



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: A HOLISTIC STUDY OF THE LOTHAS

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Abstract: This paper presents a multifaceted exploration of the Lotha community in Wokha, digging into their relationship with the land, their social organization, the status of their language, and the genetic classification of the language. The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork, linguistic analysis, and genetic research. The geographical context section examines the unique geographical location of the Lothas in Wokha and investigates how the land shapes their way of life, cultural practices, and resource management. A close examination of the social organization of the Lothas uncovers the web of traditional leadership structures, kinship systems, and communal practices that define their social fabric. It explores the status of the Lotha language within the community, casting light on language choices in various contexts, from the home to public life, and addressing the challenges and opportunities for language preservation. Furthermore, genetic classification is explored, providing insights into the genetic heritage of the Lotha people and any existing genetic diversity within the community. Through a rigorous methodology that includes data collection, analysis, and interpretation, this study underscores the interplay between land, culture, language, and social organization within the Lotha community.

Keywords:- Lotha, Naga, Tibeto-Burman, language, society, culture. Social status

1. INTRODUCTION

The state of Nagaland, a region famed for its breathtaking mountainous natural beauty and for being home to a number of distinct tribes known as the Nagas lies in the North-Eastern part of India. On December 1st, 1963, Nagaland, the acknowledged homeland of the Nagas, became the 16th state in the Indian Republic. It is bordered by the states of Manipur on the south, Assam on the west, and Arunachal Pradesh on the north. With Myanmar, a neighboring nation, Nagaland shares international borders to the east. With a total size of 16,579 square kilometres, the state is located between 25°60' and 27°40' N latitude and 93°20' and 95°15' E longitude. The state is a home to 16 major tribes, namely, Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Kachari, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Tikhir, Sumi, Yimkiung, and Zeliang. It comprises 16 administrative districts- Chumoukedima, Dimapur, Kiphire, Kohima (State Capital), Longleng, Mokochung, Mon, Nuiland, Noklak, Peren, Phek, Shamator, Tuensang, Tseminyu, Wokha and Zunheboto. Each one of these tribes has their own distinctive cultural traits and distinct languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family, which made up one of the most diverse state among the North-Eastern states. Originally, the Nagas have no system of writing and instead, they follow an oral tradition. Hence, Roman script was adopted for writing scripts. English grew increasingly popular with the arrival of modern education, and in 1967 the Nagaland Assembly designated English as the official language and the primary medium of instruction in Nagaland. Due to the lack of a common contact language among the Naga tribes, Nagamese, a pidgin language once used by the

Nagas to connect with the nearby people of the plains, has gradually become the most extensively used market language (Baishya, 2003, p. 53-54).

1.1. Methodology

The methodology employed for this research study is qualitative in nature. The methods used include primary data as well as secondary data. The primary source of information for this study is derived from fieldwork, as Lotha culture relies heavily on oral traditions passed down through generations due to the absence of written records. This research primarily centers on the study of oral narratives, considering them as a fundamental source of insight. The oral narratives encompass various categories, including folk narratives (such as myths and folktales), meta-narratives (narratives about narratives), personal narratives, life experience narratives, and auto-ethnographies shared by informants during fieldwork. The study involves individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, spanning different age groups, including men, women, and children, who serve as the primary sources of information. In addition to oral narratives, the study also encompasses the material culture connected to the folk traditions of the Lotha-Nagas, which has been gathered from the homes of community members. Furthermore, various other folklore genres within the community have been systematically documented. Fieldwork was conducted in the vicinity of several villages, including Yikum, Wokha village. Doyang as well as in and around Wokha town and Wokha districts. In addition, writers who have worked on the culture and social dynamics of Lotha previously were also included as a secondary resource.

2. WOKHA: HOME TO THE LOTHAS

One of the sixteen districts in Nagaland, Wokha is a home to the people of Lotha tribe. The term Wokha has been derived from two words wo which means 'number of people' and kha which means 'count'. Thus, the term Wokha means 'counting the number of people. According to Lotha oral tradition, the tribe's ancestors migrated from a faraway place. When the ancestors eventually arrived at this location presently known as Wokha, they counted the populace to determine the precise number of their heads, and perhaps, the Lothas may have lost track of their true number during the protracted course of their movement, therefore, they may have gathered in one location and counted themselves. Therefore, they named their place Wokha.

The Lothas represents one of the major tribes in the state of Nagaland. Basically, the Lothas call themselves kyong which simply means 'men'. The origin of the word 'Lotha' is obscure and has been interpreted in several ways. Mozhui (2004, p.04) defines the word Lotha 'lo' as a sacrifice or an offering, and 'tha' as full or satisfactory. Lotha, therefore, refers to those who made complete sacrifices in order to appease the gods or who fully sacrificed to the satisfaction of the Gods. Kikon (1993, p. 05) offers a different interpretation, claiming that the name is derived from the Khuza language 'Latha', which means 'gone to a far-off region' or 'gone forward'. It maybe perhaps the British first visited the Khuzas and Angamis in the 1930s, and it is hypothesised that they may have derived the name Lotha from the Khuza term 'Latha'.

The following table below illustrates Wokha district at a glance:

Table 1: Wokha district at a glance (Census of India 2011)

Description	Year: 2011
Year of formation	1973
Population	1.66 lakhs
Male	84, 505
Female	81, 838
Area sq.km	1.682
population per sq.km	102
Sex ratio per 1000 males	968 females
Average literacy	87.69
Male	90.81
Female	84.48
Number of blocks	05
Altitude	1,313.69 meters
Latitude	26.1 ° N
Longitude	94.27 ° E
Temprature	Max: 32°C, Min: 2°C
Average rainfall	87.69

3. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF THE SPEAKERS

Although, Lotha is spoken throughout Nagaland, the majority of speakers are concentrated in Wokha district. It covers a total geographical area of 1,628 square kilometers which represents 9.82 percent of the total area of the State of Nagaland as shown in **Table 1**. Wokha district lies in the mid-western region of the state of Nagaland situated closely to Golaghat and Jorhat districts of Assam state. It is bordered to the north by Mokokchung district, to the east by Zunheboto district, to the south by Tseminyu and Kohima districts, and to the west by Assam Plains. The topography of Wokha district is characterized by a hilly area with numerous long ridges, mountains, and seasonal flowing streams. The district is divided into three hilly regions:-

- i. The upper range, also known as the Wokha circle with Wokha village, Longsa, Chukitong, Englan and Phiro circles. It is a lengthy chain of ranges that originated from the Kohima district's Rengma area and spans its northeastern region and gradually bends towards the east till it reaches river Doyang.
- ii. The Middle range, also known as the Sanis circle, with Pangti, Sungro, Lakhuti, Aitepyong, Sanis and Lotsu circles. It raises between the Wokha and Bhandari districts before merging with the Changkikong range in the Mokokchung region to the north.
- iii. The Lower Range, commonly referred to as the Bhandari Circle is made up of Baghty, Changpang, Tsori, Yimpang and Ralan circles that stretch from the Japukong Range in Mokokchung District to the Assam Plains in the northwest.

4. SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE LOTHAS

4.1. Dress and ornaments

In olden times, it was believed that both men and women wore minimal attire that was frequently adorned with lovely decorations. They wore clothing and jewellery that had symbolic meaning and served as crucial status indicators. The Lothas have unique traditional clothing for both men and women, like most of the other Naga tribes. The traditional male attire worn was røve, a long narrow length of sturdy cloth culminating in a broad flap, which was worn around the waist, while allowing the wide cloth strap to hang in front, between the legs. Some notable textile (shawls) worn by Lotha males included Phanghrüp-sü, Longpen-sü, Jümthe-sü, Etha-sü, Eshüm-sü, and rükyu-sü according to the number of "genna" the wearer performed. A social religious complex known as "Genna" that was observed in ancient times is no longer practiced, and the significance attached to each of these shawls progressively faded. The history of the other shawls is never or very rarely mentioned, with

the exception of the frequently worn Phangrhrüp-sü and Longpen-sü. The patterns and design of a man's shawl indicate number of social gennas carried out. For instance, a man who has not engaged in social gennas wears a sütüm, a piece of white cloth with dark blueish horizontal stripes. He dons a phangrüp (a dark crimson or red shawl with black and white stripes) when performing the first genna. Following multiple gennas, a man dons longpen sü. A man of high social status usually dons the most expensive shawl, known as rükyu sü.

Women wear serüm, a skirt that is tucked in on one side of the hip and coiled around the waist. Serüm might be decorated or unadorned. Before getting married, young girls wear lorö serüm; after getting married, they wear konrö serüm. Along with the serüm the women folk don shawls like etsok sü or obveramve, tepka sü, etc. Women typically sport necklace, bracelet, armband, and earrings, brass bracelets and necklaces made of beads and shells. Feathers and coloured wool are used to make earrings for both men and women. In addition, men wear armbands at the elbows and wristbands at the wrists called khoro and khe-khüp, while women wear necklaces made of plaintain seeds and large conch shell called laküp. The Lotha women also wear several small flat brass bracelets (rumbüm) and thick round pewter armbands (tivü), both of which are traditional jewellery. Besides that the entire Lotha warrior outfit, which includes a wig (tengkho), king-tail crow's feathers (wotsü-emhi), hornbill's tail feathers (rüjüng-emhi), cotton wool pads, sash (rhutsen), small basket attached with human hair (tssükyip), and leg guard (jorü), is worn by Lotha men.

At present complete traditional costume is often reserved for use exclusively during Tokhu Emong festival or traditional/formal ceremonies. Owing to diversification and market exposure, traditional designs are increasingly fused with modern designs. A person can wear anything based on accessibility and availability, and traditional attire and ornamentation are no longer significant status indicators.

4.2. Festival

Nagaland is tagged as the 'Land of Festivals' where numerous Naga tribes celebrate variety of festivals throughout the year, most of them centred on their ways of life and means of subsistence. Festivals are occasions for sharing and exchanging gifts to one another. It is a time for establishing new ties, rekindling old ones, and getting to know one's own family. During these festivals, age-old values like generosity, hospitality, elegance, bravery, friendship, and loyalty are passed along. Lothas are renowned for their vibrant dances and music. Similar to other Naga tribes, these traditional aspects are displayed in their festivals and celebrations, which are largely focused on agriculture, the foundation of their primary income. The Naga people are known for their vivid dances and songs that celebrate the valour of legendary folk heroes and old warriors. They also like gospel hymns with traditional melodies and love songs that immortalise tragic love stories. The many tribes celebrate festivals all year long, when villages are at their liveliest (Lanunungang & Ovung, 2012, p. 14)

The main festival of the Lothas is Thokvu Emong; Tokhu, which means 'feast' and Emong, which means 'rest' or 'holiday', is a harvest festival among the Lothas. Every year, the festival is observed in November beginning on the first and lasting until the seventh day of the month. The event, which commemorates the year's bountiful harvest, is celebrated at the conclusion of the agricultural cycle, or after the harvest. It is an occasion to give thanks to God for the abundant harvest and his blessings throughout the year. In addition, it is an occasion for communities to forgive grievances from the past, establish new friendships, and exchange gifts. When the harvest is finally completed, the people take a break from their sweltering labours and begin to enjoy the results of their toil. The event is known for its vibrant dances, traditional sports, folklore, music, feasting, drinking of soko (rice beer), and merry-making. The preparation and celebration of the festival involve the entire village big or small. During this time, the village gates are renovated, the wells are cleansed and purified, the roads are swept, and the houses are decked out, proudly exhibiting their awards and accomplishments. Following the Tokhu Emong celebration, new homes are built, old ones are renovated, Chumpo, the boys' dormitory are fixed, weddings are held, and new cultivation is considered. The essence of this festival is that the event ushers in a new life that can be seen as the start of a new year in its broadest sense by emphasising that everything old is gone and that everything is now new. Lastly, People dress in their finest traditional attire and participate in communal feasts, traditional dances, and music to mark the occasion.

4.3. Head-hunting era

The Lothas engaged in head-hunting as did all other Naga tribes. The Nagas generally engaged in head hunting because they held the belief that the heads of defeated foes brought wealth to the village through a direct correlation with the productivity of the crops (Furer-Haimendorf, 1946.p, 95). During the head-hunting era the person who could bring more heads from the enemy villages was publicly praised. They were treated with dignity, respect, and prominence in society. They were revered because they were essential to the village's existence and reputation. (Ruivah, 1993.p, 190). The strongest person in the community was thought to be the one who could kill an enemy inside the adversary's village since he could do so when the village was under constant surveillance. Children and women were not exempt from head hunting. In fact, a woman's head was regarded as the most prized trophy. There were several causes behind this. The villagers always gave women the best protection possible, thus taking a woman's head required breaking through the enemy's ranks with all the risks that entailed. Perhaps there was also a goal to eliminate the enemy's female population in order to lessen their population. The demand for women's hair that was utilized for ornamentation may be yet another factor (Singh, 1972, p. 37). The Lothas believed that any woman whose husband had gone on a raid should remain chaste and should not weave since doing so would lead the husband's feet to become entangled in creepers, putting him at risk of being captured and slain by the enemy. The Menkitong, the village's sacred tree, was used to hang the heads. The practice of head-hunting significantly influenced how a village's residents lived. The villagers walked to the fields in groups so they might be prepared to fight any sudden threat, and some people were assigned to guard duty. The village was always well protected, women and children were watched after, and the inhabitants were always vigilant. Head-hunting among the Lothas came to an end in the 1880s with the establishment of the British rule in the region.

4.4. Marriage and Divorce

The Lothas follow patriarchal form of marriage and maintain nuclear families. However, women in the community were not regarded as inferior residents. There wasn't any prejudice against women. Given that they performed equally well in both physical and domestic work, Lotha women and men in society were practically on same footing. Most of the time, clan exogamy is tightly upheld, meaning that a Lotha cannot marry someone from his or her own clan, despite the fact that in some Southern Lotha villages, marriage between members of different kindred of the same clan is permitted. Although there are occasional occurrences of polygamy, monogamy is the most prevalent type of marriage.

Earlier marriages are arranged through discussion. When a man wants to marry a certain woman of his choice, a matchmaker, who is typically the mother of the groom, informs the girl's parents. If the girl's parents approve the proposal, the matchmaker receives a rice beer. The groom then makes a predetermined trip to the girl's residence with an elderly man and friends, where a priest or an elderly man offers a prayer for the upcoming marriage. After a feast and rice beer are drunk, the groom must work for his father-in-law for around a year as an indirect bride price and to allow the girl's parents to assess the boy's potentiality, character, and talent. Following the conclusion of the service commitment, a legal marriage follows. With the spread of Christianity, the tradition of getting married after serving has been abandoned. Now, an engagement service is conducted to fix the marriage date and thus marriage ceremony takes place either in the church or in some particular place, performed by the church pastors or priest, followed by a marriage feast.

Although there is no practice of the dowry system, girls are frequently given presents of various kinds. After his marriage, the youngest son may continue to live with his parents and receive the substantial share of the father's estate. However, the brothers equally split the land. The daughter receives no land portion and the youngest son keeps the family home, but she does receive gifts in the form of money, clothing, and ornaments upon her marriage. In the absence of the son or daughter, the property passes to the closest male kin.

Among the Lothas, there is no ceremony associated with divorce, and the legal process is not shielded. In olden day's adultery, misconduct, or the wife's infertility (sometimes) may be the primary causes of the divorce, and as a result, divorce cases may involve the return of the bride price. The children after the divorce often stay with the father. Infants, however, are cared for by the mother.

4.5. Food and drinks

The staple food of the population is rice. The majority of households eat three times a day, in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Their diet consists of meat from numerous domestic, wild, and bird species as well as fish (fresh and dried), bees, cultivated plants, bamboo shoots, and countless amounts of jungle leaves and berries. However, not all foods are ingested, and some foods are considered taboo. They still hold on to the old notion that eating foods considered to be unlucky will result in bad luck or bad omen for the person. Such culinary items are specifically off-limits to children. Their preferred beverage is rice beer, also known as soko. In the past, it was frequently used during festive occasions like weddings and festivals, as well as before and after meals. However, at the moment, it is categorically forbidden to utilise it during community events.

4.6. Religion

The Lothas are traditionally animists who consider God or potsow to be a supernatural entity, where material gain is valued above spiritual gain. In order to maintain their good favour with a variety of spirits, people were obligated to offer sacrifices to them. They hold that the spirit might withhold good fortune and turn violent if sufficient sacrifices were not given in a timely manner. Among them, the common spirits known to them are ronsyu (the harvest spirit), jüpvuo (the water spirit), sükhyingo (the jungle spirit), tsüngrham (the bad spirit), and longkomvü (dwarfs).

The harvest spirit known as Ronsyu is in charge of blessing or forbidding a plentiful crop. For this reason, animal sacrifices were frequently offered to Ronsyu in an effort to win his favour and therefore benefit the harvests. According to the mood, the water spirit Jüpvuo can either bless or hinder a fisherman from bringing in a good catch. When in a good mood, Sükhyingo, who is in charge of all the animals and birds in the jungle, may grant hunters a successful hunt. Additionally, the populace holds that sükhyingo exists in all living things, including humans and animals. Tsüngrham, on the other hand, is evil and takes pleasure in causing human suffering through disease and other misfortune. The spirit known as a longkumvü lives in the jungle and is frequently encountered by people. Longkumvü can be seen and heard, unlike other spirits that are invisible to the human eye. The Lothas now follow Christianity and revere one God rather than a pantheon of spirits. Christianity, in contrast to animistic faiths, emphasizes spiritual advancement.

4.7. Economy

As seen in Thong (2012, p. 12), every village in the Naga nation was a sovereign state during the head-hunting era. Each community was essentially independent and each village had enough agricultural land to maintain its inhabitants. Each settlement had animals for use as food and a sizable area of woodland for gathering supplies including food, building materials, and firewood. It also served as a hunting place for them. The villagers were not compelled to relocate to another community in order to survive. The communities of Lotha also experienced this. The Lothas have always been diligent people. Despite being adept hunters and fishers, their primary occupations were farming and animal husbandry.

The Lothas' primary economic resources are their forested lands and bodies of water. People benefited from the Doyang River's abundant fish supply. The Lothas were skilled swimmers and avid fisherman. Additionally, they produce dug-out boats, which they utilise on the Doyang river, making them the sole tribe in the Naga Hills as seen in Ganguli (1984, p. 82). Any single length of the river's fishing regulations was determined by regional custom. They are typically owned by one village or a small group of communities, and these villages zealously defend their precious privileges.

The region's vegetation is interesting since it has a lot of edible wild plants and fruits. Wild edible plants were much more prevalent than cultivated veggies and foraging vegetables and mushrooms from the wild is practised widely. To ensure that the food supply is preserved even if the village is burned, husked rice, the main staple food, is maintained in the oson (granary) outside the settlement. Dogs, cows, pigs, Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*), fowls, and other animals were tamed for use in food production and trade. With the Assamese plainmen, there were trades of items like salt, dried fish, cotton, ginger, etc. Following the harvest, women worked on weaving for the entire family while men worked on bamboo, cane, blacksmith, wooden projects, etc.

Because Lotha region is hilly, jhum cultivation, or shifting cultivation, was the most popular form of agriculture. Jhum cultivation involves cutting down trees to make room for growing a variety of crops side by side on the same plot of ground. After some years of inactivity, the area is then cultivated once more. The population had enough grains to feed themselves. People have been growing rice, maize, beans, peas, yams, brinjal, chilli, pumpkin, ginger, tomatoes, bitter-gourd, and varieties of fruits and vegetables etc. since ancient times. The most significant crop farmed is rice, which is the tribe's main source of nutrition. The state government currently discourages Jhum growing due to its detrimental effects on the environment. Terrace cultivation is also practised throughout the district, but sparingly, especially in the low-lying parts. In the terrace field, rice is specifically grown, which needs a constant supply of water. Some individuals also work in spinning, weaving, ceramics, basket making, and wood carving in addition to agriculture. However in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift toward commercial production, with agricultural activity shifting to products including rubber, oilseeds, sugarcane, coffee, and other horticulture crops.

Many educated individuals are currently employed in white collar positions in various private and public offices. Due to the recent sharp rise in the number of educated youth who are unemployed, the state government has opened up a number of channels and provided training to help these youth develop the necessary entrepreneurship skills.

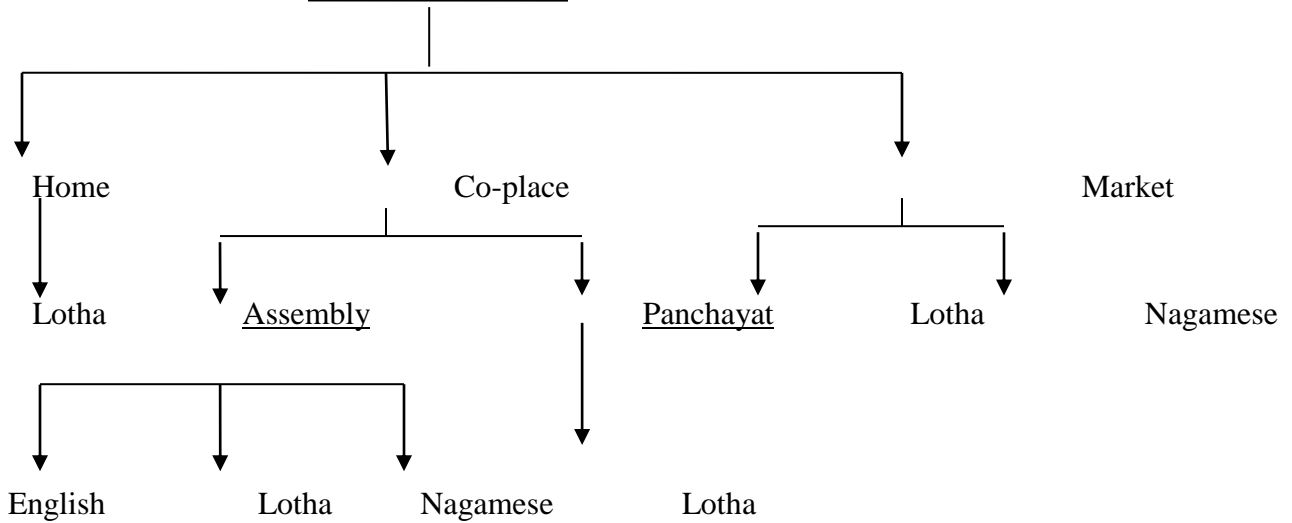
5. Language status and language choice

Lotha is one of the major languages spoken in Nagaland. The Lothas follow an oral tradition, and the information and history are passed down orally through the stories, legends, and songs from one generation to another. The Naga script which is claimed to have been written on dried animal skin is believed to have been used by the Lothas in the past and carried by their ancestors throughout the time of their migration. However it is believed that, eventually a dog ate this script because it wasn't maintained in a secure environment. Tradition has it that all of the elderly individuals who had written them had passed away at that point, and because of memory loss, the script could not be written anymore (Ghosh 1979, p. 31). Finally, with the arrival of the American Baptist missionaries towards the end of the 19th century, the Roman script was introduced as a writing system to the Lothas.

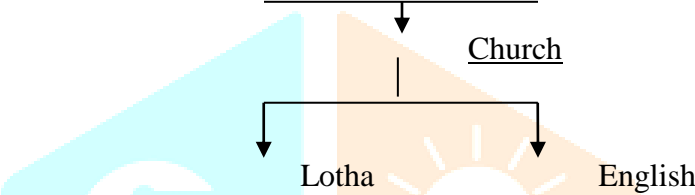
The language is taught up to the secondary level in schools. Primary grammar book, short stories, folk tales, hymnal books, text books of different kinds, Bible (which is translated into Lotha) and dictionaries compiled by the missionaries are available in the written form. Lotha is used in the public meetings, churches, sermons, festivals and rites and rituals of all kind.

The various possible domains associated with language choice are societal domains, religious domains, cultural domains and educational domains. The choice of language at home among the Lothas is Lotha, however in case of mixed marriages or marriages among other tribes or communities, Nagamese or English is used respectively. In public meetings and gatherings like the assembly and the panchayat or Hoho Lotha and English (Nagamese if required) is used. In the religious domain, that is, the church, both Lotha and English are used, whereas in market places both Lotha and Nagamese are used. In the cultural domains like rites and rituals and festivals Lotha is used solely. In the educational domains, both Lotha and English is used except in the college level and university level which is studied outside the Lotha area. The given diagram below shows the choice of language in different domains:

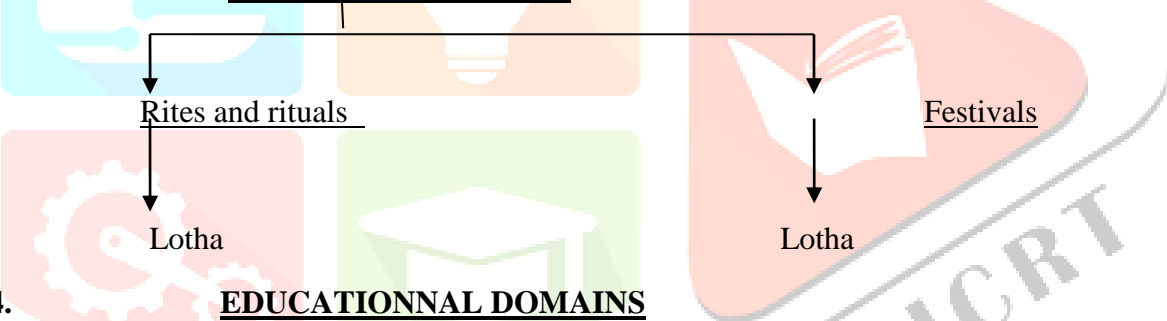
1. SOCIETAL DOMAINS



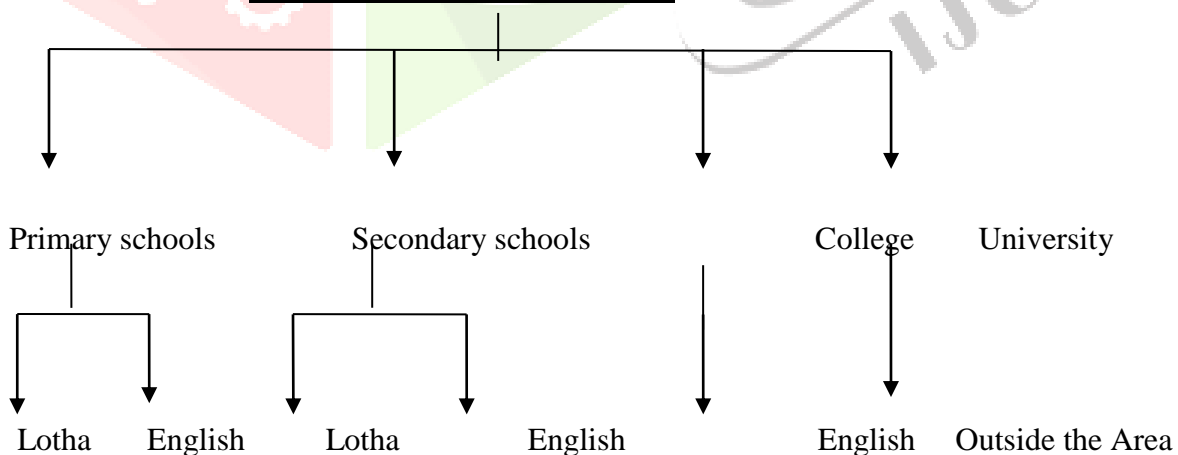
2. RELIGIOUS DOMAINS



3. CULTURAL DOMAINS



4. EDUCATIONNAL DOMAINS



5. Genetic Classification of Lotha

As it is often known in India, "Northeast India" or "(the) northeast" refers to the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. Apart from Tibeto-Burman, Northeast India has historically been home to three major language families: Tai-Kadai (Southwestern Tai, three to four variants), Indo-European (mostly Eastern Indo-Aryan, two to four languages), and Austroasiatic (Khasians). The diversity of the ethnolinguistic groups in Nagaland is very high. Although the majority of the population in this state is conceptually referred to as "Naga" in a very broad ethno-politico-linguistic sense, they speak a number of languages from perhaps four different subgroups of Tibeto-Burman (Coupe 2010) as quoted

in Post and Burling (2017, p. 215). They include, among many others, Ao, Angami, Lotha, Kheza, Chokri, Sumi, etc.

The Tibeto-Burman language family has undergone numerous efforts to include the Naga group of languages. Numerous researchers have explored the variations in these languages' categories proposed by various linguists. The first notable research on the categorization of Tibeto-Burman languages, by Grierson and Konow (1903), covered the general traits of the family and its main subgroups. Grierson (1903) conducted extensive surveys that included not just Tibeto-Burman languages but also other linguistic families. Shafer (1966) sought to build his categorization of Tibeto-Burman languages on the basis of phonological comparison and reconstruction in a number of works on Sino-Tibetan. Additionally, a number of linguists, including Benedict (1972), Matisoff (1978), Bradley (2002), Burling (2003), and many others, have put a great deal of effort into classifying Tibeto-Burman languages.

Brandreth (1878, p. 21-31) proposed one of the earliest genetic classifications of the Central Naga languages, classifying Lotha with several Mongsen and Chungli Ao dialects in his "Class XII". Damant (1880, p. 246) grouped Lotha with Ao including sumi where he referred to this group as 'Central Naga family'. Later in the Linguistics Survey of India (1899–1900; LSI III.II: 290), Sumi is acknowledged as having a closer affinity with Angami, and the Central Naga group as comprising the Ao dialects, Lotha, Sangtam and Yimchungru. Marrison (1967, p. 263) in his typological study of the languages of Nagaland grouped the Ao dialects with Sangtam in "Type B-1" whereas Lotha and Yimchungrü are grouped with Ntenyi and Meluri in "Type B-2".

Grierson (1903, p. 193) placed Lotha in the Central group of the Naga languages within Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan language family. He classified the Naga languages into three groups:

- a) Western Naga group: Angami (Tenyidie), Chokri, Khezha, Sema and Rengma.
- b) Central Naga group: Ao, **Lotha**, Sangtam and Yimchungru.
- c) Eastern Naga group: Konyak and Chang languages.

As quoted in Thurgood and LaPolla (2016, p. 184), Burling (2006) placed Lotha with the Ao Group, which is placed under 'Central' by Grierson (1903) and under 'Northern' by Shafer (1955). Burling (2006, p. 175-184) mentions that the states along the Myanmar border comprise the linguistically most heterogeneous region of North-Eastern India. He classified the Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeast India into three groups, namely, the Central Area comprising Bodo-Konyak Jingphaw languages, the Northern Area comprising the languages spoken in Arunachal Pradesh, and the Eastern Border comprising the Kuki-Chin-Naga languages.

Burling (2003, p. 182) claimed that the states along the Myanmar border comprise the linguistically most heterogeneous region of Northeastern India. According to him, despite the best efforts of Marrison (1967) and French (1983), the languages of the so-called "Naga" people are extremely difficult to understand, and there may be no Tibeto-Burman region anywhere with such a wide variety of languages. Some linguists have hypothesized that the current diversity of a language family's languages can be used to identify the initial centre from which it expanded. Nagaland and the areas bordering it would be a suitable candidate for the Sino-Tibetan homeland if this generalization were true. About the eastern region, only two things are certain. First off, Jinghpaw and Bodo-Koch are both connected to the Konyak group in the northeast. Second, a group in the south made up of the Mizo, Kuki, and Chin is closely connected. There is a great deal of variation and uncertainty between these geographic extremes.

Despite the tremendous diversity of the "Naga" languages, numerous classification attempts have come to similar, though not exactly identical, findings. Leaving out classifications that are nothing more than remakes, the following three should be treated seriously according to Burling (2006, p. 182): The Linguistic Survey of India (Vol. III, Part III, Grierson 1904), Shafer (1955), and Marrison (1967). Geoffrey Marrison's collection of a tremendous amount of information on the "Naga" languages was a great benefit to Tibeto-Burmanists. He provides a classification that is more typological than genetic and is based more on phonological, morphological, and syntactic comparisons than on lexical ones. However, he comes to groupings that are very similar to Burling's assessment as well as those made previously by the LSI (Linguistics Survey of India) and Shafer. Without a doubt, this explains why his classification aligns more closely with Shafer's than Marrison's. Lexical comparison is particularly challenging for the two dozen or more 'Naga' languages, though, as they appear almost perversely different, as if the inhabitants had spent many years purposefully altering their languages to distinguish themselves from their neighbors. A word that is frequently used in the north can go lost in Nagaland's core region before reappearing in the south. Another will be restricted to a small number of nearby languages

that otherwise seem to have little in common, and a third will be scattered around the world in random areas. The fact that most of the languages spoken close to the Myanmar border are also spoken on the other side adds another layer of complexity. Beyond them, there are still more people who call themselves "Naga," but whose languages are not at all spoken in India. It will be impossible to comprehend the "Naga" languages completely until these languages of Myanmar are taken into account. For all these reasons Burling (2006, p. 182) claims that "in the face of this extraordinary diversity, any attempt at classification must be extremely tentative".

Burling (2006, p. 182-183) classified the Naga Languages spoken in the Eastern Border Area into four groups:

- a) The Ao group
- b) Angami-Pochuri group
- c) Zeme group
- d) Tangkhul group

Burling (2006, p. 184) placed Lotha under Ao group which is represented as follows:

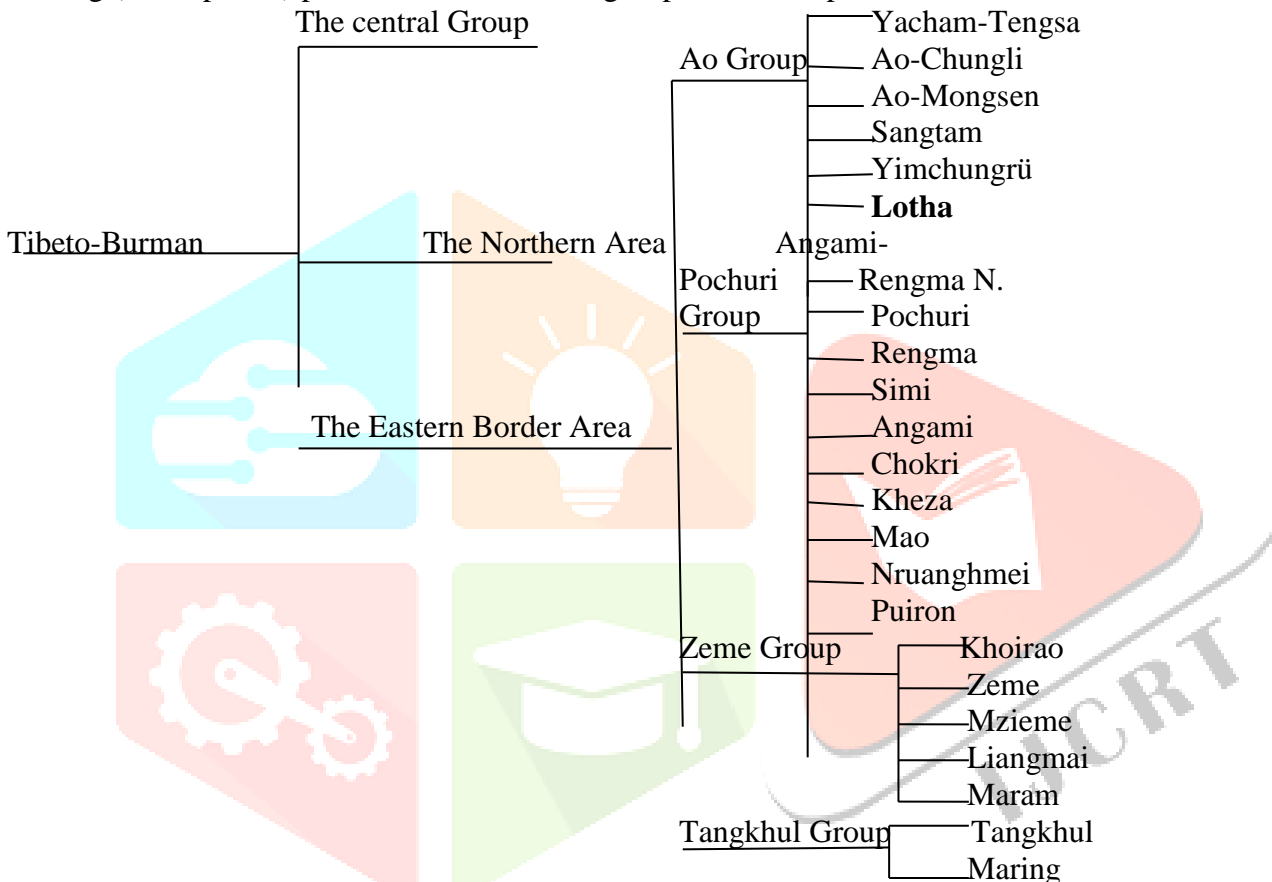


Figure 1: Genetic Classification of Lotha based on Burling (2006, p. 184)

Conclusion and summary

The linguistic and cultural landscape of the Lotha tribe, nestled within the vibrant mosaic of Nagaland, offers a fascinating insight into the rich tapestry of the Naga people. The Lothas, who call themselves "kyong," have a unique history and heritage, which is woven into their language, customs, and traditions. The etymology of the name "Wokha" itself reflects the tribe's historical journey, as it signifies the act of counting their people upon arrival in their present homeland. This migration and settlement, along with their distinctive cultural practices, have contributed to the identity of the Lothas within the broader Naga community.

The Lothas' traditional clothing, jewellery, and unique shawls not only serve as adornments but also convey their social status and cultural significance. These elements have evolved over time but remain an essential part of their identity, especially during festivals like Thokvu Emong, the harvest festival that celebrates their agricultural heritage.

The historical practice of head-hunting, while intriguing, is a testament to the complex social dynamics of the past. It underscores the importance of individuals who could bring heads as trophies, reflecting their significance in the community. Fortunately, the era of head-hunting came to an end with the advent of British rule.

Marriage and family structures among the Lothas reflect a patriarchal system, yet women are not considered inferior and have traditionally played vital roles within their society. The economic foundation of the Lothas primarily relies on agriculture, with rice as the staple food, supplemented by hunting, fishing, and gathering from the rich natural resources of their hilly region.

Language, as a central element of their culture, has undergone an interesting historical evolution. From their traditional oral tradition and the lost Naga script to the introduction of the Roman script by American Baptist missionaries, the Lotha language remains a vital part of their identity. Today, it is taught in schools and continues to be used in various domains of their lives, including religious and cultural practices.

The diverse linguistic landscape of Nagaland, with its numerous Naga tribes and languages, presents a complex and challenging area for classification. Various scholars have attempted to categorize these languages, but the vast diversity among them remains a significant obstacle.

In summary, the Lothas of Wokha District offer a compelling case study of the interplay between language, culture, and history. Their unique traditions, practices, and language contribute to the rich tapestry of Nagaland's diverse indigenous communities, highlighting the need for further scholarly exploration and appreciation of this remarkable region.

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