

## Dynamics of Indigenous Knowledge: Naming Crops among the Tribal Hill People of Nagaland

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**Abstract:** Tribal societies are mostly agro-based, which has not transitioned much from the hunter-foraging stage. Most tribal societies took a long time to start settled agricultural practices. Settled agriculture practices have not changed much for these people over the years. The *Nagas* being a tribal society have also remained predominantly an agricultural economy since time immemorial. Traditions and customs form an integral part of the culture of any tribal society. Rice, the main crop cultivated and consumed by the people, forms an integral part of this culture. Its uses are diverse from ritual purposes to medical uses. Each ritual, customs, and names have a symbolic meaning in their society. This paper will look into the origin of the cultivation of rice among the Naga and how the names given to the crops form an integral part and reflect the unique cultural part of their life

**Keywords:** agriculture, culture, names, origin, rice.

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## INTRODUCTION

What is cultivation? According to the Oxford Dictionary, in its English edition, it means the process of preparation of the soil for planting wild or domesticated plants. There have been several definitions of the term and discussions on it. Agriculture is part of the comprehensive activity of cultivation of various crops for the consumption and sustenance of human life. Harries and Fuller (2014) have elaborately tried to define the concept of what it means and conceptualized it as a 'form of land use and economy that resulted from the combination of cultivation (a bundle of human actions focused on preparing soil and planting, tending, and harvesting plants) and domestication (a bundle of genetic and morphological changes that have increased the ability of plants to adapt to cultivation)'. The transition of man from a hunter-gather stage to the neolithic settled agricultural stage is considered one of the greatest achievements of human beings. This development in human evolution to produce food and other products from domesticated plant species and animals is considered the gateway to new social and economic complexity in human cultural evolution (Barker 2006; Diamond 2002).

When we look at the physiography of South East Asia, vast tracks of it are covered by the green landscape of paddy plantations. Come monsoon, almost all the fields are covered with lush

green paddy plants swaying in the rain. For a first-timer to the area, it seems somewhat a mystical place. The people in the region have been practising rice cultivation for as long as they can remember. Besides that, various other kinds of cereal like wheat and barley dominate the agricultural scenario of the country's north-western region and the south is characterized by its coconut groves. The region offers a medley of various traditions and customs. The monsoon rain mostly shapes the agricultural pattern in the region. Agriculture in India is said to be first started around 10,000 years ago along the western tributaries of the Indus River. The pattern of agriculture in India is different in various parts of the country due to its influence by its immigrants of farmers from various areas and also the adoption of various wild and domesticated crops.

In the Indian context, it was during the colonial period that the first initial task of documenting the nation's agricultural history was done under Lord Mayo, the Governor-General of British India when he established the Department of Agriculture and Revenue. As a subject of study, agriculture began to gain momentum in the growing light of the changing historical perspective on development. William Moreland in "The Agrarian System of Moslem India", is credited with the first writing on agrarian Indian history (as cited in David Ludden, 2005). In terms of human resources and the environment, northeast India offers the most fascinating relationship study. The region lies at the juncture where numerous cultures and people have come into connecting, thereby influencing each other on account of the region's topographical point where South and East Asia, as well as South East Asia, meet. The region is a rich network of an ecosystem that provides the ideal environment for any culture to flourish. D.K. Medhi (2003) has classified this region as "The Great Indian Corridor" (as cited in Manjil Hazarika, 2006. a). This region is also classified as an important region in world archaeology. It has played a crucial role in human evolution's domestication and food production stage. India is considered the centre for the widest variety of rice domestication. It was from the site of Lahuradewa (Fuller 2011) that the first evidence of rice cultivation in South Asia was found in the country. The North-East region offers the most favourable area for the study of the cultivation of rice. K.C. Agarwal (1996) based on the Vavilovian theory that India is one of the centres of origin of rice has also described the North-eastern region as one of the main regions of the Vavilovian centre of biodiversity and the centre of many species of plants and animals (as cited in Manjil Hazarika 2017:217). North-East region though it produces mainly for self-consumption offers the widest variety of species of rice, both domestic and wild. North-East India also offers a rich flora and fauna resources. Recognizing the importance of this, it was in the International Indo-Pacific Prehistoric Congress (20-23 December 1978, Pune, India) that, for the first time, North-East India was seen as a potential area for the domestication of several domesticated plants and also that the region may be a cultural bridge between India and South-East Asia was recognized (Hazarika 2006. b).

The similarities between the Neolithic tradition of North-East India with those of South-East and East Asia have been seen not only in its archaeological data like its celts making tradition, cord impressed pottery tradition but also in its rice agriculture. The Neolithic tradition of North-East India shows more similarities with its neighbouring areas of South and East Asia than the Indian mainland Neolithic tradition. North-east India also seems to have linguistic affinities with its South and East Asia counterpart. Christoph Von Fürer-Haimendorf (1971), describes some kind of *cultural Parallels* between the North Eastern tribes of India and the people of the Philippines. He elaborates on the broad likeness between the two groups of people despite the great distance between them. There are similarities in the ecology and agriculture practices, especially in the construction of the elaborate terraced fields by the Angami tribe of Nagaland, the Apa Tanis of Arunachal Pradesh, and the Ifugaos of the Philippines. Authors like George Van Driem (2008), Peter Bellwood (2003) and Roger Blench (2008) in recent

times have tried to analyze the prehistory as well as the diffusion of the Neolithic tradition in North-East India with a comparative and historical linguistics approach. George Van Driem (2008) also suggests that the linguistic palaeontology and the native lore both indicate that the ancient Tibeto-Burman to which the North-East India majority population belongs, were cultivators of broomcorn millet *panicum miliaceum* and foxtail millet *Setaria Italica*, whereas the ancient Austro-Asiatic which formed the other group in North-East India was the most likely candidate for the cultivators of rice.

The Tibeto-Burman-speaking population was probably assumed as the first farming communities of the northeast that introduced the rice cultivation system in this part which originated from East Asia (Hazarika 2006. a, Hazarika 2017: 153). George Van Driem (2017) and Eleanor Kingwell-Banham, *et al.* (2015) have described the northeast region and surrounding regions nearby as a region that introduced a third variety of rice different from the *Oryza Sativa* which is considered one of the earliest varieties of rice cultivated by the neolithic community. This area has been classified as a region lying between two important regions which might yield archaeobotanical evidence suggesting a new study in the neolithic study of the North-East.

## RICE CULTURE IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Rice is one of the most widely cultivated staple crops of the people in the north-eastern region. It is used in almost all aspects of the life of people and almost all social and cultural festivities are focalized around it. It is no surprise that almost all meals of the people have some form of rice in them. This close relationship between this agricultural practice and their social and cultural life indicates the close relationship between the people and their environment. The cultural foundation of the people of these regions is deeply embedded in their agricultural identity. Although the people practised mixed forms of cropping patterns, however, rice dominates as the main staple crop of the people. Northeast India comes under one of the ecological diversity hotspots of the country where there is a probability of it being one of the centres where early man learned how to domesticate wild crops which were conducive to growing and consumption (Hazarika 2017:219). The ability to produce food and other products from domesticated plants and animals has since opened up a new pathway to the ecological and social complexity of mankind.

T.T. Chang (1976) has identified the Asian rice (*Oryza Sativa*) as having evolved from an annual genealogy over a broad belt that extended from the Ganges plains below the foothills of the Himalayas, across Upper Burma, northern Thailand, and Laos, to North Vietnam and south China. He further attributes the domestication of rice to have occurred either independently or simultaneously at many sites in the region. Peter Bellwood, one of the eminent archaeologists' postulates on the origin of rice and specifically that of the native *Japonica* of rice variety with its origin in Northeast India (as cited in Manjil Hazarika 2017:223). There have been various theories on the origin and domestication of rice and even now as we know various anthropologists, botanists and archaeologists are trying to identify the exact place and when rice was eventually domesticated from its wild variety. There are more than a thousand varieties of rice in India and northeast India also has a large quantity of it. Manjil Hazarika (2017) attributes the large varieties of rice available to a result of experimentation and selection of the most productive varieties for cultivation. Rice cultivation is speculated to most probably began when early people dropped seeds on the soil in low-lying spots near their homesteads, kept out the weeds and animals, and, probably, manipulated the water supply (T.T. Chang 1976). The sites of cultivation were probably selected and moved nearer to the habitation as people could observe how they reacted to the soil and water. The movement of people from one place to another due to various reasons might have helped in the transmigration of rice agriculture practice.

Rice cultivation in northeast India is still practised by the people of the region using their ancestral method of cultivation which suits their land. This indigenous knowledge has been passed on from one generation to another which has suited their local indigenous microclimatic condition. Rice varieties of this region are found to possess unique qualities which have drawn great interest to the plant breeders (Vanlalsanga *et al.* 2019). Some of the useful qualities identified in these landraces include unique adaptive features for cold tolerance, flooding and salt tolerance, etc. Hazarika (2017:225) attributes the wide domestication of rice in the region to have resulted in higher yield and the evolution of the non-shattering nature of the grain made it possible to hold the grain in the panicle till the time of manual harvesting. He further attributes that because of the advantageous characteristics of the rice plant, it has made rice popular and the preferred crop of the farmers.

## RICE CULTURE IN NAGALAND

Since pre-historic times, agriculture was the main way of life of the people and till now it continues to be so for more than half of its population. Nagaland's agricultural system is mostly traditional where it is village-based and the community also plays an important role. Even the ownership of the land and its cultivation is exclusively determined by tradition and customary laws. The two main forms of agriculture practised by the people are Jhum cultivation and Terrace Rice cultivation. Jhum cultivation is practised by mostly the tribes of Ao, Lotha, Sema, and Terrace cultivation mostly by the Angamis, Chakhesang, and the Konyaks of the far north who also seem to use it mainly for Taro cultivation (Jacobs.1998:33-5). Some traditional practices are unique to Nagaland agriculture like the "Zabo" (Sharma.2004, Hore 2005) system of water harvesting practised in Phek district, the Alder tree-based system of cultivation in Khonoma village of Kohima district (Pulamte.2009), etc. In recent years, the people have also started to practice a mixed cropping system of plantation and inter-cropping. The various types of crops grown in the State are maize, potato, pulses, millets, rice, etc. However, rice dominates as the main cropping system. Some of the earliest crops which were grown in the Naga Hills were taro, Job's tears (*Coix*) (Hutton.1965), etc.

Recent archaeobotanical excavation works have also revealed the presence of different varieties of rice, both wild and cultivated, millets of different varieties, cotton seeds, *Zanthoxylum* (*Mechina*), etc, which reveals to us the earliest form of subsistence of the people (Pokharia. *Et al.* 2013). Rice of wild and cultivated rice (*Oryza sativa*), and millets (*Setaria sp.*, *Echinochloa sp.*, *Paspalum sp.*), remains of *T. aestivum*, *Hordeum vulgare*, *L. sativus*, *V. unguiculata*, *Vigna sp.* (*cf. radiata*, *aconitifolia*), *M. uniflorum* and *Gossypium sp.* from the first millennium to second millennium AD have been recorded from early Naga ancestral sites (Pokharia *et al.*, 2013). The discovery of this botanical evidence helps us to preliminarily form an idea about the prehistoric diet of the people and also the crops of their time.

Traditions which are an integral part of the Naga people and particularly those dealing with agriculture have been difficult for them to abandon and changes in this field have been slow. The methods of cultivation, tools used, etc have more or less remained the same since. Almost every rural household in the Naga village countryside is engaged in cultivation and particularly rice cultivation. Christopher Von Furer-Haimendorf ([1933] 2016:82) describes how a Naga is so occupied that nine-tenths of his thought and life are devoted to his field, and the things which mean the most to him Naga deal with his agriculture.

The agricultural operations carry cultural significance for the people and are marked by rituals varying from tribe to tribe. All functions, celebrations, and festivities of the people focus on various operations under the different systems of agriculture. There are however three stages in the traditional agricultural practice of the people that are particularly stressed with important rituals: the initial jungle



clearing and the burning of the felled trees; sowing and reaping. These rituals vary from tribe to tribe and may involve some form of offerings of a sacrificial animal, observance of the *Genna* period of abstinence from work, sex, and other everyday activities, and feasting and dancing (Jacobs 1998:38). *Genna* period varies from tribe to tribe lasting from one to two days or more. Each tribe have their specific day of restricted days period. Most of the festivals of the Nagas are related to agriculture, e.g., we have the *Moatsu* festival of the Ao tribe which is celebrated when the sowing is over, the Angami festival of *Sekrenyi*, the Rengma *Ngadah*, and *Tulunio* of the Sema tribe., etc which are all harvest festivals (Joshi. 2001:154-5). Almost all these festivals are linked with the cultivation of rice. Rice was seen as a sort of marker that a ritual was being performed. Its importance was also seen in how it played a role in various life cycle rituals of a Naga. Nagas like any tribal people of the world have their social taboos and superstitions which have been passed on from generation to generation through the oral traditions of folklore and practices.

Naga farmers plant various types of rice varieties including glutinous and non-glutinous ones which are white, red and black rice. These grains of rice are planted in jhum plantation as well as terrace cultivation. There are more varieties of terrace rice than Jhum rice cultivation. Following the traditional method of rice cultivation, the farmers through their years of experience, plant more than one variety of rice in one field. Most of the sowing of rice is done for Jhum cultivation in March and April. For Terrace cultivation, the paddy seeds are first planted in a separate nursery bed in March and April and by early June with the coming of the monsoon rain are transplanted in the paddy field which has been inundated with water drawn from the streams. Harvest is usually started by August for Jhum fields and in October for terrace cultivations. The Naga farmers traditionally use manual labour for all their work. However, with the coming of types of machinery, some of the farmers whose fields are accessible by road have started using mechanical means for toiling their lands.

Rice planted by the farmers is used not only for consumption but also for making local beer, roti, and medicinal purposes. Among the Angami tribe, a particular variety of glutinous rice known as '*Nyadie*', '*Ramorunya*', from the Pochury tribe '*Thonari*', '*Hasho*', '*yamkhai*' from the Konyak tribe, '*Azongshu*' from the Sangtamis used for preparing local rice beer which is specifically used during special festivals and occasions. Besides that, people also use rice for treating and ailing relief from various sicknesses like stomach aches and weakness. Rice water was used by the people to get relief from stomach-gastric pain as well as during loss of appetite to give strength to the sick person.

The status of rice in the life of a Naga villager is diverse, not only was it a source of food for them but it also played an important role in its economic, and social structure. For performing the feast of merit which was the highest position that a Naga farmer could achieve in his life, without rice and rice beer it was not possible. Rice was used for the production of alcohol which was consumed by the people and also used in various rituals and was the most important in any socio-religious ritual in grain-producing societies and regions. Performing this ritual meant that he could build his house with the horn-shaped carvings and also wear the shawl which was specifically embroidered. J.P. Mills (1935) while observing this practice of the Nagas quoted:

*"The essence of this system is that every male Naga if he is to acquire merit and status in this world and the next, must give a series of feasts, every detail of which is strictly prescribed. An immense amount of rice and rice beer is consumed, and more rice than money goes to the buying of the animals. The Feasts therefore directly stimulate agriculture"*.

Rice consumption and cultivation among the Nagas besides being an important agricultural practice also highlighted the social structure of the people. Among the Konyak Naga, there was also specific rice which could be grown only by the Anghclan known as '*Shahtoi*'. This was to be grown around

the field hut house only and to be eaten within the Angh house only. It was believed that if outsiders took it, the Angh and the village would lose all their blessings. This in a way highlighted their local superstitious beliefs and taboos as well which continues till today. The Zeliang people in Benrue village also grew a specific paddy known as 'Swampuiehie', which was described as having small seeds and a husk easy to break that even a handicapped person could break and eat easily. The literal meaning of *Swamean* is the handicapped person. This was specifically grown and eaten by these groups of people in society.

Anoteworthy feature of the Naga agricultural system was also the practice of naming a crop. Naming serves as a powerful vehicle of identity and culture. Traditional rice varieties grown are specifically given names which are symbolic of those people or places who introduced the variety in the village. Sometimes they are also morphological descriptions or characteristic features, for example, *Duikung Meu* which is grown by the Zeliang people from Poilwa village, whereby *Duikung* means the coldest place and *Meu* means rice. This type of paddy thereby grows best in the coldest part of the terrace field. *Hepwaieirangtuirice*, which translates into a paddy that looks like an elephant mouth, was also grown by Benrue village. Another variety of paddy grown by the Angami tribe from Viswema village was called *Rusūolha*. It was said to be first introduced in the village during the Second World War by the Japanese soldiers who came and hence named. This tradition which has been practised by the people is found to be most common among those farmers practising Terrace rice cultivation. However, with the introduction of terrace farming in those areas where Jhum cultivation was the main form of cultivation, this practice also became prominent in these areas.

Economically also for a Naga, rice served as a means for exchange with their neighbouring tribe and villagers. Yemnyei Ngonyen, an eighty-year-old man from *Yongnyah* village which is a Phom Village remembers how the upper Konyak people from the neighbouring areas came down to the village to buy paddy in exchange for utensils and tea. Seeds exchange with their neighbouring villages as well as tribes was also carried out. In some cases, baskets of rice were given as a token to the male sibling for the cultivable lands which were given to the daughters of the family as inheritance land by her father. Thus, rice also played an important role in societal cultural ritual purposes.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding the heritage and history of the people through the study of the agricultural vocabulary used can also be an important aspect of the study of the people. In this respect, Elsdon Best (1930) describes how the Māori people of New Zealand have preserved the names of the crops which were grown by their ancestors as well as new crops introduced through their songs and folktales, names given to the crops grown by them and thereby helping preserve their history for the future. Studying the vocal terms used by the Nagas to give to the various varieties of rice grown by them and also their socio-economic dimension might also help to throw new light into the study of the dynamics of knowledge of the people regarding their agricultural system also. These local food varieties' names become a part of the oral narratives of the people keeping their local /rural communities' folk narratives alive. Further excavation works on archaeobotanical work in the region would also help us to analyse and substantiate the domestication and cultivation of rice in the region and its spread and subsistence pattern of the people. An ethnographic study on the present-day society and its cultural relation with their agricultural system would further help us to know about the early domestication and spread of food crops among the people. As Aier (2018:5) has rightly described how the oral narration and folklores of the people present a wealth of information on the inner workings of the social and cultural life of the people by revealing an ethnographic snapshot of the lived past and their cultural ethos.

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