

## Domestic Architecture of the Nagas : A Case Study on Traditional Architecture of Mesulumi Village

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**Abstract:** A rare beautiful landscape located in the Western side and a bounty evergreen forest covered in the South - Eastern part of the Village, bounded by two main Rivers joined together known as *Rithi*, stretches down the River *Lanye*. One river flows down from West side commonly known as *Riwa/Zhienhu/Take/Zile Keri*. The other river from South-East called *Menda Keri*. One can have relief view of the Village from the opposite direction for those of the nature lovers. It is a breath taking relief while travelling through Phek District or off to the State Capital, Kohima where you can see almost the whole Village and one of the most beautiful terrace fields ever came across in the region, covered both left and right and down the Village.

The Village is located somewhere between the State Capital, Kohima and District Head Quarter; Phek (*Chakhesang*), covers 84 kms and 61 kms respectively which cut through the State Highway and ongoing NH – 155, 2-Lane. Geographically the Village settlement is situated within the zone of 25° 34' 29.41" - 25° 34' 58.49" North latitudes and 94° 20' 25.63" - 94° 20' 36.10" East Longitudes and 1667 meters approximately above the mean sea level altitudes.

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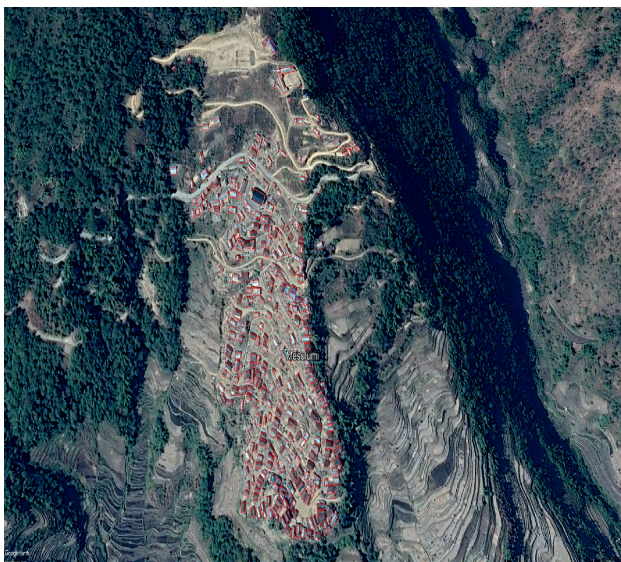
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Settlement (Google Earth 2015) and Map of Mesulumi Village

## INTRODUCTION

Mesulumi Village with its rich cultural tradition, economic self sufficient, flora and fauna with its evergreen forest and availability of water resource is the pride for the inhabitants. It has its own ways of constructing traditional architecture which has developed throughout the time. Built by the skilled locals themselves with locally available raw materials. The legacy of constructing domestic architecture in performing rituals, its techniques, tools used, use of raw materials, types, significant meanings, symbolism etc., has been handed down by the ancestral to the present generations enables the oral history alive. Though the heritage of traditional architecture is vanishing yet oral tradition still maintained.

This paper is an attempt to discuss limited subtitle of a particular Village with a view to go for indept comperative studies with neighbouring Villages, other tribes in Nagaland and outside the State which are associated to Traditional Domestic Architecture.

Domestic architecture evolved through time immemorial by the Naga tribes of Nagaland is vividly reflected in multiform house patterns and planning concepts, conditioned by the quintessential traditions, beliefs, and practices. The prevailing geophysical and climatic conditions have played a pivotal role in the choice of material, structural parameters and the selection of sites for dwelling.

Domestic architectures are much more than physical structures. It is a home, place of work, rest and worship. Houses are building which are inhabited by different individuals or groups such as households of kin-related or gods or spirits of an ancestral inheritance, or kept specific objects such as ritual paraphernalia. Houses are maintained by individuals, family or specific social groups with a particular purpose and function. As such, houses express symbolically through architectural design, decoration and layout. Houses speak to the members of a community about socio-economic categories and values and it also informs others about its purpose and the status of its inhabitants. Such traditional architecture is also the appropriate space where traditional knowledge and skills are learnt. The traditional Naga 'Morung' is one of the best examples where elements of traditional knowledge such as the art of weaving, costume-adornment, dancing, oral traditions, hunting skills and techniques of traditional warfare are shared with young members of the village.

In other aspect of traditional architecture, most Naga groups build temporary field-huts in the agricultural season, particularly if the fields are a long way from village. The designs of such field huts differ according to the group build by them.

In studying the house as a multifaceted category, one may approach the complexities of social life in the region and seek new and enhanced understandings of profound social and cultural phenomena and processes.

Domestic architecture and built structures have always attracted interest, but just as the study of interdisciplinary subjects has changed drastically over the years, so has the study of architecture within the field of various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history and also archaeology. Recent studies in architecture have begun to focus on domestic settings in order to better understand the day to day lives of the common citizen. The examination and study of private household buildings, when combined with established knowledge of elite, political, and religious spheres of society, with a more versatile, well-rounded perspective. Architecture is often a canvas for changes with a society or culture. Social, economic, or political shifts within populations materialize as modifications in the built environment. As Hiller and Hanson (1984: 27) assert, the most far-reaching changes in the evolution of societies have usually involved or led to profound shifts in spatial form and in the relation of society to its spatial milieu; these shifts appear to be not so much a by-product of the social changes, but an intrinsic part of them and even to some extent causative of them (cited in Drennan 2010).

Nagaland having 16 major tribes constructing of traditional architecture differs from tribe to tribe. Even in celebration of festivals, performing rituals also varied from village to village and tribe to tribe but one unique uniformity could be seen is using of raw materials, tools and techniques while constructing traditional architecture is almost the same.

Following are some few sub-points to discuss, Site Selection, Layout of a Traditional Architecture and its division and Types of Traditional Architecture.

## 1. Site Selection

In site selection for a new house construction the owner shall first survey plot of land and if found appropriate or convenient the following day or after few days he will wake up early in the morning and perform rituals as he reached to the new site. Some of the materials used while performing rituals are Fire, Dao, Spear, War Shield known as *Mezhi Zhide*, Traditional Trap made of bamboo cane known as *Kusa*, and Local Brew from bamboo basket called *Khuba*. After reaching the spot he seeks blessings from the gods, make fire and start the works. The fire that was brought from the previous home shall keep till finishing of a new house. Meanwhile if the fire goes off before finishing of a house construction it is considered to be a bad omen.

Words of blessings pronounced by the owner before anyone comes for work:-

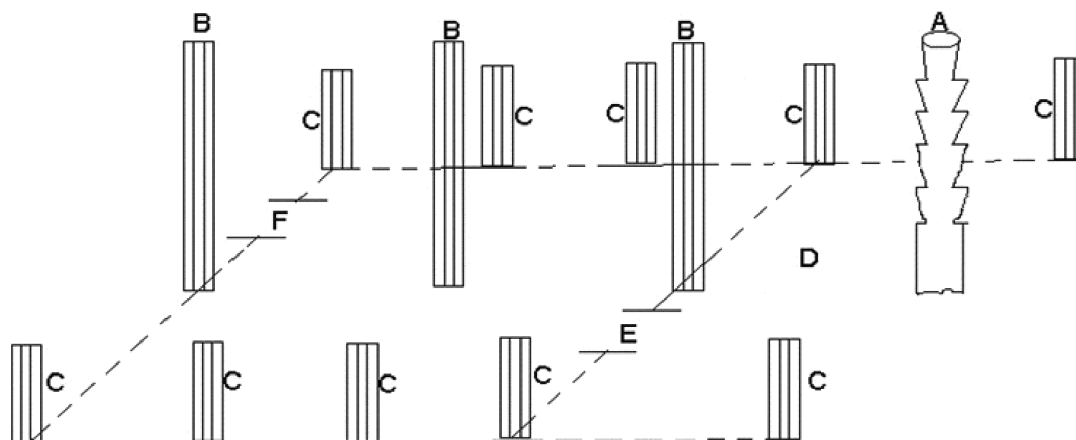
- (a) Good health - *Kechükenyü chüre kenyüe*
- (b) Long Live - *Kerhirho ketha chükelou chüe*
- (c) Prosperity (Wealth) – *Kechine kakruo chü mezü masü*
- (d) May riches never run dry - *Tompu sompue*
- (e) Good Omen be with us - *Kewe ketha kede chüe*.

## 2. Layout of a Traditional Architecture and its division

In a layout of a Traditional Architecture, it is divided into four main parts – *Kediza*, *Kechiru*, *Kahu* and *Lekhake*

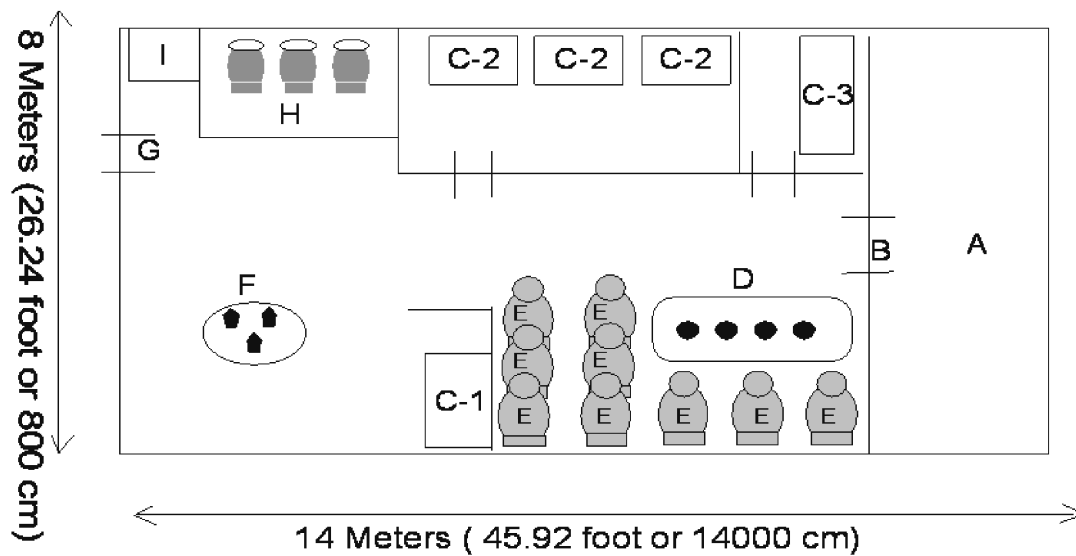
- (a) *Kediza* – This is an outer most part which is meant for public gathering for any type of meeting and discussion and a place for drying grains eg; rice, maize, millet, job tears or any type of vegetables. In other words it can be termed as Multi-purpose platform.
- (b) *Kechiru* – Courtyard or Quad is a place of receiving guest, rearing of cattle like mithun or pigs also meant for blacksmith, woodcrafts and weaving. In other words, this place is a sitting room or common room because in olden days there is no such as common room/ sitting room like we have today.
- (c) *Kahu* – This is the whole interior part known as *Kahu* which is again divided into four-five parts depending on the size of a house. 1. Granary section and a Large Wooden pounding rice table kept for pounding rice, maize, and millet, job tears etc., 2. Bedroom for peer group 3. Family toilet and Wooden or Earthen Jars for preparing local brew 4. Kitchen and a couple bedroom.
- (d) *Lekhake* - Kitchen (*Maphu* - Hearth) – This place is considered as a sacred place because this is the place where rituals are first performed and couple sleep besides the Hearth. It is forbidden to cook certain types of wild animals, birds and vegetables from the hearth because it is said to be taboo.

PLATE-I LAYOUT OF MAIN POSTS



- (a) Design and decorative measures of a King Post
- (b) King Post/Main Post
- (c) Queen Post/Side Post
- (d) Verandah/Courtyard
- (e) Main Entrance
- (f) Mini exit door

PLATE-II IMAGERY PLAN OF A RICHMAN HOUSE



- (a) Front verandah/courtyard
- (b) Main entrance
- (c) Beds (1-Couple, 2-Children, 3-Peer group)
- (d) Pounding table
- (e) Granary (Traditional methods of grain storage)
- (f) Hearth
- (g) Mini exit door
- (h) Local brew space
- (i) Family toilet



### 3. TYPES OF TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

In olden days constructing of Traditional Architecture is mainly based on economical line depending on their wealth and capabilities which represent their social status. Traditional Domestic Architecture has been classified into four categories viz;- *Kechi Chiso*, *Kechi Chirhü*, *Kechi Poti* and *Kemhi*.

(a) ***Kechi Chiso with Echü Ketsü Cho***: Type one Traditional Architecture hold decorative gable horn with wood carvings of animal heads and this first type of constructing Traditional Architecture is the richest group of people who offers feast of merit two times. In completion of Feast of Merit two times observing all norms and performing rituals for 29 days, the couple is entitled to construct a new house with gable horn of decorative design and a hole in the middle and wood carvings of animal heads with design and decorative measures represent mithun heads at the front walls known as *Kechi Chiso* and *Echü Ketsü Cho* respectively and a colorful shawl having different designs with animal heads called *Lichira*. During the time of feasting the couple invests more wealth than the other following Feast donors. Actual days of performing rituals and observing genna in this Feast of Merit is 30 days but if a person completed the total given days it is considered they may fall sick and life short and afraid of their unseen supreme god or gods putting into an account that they are overtaking their gods



Type I - *Kechi Chiso with Echü Ketsü Cho* – Decorative gable horn with wood carvings of animal heads

(b) ***Kechi Chirhü with Echü Ketsü Cho***: Curve gable horn with design and decorative measures: The second type Feast of Merit offer 3 (three) times performing rituals and observing genna for 9 days in each Feast of Merit. After offering Feast of Merit 3 (three) times and performing rituals the couple is entitled to construct a new house with curve gable design represent a mithun horn known as *Kechi Chirhü with Echü Ketsü Cho* - wooden carvings decorative design represent mithun heads at the front walls. In completion of all formalities, the couple is entitled to wear a pure white shawl which is a thick stitch using porcupine coat of sharp spines, or quills called *Terü Kedera*.



**Type II –Kechi Chirhü with Echü Ketsü Cho – Curve gable horn with wood carvings of animal heads**

**(c). Kechi Poti with Echü Ketsü Cho:** Gable horn not raise beyond the roof top with wood carvings representing mithun heads: Third group of people also follow the same system of performing rituals like the second group but the difference between this two are, the third group is the follow up of the second group in which their performing of rituals, offering Feast of Merit is incomplete which means they offer Feast of Merit for only 2 (two) times. Therefore, the third group of people will not construct a house of gable horn rising above the house. Performing rituals and offering Feast of Merit two times will entitle the couple with gable not rising above the roof top and wood carvings of decorative design represent mithun heads at the front walls known as *Echü Ketsü Cho* and the couple is entitled to wear a pure white shawl which is a thick stitch using porcupine coat of sharp spines, or quills called *Terü Kedera*.



**Type III – Kechi Poti with Echü Ketsü Cho - Gable horn not raises beyond the roof top with wood carvings of animal heads. (Two times Feast of Merit)**



(d) **Kemhi - Plain:** The last and the fourth group of people are considered economically the poorest section of people because they couldn't offer Feast of Merit therefore construct their house in plain which is without gable horn and any design or decorative measures. They are not entitled to wear traditional shawls which were entitled by the above three group of people. During the time of constructing their houses, they offer simple lunch and dinner. Only local brew/rice beer with Naga dal shall be offered to the workers. The owner shall not perform rituals like the way the three upper classes performed by killing animals and make sacrifices.



Type IV A house without gable horn and any design (Who does not offer Feast of Merit)

## CONCLUSION

Based on the importance of architecture as an interdisciplinary subject, the study focus mainly on selection of site, layout pattern and types of traditional construction of architecture, such as access analysis and visibility patterns of domestic architectures in Mesulumi Village and tracing historical links between architectural forms across the region. The main purpose of this research is also concerned with the variation (both morphologically & functionally) in the construction of domestic architecture among the Naga tribes of Nagaland and the meanings and symbolism attached to the houses.

As the study probes into the centrally significant role of houses within the Mesulumi Village, the proposed research will help to reveal new insights into the adaptive mechanisms of domestic architecture, how people shape buildings and buildings shape people, how rules about layout and uses of space have an impact on social relationships, the types of architecture used and their functions such as status differentiation and ritual performing ideas, gender symbolism etc., ultimately uncovering basic themes concerning the idea of life and life processes themselves. This research will also appeal to other disciplines in uncovering fundamental themes concerning the concepts of domestic architecture and their dynamics inherent across cultures.

In the midst of the fast pace of influence of modern style house architecture not only in Mesulumi Village but in Naga rural Villages, there has been drastic decline in the construction of traditional house architecture and along with it, the traditional knowledge and associated skills with such construction. Given this context, the research also demand an urgent need to document the dying knowledge and the meanings associated with such architecture before they are lost.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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