chicken and have food together.



The Chhanji (on the left) is traditionally worn by women, while the Labouchhee (on the right) is typically worn by men.

From the elder’s narration, we see that souls possess interiority and agency, who respond to speech, affection, and persuasion. Healing is the act of re-weaving the relational order where the relationship between the body and the soul is negotiated. Illness is spatially located as the soul is displaced into another being’s domain. This implies that the land is inhabited by beings (spirits/persons) with territorial rights that humans must share with them. Health requires knowing the geography of spirits—a cosmological cartography called “Shabou” of spirits in the Ho language. The elder described it this way:

For instance, did they (the person who lost their soul) go to carry firewood, or to the field, or somewhere else? It means the direction or path that leads to certain places that can indicate which spirit could have taken the soul. It could be the spirit of the paddy (terrace) field, the spirit of the irrigation channel—since we source the water from very far away to irrigate the fields—or even the spirit of the forest, as people go there to gather firewood. That is how they find the owner-spirit⁵¹. After getting the directions from the diviner, they pick two friends, and they go in the direction to call the lost soul. It must be done only early in the morning.

Diviner (Prasabou)

Pra or stick divination is a traditional form of divination in which an expert casts two sticks onto the ground or another surface while focusing on a specific question, such as the outcome of a battle or the fate of a believed lost soul. The relative position, distance, and interaction of the sticks after they fall are then interpreted to provide an answer. The closer and more aligned the sticks are, the stronger and more affirming the prediction is considered to be.

In the words of the elder:

Prasapo will not accompany them in the retrieval ritual. They are diviners, and among them, there will be a few with more potent abilities in predicting outcomes, referred to as “Pratsürapo.” They will break sticks and use two of those sticks to predict, “It is probably the one (spirit) from our paddy field,” throwing the sticks on the ground. If it is true, the sticks will be much further apart, but if it is true, the sticks shall touch each other. If the sticks are a bit apart, the person will fall sick. If the ill person is going to get well sooner, the sticks will be on top of each other. For a lost soul, they shall do this and find the path taken by the lost soul, then proceed to do the soul-retrieving ritual (Mounzaa). If the owner opens the door when asked if the soul has returned, it is considered a success.

Weretigers

The weretiger phenomenon in the Ho Naga tradition is imbued with layers of TEK about metamorphosis, moral personhood, danger, and cosmological change. It is a theory that explains the existence of humans, animals, spirits, and powers in the world. In the narrative of the story of an individual called Ywempoh, who was a weretiger, the elder presents an ontology of transformability. The dual possibility of transforming into a tiger either from the body or the soul reflects a cosmology where the boundaries between species are porous. It strongly resonates with Descola’s (2013) animistic “interiority,” where beings share a similar inner personhood but differ externally. Here, personhood extends beyond the human, where even as a tiger, he retains human intentionality and interiority with the ability to think, regret, and show affection. Weretigers are treated as beings with moral agency, exhibiting preferences in hunting or harming people. However, it also comes with its vulnerabilities, as the human will die if the tiger dies. Therefore, such extraordinary power requires moral discipline, offering deeper insights into indigenous moral philosophy.

The elder captures this dynamic in his account:

Among the Ho Nagas, Taga Ywempoh (meaning a Taga person named Ywempoh) was

⁵¹Here the word used is “mipo” means owner, referring to the spirits as owners.

the first to become a weretiger. The Kokis (or Taga in Ho language) haven't been here long; it's only their second or third generation. His name is Ywenpoh from a Koki village, which is why he is known as Taga Ywenpoh. It is a Koki village, but the Hao people also settled there, although we speak different languages; we are all Ho Nagas.

Taga Ywenpoh became a weretiger. When he was in his prime, he met a man from Khanitlengbou (Kon Kaing Lon), who travelled⁵² from Khanitlengbou village to Taga village, sharpening his spear. I think his name was Sipoh; I can't recall the name right now. He was getting ready to return⁵³ to his village, Khanitlengbou. As I have mentioned earlier, they carry only a spear while travelling. The distance between the two villages is short; it doesn't take that long. As it was getting dark, he was sharpening his spear. "Ainh, Reewabou⁵⁴, it is already dark, why are you sharpening your spear?" asked Ywenpoh. He had become a huge weretiger at the time (meaning his tiger had become very huge). "Ainh, Agibou, I'm about to move out now; come, wild animal or humans, I'll do this," said the man while demonstrating his spear-handling skills. He wished him luck and then moved ahead of the man in tiger form. He planned to scare him as he approached. Since the tigerman was aware of all the moves that would be made, as demonstrated to him earlier, he would leap to the opposite side each time the man attacked. His goal was not to kill him, but rather to frighten him by jumping from side to side and up and down across the road. The man ran up to the Pachhang tree—which still exists to this day—and shouted, to which the Khanitlengbou villagers came with lit pinetorches and rescued him.

He once killed and ate one of the mithuns of my namesake in my village (Layum). The mithun was about 11 years old. Later, he returned to his village and said, "Of all the meat I have ever eaten, Rarabou⁵⁵ Honpoh's son, Sheephro's mithun has the toughest skin." Since it was an old mithun, the skin was very tough.

⁵²The term used here is "tuk" meaning to enter or get in referring to a downhill landscape.

⁵³Here, the word used is "set" meaning to come out indicating a uphill direction of travel.

⁵⁴Reewabou is a kinship term used by couple to address the children of the wife's bothers and sisters (the wife's nieces and nephews). This kinship designation is embedded in the institution of Shabou, which is a prescriptive marriage alliance between the wife's natal family and the husband's family. Within this system, the couple's children can marry the Reewabou, and the latter are socially obliged to accept such proposals. Refusal constitutes a breach of Shabou and is interpreted as severing the alliance. Traditionally, Shabou alliance are maintained through successive generations generations, with at least one intermarriage between the two families in each generation.

Tika Ywepoh did not just die of illness. In Manipur, before reaching Kharasom (Ukhrul district), there is a steep uphill—we can see it from my house (Layum). Since he (Ywepoh) turned into a tiger, he roamed around even those regions. Fusilu was the name of the person who shot and killed him. Ywepoh went hunting in the morning since he was a tiger, and he was searching for prey. In those days, the Ho people hunted in this region (referring to the current border areas under Meluri District, Nagaland, and Ukhrul District, Manipur), as there were no villages. It was dawning, and there was only a tiny ray of light thorning⁵⁶ out at the mouth of the mountain. He was lying down with his back resting against a huge pine tree, saying, “Aeoh! My wife, my children, what was I seeking in this faraway land?⁵⁷ (What am I doing here so far away?).” He had just changed back into his human form and was talking to himself. Meanwhile, Fusiluk, who was a skilled hunter, thought, “Umm.. This is not human; this doesn’t sound like a human talking.” He cocked his gun and took his aim. He had a dead branch of a pine tree near his feet, which snapped as he stepped on it. Hearing this startled Ywepoh, and a huge tiger shuddered in front of the hunter. Since it was formed from the body rather than the spirit, it was enormous. As Fusiluk saw this huge tiger, he shot and killed him on the spot on that hillside. This is our Ho folktale.

The elder outlines the process of becoming a weretiger, detailing its characteristics and emphasising the significant changes that Christianity has brought to Ho society:

Weretiger must have been implanted in him by someone else, or, as others say, he might have drunk water from some streams. That is why it is said that we cannot drink water from just any stream. The tiger that is formed by the body (rather than the spirit) is very huge. If it is formed from the soul, the person might not die when the tiger dies, but the person whose tiger is turned from the body will die if the tiger dies. Most of these stories are from my grandfather’s generation; I have not come across weretigers in my lifetime, and it was not even my dad’s generation. Weretigers do not prey on humans. However, weretigers may kill those who mistreat or persecute them, but they will not eat them. They do not just prey on all animals; they could

⁵⁵ *Rarabou is endonym for Layum village. It is a standard traditional practice among the Ho Nagas to name the village and the father of a person while talking about them. For example, Kohima’s John’s son, David (meaning John’s Son from Kohima). Sometimes, kinship suffix are also added before the name. Nowadays.*

⁵⁶ *He is referring to the tiny sunray shaped like a thorn. This conversion is done to preserve the poetic quality of the elder’s narration.*

⁵⁷ *The phrase is used in conversation when asking “Why are you here?” or “What are you doing here?”*

have killed and eaten all the deer in the region. There are certain kinds of animals that they eat. Even among animal species, such as stags, there are specific preferences. If people persecute them, they won't even bite them, but pound them to death. Even though there were weretigers, the Ho people had killed so many tigers. I have seen it with my own eyes. Nowadays, we don't have any weretigers in our region. After the introduction of Christianity, the phenomenon of weretigers ceased to exist. In the past, being a Christian or a deacon meant refraining from eating or drinking certain things. This discipline contributed to the strength of Christianity, demonstrated through the fervent prayers of that time. Even when relatives gathered around crying that a person was about to pass away, when the Deacons prayed and sang songs, they got better. I have witnessed that with my own eyes. Unlike in the early days of Christianity, nowadays Christians drink rum and chew tobacco.

The elder frames the disappearance of weretigers within a historical and ontological transition from an animist world populated by transformative and relational beings to a Christianised world where such beings began to lose relevance. However, proselytisation did not replace the animist cosmology with a theological one; rather, it produced an ontological realignment in which elements of the former were reinterpreted and absorbed into the latter framework.

Feast of Merit (Chājhue)

The Ho feast of merit reveals several interconnected aspects of Ho social life, ritual practice, moral order, and prestige-making. Stone-pulling (Lunkheng), the erection of Dathrung (a wooden post with carved designs), the butchering of buffalo, tail-cutting rituals, kinship norms, and taboo, together, form a coherent picture of the feast of merit as a moral, political, economic, aesthetic, and cosmological performance. Ceremonies such as Lunkheng (stone pulling) and Bola (Dathrung erection) show that the feast of merit is not only a redistributive event but also an act of materialising prestige. The erection of monoliths and carved logs serves as a permanent marker of wealth, economic redistribution, prestige, and generosity. Most importantly, these ceremonies operate within a strict ritual sequence governed by *na* (taboos), where deviation invites shame and social sanction, reinforcing the moral and relational order that the feast seeks to uphold.



Dathrungs erected in front of a traditional Ho house.

The advent of Christianity, the state, and the new economic system gradually brought an end to this ritualised economic redistribution and prestige-making.

The elder offers the following details, which are central to understanding the Ho feast of merit:

In the Ho Language, Lunkheng refers to a stone-pulling ceremony, where participants bring the stone and plant it. Bola refers to the traditional Dathrung plantation, which involves cutting a log from a huge tree and adding designs to the edges of the log along its length. These two ceremonies indicate the number of feasts an individual has given and their corresponding level of significance. In our Ho tradition, it is “na” to perform Lunkheng (stone-pulling ceremony) before performing Bola. That is when you perform the buffalo tail-cutting ceremony and erect several Dathrungs. Only after performing the Bola ceremony two or three times can one perform the Lunkheng. The Lunkheng or stone-pulling ceremony is the highest level of the feast of merit, where one has to slaughter more than five buffalo. From the first feast itself, you have to feed the entire village. If you can manage, you can perform the stone-pulling ceremony from the second feast. It also depends on the feast-giver if they want to plant only Dathrung from the second feast onwards; they may choose not to erect any Dathrung and perform only the stone-pulling ceremony from the second feast onwards.



The dao (machete) used in the buffalo tail-cutting ceremony.

While carving designs on the log, the middle portion is left untouched, resulting in the formation of a ridge along its length. These designs were made by cutting with a dao in a series of cut marks. At the top of this post, made from the log, a structural Y-shaped design is carved, known as Khoyenkho. On top of the post, figurines of birds and planes are also carved out. They got to see it during the Japanese War (Japan Raazi, referring to WWII). So this was added to the structure later. The dummies

of birds were present before. Between the middle and the bottom, the figures of a buffalo head are carved on all the Dathrungs, which can number up to 5-10 on the first feast, and the number of posts keeps on increasing in rows.



Demonstration of the buffalo tail-cutting ceremony.

Different rituals are associated with acquiring a Dathrung: witnessing the cutting of the tree, carrying the log, and erecting the Dathrung. After the tree is cut down to be used for making the Dathrung, the log is taken on the seventh day. On the same day, holes are dug for inserting the logs, and the branches of the tree are collected and burned. The next morning, the Dathrung is erected. The process of installing the Dathrung is slow and steady, accompanied by singing: “Wo, wo. Oui!” This is followed by the chant, “Wo ah wo oh, Wo ah wo oh!” After the log is inserted into the hole dug the previous day, it is ensured that it stands straight. Members involved in the installation observe from a distance to make sure it is not tilted in any direction. Before insertion into the holes, all the Dathrungs are lined up next to their respective holes, and they are inserted one by one. Although it is technically possible to install all of them at once, this practice is not followed. The observers ensure that all structures are in a straight line. Only then do they secure the Dathrungs into the soil to solidify them in place. The standard number of Dathrungs in one installation is seven, which is a strict ancestral tradition.

If a feast is organised, then seven Dathrungs will be installed in front of the house, and the installation must be completed on the same day. Each one of them will be raised one at a time, with some workers assigned to lift the structure while others fill the soil after inserting the Dathrung. The buffalo will be tied to the Dathrung,

where the ceremony will take place. The heads of the buffalo will be secured to it. A minimum of two or three buffalo must be slaughtered for the installation of the Dathrung. This is because using only one buffalo is considered odd, as it is referred to as “lacking a friend” and is viewed as inappropriate. If you’re cutting the tail, your friend will hold the buffalo’s tail. When the tail is cut, the meat from the sacrum is also chopped off along with it. Strong men are capable of cutting through to the bone. The heads of the buffalo are tied between any two Dathrungs by connecting them with a piece of wood locally known as Kuthrochhang.

He tells a popular story about a feast-giver who failed to properly perform the tail-cutting ceremony, illustrating the consequences of such a mistake. Afu Nithangpoh came to his in-laws’ place in Rarepora (Layum) to perform the tail-cutting ceremony. This ceremony is done only at Mapou’s (in-laws’) residence; it is not organised randomly. It’s important to note that when cutting the tail of a buffalo, we are supposed to wear the armlet (Siphou) on the right arm while raising the dao on the right side. However, he wore it on his left arm instead. This posed a problem because the armlet, which is worn on the upper arm, had a lot of fur, obstructing his visibility. Because of this, he couldn’t even cut the edge of the tail.

My villagers laughed at the incident because it is considered na to miss while cutting the tail of a buffalo. If we cut from the edge of the hindquarters, the tail can be cut off. But since he couldn’t see properly because of the furry armlet, he missed the hindquarters and cut only the edge of the tail. So, my villagers cut off the tail in a proper, traditional manner and threw it up into the sky. He was so embarrassed that he didn’t even eat during the feast and left. This happened when he was living in Pafunra.



An armlet (siphou) worn by men

Monolith Erection

The ceremony is a large-scale communal redistribution of wealth. The act of butchering 5 to 15 buffalo is not simply sacrificial—it is a public distribution of wealth and prestige. This situates stone-pulling within the broader framework of a merit, generosity, and prestige economy, where the giver demonstrates capacity, courage, and social commitment. During the stone-pulling ceremony, participants express their connections with non-human entities such as boulders, animals, and spirits, acknowledging their personhood and interiority. It also allows the youths of the village to participate in a marathon, where winners are honoured with shawls and public recognition, thereby undergoing a moral training of both body and character. In short, Lunkheng is a ritualised process through which material abundance, moral discipline, cosmological relationships, and social hierarchy are publicly enacted. It binds the village through redistribution, tests individual and collective virtue, and expresses an animist ontology where stones, animals, humans, and spirits participate in a shared moral universe.

The passage from the elder clearly illustrates this relationship:

During Lunkheng (Stone-pulling ceremony), buffalo are butchered, usually starting from five, ten, or even fifteen buffalo that I have witnessed. Let me share the oral tradition surrounding this event. If I decide to hold this ceremony and butcher five buffalo, I will distribute portions of each buffalo—such as muscle, skin, and bones—among the citizens of the village. To carry this meat, one needs a huge basket; sometimes, this requires making two trips.

The stone-pulling ceremony begins with digging up a boulder from the forest. On the day of the excavation, all the villagers participate, while family members and relatives help select the appropriate boulder. The owner shall say, “May you have a good heart,” then recite a prayer and pour rice beer over it. The villagers focus on the technical aspects, such as clearing the path and preparing for the pulling by securing the boulder to wooden poles, which are tree trunks used as hauling tools. In the evening, before heading home, the owner must place a branch or leaves on the boulder to prevent jungle cats from defecating on it. If a jungle cat defecates on the boulder intended for the ceremony, it is considered *na*, and the boulder must be abandoned in favour of another one. If I find a perfect boulder meant for the ceremony, and my friend also wants it, he might use a cunning trick. He could place jungle cat faeces on it and pour water over it, which would render the boulder *na* and cause me to abandon it. This would allow him to claim it without any concern since it would not be considered *na* for him.

During the ceremony, relatives from all the villages will be invited. Typically, 40 to 50 people participate in pulling the boulder. Several tree trunks are tied to the boulder,

with at least three ropes, each about 30 to 40 meters long, attached at the front for pulling. As they pull the boulder, they sing and chant in unison, “Wo! Wo oh! Wo!” The Lunkheng song is very beautiful. If the boulder is to be placed in the jungle, there should be a running race competition. The megalith will be erected near the village, in an area with no nearby settlements, but situated in a favourable location within the jungle. However, if it is planted in the village, there will be no competition.

Let me tell you about the competition. If a megalith is erected today, the competitors will go to a designated location in the forest to spend the night. For example, if they are starting the race from the cavesite near the village, they would spend the night in the cave. In the olden days, they did not wear much clothing; they had only a thin cloth, which they used to cover themselves while spending the night in the forest. There would be a designated group of people called the Chheekhobou who would go to the starting point at dawn. As soon as they reach the location from the village, the competitors will start the race with no official signal to begin. The runners would begin the race without caring about their clothing, even if they had kicked it into the fire. The Chheekhobou would collect the shawls, shaking off the charcoal from the fabric. At a particular point in the race, people would identify the first seven winners. These winners would eat only meat, no vegetables, until the end of the celebration (feast of merit), and they would eat only the food provided by the feast-giver. Even if they go home, they must not sleep with their wives or children, as this is considered na, a practice stemming from the days of “spear-thrusting,” which refers to inter-village warfare. When the Chheekhobou arrive at the location where the winners are identified, the feast-giver’s wife will award them with shawls such as Techhee and Labouchhee, before taking them to the residence of the feast-giver.



Men's Shaw, Techhee, worn by feast givers.

The winners of the running race during the Feast of Merit, along with the Chheekhobou, would march from the location where the winners were announced to the residence of the host. They would march in order of their winning positions, singing the war victory song. While singing the song, one member of the group would sing “Wo,” and the other members would respond with “Poh!” As they marched and sang the victory song, they raised their hands, creating a sight that was awe-inspiring.

I was also a participant in the race during my time. It was the feast given by Aki⁵⁸ Kha. He died a long time ago. I think I got the fifth position. However, your grandma and grandpa⁵⁹ scolded me, saying that, as a Christian, it is wrong to partake in such ceremonies. The problem is that it takes seven days to finish the ritual, as the winners of the race had to eat only the food given by the feast giver. The ritual is an important part of the feast, which makes it difficult for me, as it is na to break the rules of the ritual. This is why my parents scolded me for participating. I expected a signal like “one, two, three,” followed by a whistle, similar to the signals used in Christian running race competitions. As a result, we were still sleeping while others had already started running.

Distribution, Kinship, and Dance of the Feast of Merit

The Ho feast of merit follows a systematic and ritualised order of ceremonies strictly governed by norms and taboos. In this section, the elder explains in detail the rules for the distribution of meat and rice, and the role of kinship and folk dances in the feast of merit:

If five buffalo are butchered, each portion—skin, muscle, and bone—will be distributed among the villagers. When ten buffalo are slaughtered, the villagers will receive ten skins, ten muscle portions, and ten bone portions. This same process continues when fifteen buffalo are butchered. The share for relatives from other villages differs from the rest of the people, however. If a family has five boys who help with pulling the boulder— even just holding the rope—each boy will receive a tin⁶⁰ of rice (with husks removed). Even a child who has started walking can join the stone-pulling ceremony, even if it is only to hold the rope. During the year of the feast, villagers do not pound rice for paddy transplantation; instead, they eat what they receive from the feast giver. The meat provided at the feast is often more than sufficient. In fact, they have so much that they must dry the excess meat above the hearth in a wooden basket, as their meat basket is already full. Each basket contains specific parts of the meat, such as skins, muscles, bones, and fats. These baskets, woven with cane, are hung and lined up on the wall for storage.

At the residence of the feast giver, there are designated groups assigned to carry out different tasks. Among these groups from within the relatives, they would tie a wooden pole on top of the Dathrung, where they would tie up the head of the buffalo. This was done the next morning after they had performed the tail-cutting ceremony.

⁵⁸*Aki is a term used for maternal uncles and those from clans outside your own.*

⁵⁹*The speaker refers to his own parents using second-person kinship terms in relation to the interviewer.*

⁶⁰*A tin of rice is about 15kg when the husks are removed.*

On the top part of the Dathrung, several woods are tied parallel to each other, and all the heads of the buffalo slaughtered in the feast are tied on it. Similarly, the dao used in the tail-cutting ceremony is also tied to it, indicating the dao used in the ceremony.

On the same day, there shall be folk song and folk dance performances. It is worth noting that folk dances are not performed during the stone-pulling ceremony. If we hold the tail-cutting ceremony today, there will be folk dances tomorrow. Regardless of the number of participants—twenty to thirty—all the men will wear the traditional headgear called Raakha. This is how the attire looks: a headgear called Raakha will be worn, a pair of short black pants, an undershirt, a thrintei (anklet), a Siphou (armlet) on the upper arms, and a dao. Women do not participate in the folk dance on this occasion, as they have their own rice beer drinking day.

The Atonbou clan of Nonrey and the Sitrundebou of Layum were competing to be the First Dancers⁶¹ in the ceremony. Since the feast-giver belongs to the latter, the Atonbou clan took the opportunity to dance first. It is a traditional practice that the clan of the feast giver does not usually initiate the dance. Therefore, even though the Sutrundebou clan knew the footwork much better than the competing clan, they could not begin because they were the host. The Atonbou clan did not know the footwork, so they were singing, “Oh ha!” repeatedly without dancing or demonstrating any footwork. Even though they are known as Atonbou, they should be called “Khantebou.” Whereas, the Sudrundebou clan is the children of Nilen, which is why they are called Nilennabou (Children of Nilen). While the Atonbou dancers were singing, Afu Nilen was listening to it sitting near the foot of the Dathrung. Even though he was the feast-giver and should not initiate the dance, he had to intervene because the Atonbou clan would not do the footwork, and also, they were competing for the position of the first dancers. From the foot of the Dathrung, he initiated the dance by singing, “Oh ha! Oh Ha!” [the rest of the song could not be translated]. The Satrundebou clan performed the first and original folk dance (the song and footwork).

Here is another eyewitness account from an elder who witnessed two feasts of merit during her childhood:

During my childhood, I witnessed two significant feasts of merit, which are known

⁶¹*"First Dancers" are the most skilled and knowledgeable dancers in the community. They master various footwork, rhythmic variations, and choreographic sequences. In performances, they lead the dance line, initiating the melody and movements, which others follow with repetitions or slight variations. Their intricate footwork highlights their expertise and authority within the dance formation.*

as *Chājhue*⁶² in our language. One notable occasion was the feast hosted by Afu Thro, who held 16 feasts, sacrificing 10 pigs and 10 buffalo each time, along with the erection of 16 megaliths. When these meats last for a long time (like years), they are called *Suehgok Suehka*⁶³. On the day of his death, his funeral was quite spectacular. Everyone was dressed in traditional attire and carried well-decorated spears. As Christians, we did not participate in his funeral. He was a wealthy man, and his community handled the arrangements for his funeral. This occurred before I reached marriageable age. The funeral processions and rituals varied depending on whether the deceased was a chief, a wealthy individual, or a Christian. However, over time, many village chiefs began converting to Christianity, resulting in a shift in burial practices as more people adopted the faith.

During the stone-pulling ceremony, the people at the back use tree trunks as levers to assist in moving the boulder. If the boulder doesn't budge, they check to see if it has a baby stone nearby. If a baby stone is found in the same location, they dig it up and strap it onto the back of the mother boulder. Only then will the boulder be able to move. Initially, only men participate in the pulling ceremony; however, if the boulder still does not move because the baby stone was left behind, they will excavate the baby stone and call the women to assist in pulling the boulder. During the ceremony, everyone will be dressed in their full traditional attire.

Sheekha of Rareebou (Layum) invited the people of Lephori to his feast. There is a folk song about this: *Chwue na sa nit rou? Asitha kusa lo!* (Who was the messenger? It was Asitha). I was told that when Lephori came and performed folk dances, people were amazed because they performed very well. People of Lephori could sing and dance very well; even their dances were so intricate, involving a lot of jumping. Sheekha was a wealthy man; when he passed away, he left behind 40-50 buffalo, and about 3-4 lakhs of money. My mother used to sing folksongs to me about this event.

With the advent of Christianity, they stopped practising this tradition. Since structures (such as Dathrungs) are not typically taken down under normal circumstances, people began removing them to prevent them from falling on people during storms, especially as the structures grew older. There are instances where houses were destroyed during storms and even killed some children. Some of these structures are made of pinewood, which gets easily rotten if the tree was not a fatwood. Nowadays, most of the structures are taken down for firewood. However, a few of them are currently erected outside the Tribal Hoho Office.

⁶²“*Chā*” means people or public, and “*jhue*” means to call, invite, or take someone somewhere.

⁶³This term is typically used by older generation. Due to the loss of feast-giving tradition and the availability of meat in modern times, it has become less frequent in usage.

Chājhue (the feast of merit) is a social institution, in the anthropological sense of a stable set of norms, roles, and ritualized practices that organize social, economic, and moral life. The feast integrates redistribution, prestige-making, kinship obligations, and ritual authority into a single, intergenerationally transmitted framework. The elder’s account of being scolded for participating in pre-Christian rituals—because the rules are too strict and naïve—reveals a local theology of incompatibility. Christian temporalities, such as the use of whistles, scheduled races, and the clean separation of sacred and profane, contrast with the immersive, continuous ritual time of the ceremonies. These eyewitness accounts provide a clear example of ritual transformation under Christianity, moral frictions, and generational reinterpretation of the traditional practices.

Jelle J.P. Wouters (2022) delivers a pointed critique of the “overtly orthodox and zealous American Baptist missionaries” who, in his account, dismantled one of the central pillars of Naga moral economy and led to the “emergence of Naga capitalist/elite class invested in unrestrained accumulation” of wealth. Western religious influence did not merely change religious practices, but restructured the very ethics of economic life in Naga society. The result is a social order corrupted by capitalist values—one where accumulation is encouraged, inequality deepens, and the former ethos of generous redistribution is largely abandoned. Prestige, as understood in Naga tradition, is earned through expansive generosity and communal redistribution, rather than through the mere hoarding or display of personal wealth.

The Ho Naga Institution of Mabou and Shabou

This section is based on the elder’s narration and discussions with other members of the Ho community. Only a few direct quotes are used here because conversations from multiple sources required analysis to construct and understand this institution.

The kinship systems of Mabou and Shabou play a crucial role in social relations, significantly impacting various rituals and ceremonies. Shabou refers to the daughters and granddaughters of maternal uncles, and marriage within this category is traditionally encouraged. Mabou represents an institutionalised affinal relationship between two families united by marriage, where both families recognize, address, and treat each other as Mabou. Another use of the term Mabou is befriending someone in another village, allowing the two people involved to stay at each other’s place while travelling to their own villages. This designation is not just descriptive; it carries normative expectations regarding hospitality, ritual obligations, and mutual respect. This relationship fosters a pattern of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, creating lasting alliances between the two families across generations. Through Shabou, kinship connections involve not only biological but also social, ritual, and political dimensions, as they are reinforced through ongoing intermarriage.

This institution generates a network of interconnected marriage alliances, since the relationship can also be initiated through the line of paternal aunts. When Shabou designates the daughters of maternal uncles, the relationship is reciprocally mirrored: one's own sisters and nieces are regarded as the Shabou of the sons of paternal aunts, thereby extending the alliance symmetrically across both sides of the kin network. When an alliance is broken—either through divorce or through the withdrawal of a consent to the customary right to marriage, even if the daughter is engaged to another—the family responsible for the rupture is required to provide alliance compensation to the aggrieved party. This compensation is typically rendered in the form of a buffalo or cow, symbolising both restitution and the recognition of the social cost incurred by the broken pact. The value of the compensation increases with the depth of the intergenerational relationship and the number of children in the case of divorce: for example, when an alliance extends into the fourth generation, the compensation is correspondingly heightened to four buffalo or cows, or an equivalent payment in cash. Through these mechanisms, marriage alliances are framed as moral and economic commitments whose breach necessitates ritualized forms of redress to restore equilibrium within the social order.

The establishment of the alliance is symbolised by the gift of the finest axe and spear from the groom to the bride's parents or to the eldest son if the parents are no longer alive. If a Ho marries someone from another community, a shawl is given instead of an axe and a spear, unless they specifically request otherwise. Among the living relatives, the oldest couple forms the Mapang (root or base), playing a crucial role in the continuity of this tradition and overseeing the norms of this matter. Each non-Shabou marriage, known as Matheng (meaning new), establishes its own Mapang, which subsequent descendants use to determine their Shabou. Misunderstandings within a Matheng marriage are approached with exceptional tact, as speaking in a manner that might provoke the wife's family is culturally unacceptable (na). Proximity to the Mapang in generational terms (for instance, first-generation sons), combined with the greater the number of marital ties between the two families, significantly strengthens one's customary claim to marriage. This creates nodes (Mapang) of interconnected alliances that guide normative expectations in rituals, ceremonies, gifts, and exchange.

Brothers have culturally defined obligations toward the sisters adjacent to them in birth order as their children become Shabou to their sisters' children. The responsibility is passed on to the eldest son of the brother in the event of untimely death. This relationship represents a strong form of avunculate in which the maternal uncle exercises moral authority, disciplinary rights, and ritual potency over his sister's children. However, this avunculate system is embedded within a prescriptive matrilineal cross-cousin marriage framework. Among avuncular obligations of the uncle to his sister adjacent in birth order, a significant practice is the festive gifting of meat portions to the sister's household. Their reciprocity is intentionally asymmetrical: they return one portion less than what

the maternal uncle had given. Thus, when the uncle sends three (or even two and a half) portions, the sister's family customarily responds with two. For the brothers who are non-adjacent in birth order, they serve cooked meals, typically consisting of meat and chilli. This obligation is now performed every Christmas, unlike in the past, when a different ceremony was held for this event before the introduction of Christianity.

Exchange and reciprocity are crucial aspects of the Mabou/Shabou institution, with each gift possessing its own ritual significance. As a woman explains, "When I was very sick last year, my nephew gifted me a Labouchhee (shawl) that will be used to wrap my body when I pass away. Even though I didn't ask anything from him, he knows his obligations, as I am the Mapang. I'm also thinking of giving him one shawl, although I am not obligated to. Since I'm more well-off compared to them, my family has to show courtesy of our alliance and buy one shawl for each head of the family." The nephew's gift expresses a moral expectation that kin remain responsible not only for life-cycle events but also for the care of the body after death. The shawl is not merely a cultural aesthetic signifying community identity, but it is a social object charged with kinship meanings, serving as a vehicle of memory and a ritual item that binds the giver and the recipient across life and death.

Mabou obligations specify how to greet, where to stay, who owes hospitality, ritual courtesies, and the exchange of gifts and food. In relation to the buffalo tail-cutting ceremony, the elder explains, "Your maternal grandfather cannot perform the ceremony at your residence because it is na. However, your father should do the ceremony at the residence of your maternal grandfather or your eldest surviving maternal uncle in the event of your grandfather's untimely death." The maternal lineage holds specific ritual prerogatives, which are spatially anchored on the grounds of the mother's clan. Performing the act in the wrong location risks violating cosmological boundaries, attracting misfortune, or disrupting ancestral order. This spatial ordering of ritual authority signals that the maternal line retains moral and cosmological influence over the child, even though descent is often patrilineal in social practice.

The institution of Mabou/Shabou establishes a rule of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage that fosters stable alliances between two lineages. While it involves marrying cousins, such practices are common among many Indigenous societies and do not inherently lead to genetic issues, particularly when descent groups practice exogamy, and the population size is adequate. This institution plays a crucial role in rituals and ceremonies, while maintaining strong kinship and marriage alliances to facilitate a more efficient social organisation. Cosmological norms govern the relationships between kinship groups and marriage alliances, where failure to fulfil one's obligation risks misfortune and moral sanctioning.

Folktale of Sitrundebou and Khantebou

Although variations of this folktale exist among the Ho communities, this is the elder's narration of the origin of the Sitrundebou and Khantebou clans.

Even today, none of the clans or lineages has disappeared. Sitrundebou and Khantebou originated from two brothers. One of the brothers would always go hunting, while the other brother would only cook and eat what was hunted (thus the name Khante; *khan* means to cook). There is another folktale about these two brothers. The Khante was the older one, while the younger was Sudrundebou. Since the younger brother was a skilled hunter, he would give all the special portions (thighs and limbs) of the game to his friend. However, it is customary to give these meat portions to the elder brother. Therefore, the elder brother used to tell him, "You will understand one day, younger brother." He used to think about what his elder brother had told him. In olden days, the spear used to be sharpened so well that when they held their spear and went into the jungle, the leaves of trees would just fall when the tip of the spear touched them, even so slightly. So one day, they all went hunting. When the younger brother killed a deer with his spear, he removed all the intestines and put them all over his body, pretending to be dead. When his friend, to whom he had given all the special meat portions, came across his body, he got scared and jumped over it and ran away. It was *na* for someone from another clan to touch the body of a dead person in the jungle because one could be blamed for the murder of the other. The older brother came later as he couldn't walk as fast due to old age. He discovered his supposedly dead body and embraced him, saying, "Oh, my younger brother." Then the younger brother understood what his brother had been telling him, and realised he had not been giving him special portions of meat. From that day onwards, he would always give him portions of meat that he loved, such as internal organs and muscle. That is why it is said in our oral tradition that relatives and friends can never be the same/equal. This is our Ho Naga folktale.

Ho Naga Customary Laws and Inheritance

The Ho Naga customary laws on inheritance follow a patrilineal framework structured by male descent, with the male bloodline serving as the legitimate channel through which ancestral property and continuity of the clan are maintained. It privileges the eldest son with the largest share of the property, signalling seniority as a central principle of order. The younger brothers and sisters cannot challenge their parents' decision because the authority of customary law overrides individual competence, education, or social mobility. Daughters do not inherit any property unless their parents do not have sons, or if the daughter marries last among the siblings, or does not get married at all. They received land based on exceptional rather than structural rights, which indicates a moral obligation and a gesture of affection by the parents, as they typically take care of their

elderly parents. This is partial but not foundational inheritance based on the consensus between the father and sons. Such an agnatic system of inheritance protects the coherence of the patrilineal unit and prevents fragmentation of land across marriage lines.

In the event of the end of the male bloodline, the institution of Kholobou functions as an absorption mechanism for lineage continuity by passing the property to close agnates (brothers or nephews). This system prevents land from drifting outside the lineage, reinforces the idea that property is an ancestral belonging, and ensures continuity of ritual, social, and agricultural responsibilities. Property becomes inseparable from kinship morality, where gendered hierarchy is foundational but emotionally negotiated. The Ho customary law of inheritance is preventive rather than punitive, as it can foresee potential conflicts that can emerge when inheritance through emotional reciprocity is misinterpreted as structural entitlement.

Here is the elder's account of the customary law of inheritance:

In the Ho tradition, land/field is usually not passed down to daughters. However, if there are no sons, a small portion of the land could be given to the daughters. This is done because it feels incomplete not to pass down any property since the parents did not have a son. The bigger properties, such as important land, fields, or houses, cannot be passed down to the daughters. If a couple does not have any sons, the property will be inherited by their relatives, known as Kholobou (literally means, "those who pick up"). For instance, you and your eldest brother have many sons and daughters, but your elder brother (middle child) has only daughters and no sons. Then, your elder brother shall discuss with you and your eldest brother. "Ate, Anashwinpa⁶⁴, I am going to live long into my old age⁶⁵. My daughter, who is getting married last, will take care⁶⁶ of me. I cannot say that I am going to give her all my property. I should at least pass down a piece of land to her." The brothers can discuss which part of the land can be given to her. The brothers can never say no to this proposal. For the love of the last daughter, a certain land is given to her.

Even after the parents die, the daughter shall cultivate the land, since the brothers have already agreed to it (min ka, which means "cracked mouth," indicating they

⁶⁴*Ate addresses elder brother and Ana or Anashwinpa addresses the younger or youngest brother respectively; together the term "Ate anashwinpa" refers to all the siblings. However "Ate Ana" refers to one's own relatives.*

⁶⁵*The term used here is Sheesaktlara used to refer to an elderly person who live to the old age that require care from sons and daughters. Shi means death, and sik means difficult.*

⁶⁶*Here, the term used in "naa" which is the same word used to refer to an infant, or children. The verb form of this word is used to describe nurturing or raising children.*

have already spoken their words and made their decision). The daughter cannot claim any land further than what has been demarcated. This arrangement is reached only after an agreement between the brothers. A father cannot solely decide to pass down any land to his daughter. This is because our Naga tradition follows the male bloodline, where the eldest son typically receives the largest share of the inheritance. Even if the eldest son knows nothing (probably meaning he is uneducated) and stays only at home, since we already have a Naga customary law, the younger siblings cannot attempt to take away his inheritance. The younger brothers cannot challenge or question the amount of inheritance acquired by the eldest brother. The share has been given to the children by their father, which is a Ho customary practice.

As I explained earlier, if the middle sibling decides to give land to one of the daughters without consulting his brothers, it could lead to a future dispute. This issue arose in Pafunra several years ago. A woman (personal information excluded) married a Burmese man (likely from the Bamar ethnic group). She was the last daughter to get married and took care of her parents. According to tradition, she was given a portion of land. However, she claimed ownership of all the land, including areas that were not designated for her. This led to a heated legal dispute that escalated all the way to the Layshi Naga customary justice system.

He explains the institution of Kholobou as follows:

For example, you and I come from the same bloodline. If you have no biological brothers and no sons, but I have many children, I could claim all your property. Even if you have a substantial amount of money, your daughters would not be able to claim it. If you own a concrete house, I will inherit it, along with your car if you have one. That means my patrilineal uncle will inherit my property under such circumstances. As I have explained, if your elder brother did not have any sons, then your eldest brother's children will inherit his property. However, if neither of your elder brothers has any sons, then you (the youngest) will inherit all their property. That makes you a Kholobou. For instance, among the three of you, your eldest brother is already married. Before that, your parents had already divided the land among the three of you. Suppose your parents took the three of you and did the Parah, which refers to the buying of new land when the share becomes less for the younger siblings. When this happens, the share of the youngest will be given to the elder one. Along with the siblings and parents, they shall have a consensus to provide the newly bought land to the youngest son.

Spirit Landscapes and Environmental Stewardship

The elder's account of the Ho Nagas cosmology reveals an Indigenous environmental ethic grounded in relational ontology, where trees, rocks, fields, forests, and water sources are inhabited by dirawu (spirits) and governed by spirit owners (rawumih). Large trees

(rakapo), boulders, dark forest springs, cultivated fields, and even houses are understood as sentient or guarded spaces, demanding careful conduct, ritual acknowledgement, and restraint. Practices such as offering yamaa before eating, avoiding certain locations inhabited by spirits, and seeking ritual mediation through shamans (mubou) do not only regulate human–spirit relations; they also serve as social mechanisms that limit overextraction, prevent reckless movements into fragile ecosystems, and promote awareness of environmental thresholds.

This cosmology embeds environmental stewardship within everyday moral life rather than separating it as a distinct “conservation” practice. Fear (dirawu jiwa), na (taboo), ritual obligation, and spiritual accountability generate caution in deep valleys, dense forests, and fertile zones—spaces that are ecologically sensitive and potentially dangerous. Similarly, the narrative of village founding, seed testing soil fertility, dream divination (Mangsha Nayueh), and the tiger’s refusal of human settlement illustrates how non-human actors—plants, animals, spirits, and dreams—participate in decisions about land use. Settlement is not framed as human entitlement but as a negotiated process contingent on ecological signs and non-human consent.

In the context of climate change, TEK provides not technical solutions but ethical orientations: an attentiveness to ecological limits, respect for non-human agency, and the prioritization of long-term relational balance (naa/care and na/taboo) over immediate human gain. Rather than treating forests, fields, and wildlife as inert resources, these narratives position them as co-inhabitants with the power to sustain or withdraw life. This relational approach to environmental stewardship challenges the prevailing logic of extraction and scalability that contributes to current ecological crises. It emphasizes that climate vulnerability is not merely a scientific issue; rather, it is a crisis rooted in the disrupted relationships between humans and their environments.

CHAPTER 5

FIELDWORK REFLECTIONS

COMMUNITY LIFE, AGRICULTURE, AND FIELDWORK LEARNING IN MELURI AND NOKLAK DISTRICTS

~By Kevide Lcho

Sites and Objectives

The fieldwork conducted in the districts of Meluri and Noklak was a comprehensive and insightful experience that significantly contributed to a deeper understanding of community life, cultural practices, and traditional livelihoods in remote regions. The primary objective of the fieldwork was to spend considerable time with the local communities, document their oral histories, and understand their perception of climate change and its impact. These objectives were largely achieved through direct engagement, participant observation, and engaging in conversation with the community members.

Community Life in Meluri

In Meluri District, particularly in Reguri village, the community demonstrated strong social organization and a deeply embedded culture of hospitality. Despite our positionality as outsiders, the villagers interacted with us in a respectful and welcoming manner, reflecting their inclusive social values. Observations revealed that community relationships are built on mutual trust, cooperation, and respect. The manner in which the villagers engaged with us suggested that visitors are not viewed as strangers but are instead integrated into the social environment.



Kevide participating in a cultural dance with school students in Reguri Village

This practice highlights the importance of collective identity and shared responsibility within the community. Such interactions provided valuable insights into how cultural norms and traditions influence everyday social behavior.

Furthermore, the fieldwork enabled me to immerse myself in the community and gain an understanding of its relationships with the surrounding environment. The villagers' close connection to their land and natural resources was evident in their routines and practices. Striking a conversation with the community members, attending their Church services, visiting important cultural and historical sites, and participating in their social events greatly helped in bonding with the community. Through this experience, I realized the role of tradition and Indigenous knowledge in sustaining community life over generations. Fieldwork in Reguri Village was particularly noteworthy, as it demonstrated how cultural continuity and social cohesion contribute to a strong sense of belonging within the community.

Agriculture in Noklak

The experience in Noklak district further expanded our understanding of traditional agricultural practices and community cooperation. One of the most significant observations was the practice of jhum (shifting) cultivation. This form of agriculture is not merely an economic activity but a collective social process that involves cooperation among community members. Men and women took part in farming activities together, demonstrating shared responsibility and cooperation between genders within the community. The communal nature of jhum cultivation highlights the interdependence of households and the importance of collective labor in sustaining livelihoods.



Farmers taking a tea break in the fields of Choklangan Village

In addition, the agricultural lifestyle of farmers in Noklak was observed to be closely linked to seasonal cycles and environmental conditions. Although time constraints limited opportunities for long-term fieldwork and in-depth interviews, I had an immersive fieldwork experience by following them to their fields. Through this participatory approach and ethnographic conversations, I came to know that king chili is one of the major crops cultivated in the area and serves as a key source of income. This observation indicates the significance of Indigenous crops in the local economy and their role in maintaining

traditional agricultural systems. The reliance on such crops also reflects the adaptability of the community to its geographic and climatic conditions.

Challenges During Fieldwork

The fieldwork also brought attention to the infrastructural and logistical challenges faced in remote regions. Transportation through hilly terrain and poorly maintained roads posed significant difficulties during the journey. Traveling along rough roads and steep slopes required careful navigation, emphasizing the physical challenges associated with conducting field research in such areas. These observations also highlighted the broader issue of limited infrastructure and accessibility, which affects not only researchers but also local communities in terms of mobility and access to markets, healthcare, and education.

Despite these challenges, the fieldwork proved to be a valuable learning experience. It provided an opportunity to observe real-life applications of concepts studied in theory, particularly in relation to community organization, traditional livelihoods, and rural development. The experience emphasized the importance of adaptability, patience, and cultural sensitivity while conducting field-based research.

Conclusions

In summary, the fieldwork in Meluri and Noklak districts provided valuable observational learning and practical exposure to community life, traditional agricultural practices, and infrastructural realities. Beyond strengthening academic understanding, the experience enhanced the ability to engage critically with field-based research through participant observation and interaction with local communities. Overall, this fieldwork has proven that immersive participation is an essential component of this project, offering insights that deepened the analysis and contextual relevance of the study.

LEARNING AT THE BORDERLANDS: INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

~By *Tümüzo Katiry*

The Earthkeepers project had a profound impact on my understanding of oral tradition, the intricacies of immersive ethnographic research in postcolonial Indigenous contexts, the ethics of decolonial research, and the significance of Indigenous knowledge in relation to climate change. Reading about the Nagas in academic writings or media portrayals of our society is incommensurate with the level of understanding gained through three years of collaboration with communities in the Naga borderlands. These years of being introduced to new people, establishing relationships, eating their food, staying in their villages, attending church services, participating in festivals, engaging in conversations about lived experiences of marginality while fishing and sowing paddy alongside them, listening to elders narrate age-old folktales, and sharing tea as political views were discussed around the evening hearth fundamentally reshaped my perception of Naga borderland communities. Although I belong to one of the communities we worked with, my fieldwork experiences have led to an epistemic shift that has allowed me to embrace Indigenous pedagogies and traditional ecological knowledge, which I had previously overlooked. In this section, I summarize my experience of the three-year Earthkeepers project as a Canada-IDRC Myanmar Research Fellow. To reinforce the elders' and communities' accounts and highlight the nuances, I present my reflection on some of the events and activities that occurred during the fieldwork.

Navigating Research and Community Collaboration in Naga Villages

On April 6, 2023, we set out from Kohima to Noklak after informing the villages of our visit, as it is mandatory to notify the Village Council for any such visits. The council is responsible for managing these affairs. Noklak is approximately 260 km from Kohima, and our journey included passing through several districts, including Wokha, Mokokchung, and Tuensang. We spent the night in Mokokchung, as the drive to Noklak takes over ten hours.

Starting on April 8, we began visiting a different village each day, beginning with Dan village. The villages we visited included Dan, Wui, Peshu, and Langnok. We were interested in these villages due to their proximity to the Indo-Myanmar border, an important location for trade, security and surveillance, political agitation and contestation, and the bilateral relationship between Naga communities on either side of the border.

We could not visit two important villages, namely Wongthoi and Choklangan, because of some unavoidable circumstances—the former had other engagements, and the latter due to time constraints, poor road conditions, and mechanical issues with the vehicle.

However, we had the opportunity to meet a key stakeholder from Choklangan, who could facilitate our collaboration with the village. This has shown me that the field is not a neutral site of execution but an active context that reshapes research trajectories.

While our efforts to initiate collaboration in Noklak district were successful, the same cannot be said about Meluri. We could not in any way subvert the Pochury Hoho's resolution against conducting research within their jurisdiction by outsiders or involving non-native scholars. It would not only have been unethical, but would have eroded the basic principles of decolonial research, even if we were able to convince some villages within the jurisdiction to collaborate with us.

However, with approval from the Pochury Hoho, the Village Council Chairman of Lephori invited us to assist them in documenting the Nyavü Khü (festival). As a member of this village, I had the opportunity to discuss at length the implications of involving researchers from The Highland Institute in documenting the festival. The Chairman and his colleagues expressed the urgency of documenting not only the festival but also the community's oral histories and Indigenous knowledge, due to the decline in the number of knowledgeable elders in the village.

On this basis, the Earthkeepers team, along with Anna Geerling (a Dutch anthropologist) and Sholu Movi, an Indigenous scholar—both of whom represented the Ekologos project at The Highland Institute—assisted in documenting the Nyavü Khü festival from February 7–10, 2024. Prior to this, we also documented folksongs and folktales in Zhavame Village in Phek district during the last week of January 2024. Following the example of the Pochury Hoho, the Zhavame community informed us that they would regulate research access in the future, making us likely the last outsiders to carry out any kind of research in the village.

From our perspective, these two cases are not considered instances of arrogant gatekeeping. We view it as an execution of epistemic sovereignty by the communities who want to write their own story, manage, and regulate their portrayals to the global audience, and most importantly, disallow the elite capture of Indigenous knowledge. The community regulation of research access is also a reaction to extractive research by outsiders, where the consequences of any inaccuracies, which usually create internal conflict, are left to the community to deal with.

In this context, it is justifiable to have regulations to protect the community from exploitation and ensure accountability in knowledge production and documentation. However, regulation without the resources to protect and propagate Indigenous knowledge can lead to the disengagement of the younger population from the epistemic and ontological foundations through which collective identity is formed and sustained. Without proper

state support and a lack of capacity building within the community, community resolution becomes ineffective if the goal is to achieve epistemic sovereignty and self-determination in knowledge production. Therefore, we need a policy framework that supports Naga communities in gaining epistemic sovereignty and self-determination without problems due to a lack of capacity.

Indo-Myanmar Border

Tourists and the media portray an exoticized imagery of the Eastern Naga communities due to the remoteness of the location and the conditions created by the Indo-Myanmar border. This buries the tension and inconvenience caused by the border as it cuts through ancestral lands, resulting in the subsumption of the community land to Myanmar. However, farmers still cultivate their ancestral land beyond the border, which is why they not only oppose the existence of the border, but also actively resist the scrapping of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) and construction of a fence.



Paddy field of the Dan villagers (India) across the border in Myanmar

On April 8, 2023, the Dan villagers took us to the border where the International Trade Centre (ITC) is located to show us the structure that divides their land and community between two countries. The Head Gaonbura pointed to his paddy fields in the hills across the border and told Catriona Child (our British coordinator) that her ancestors had done this, requesting her to undo the border. He had witnessed WW2 in his childhood and

recounted when his villagers rescued the pilots of the Allied Forces who had crash-landed in their land. He believed it was bad manners for the Allies not to revisit them after they had helped and rescued aircrews during the War.

As the Nagas had assisted the British during the War, communities living in the borderland felt that their loyalty was unreciprocated when the colonial empire improperly demarcated the border and left it in the hands of postcolonial states that disregarded Indigenous boundaries. People here do not view the border simply as a structure that forced more than half of the Khamniungan communities to be subsumed into Myanmar; they also see it as a source of daily inconvenience, as they must cross it to access their land, family, sacred places, and historical sites.

The ITC has become dysfunctional partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented international travel, and the local militancy, which the villagers claim is the primary cause of the dysfunction. Border personnel were meticulous about checking our backgrounds and intentions, and it is not surprising that our ID cards were temporarily seized before we crossed into Myanmar. Although we were permitted to cross, we were prohibited from going beyond the one-kilometer mark from the border.

With the border being highly militarized, the villagers in Noklak constantly interact with the border personnel, sometimes resulting in serious altercations. What emerges is an adversarial co-existence marked by negotiation and contestation between the military personnel and Indigenous residents. Some villagers recounted incidents where they had destroyed gates, prevented the construction of border walls, and removed boundary pillars as these structures appeared on their land plots, local grounds, and footpaths. While this may seem like a serious predicament, it has become a part of their daily life that is unlikely to change anytime soon.

Our presence at the border was never a neutral act, as we were positioned within the power structure that regulates the border space. We were under surveillance at the border in much the same way as the villagers, and our attempt to cross required us, alongside them, to negotiate and mediate the situation through cooperation with border force personnel. Despite the restrictions at the border, community members would never relinquish their right to access their ancestral land, which holds important historical and cultural sites. Our border-crossing experience revealed both the villagers' resilience in defending ancestral land and the situated nature of Indigenous knowledge, which unfolded for us only through co-presence and shared risk in spaces rendered inaccessible by state structures.

Embracing Traditional Ecological Knowledge

As Nagas, we learn Indigenous wisdom from our parents and grandparents without comprehending the relevance of this knowledge to shifting ecological conditions. While I

had a rough idea about its significance in the context of Indigenous epistemic sovereignty and self-determination, I entered the field unprepared for what would unfold right in front of my eyes. Like many Nagas, I have, at several instances in my life, witnessed the application of Indigenous knowledge, especially during agricultural activities, gathering, or hunting. However, those experiences did not reveal the wider scope and significance of this knowledge until I experienced it in the fieldwork context, as I shall explain below.

One evening in April 2025, as we were conducting fieldwork in Noklak District, a storm-laden sky hung over Choklangan village. Then a forest fire broke out in the hills opposite the village, initially starting small before escalating into a roaring blaze that began to spread towards a thicket of pine trees. We gathered outside one of the morungs, the traditional boys' dormitory, where we had watched the elders skillfully weave baskets next to a huge log drum, as they shared stories over cups of tea. I was initially alarmed, as a man pointed out that if the pine trees caught fire, it would become more violent. However, the villagers were not as worried as I thought they would be, and for a reason.

They attributed the probable cause to a lightning strike, emphasizing that no one would be cultivating those hills that year, as the location of paddy fields changes annually. To further deduce that it was not human-induced, they asserted that it would be unusual for anyone to wander into that area at that time of year. With confidence, they told me that the fire would not spread beyond a ridge near the village, likely due to the presence of a stream in the valley that served as a natural barrier. True to their prediction, the fire extinguished itself by the next day, leaving the hills charred and bald, with few tree trunks standing bare, stripped of leaves by the wildfire.

This moment illuminated for me the profound ecological knowledge woven into the fabric of Indigenous practices. The community understood fire behavior, recognized the seasonal rhythms of the land, and noted the significance of natural firebreaks created by topography. Even in the absence of natural barriers, I knew that creating firebreaks by clearing patches of forest around a wildfire is the traditional Naga method of controlling forest fires. This knowledge was not derived from satellite data or scientific models but was instead a product of generations living in this environment, learning from both success and failure. The experience highlighted the invaluable wisdom that Indigenous communities possess regarding the delicate interplay between landscape and human activity.

Let me present another example of the application of Indigenous knowledge from one of our field visits to Dan Village. We joined a group of Dan youths for fishing at a nearby stream. What made this fishing experience exceptional was the complete absence of modern fishing tools, which are prohibited by village authorities to prevent overexploitation. Instead, they employed an Indigenous method that is more sustainable and less exploitative.



Traditional fishing technique involving the diversion of a stream into an alternate channel, with Tümüzo participating in the fishing activity.

We temporarily diverted the stream's flow by guiding the water toward an alternate channel that appeared to have been used regularly. I was aware of this method, but had not attempted to divert a stream of this width and depth effectively. In this method, the main bed is allowed to gradually drain by installing a barricade made of logs, bushes growing near the stream, rocks from an alternate channel, and other materials. In our case, we also used a tarpaulin to prevent excessive leakage. As the water receded, small fish, tadpoles, and aquatic insects became visible and easier to catch by hand or with simple woven bamboo traps.

We did not use fishing rods, nets, dynamite, or other modern fishing tools; instead, we gathered what we needed and placed them in bamboo culms that were fashioned into containers and filled with water. While we collected these aquatic animals, we were reminded that we could not take home anything we obtained, as the consensus within the community is to cook and eat the catch in the riverside huts. These regulations within the village prevent unrestrained collection, allowing aquatic life to regenerate without suffering repercussions from overfishing.

The fishing tradition in this community clearly shows an ethic of selective and restrained harvest. Though the drying bed was full of tadpoles, they did not indiscriminately collect them, as there is a balanced combination of these animals in different proportions in their culinary practice. When I asked whether the remaining tadpoles would die, they assured

me that although they appeared immobile, once the stream returned, they would revive. We also used a conical bamboo basket trap placed in the shallower part of the waterway and collected fish as we moved down the stream. After we had collected enough, we restored the stream to its original flow.

This experience demonstrated not only an innovative and non-invasive Indigenous fishing technique but also a broader ethic of relationality and restraint. Fishing in this manner is not just about sustainability; it demonstrates a reciprocal relationship with the landscape for a symbiotic existence.

Conclusion

I cannot encapsulate my entire fieldwork experience in a few pages, but I have highlighted several instances where I find myself at the intersection of factors that contribute to knowledge production. Fieldwork unfolded at the intersection of academic inquiry, Indigenous knowledge as lived practice, negotiations with community leaders and state authorities at the border, and the natural and social conditions that rendered knowledge an embodied, experiential process.

In this account, I have intentionally excluded my interactions with borderland communities on climate change. My primary focus was on demonstrating community resilience in protecting their right to preserve and practice Indigenous knowledge, even if it means regulating research access to their community or resisting military interventions and state structures that prevent movement across the border. Additionally, I have demonstrated how these communities are capable of navigating local ecological changes by using their profound knowledge of the landscape and topography.

On this basis, I argue that Indigenous people are equipped with Indigenous knowledge to understand climate change, at least at the local level, and actively attempt to adapt to ecological changes. Regardless of their scientific knowledge, as discussed in other sections of the report, they continuously strive to adapt to or mitigate the effects of climate change. Whether they view these changes as adverse impacts depends on the highly localized context of how climate change affects their livelihoods. Nevertheless, the importance of Indigenous knowledge is indisputable, and the absence of institutions to preserve or share it with future generations is a matter of grave concern.

Taking all this into account, a decolonial policy framework for the production, documentation, protection, and dissemination of Indigenous knowledge, implementable by the state or tribal apex bodies, includes the following:

- Reframe Indigenous knowledge as a living epistemology rather than a cultural artefact. State policies should avoid extractive documentation models that focus

on recording, storing, and displaying knowledge. Instead, policies should aim to support intergenerational transmission through festivals, agricultural cycles, customary courts, and ritual contexts.

- The dissemination of Indigenous knowledge should occur through traditional methods and institutions rather than modern settings that are disconnected from their context. This requires reinstating Indigenous systems of knowledge sharing, such as the Morungs. Additionally, it is essential to recognize and appropriately remunerate Indigenous intellectuals who possess this knowledge and are willing to share it.
- Establish community sovereignty over knowledge production, not merely consent. All documentation projects must be governed by community-owned protocols, meaning that even state-funded research should require community-level approval.
- Prioritize Indigenous languages over English or other standardized regional languages. Translation must be undertaken with care, as it is not neutral. Many Indigenous concepts lose ontology, relationality, and ethics when forced into other linguistic frameworks.
- Documentation should produce value for the community first. Every project must include community-accessible outputs (e.g., booklets), capacity building within the community, and other tangible benefits such as education and climate resilience.
- Indigenous knowledge must inform policies related to land use, climate change strategies, and forest governance.

STANDING BETWEEN WORLDS

~By Saktum Wonti

Some stories disappear with the land. Some kinds of knowledge are rewritten when steel pierces the skin of the earth. Perhaps this is what is quietly lost when one grows up among rising buildings and widening roads. Towns give us new lenses to see the world; they teach us to understand life through institutions, schedules, and walls.

Although I was born and raised in a town, I was lucky enough not to be completely cut off from village culture. I grew up listening to my parents' stories—fragments of belief that quietly tethered us to older ways of knowing. When a chicken was killed, my mother would ask us to watch its feet, to see how one crossed over the other in its final moment, reading from that gesture whether fortune leaned toward good or ill. When the fire crackled, she would smile and say, “The fire is laughing—we will eat meat soon.” These were small beliefs, folded into the ordinary rhythms of life, passed down not as doctrine but as habit, like a thin thread binding us to a vast ocean of ancestral wisdom.



Saktum Wonti in Dan Village

I write this as a researcher, but also as someone who belongs. I am from the Khamniungan Naga tribe. After completing my master's in anthropology, this project became my first step into the research world, and my first return to landscapes and communities that were mine, yet unfamiliar. I stood between worlds: between town and village, between training and lived memory, between recording knowledge and remembering how to listen.

Fieldwork altered my way of seeing. It gave me new eyes to understand the world through the lives, gestures, and silences of the people we met; their stories were inseparable from the land, the forests, and the rivers around them. This is

an experience that cannot be fully contained within these pages. The love I carry for the people we encountered outweighs the ink I use to write about them.

Through this project, I traveled with my team to remote parts of Nagaland: Reguri, Kanjang, Lepthori, and Akhegwo in Meluri; Zhavame under Phek, in partnership with Ekologos; and Noklak, over the past three years. We moved through villages such as Wui, Dan, Peshu, Langnok, and Choklangan, each place leaving its own quiet imprint on us.

The farther we traveled, the emptier the roads became, sometimes no more than broken paths winding through dense forests. Most of our fieldwork took place during the dry season, when the roads remained passable; during the rains, they turned treacherous—slippery and unstable—often cutting off access to villages entirely. At times, we passed through smoke and ash from forests burned for jhum cultivation as we neared village settlements, the earth caught in a delicate balance between renewal and loss.

Mornings in the field arrived gently. We woke to the sounds of birdsong, announcements called out by village elders from hilltops, the laughter and running feet of children, and hunters and field-goers greeting one another as the day unfolded. Life here began not with clocks, but with voices, footsteps, and the breathing of the land.

Evenings gathered us around the hearth. We cooked together and listened to stories. Neighbors would knock on our doors carrying vegetables and forest leaves, telling us which would help us sleep better, or saying softly, “This is khelia gyan. It grows only on Khelia Mountain. You cannot plant it elsewhere.” Through such gestures, we learned how deeply knowledge was rooted in place. Forests were spoken of as vast and alive, rich with birdsong. Jungle fowls would sometimes stop us mid-



At the hearth in Reguri Village.

path. I remember an elder in Reguri, excitement lighting his face as he asked me to listen to a recording on his phone. It was the hoot of a large band of hoolock gibbons. Alongside these moments came hunting stories, and long lists of animals once seen, now rarely encountered.

On quieter days, we sat outside the morung, where elders gathered under the sun with large mugs of black tea. The sense of community was palpable. We watched houses rise within days, built by many hands. In Reguri, we witnessed the entire village come together to construct the church, labor accompanied by rhythmic chants and work songs.

Yet beneath this collective life ran stories of change. Mothers spoke of a time when women worked together in large groups in one another’s fields. Elders in Reguri Village recalled seasons when entire villages moved to their fields during plantations with their cattle, living there for weeks, cooking together, talking late into the night. Now, many described

a shift toward individualized labor, particularly in timber work. Men often spent the entire week in the forest, returning home only on weekends. We frequently saw massive trucks carrying freshly logged timber down winding mountain roads toward Dimapur. With these changes, the social weave seemed to loosen, strand by strand.

During our fieldwork, we were privileged to witness festivals that revealed the deep ties between land, labor, and belief. In Akhegwo, we joined the Changyangthakhu festival, a long procession of song and dance exchanged between khels, marking the beginning of the jhum cycle. In Lephori Village, we experienced Nyavü khü, a rare village-specific festival honoring the end and renewal of agricultural life. Though youth participation has declined, these festivals remain acts of remembrance, holding together community, land, and identity.



Dance Troupes in Akhegwo (left) and Lephori (right).

Zhavame in Phek District, which we visited on an excursion outside our main research area, offered another kind of learning. Guided by village elders and the Students' Union, we travelled through stories and songs they believed must be documented before they faded. Conversations on climate change emerged naturally, in kitchens and fields. Elders spoke of animals no longer seen, of colder mornings when snow once covered the mountains, of water sources that used to freeze. Warmer temperatures have brought faster-ripening fruits and new crops, but also pests, rotting potatoes, unpredictable hailstorms, landslides, and shrinking harvests. Over the past decade, they said, rains have thinned, rivers slowed, and large trees near villages disappeared.

One moment reshaped my understanding of research. During focus group discussions, conversations often unfolded beyond our questions. Elders spoke among themselves, young translators joined in, and debates emerged that we did not always fully understand. At first, I worried about losing control of the discussion. Then I realized that allowing

these conversations to happen was the work. Research was not extractive. It was listening, making space, and trusting knowledge to move in its own way. Sometimes, recording mattered less than sitting back and letting people speak to one another.

A Line That Bleeds

Our primary field sites lie along the Indo–Myanmar borderlands of Meluri and Noklak. Here, the border announced itself quietly. Burmese coffee and biscuits were served upon arrival. Old posters of Burmese actors hung on the walls. Motorbikes without registration plates navigated steep mountain paths. Trade moved fluidly: cattle and buffalo crossed over, women sold bamboo hats with painted flowers, shops stocked Burmese knives, oils, and thanaka (a traditional, yellowish-white cosmetic paste).

But the border also carried pain, which slowly unfolded as one listened and traveled deeper into the region. In Dan village, this was evident almost immediately. No sooner had we arrived than the conversation turned to conflict. It came up casually, over tea, as if they were speaking of bumping into a friend the other day. They spoke of constant firing along the border, of how frequent it had become. Some said they had learned to sleep to the sound of gunfire, like a lullaby. “The people who live closer to where the firing happens,” one of them said, almost laughing, “they know when to give a little side.” What stayed with me was not only what they said, but how they said it. There was laughter, lightness—an ease that revealed how deeply the violence had settled into everyday life. The border was no longer an event. It was a condition.



Burmese-made motorcycles parked outside a house in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands

The presence of the Assam Rifles in this otherwise serene and remote mountain landscape felt strikingly out of place. The forests were quiet, the villages slow-moving, the mountains watchful. And yet, uniforms, camps, and checkpoints cut through this calm. Villagers described their relationship with the forces as complex and ambivalent. Our own encounter at the border gate made this relationship visible in ways words alone could not. We were stopped and questioned as we tried to cross the border to reach the fields, where the village gaonbura wanted to show us the place where a World War II plane had crashed. He told us he had been a young boy then, and the memory still sat heavily with him.

We watched as people coming from the Myanmar side were checked thoroughly. Bags were opened, pockets searched, and trucks inspected with a rough meticulousness that lingered too long. The process felt uneven and heavy. I noticed the tightening of shoulders and the restrained anger and frustration on the faces of our guides as they were questioned, their patience wearing thin in silence. Threaded through this tension were moments of casual familiarity. The Assam Rifles joked with the village gaonbura as if they were old acquaintances, exchanging smiles and small talk that sat uneasily alongside the searching eyes and raised voices. In that moment, we understood the relationship not as one of simple hostility or harmony, but as something lived daily—negotiated through authority, familiarity, resentment, and endurance.

Dan itself is a border village; its agricultural fields are scattered across an international line. Farmers cross daily through an Assam Rifles camp to reach land they consider theirs ancestrally. Our guide told us, “We are also asked to make a border pass. I never made a border pass. I would rather argue with them.” There was a quiet defiance in his voice, born not of rebellion but of belonging. It was their land, and the logic of needing permission to reach one’s own fields did not sit easily with anyone. For many here, the border was not a line on a map. It was a wound.

What Still Remains

Communication here had also changed. One evening, as we cooked by the fire, a sudden crackle came from the kitchen wall, making us startle. The elders laughed and told us it was a walkie-talkie. With unreliable networks, this had become the fastest way to share news—sometimes even news of death. As we traveled onward, our guide Lemdumong carried one with him, a constant reminder of how life here required vigilance. In these small moments, we saw how communication had shifted from log drums to radio waves, while the need to stay connected remained unchanged.



Interview Session in a household kitchen, Choklangan village

Language revealed another quiet loss. We often could not fully understand the words the elders spoke. Certain terms no longer made sense in daily life, and even the youths in the village found it difficult to translate during interviews. With shifts in lifestyle, work, and values, the language itself is slowly being forgotten.

There has been a noticeable shift from traditional crops to cash crops. Millets and Job's tears are being grown less, due to changing diets and the turn toward more profitable crops. Only one or two plants are grown outside houses to preserve the seeds for the future. We also saw the daily struggles of farmers compounded by problems of transport and markets. Harvests were often halved, not because of climate alone, but because produce could not reach buyers. Local organic potatoes, cabbage, and vegetables were sometimes fed to pigs simply because there was no way to sell them, while in towns we bought the same vegetables—grown with chemicals—at high prices from other districts and states.

In Noklak, training programs taught value addition—making candies from ginger, preserves from fruits, and other products—but without markets, even these efforts often rotted in storerooms. These were not abstract problems of policy or economy; they were lived frustrations, the daily reality of farmers whose labor, skill, and care struggled against isolation, infrastructure, and opportunity.

This journey taught me how much we still do not know. It gave me a new lens through which to see land, forest, and life itself. The world around us has been shaped by animal calls, lunar cycles, respect for, and fear of the forest. Indigenous knowledge is not nostalgic. It is necessary. We cannot confront climate change without seeing ourselves as extensions of a living world. Our greatest libraries are fading with our elders, even as the land itself burns.

We have come far from how our ancestors lived. Our values are shifting; our relationship with land is changing. In towns, land has become a commodity rather than kin. Yet something remains. Traces still sing—in elders' voices, in stones and houses, in paths worn thin by memory.

Perhaps there is a limit to what Google and books can teach us. Some knowledge is carried only by voices, in soil and stone, in rivers and forests. Some truths can only be learned when we walk with the land—not as outsiders, but as part of the story.

I am deeply grateful to IDRC Canada and the Highland Institute for this opportunity to walk this path, to return to our stories, and to write from within them. And to my Earthkeepers team, who became family along the way.

WORKSHOPS AND SEMINARS: CHOKLANGAN AND REGURI

As part of its commitment to working closely with partner villages, the Earthkeepers team organised seminars in Choklangan (Noklak District) and Reguri (Meluri District), at the request of the respective communities. These events are briefly outlined below.

Young Guardians of Nature: Climate and Wildlife Conservation Workshop, Choklangan

Choklangan is a Khamniungan village located in the forested borderlands of Noklak District, close to the Indo–Myanmar border. The surrounding forests support rich biodiversity and remain central to local livelihoods and conservation ethics. During the workshop, students identified local animals using their own language, took part in interactive games illustrating ecological interdependence, and listened to stories contrasting sustainable and destructive environmental practices.

On April 14, 2025, the Earthkeepers team, in collaboration with the youth collective Spring Ages, conducted a workshop titled Young Guardians of Nature: Climate and Wildlife Conservation at Government Middle School, Choklangan. The workshop engaged around 40 students aged 7–14 and five teachers, using participatory activities to build early awareness of climate change, biodiversity, and environmental responsibility.

Creative activities, including drawing their village ten years into the future, encouraged students to reflect on environmental protection and community well-being. Documentary screenings and discussions on waste management and conservation helped reinforce key messages. Feedback from students and teachers highlighted the workshop’s effectiveness in fostering environmental awareness and positive attitudes toward conservation at an early age.

Climate Change and Forest Conservation Seminar, Reguri Village

Reguri is a small, remote border village in the Meluri District of eastern Nagaland, with around 180 households and long-standing ties with neighboring communities in Myanmar. The area was once characterized by dense montane and subtropical forests supporting rich wildlife, including hoolock gibbons, hornbills, bears, and other rare and endangered species. Over recent decades, however, extensive timber extraction has led to large-scale deforestation.

These changes were evident during fieldwork in November 2024, when the Earthkeepers team observed trucks loaded with timber leaving the village daily. Community members

also described a range of growing environmental challenges, including water shortages, riverbank erosion, and the loss of paddy fields.

During the team's first visit to Reguri, discussions with villagers highlighted the complex factors shaping current land-use practices. Residents explained that logging had become one of the few available sources of income, influenced by limited livelihood options and broader political pressures. At the same time, young people and teachers at the Government Middle School shared their interest in long-term forest stewardship, particularly in relation to proposals affecting one of Reguri's remaining areas of intact forest. They felt that perspectives from outside the village could help enrich local discussions on conservation and sustainability and, therefore, invited the team to speak publicly on climate change and sustainable development.

Around the same time, the village decided to designate a Community Conserved Area (CCA) comprising good-quality secondary forest, which would be protected from hunting and logging. In response, a one-day Climate Change and Forest Conservation seminar was held on March 24, 2025, at Government Middle School, Reguri. Organized by The Highland Institute through the Earthkeepers initiative and supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, the seminar brought together village leaders, elders, youth, and invited speakers, including prominent local conservationists and representatives of the Wildlife Conservation Society of India (WCS).

Through storytelling, documentary screenings, presentations, and panel discussions, participants reflected on environmental change, the cultural and ecological value of forests, and alternatives to extractive livelihoods such as ecotourism, beekeeping, community nurseries, and handicrafts.

After the seminar, WCS generously agreed to provide camera traps and technical expertise for a camera-trapping survey of the CCA. With further sponsorship from IDRC, the camera-trapping exercise was carried out between November 23, 2025, and January 5, 2026.

Key Lessons from Reguri

- External research engagement can strengthen local conservation voices, particularly those of youth and teachers.
 - Climate change discussions are most effective when linked to lived environmental impacts and livelihood concerns.
 - Indigenous institutions remain central to decisions about forest use and protection.
 - Dialogue-based interventions can support concrete conservation outcomes when carefully timed.
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Key Outcomes from the Seminars

- Strengthened community dialogue on climate change, forest conservation, and locally appropriate livelihood options.
 - Renewed recognition of Indigenous ecological knowledge as central to environmental stewardship and climate adaptation.
 - Increased environmental awareness and engagement among schoolchildren through participatory and creative learning.
 - Strong local interest in continued collaboration, education, and follow-up activities.
 - A camera-trap survey has been carried out in the Reguri CCA.
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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Revisiting the Central Questions

This study has explored Ho Naga oral history primarily through in-depth interviews, and Khamniungan Indigenous lifeworlds through an ethnographic examination of agriculture, ritual practice, oral narratives, social organization, and environmental knowledge in villages located along the Indo–Myanmar border. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Wui, Choklangan, Dan (Pangsha), and surrounding settlements, the analysis shows how everyday practices are shaped by long-standing relationships with land, forest, spirits, and kin, while these relationships are simultaneously being reworked under conditions of political division, religious transformation, and environmental uncertainty.

A key finding of this research is that many Khamniungans do not conceptualize climate change as a singular, global phenomenon articulated through scientific or international policy frameworks. Instead, environmental change is understood through locally grounded observation, historical memory, and moral reasoning. Shifts in rainfall, temperature, snowfall, and water availability are interpreted in relation to visible changes in land use, deforestation, road construction, housing materials, and altered patterns of cultivation. Climate change, as articulated by villagers, is experienced as a disruption within the immediate landscape rather than as an abstract planetary crisis.

This locally situated understanding should not be read as a lack of awareness or scientific ignorance. On the contrary, villagers demonstrate detailed intergenerational knowledge of shifts in climatic conditions and ecological indicators, recalling past winters marked by snow and frost, predictable seasonal cycles, and reliable water sources. Their interpretations reflect an epistemological orientation in which environmental stability is relational—dependent on human restraint, forest health, and moral conduct—rather than on distant global climate governance. In this sense, climate change is framed as a consequence of broken relationships between humans, land, and non-human agencies.

Agricultural festivals and hunting practices reveal how social cohesion is actively produced through collective labour, ritual exchange, and regulated resource use. Systems of meat-sharing, seasonal restrictions on hunting, and community-imposed penalties illustrate that conservation among the Khamniungan has long been embedded within social institutions rather than enforced through external regulation. These practices challenge dominant

conservation models that separate environmental protection from social life, instead demonstrating how ecological stewardship is sustained through kinship, morality, and reciprocity.

Importantly, Khamniungans are not passive victims of environmental or political change. The study highlights how villagers actively interpret, respond to, and manage ecological transformations through Indigenous institutions and collective practices. Even as Christianity and state institutions have altered ritual forms, many principles of restraint, reciprocity, and collective responsibility continue to shape environmental engagement.

The borderland location of the study area profoundly conditions these dynamics. The Indo–Myanmar border, imposed without the consent of Indigenous communities, fragments ancestral land, kinship networks, and ecological systems that long functioned as integrated wholes. Restrictions on movement, the scrapping of the Free Movement Regime, and proposals for border fencing have intensified everyday vulnerabilities by limiting access to fields, forests, and relatives across the border. These political interventions aggravate climate-related uncertainty, making adaptation more difficult in a region where livelihoods depend on mobility and cross-border access to land.

At the same time, the border has not erased Indigenous claims to place. Villagers continue to assert historical ownership, moral attachment, and emotional belonging to lands now classified under different nation-states. These assertions reveal how identity, sovereignty, and ecology remain deeply intertwined in the Khamniungan worldview, each shaping and being shaped by the others in everyday life.

Religious interpretations further complicate environmental perception. For some villagers, climatic instability is understood through Christian narratives of an aging world or approaching end times. These interpretations coexist with ecological explanations rather than replacing them, illustrating how global religious frameworks are locally reinterpreted to make sense of environmental change. Such pluralistic explanations highlight the flexibility of Indigenous knowledge systems in accommodating multiple sources of meaning.

Taken together, the findings challenge dominant climate narratives that assume a universal understanding of climate change as a global scientific phenomenon. In the Khamniungan context, climate change is experienced as local, relational, and moral, grounded in everyday encounters with land, forest, and weather. Effective climate policy and adaptation strategies in such contexts must therefore engage seriously with Indigenous epistemologies rather than imposing externally defined frameworks that may fail to resonate with lived realities.

These observations point toward a broader Indigenous way of knowing, which is taken up more explicitly in the next section.

Returning to the Indigenous Way of Knowing

In processes of meaning-making, Indigenous communities draw knowledge from ecological cues, intergenerational transmission of embodied experience, and relationships with human and non-human agencies. Aligning with phenomenological critiques of language, words alone are insufficient to articulate embodied, place-based experiences and ritual knowledge. Indigenous epistemic frameworks are profoundly shaped and continually regenerated by the places people inhabit and by historically accumulated experiences transmitted through oral traditions.

As demonstrated throughout this report, Indigenous epistemologies are lived experiences rather than abstract concepts, and meaning-making is the primary mode through which these epistemologies operate. In working with Indigenous words or expressions, such as *na* in the Ho language, it was necessary to situate the contexts, actions, events, and encounters associated with these concepts. This reflects a pragmatic approach to understanding the world, one capable of perceiving subtle changes essential for adaptation to shifting local ecologies.

It may appear that climate change undermines Indigenous knowledge by destabilizing the places through which knowledge is produced—altering landscapes, disrupting ecological rhythms, and threatening place-based practices. Yet Indigenous epistemic frameworks are adaptive, relational, and processual, allowing knowledge to be reworked through changing environmental conditions rather than erased by them. For example, the people of Peshu experimented with different seed varieties by planting them in multiple locations and at varying times of year, particularly when harvests were adversely affected by irregular weather patterns.

In this light, it is necessary to challenge the misconception in Nagaland that Indigenous knowledge—sometimes colloquially dismissed as outdated tradition—has lost relevance. Such views have encouraged Western-centric approaches to addressing Indigenous concerns. While recognizing the value of mainstream science, it remains essential not to overlook the significance of Indigenous knowledge, which continues to play a vital role in the everyday lives of Naga communities.

With advances in science and technology, a persistent misconception has taken hold: that different ways of knowing can be hierarchically ranked, a view shaped by Western colonial epistemologies. Because Indigenous knowledge and Western science operate within fundamentally different epistemic frameworks, Indigenous knowledge cannot be rendered legitimate through scientific validation alone. The question, therefore, is not one of justification, but of how these distinct systems of knowing can be brought into relation without epistemic hierarchy.

Limitations and Challenges

Our fieldwork was shaped by a range of logistical, social, and methodological challenges that required constant adjustment. Poor road conditions significantly affected mobility, making travel to field sites slow and physically demanding. On one occasion, a mechanical failure caused our vehicle to break down en route, delaying our arrival and rendering fieldwork plans vulnerable to infrastructural limitations. Our schedules and movements were closely tied to decisions made by the community or by individuals responsible for coordinating the community-led approach, partially limiting our ability to plan independently.

Accommodation and food arrangements required careful planning. While villagers were consistently hospitable and often assisted in finding places to stay, many communities lacked basic amenities to host visitors for extended periods. In remote villages, access to groceries was limited or absent, making it essential to carry adequate food supplies during pre-fieldwork preparation. These constraints highlighted the importance of logistical self-sufficiency when conducting research in remote locations.

Language differences posed another significant challenge. Explaining research questions clearly was often difficult, necessitating the use of local translators, which slowed the pace of interviews and occasionally disrupted conversations. At times, respondents' answers diverged from the specific questions asked, creating interpretive challenges during data analysis. This was particularly evident when elders employed terms, concepts, and narrative styles unfamiliar to younger generations. Many of these terms—relating to beliefs, rituals, deities, and cosmological phenomena—are no longer in everyday use, rendering translation and interpretation challenging.

The availability of participants also shaped methodological choices. Unlike immersive participant observation, interview-based methods and focus group discussions had to be scheduled around villagers' daily routines. As most community members are farmers, agricultural cycles—especially sowing, clearing, and harvesting seasons—significantly limited the time available for research engagement. During these periods, some respondents were understandably hesitant to participate or could only offer brief interactions.

Engaging with women presented additional challenges. Village councils and storytellers are predominantly male, and official meetings usually exclude women. Men tended to speak openly and assertively, even in group settings, whereas women often remained in the background or positioned their husbands as the appropriate respondents. These gendered dynamics constrained women's participation and limited the range of perspectives represented in formal discussions.

The process of documenting Indigenous knowledge and oral histories also prompted communities to deliberate carefully on which narratives were appropriate to share and

who was authorised to speak. As a result, interviews could not be conducted with just any community member. Instead, we often had to wait for the availability of elders, who are regarded as custodians of local knowledge. While this ensured narrative legitimacy, it also restricted spontaneity and access.

Adopting a community-led approach brought important ethical and relational benefits but also introduced certain limitations. Community members sometimes overlooked practices or observations they considered routine or insignificant, even though such details were analytically valuable. In other cases, sensitive topics were avoided altogether. Storytelling roles were most often assigned to men, further narrowing the diversity of voices and experiences in this report.

Technical and infrastructural constraints also affected data quality. Audio recordings were frequently compromised by background noise, and the absence of basic supplies—such as spare batteries—posed recurring difficulties. The scarcity of auto repair services in remote areas further discouraged travel to certain sites, reinforcing the need for thorough vehicle checks before departure. Power supply and mobile network connectivity were also unreliable, affecting both communication and data management.

Time constraints remained a persistent challenge. Some interviews coincided with peak agricultural seasons, when people were occupied from early morning until evening. Mornings were spent preparing for the fields, while evenings were reserved for rest after physically demanding labour—boundaries we felt ethically obliged to respect.

Finally, time, financial limitations, and physical fatigue required difficult decisions about the scope of the study. Langnok and Peshu villages had to be excluded due to long travel times and constrained resources. Extended journeys, irregular meals, and unfamiliar food and water conditions increased the risk of illness. In many remote villages, primary healthcare facilities were absent or non-functional, making it essential to carry basic medications and first-aid supplies throughout the fieldwork period.

Contribution and Future Directions

This study contributes to anthropological scholarship on Indigenous knowledge, borderlands, and climate change by accentuating Indigenous perspectives as analytically central rather than supplementary. It demonstrates that meaningful responses to environmental change require attention not only to scientific data but also to the social, political, and moral worlds through which people understand and respond to ecological transformation. By centering Indigenous voices, the study affirms the agency, resilience, and knowledge of Indigenous borderland communities as they navigate a rapidly changing world.

Future researchers can focus on epistemic frameworks and meaning-making among

Indigenous communities, and how these relate to the adaptive capabilities of Indigenous knowledge, especially in the absence of external support. It is also crucial to further investigate adaptive strategies in agriculture, particularly in response to unpredictable weather patterns and changing local ecologies. Given the recent rise in modern tools and farming techniques within traditional agricultural practices, it is important to examine the outcomes and implications of this convergence.

In all, the Indigenous landscape and oral history associated with those places play an important role in how modern infrastructure and state policies are perceived. To address this, a clear method for sharing information about climate change, its impacts, and adaptive strategies must be established, tailored to the local ecological context. This understanding can aid in the implementation of projects focused on conservation, community well-being, and the reclamation of cultural heritage.

In the larger epistemic landscape, future decolonial scholarship must move beyond treating Indigenous knowledge as a supplementary or instrumental resource and instead prioritize it as a self-sustaining, internally coherent system of knowing, grounded in community authority and lived experience. A decolonial approach, in this sense, does not entail the uncritical recovery or revitalization of precolonial traditions, nor does it presume a return to animistic worldviews as a normative goal. Rather, it requires scholars to take seriously the contemporary epistemic choices made by Indigenous communities themselves—even when such choices are shaped by colonial histories, as in the case of Christianity becoming deeply embedded within Naga identity.

The implications of this research, therefore, extend to the ethical responsibilities of researchers working within decolonial frameworks. Respecting Indigenous knowledge systems also means respecting Indigenous decisions, including those that may appear contradictory from a decolonial standpoint. Researchers must learn to negotiate these tensions without imposing external expectations of authenticity, resistance, or cultural revitalization. In doing so, future scholarship can contribute not only to the documentation of Indigenous knowledge but also to the affirmation of Indigenous authority over the meanings, trajectories, and futures of their own epistemic worlds.

Executive Summary

This chapter brings together ethnographic findings from research conducted among the Ho Naga and Khamniungan communities living along the Indo–Myanmar border. Drawing on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation of agriculture, ritual life, oral narratives, and environmental practices, it shows how everyday life is shaped by enduring relationships with land, forest, spirits, and kin. These relationships remain central even as they are reworked under conditions of political division, religious change, and environmental uncertainty.

A key finding is that climate change is not understood locally as a singular, global phenomenon framed through scientific or policy discourse. Instead, environmental change is interpreted through close observation of rainfall, temperature, water availability, land use, and cultivation practices, informed by historical memory and moral reasoning. Villagers demonstrate detailed intergenerational knowledge of climatic variation, recalling earlier seasonal rhythms, colder winters, and more reliable water sources. Environmental instability is widely understood as relational, linked to human conduct, forest health, and disrupted relationships between people and their surroundings.

Border politics play a critical role in shaping vulnerability and adaptive capacity. The imposition of the Indo–Myanmar border, restrictions on movement, and proposed fencing fragment ancestral land, kinship networks, and ecological systems, limiting access to fields, forests, and cross-border support. These constraints intensify climate-related risks in a region where mobility has long been central to livelihoods and resilience. Taken together, the findings underline the need for climate and development interventions that account for borderland realities and engage Indigenous epistemologies and institutions as central to adaptation.

Key Recommendations

- Integrate border dynamics into climate adaptation planning, recognising how mobility restrictions and territorial fragmentation intensify environmental vulnerability.
- Engage Indigenous epistemologies as coherent systems of knowledge, rather than treating local knowledge as supplementary to scientific frameworks.

- Support Indigenous institutions and collective practices—such as agricultural festivals, hunting regulations, and systems of sharing—as foundations of environmental stewardship.
- Design climate interventions that are locally grounded, drawing on intergenerational observation, moral reasoning, and place-based experience.
- Recognise mobility as an adaptive resource, particularly in borderland contexts where livelihoods depend on access to dispersed land and kin networks.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all climate policy frameworks, and ensure that interventions resonate with lived realities, social institutions, and moral worlds.
- Enhance research on adaptive agricultural strategies to tackle climate variability, focusing on unpredictable weather and local ecological changes.
- Establish context-specific mechanisms for sharing climate information, ensuring that knowledge about climate change impacts and adaptive practices is communicated in ways that are accessible, locally relevant, and ecologically grounded.

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APPENDICES

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

This Memorandum of Understanding ("MOU") is entered into on _____ between the Earthkeepers research team of the Highland Institute ("Earthkeepers") and the communities in rural Nagaland along the Indo-Myanmar border ("Communities").

Purpose

The purpose of this MOU is to establish a framework for collaboration and partnership between Earthkeepers and the Communities, towards a community-engaged research project focused on climate change, documenting local ecological knowledge, and other forms of knowledge, including myths, songs, proverbs, and other oral literatures, as well as ethnobotanical and ethnomedical knowledge (as and when available). The project aims to co-create and co-curate an Atlas of Ecological Knowledge that strengthens the community knowledge base, towards greater cultural and linguistic preservation, but also as a critical resource for climate resilience and adaptation in the increasingly fragile greater Himalayan and Southeast Asian biosphere.

Term of Agreement

This MOU will be effective for a period of two (2) years, 2024-2025.

Scope of Work

This project will follow community-based methods of recording oral literature and ecological knowledge, employing a research team familiar with the focus communities.

The research will carry out the following activities:

1. Document local ecological knowledge, and other forms of knowledge, including myths, songs, proverbs, and other oral literatures, as well as ethnobotanical and ethnomedicinal knowledge, using culturally appropriate methods that involve close collaboration with local community leaders and cultural gate-keepers. Our interviewees will include village elders, members of the Village Council, members of Women's Groups, members of the Students Federation, male and female farmers and householders.
2. Co-curate and contribute to an Atlas of Ecological Knowledge that incorporates

local ecological knowledge and other forms of knowledge, including myths, songs, proverbs, and other oral literature, as well as ethnobotanical and ethnomedicinal knowledge. The Atlas will be a critical resource for climate resilience and adaptation in the increasingly fragile greater Himalayan and Southeast Asian Massif biosphere.

3. Record the various methods used by farmers and community members to cope with and mitigate the impacts of climate change on agriculture and livelihoods.
4. Publish research papers, reports, and other materials based on the project's findings.

Responsibilities

Earthkeepers and Communities agree to the following responsibilities:

1. Earthkeepers will provide technical assistance, research expertise, and funding for the project.
2. Communities will provide access to their lands, natural resources, and cultural heritage.
3. Both Earthkeepers and Communities will collaborate closely to ensure that the project reflects the interests and priorities of the Communities.
4. Both Earthkeepers and Communities will contribute to the dissemination and application of the project's findings.

Intellectual Property Rights

All intellectual property rights derived from this project will be jointly owned by Earthkeepers and Communities. Any commercial use of such intellectual property will require mutual agreement.

Confidentiality

Both Earthkeepers and Communities agree to keep confidential any information that is designated as confidential by the other party.

Termination

Either party may terminate this MOU with 30 days written notice to the other party. This MOU represents the entire understanding of the parties and supersedes all prior negotiations, discussions, and agreements between them. Any modification of this MOU

must be in writing and signed by both parties.

Signed on behalf of Earthkeepers:

Catriona Child,

Earthkeepers Research Team Leader

Highland Institute

Signed on behalf of Communities:

_____, Community Leader

_____ [NAME OF COMMUNITY]

<To be filled in by researcher> Research Participant Number:	Film recording file name: Audio recording file name:	Date, Time & Place: Group / Individual
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A

Participant Information Sheet & Consent Form

*Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Climate Change in Eastern Nagaland (India)
& Naga Self-Administered Zone (Myanmar): Canada-Myanmar IDRC Research
Fellowships based at The Highland Institute, Kohima, Nagaland.*

Purpose of this Form

We - the Earthkeepers research team - currently consisting of Catriona Child (Main K4DM-II Technical Reportee/Project Coordinator) and the three IDRC Myanmar Research Fellows namely Tümüzo Katiry, Saktum Wonti, and Kevide Lcho based at the Highland Institute (Kohima) – are thankful you consider taking part in this research. Before we start, we want to ensure you are informed about the project and voluntarily agree to participate while knowing your rights. Below is an overview of the project’s intentions, and at the end follows a consent form where we ask you to indicate which aspects you agree to and sign. This is to ensure you voluntarily and knowingly participate in the project.

Research Project Overview

The research project you have been invited to participate in aims to document traditional ecological knowledge and the impact of climate change. This includes gathering information about traditional beliefs, myths, songs, proverbs, and other oral literature, as well as knowledge and practices related to plants, crops, farming, water, and animals. We are also interested in learning about Indigenous methods of adapting to irregular seasonal changes, which have recently become a problem for the community. Our interviewees will include village elders, members of the Village Council, members of Women’s Groups, members of the Students Federation, male and female farmers and householders.

Scope of Work

The research project includes the following activities:

1. The team will gather ethnographic and ecological data and work with the local co-ordinator and experts connected with the Highland Institute to develop a cultural dictionary, and an atlas of traditional ecological knowledge (ecological knowledge broadly includes everything from traditional weather forecasts to the medicinal uses of local plants, as well as architecture that is adapted to local climate conditions). The dictionary and atlas will help people in the relevant regions make more contributions and build better relationships for future cultural and ecological

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<To be filled in by researcher> Research Participant Number:	Film recording file name: Audio recording file name:	Date, Time & Place: Group / Individual
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resilience. The cultural dictionary will help in providing context for oral history, so that the figurative language used in the texts may be properly interpreted.

2. Armed with the necessary recording and transcribing equipment, the research team will develop a list of the various forms of oral literature and the types of traditional ecological knowledge, and prepare a catalogue of oral literature based on the classification used by the community.
3. All recordings will be catalogued and securely deposited in the digital library of the Highland Institute and will ensure that the recordings are available to the members of the local community.
4. A booklet will be created and distributed to the village based on the information gathered in this research.
5. Publish research papers, reports, and other materials based on the project's process and findings.

Your Participation

Depending on your preference, we will either meet you in your home or another place of choice or walk with you to certain landmarks or village, forest or field areas, that carry specific cultural or practical value to you. We will conduct an open-ended interview with the help of a guide. Each consultation/interview will be 60-90 minutes, or however long you want to share with us. We will record audio and visuals while asking you Oral histories, songs, and proverbs about nature/the agricultural cycle, weather, and climate. We also would like to talk about your understanding of global climate change and ask you about the recent climate changes and the differences in crop performance you have noticed in your village.

Will the study directly benefit me?

While there are no direct benefits to you from this study, your participation will contribute to documenting and potentially revitalising your community's cultural knowledge and practices.

Data Storage, Protection & Accessibility

During the fieldwork, the data will be stored on a portable external hard drive, which will remain at The Highland Institute, Kohima. No access will be granted to this archive to anyone outside the community, except with exceptional permission from the team and community. To ensure the community's access to the material, the raw recorded data could

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<To be filled in by researcher> Research Participant Number:	Film recording file name: Audio recording file name:	Date, Time & Place: Group / Individual
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be immediately transferred to an external hard drive for data storage under the control of the Village Council, if available. Alternatively, the raw data can be made available to the Village Council through access to an online, protected, and encrypted server based at the Highland Institute (Kohima), under the condition that such server is accessed only on computers protected by anti-malware software. Furthermore, the data will also be stored in physical locations at the Institute, accessible only to authorised community members and the research team.

Public access to the data will be determined in consultation with the Village Council.

Withdrawal from Study

You may withdraw from your participation at any time without providing reasons for your withdrawal. If you appear in audio and video recordings, we will delete those recordings. However, please note that once research findings have been published in papers, withdrawal can only be guaranteed for future publications. If any of the data was shared online and you request withdrawal or for it to be made private at a later date, any such public materials that include your data will be removed immediately, though please be aware that we cannot confirm deletion of images on social media sites shared by third parties since publication. Any information you give us will not be linked to your name without your consent.

Contact

For any later questions or to withdraw your participation from the study (up to two weeks after the interview), you can reach us through your Village Council, or directly contact us at:

- The Highland Institute - Phone: +91 7005-605-596; Email: info@highlandinstitute.org; Address: Meluri Road Kohima Village, 797003 Kohima.
- The Research Team:
 - * Catriona Child – Phone: +91 9871790647; Email: catriona@highlandinstitute.org (in English only)
 - * Kevide Lcho - Phone: +91 8837047433; Email: kevide@highlandinstitute.org (in Nagamese/ English)
 - * Saktum Wonti - Phone: +91 9774942409; Email: saktum@highlandinstitute.org (in Nagamese/ Khamniungan/ English)
 - * Tümüzo Katiry – Phone: +91 7085717345; Email: tumuzo@highlandinstitute.org (in Nagamese / Pochury languages)

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<To be filled in by researcher> Research Participant Number:	Film recording file name: Audio recording file name:	Date, Time & Place: Group / Individual
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Please communicate your participant number (which is written on the top of this form) when contacting us, including if you would seek to withdraw from the study at a later date.

Declaration of Free, Prior and Informed Consent

Signed on behalf of Research Participant

Part A (Required for Participation)

Please circle YES for all the following questions if you wish to participate:

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Information provided above. **YES / NO**

- I confirm that I had the opportunity to ask questions, and all my questions about the study or this form were answered to my satisfaction. If I did not understand any of the words in this document, the researchers or a member of the study staff explained them to me so that their meaning was clear. **YES / NO**

- I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. **YES / NO**

- I permit the information I share and the resulting data to be maintained, used and shared as described above. **YES/NO**

- I understand that I may withdraw from the study (in part or fully) at any time, without giving a reason and without any negative consequences. **YES/NO**

PART B – (Optional for Participation)

- Please circle either YES or NO for the following questions about your participation:
- I agree that my data will be stored at The Highland Institute and may be used in future ethically approved research. **YES/NO**

- I agree to allow using the information I provided in the form of a report/paper/ and used in publications. **YES/NO**

- I agree to our discussions being audio recorded. **YES/NO**

- I agree to our discussions being video recorded. **YES/NO**

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<To be filled in by researcher> Research Participant Number:	Film recording file name: Audio recording file name:	Date, Time & Place: Group / Individual
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- I agree that my face is visible and recognisable in the video recordings taken during our conversation. **YES/NO**
- I agree to the video and audio recordings being used for public dissemination, likely on an online website, yet I understand that I could always request for this material to be removed, or made private at a later date (by contacting the Village Council or directly reaching out to The Highland Institute in Kohima). **YES/NO**
- I want the stories and knowledge I share to be linked to my name. **YES NO**

>If you selected NO, we will not mention your name, but give you an anonymous name in written output, nor mention your name in the videos. However, in case you consent to us filming your face, and the videos are published, people will be able to recognise you on video material.

With regards to the eventual sharing of the data on the internet, please tick the box(es) that apply to what you agree with:

- I agree to the audio and film recordings being made public on online platforms – visible to all people who would visit the website, no matter from where they are visiting the site.
 - * I agree that the information I share will be translated and intelligible to people who do not speak my language.
 - * I do not want the stories I share to be translated, but they can be shared publicly.
- I only agree to the recordings being made public to members of my community
 - * I agree that the information I share will be translated and intelligible to people who do not speak my language.
 - * I do not want the information I share to be translated.
- Other: [Detail in which ways you consent to the data to be used / how you want the use or sharing of data to be restricted]:

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<To be filled in by researcher> Research Participant Number:	Film recording file name: Audio recording file name:	Date, Time & Place: Group / Individual
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Signed,

_____ [NAME PARTICIPANT]

_____ [NAME OF COMMUNITY]

_____ [SIGNATURE]

DATE _____ PLACE _____

Witnessed by Earthkeepers Research Team:

Catriona Child

(SIGNATURE)

Earthkeepers Research Team Leader

The Highland Institute

[NAME]

[SIGNATURE]

EK Research Team Member most closely associated with the community of the research participant signing this form - The Highland Institute

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