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Tradition As Livelihood: *Nhaku* And The Cultural Ecology Of The Chakhesang Nagas

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Abstract: This paper explores *Nhaku*, a traditional food-gathering practice among the Chakhesang Nagas of Nagaland, as a lens to understand how indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, and livelihood are deeply interconnected. *Nhaku* involves the seasonal collection of small aquatic creatures from paddy fields, primarily by women, and is embedded in the community's agrarian rhythm, nutritional habits, and oral traditions. More than a subsistence activity, it reflects sustainable resource use, gendered knowledge transmission, and a collective relationship with the land. Based on interviews with local elders and practitioners, the study highlights the cultural, ecological, and medicinal significance of *Nhaku*, while also addressing the need to preserve and promote its cultural and medicinal significance. The paper calls for documentation, community engagement, and cultural revitalization to preserve this practice. By situating *Nhaku* within broader discourses on traditional ecological knowledge and food heritage, the paper argues that sustaining such practices is vital not only for cultural continuity but also for promoting sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity conservation.

Keywords: *Nhaku*, Chakhesang Nagas, Indigenous Knowledge, Traditional Livelihood, Cultural Ecology, Oral Tradition.

INTRODUCTION

In many Indigenous communities across the world, tradition is not a separate aspect of culture to be practiced occasionally or preserved only for festivals. Rather, it is a way of life, a living system that shapes how people relate to the land, to each other, and to the spiritual world. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), traditional knowledge refers to the knowledge, skills, and practices that are created, preserved, and transmitted across generations within a community. This knowledge is often deeply connected to the community's cultural and spiritual identity (2020). Similarly, UNESCO describes traditional knowledge as the understanding, innovations, and practices of Indigenous and local communities that reflect their traditional ways of living and are closely linked to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Traditional knowledge, practices, and beliefs are embedded in everyday activities such as farming, cooking, healing, storytelling, and community decision-making. These practices are often passed down through generations not through written texts, but through lived experience, oral transmission, and collective memory. For such communities, tradition is livelihood, education, and identity all at once. It governs how natural resources are used, how knowledge is shared, and how values such as respect, reciprocity, and cooperation are taught. The land is not viewed as a commodity, but as a living ancestor or a source of life that must be cared for. In this context, traditional practices are not static customs of the past but dynamic systems of knowledge and survival, shaped by centuries of adaptation and lived wisdom.

Among the Chakhesang Nagas as well, traditional practices are deeply interwoven with everyday life, shaping not only cultural identity but also systems of livelihood and ecological knowledge. One such practice is *Nhaku*, the seasonal gathering of small water creatures such as snails, crabs, and insects from paddy fields. Practiced by women, *Nhaku* has long served as an important source of food, medicine, and communal bonding within the Chakhesang community. This practice involves women skillfully sieving through the mud and water with a bamboo basket (*tüthriüh*), collecting edible creatures such as small fish, crabs, snails, and frogs, which are then stored in a waist-tied bamboo container (*Chebvii*). More than just a means of food gathering, *Nhaku* embodies the spirit of communal labor, knowledge-sharing, and ecological adaptation. In the past, *Nhaku* was more than a subsistence activity; it reflected a way of living that was closely tied to the rhythms of the land, the cycles of farming, and the oral transmission of indigenous knowledge.

This paper explores *Nhaku* to make a case for how tradition and livelihood are intimately connected in Chakhesang Naga society. It examines the cultural, ecological, and nutritional significance of *Nhaku* to highlight the importance of protecting traditional practices that embody both sustainable living and indigenous knowledge. It presents the argument that the erosion of indigenous practices not only affects cultural identity but also disrupts sustainable ways of living that have supported communities for generations. The paper then, seeks to make a call for the need to recognize the richness of traditional knowledge and to understand how such practices are interwoven with Indigenous worldviews and community well-being.

THE CHAKHESANG NAGAS: AN OVERVIEW

The Chakhesang Nagas are one of the major Naga tribes of Nagaland, primarily residing in Phek District, located in the southeastern part of the state. The name *Chakhesang* is a compound of the names of three sub-groups—Chokri, Khezha, and Sangtam, who originally formed the tribe (Singh et al., 2018). Although the Sangtam are now recognized as a separate tribe, the original nomenclature *Chakhesang* has been retained. During the British colonial period, the group was referred to as the “Eastern Angamis,” a term that is no longer in use. In the present day, the Chakhesang tribe consists primarily of three sub-groups: Chokri, Khezha, and Poumai Chakhesangs, who speak Chokri and Khezha with Tenyidie as the common dialect. This blending of groups contributes to the Chakhesang tribe’s distinctive cultural and social diversity within the wider Naga ethnolinguistic landscape. Geographically, the Chakhesangs are concentrated in the Pfutsero, Chozuba, and Phek subdivisions of Phek district. The region shares borders with various other Naga communities, including the Mao, Poumai, Tangkhul, Sumi, Angami, and Pochury tribes.

Like other Naga tribes, the Chakhesangs possess rich oral traditions and cultural expressions that are central to their identity. These traditions are deeply intertwined with their agrarian lifestyle, seasonal rituals, and spiritual relationship with the land (Kapfo, 2023). As noted by Hesuh (2024), Chakhesang culture is fundamentally shaped by agriculture, with terrace farming and shifting cultivation forming the backbone of their subsistence practices. Crops such as rice, millet, maize, and vegetables are commonly grown, while livestock rearing, particularly pigs and poultry, plays a vital role in their diet and ceremonial life. Their food practices are rooted in sustainability, drawing heavily on locally available resources. Fermented foods, smoked meats, wild herbs, and foraged ingredients, including edible insects and aquatic species, are staple elements of Chakhesang cuisine. One such distinctive practice is *Nhaku*, in which women gather small aquatic creatures, such as fish, crabs, snails, and frogs, from paddy fields before the planting season. More than a means of food collection, *Nhaku* represents a cultural tradition that reflects sustainable living, and a deep respect for nature. This paper explores *Nhaku* not merely as a subsistence activity but as a meaningful expression of the Chakhesang Nagas cultural ecology, illustrating how tradition and livelihood remain interwoven in the everyday lives of the community.

NHAKU AS A TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE OF THE CHAKHESANG NAGAS

According to Ogar et.al (2020), Traditional and Indigenous knowledge has guided human societies for millennia and is deeply rooted in the cultural and communal practices of people across the globe. It represents rich, intricate understandings of and relationships with natural ecosystems, developed and refined over generations. While grounded in ancestral wisdom, Indigenous knowledge remains highly relevant today, offering sustainable ways of living that are closely tied to specific places. It is expressed through oral traditions, spiritual and material culture, art, music, and a continued connection to ancestral lands. In this light, *Nhaku* may be seen as a localized expression of such knowledge, an Indigenous practice that reflects the Chakhesang Naga people's deep ecological awareness, cultural identity, and sustainable relationship with their land. It is unique traditional practice of the Chakhesang Naga women, carried out in wet paddy fields before the planting season.

Nhaku involves the careful harvesting of small aquatic creatures such as fish, crabs, snails, frogs, and various water insects from paddy fields, which are then prepared into a traditional dish of the same name. The practice requires skill, patience, and the use of specific traditional tools, most of which have been developed and refined over generations. Women play a central role in this activity, using a specially crafted bamboo basket known as *tüthriüh*, a large, four-cornered container with a flat base and small perforations, to sieve through mud and water. As they move slowly through the flooded fields, they scoop up muddy water into the basket, allowing it to drain while retaining the edible aquatic creatures. These are then transferred into a storage basket called *Chebvü*, a bamboo container traditionally tied around the waist with a belt for convenience. The *Chebvü* features a wider base and narrower opening, designed to safely hold the collected creatures. In recent times, however, this has often been replaced by plastic bottles or containers.

Nhaku is more than a food-gathering technique; it embodies indigenous knowledge, ecological sensitivity, and sustainable resource use. The practice reflects the Chakhesang Naga community's deep connection to the land and its ecosystems. Moreover, it fosters communal bonding, as it is typically carried out in groups, particularly by women, who share stories, songs, and laughter while working together. Though relatively unknown outside Chakhesang areas, *Nhaku* remains a vibrant part of their cultural identity and culinary tradition, reflecting both practical knowledge and the intangible values of cooperation, memory, and care for the environment.

The process of *Nhaku* demanded both skill and precision. The collector would carefully step into the water, leading with the left foot, followed by the right. The *tüthriüh*, basket was then positioned just above the muddy surface of the paddy field, ensuring it did not touch the bottom. One side of the basket was pressed against the right knee for stability, while the other rested lightly on the submerged mud. The collector would then reach forward, scoop in mud or hay straw, and skillfully sift through the contents to extract edible creatures. This process was repeated throughout the day, with each collection carefully examined. Once finished, snails were thoroughly cleaned, wrapped in leaves, and tied securely, while other collected creatures were placed in the *chebvü*.

NHAKU AS LIVELIHOOD

According to Frainer et.al (2020), the vast and valuable realm of Indigenous wisdom and traditional knowledge represents a largely unseen world that continues to thrive in many parts of the globe. It serves as a foundation for the well-being and everyday livelihoods of millions, especially in communities strongly rooted in their cultural heritage and native languages. In a similar light, the traditional practice of *Nhaku* has long served as an essential livelihood activity among the Chakhesang Nagas. Carried out primarily by women, this method of gathering small aquatic creatures such as snails, crabs, tadpoles, and water insects from paddy fields provided an important source of food and nutrition, particularly during and after the planting season. These water creatures, though often overlooked in mainstream diets, are rich in protein and other nutrients. In Chakhesang traditional knowledge, they were not only eaten as delicacies but also valued for their medicinal benefits, especially in postpartum care, digestion, and wound healing.

In rural Chakhesang households, *Nhaku* contributed directly to subsistence and health. Families who practiced *Nhaku* relied less on market food items and more on what the land and water naturally offered. This not only ensured seasonal food availability but also promoted a healthier, more organic diet. Furthermore, the practice helped reduce household expenditure, particularly for those with limited financial means, by providing a reliable supplement to rice and vegetables. *Nhaku* also played a quiet yet meaningful role in promoting sustainable living. Since it did not require modern tools or intensive farming methods, the practice remained low-impact and environmentally friendly. It encouraged respect for the natural rhythm of the land and water, as well as the responsible use of local resources. The seasonal nature of *Nhaku* meant that it worked in harmony with the cycles of rice cultivation, without disrupting ecological balance.

Importantly, *Nhaku* was closely tied to traditional farming and land use systems. The creatures were gathered from the very same paddy fields where families cultivated rice, showing how interconnected food, farming, and water management were in the Chakhesang Naga life. These fields were not only spaces of production but also sites of interaction between people and their environment. In this way, *Nhaku* reflects a holistic understanding of livelihood, where food, health, ecology, and culture come together in daily practice

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF *NHAKU*

According to Swiderska et al. (2022), Indigenous Peoples' food systems are deeply intertwined with their cultural traditions, reflecting social and cultural meanings, practices, and techniques. These systems encompass the entire food cycle, from seed selection and cultivation to harvesting, storage, processing, preparation, and cooking. Similarly, *Nhaku* holds significant cultural value, serving as an essential element of traditional food practices and heritage. Before the arrival of Christianity, *Nhaku* was closely linked to specific rituals and customs within the Chakhesang community. Traditionally, it was prohibited to engage in *Nhaku* or even place the *Nhaku* baskets in the paddy fields before the harvest. This restriction was tied to the belief that the land and its resources needed to rest and rejuvenate before they could be harvested. Once the harvest was complete, these restrictions were lifted, and the villagers would begin preparing the fields for the next cycle. This preparation included cutting hay, stacking it in layers, cleaning the wet paddy fields, and constructing shelters for aquatic creatures. After allowing the ecosystem a week to settle, the practice of *Nhaku* would begin. This practice was not only a means of gathering food but also a key cultural and spiritual activity that connected the community to their environment.

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF *NHAKU*

According to the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition (2009, p. 17), Food has played a crucial role in shaping early human communication, serving as a means of connection and social integration. Sharing food often symbolizes acceptance into a community, reinforcing cultural identity and fostering relationships among individuals. It acts as a medium through which people engage with one another, creating a sense of belonging. In the same light, the traditional festivals also highlight the social significance of food. For instance, among the Chakhesang Nagas, the Khiliinye festival was celebrated, usually in December. This festival was a significant cultural event where villagers engaged in sports activities, with each *khel* required to participate. Women from each *khel* formed peer groups and went for *Nhaku* together. If it rained, they would pluck leaves to shield their heads and baskets. Upon reaching a resting shed, they would sing a traditional song, "*Ne hi mo zo ha nu di zo le*" ("If it's not you, then I have no joy"), pairing up in twos before continuing their work. *Nhaku* was more than just a food-gathering activity; it was a social experience where women conversed, exchanged cooking tips, and shared stories, strengthening community bonds. Traditionally, *Nhaku* was also enjoyed alongside the traditional rice beer, making it an essential part of social gatherings that fostered unity and deepened friendships.

Women eagerly planned for *Nhaku* days in advance, looking forward to the joyful experience. It was a time of laughter and bonding as groups of women set out to different wet paddy fields, each taking a separate route. Since *Nhaku* was a vital food source, they approached the practice with great care and enthusiasm. A special tradition marked the event, whichever group returned home first would place fresh flowers and green leaves on the main road or pathways. This acted as a playful yet meaningful signal, informing the others that some had already completed their *Nhaku*. This simple gesture reinforced community bonds and added an element of excitement.

After collecting *Nhaku*, the women would gather to compare their catch. If one had collected less, the others would generously share, ensuring that everyone had an equal share. This spirit of generosity and communal care highlighted the deep social ties within the community. If it rained on their way back, they would pluck oak leaves and use them to cover their *Lechü* baskets, lifting the baskets over their heads as makeshift shelters.

THE NUTRITIONAL AND MEDICINAL SIGNIFICANCE OF *NHAKU*

According to Kuhnlein H, et al. (2006), Indigenous traditional food systems are naturally sustainable and nutritionally rich, relying on locally available crops, wild plants, and traditionally raised livestock. These diets emphasize biodiversity, seasonal eating, and organic farming, providing essential vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Foods like whole grains, legumes, fish, and medicinal plants support overall health and disease prevention. Traditional preparation methods also help retain nutrients. Preserving these food practices is vital for cultural identity, food security, and tackling modern health challenges. *Nhaku* as a traditional food also offers myriad nutritional significance. *Nhaku* was not only a source of food but also played a vital role in the health and well-being of the Chakhesang community. Rich in protein and essential nutrients, the edible creatures collected through *Nhaku* contributed to a balanced diet, particularly for those engaged in physically demanding agricultural work. The practice also reflected the community's deep understanding of natural food sources and their benefits.

One of the most valued aspects of *Nhaku* was its medicinal properties. *Nhaku* dish was commonly prepared for individuals recovering from surgery or injuries, especially when pork or other meats were not suitable for consumption. It was also considered beneficial for digestive health, with certain creatures believed to aid in the treatment of ulcers and other stomach ailments.

Nhaku was particularly important for postpartum recovery. Women who had recently given birth were provided with *Nhaku* dish to restore strength and promote healing. Additionally, it was believed to support faster recovery from fractures and broken bones, making it a valued part of traditional healing practices. Beyond its nutritional and medicinal benefits, *Nhaku* reinforced the Chakhesang people's reliance on natural remedies and their deep-rooted connection to their environment. The knowledge of these traditional healing foods was passed down through generations, ensuring the preservation of indigenous health practices.

CONCLUSION

Although *Nhaku* continues to be practiced in the rural Chakhesang communities, it remains largely undocumented. Many villagers still rely on *Nhaku* as an important source of nutrition, yet its cultural significance and indigenous value remain underrepresented in formal records. In contrast, urban areas reveal a growing disconnect, many young people are unfamiliar with the practice due to reduced access to paddy fields, which are essential for *Nhaku*. Urbanization has not only distanced individuals from the land but also disrupted traditional food systems. What was once a communal, self-sustaining activity has increasingly become commercialized, with aquatic creatures now sold in markets rather than freely gathered and shared among families and neighbors. This paper presents the following initiatives that can be taken up to preserve the cultural and nutritional significance of *Nhaku*.

Firstly, efforts should be made to document the practice through ethnographic studies and oral histories, recording the experiences and knowledge of elders. This documentation can help raise awareness of the tradition and its importance among the younger generation. In addition, organizing cultural programs and workshops that highlight the value of *Nhaku* can serve as a means to educate younger generations about the practice, fostering greater interest and participation.

It may also be stated that community involvement is key to revitalizing the practice of *Nhaku*. Local women and elders can be encouraged to share their knowledge and pass down the tradition to strengthen community bonds and ensure its continuity. Seasonal *Nhaku* events or festivals can also be organized, providing an opportunity for communal participation and celebration of the practice, further embedding it into the cultural fabric of the community. Additionally, eco-tourism initiatives could offer visitors the chance to experience *Nhaku* firsthand, making it a unique cultural and culinary attraction. Further, promoting the nutritional and medicinal benefits of *Nhaku* is seen as crucial. Research on its health benefits could help establish it as a valuable food source, particularly due to its medicinal properties, and local markets and restaurants could be encouraged to feature dishes made from *Nhaku* ingredients.

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