



"Voices of Tradition: Oral Histories and Rituals of the *Khilünyie* (Fish Festival) in the Chakhesang Naga Society"

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Abstract

This paper aims to document and preserve the rich cultural heritage of the Chakhesang Nagas by focusing on the Khilünyie Festival, also known as the Fish Festival. It emphasizes the indispensable role of oral tradition as the primary source of heritage and history for the Chakhesang Naga people. Festivals serve as a significant source of oral tradition, highlighting the deep-rooted traditions of the community. Through documentation, this paper unveils the cultural richness inherent in the Khilünyie festival while also highlighting the need to preserve and promote oral tradition.

Key Words: *Khilünyie* Festival, Chakhesang Nagas, Oral Tradition

Introduction

The Chakhesang Nagas, residing in the Phek district of Nagaland, are a prominent tribe deeply rooted in a land rich with traditions and heritage. For generations, this community has thrived amidst a tapestry of indigenous traditions, folklore, and rituals, each thread weaving a vibrant narrative of cultural resilience and identity. The region is steeped in history, with indigenous traditions, folklore, and rituals forming the backbone of Chakhesang society. These traditions are integral to their identity and closely tied to their agrarian lifestyle, encompassing rituals related to agriculture and a profound connection to the natural world (Kapfo, 2023). The Chakhesangs cultivate a variety of crops such as rice, millet, job's tears, maize, pumpkin, gourd, yam, chili, and ginger. Their everyday diet includes locally prepared bamboo shoots, fermented soybeans, rice tea, maize tea, and a host of other items. The Chakhesang people follow a patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal family system (Khamu and Langstieh, 2015), which further highlights the importance of tradition in their social structure. Known as the "*land of traditions*," Phek district is a testament to the enduring cultural practices and beliefs of the Chakhesang people. Within the backdrop of this rich cultural tradition of the Chakhesang Nagas, this paper seeks to celebrate and promote the rich voices of tradition through the documentation of the *Khilünyie* festival also known as the Fish Festival.

Oral Tradition and the need for Documentation

Oral tradition is a cornerstone of cultural preservation, particularly among tribal communities like the Naga people. It serves as a channel for passing down knowledge, customs, and beliefs through spoken narratives. Suokhrie (2024) aptly notes that these oral traditions not only connect individuals to their cultural roots but also play a vital role in identity formation and community cohesion. Similarly, Mor and Kezo (2023)

highlight that oral traditions have been the primary means for the Nagas to preserve and transmit their values and culture across generations.

However, with modern influences encroaching and generational shifts occurring, there is a critical need to document these oral traditions. This documentation serves to safeguard invaluable cultural practices, stories, and rituals from being lost over time. As Krocha (Morung Express, 2023) emphasizes, our traditional homes and villages are rich with untold stories that deserve documentation for posterity.

This paper focuses on the *Khilünyie* festival, a significant cultural event celebrated by the Chakhesang Naga community in Nagaland. Its primary objective is to document and explore the oral traditions, rituals, and cultural significance embedded within this festival. By doing so, it emphasizes the importance of oral documentation in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. Through scholarly exploration, these oral traditions can be preserved, studied, and shared with future generations, contributing to a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural practices.

Introduction to the *Khilünyie* festival (Fish festival)

The *Khilünyie*, also known as the Fish Festival or *Fünyie*, is an ancient celebration deeply rooted in the traditions of the Chakhesang people. This festival, observed right after the paddy harvest during the month of *Ziephie* (November), holds a special significance in the cultural calendar of the community. Specifically celebrated between the 10th to 20th of November each year, after the culmination of the paddy harvest, *Khilünyie* is a time-honored occasion dedicated to invoking divine blessings for a bountiful and sustainable summer season.

Central to the festival's customs is the symbolic importance attributed to fish. According to Vadeo, (Morung Express, 2024), “Traditionally, fish is believed to signify money and wealth. Fish is regarded to be clean and holy as it lives in water. It is also believed that water signifies richness. Thus, partaking fish with the first grain of the new harvest is believed to bring/beget good fortunes”. The act of partaking in fish alongside the first grains of the new harvest carries profound meaning. It is believed to usher in good fortunes and ensure the judicious utilization of the crops gathered, thereby ensuring sustenance and abundance for the community. Through the celebration of *Khilünyie*, the Chakhesang people express their reverence for nature's bounty and their aspirations for a harmonious and fruitful existence.

Documentation of the *Khilünyie* Festival Rituals

The documentation process for this study centered on Porba Village, a pivotal Chakhesang Naga Village that places significant emphasis on the *Khilünyie* Festival. Over a period of three months, oral interviews were conducted with esteemed elders from Porba Village to gather profound insights into the cultural significance of the *Khilünyie* Festival. The methodology employed focused on engaging knowledgeable elders who possess a deep understanding of the festival's traditions and rituals. By utilizing audio recordings, the study ensured precise capture of the elders' narratives, facilitating comprehensive analysis and interpretation during the transcription phase. The subsequent sections offer a comprehensive overview of the *Khilünyie* Festival, synthesized and derived from the documentation process.

***Khikro*- The first day of the festival**

On the initial day of the festival, known as *Khikro*, preparations commence in earnest. This term, derived from the act of dropping paddy grains into barns, signifies the beginning of the festivity. Typically, the matriarch of the family undertakes the task of gathering these grains manually from the remnants left in the paddy fields. In the evening, she ceremoniously deposits a handful of paddy into each barn, accompanied by a heartfelt invocation: “*A lhacülhale hako bu cü pepoupelou, kepoukedei chiücie,*” which translates to “Lord, bless the harvested paddy, ensuring its multiplication.”

On *Khikro*, all villagers go to their paddy fields to catch fish. Any fish caught, except for the dead ones, are not allowed to be brought into the village that day. Instead, the live fish are kept at the outskirts of the village near the gates. These fish are then collected the next day.

In the early morning of *Khikro*, before sunrise, all brides-to-be are married off and go to their husband's home, carrying their bamboo baskets. In the evening, the groom's parents decide which barns will be given to the couple. The groom's parents open the covers of the barns and say to the bride, "You will be the steward of these barns." The bride then takes some paddy in her hand and drops a few grains into each of the designated barns, symbolizing that they now belong to the newlyweds.

***Khilü*- The second day of the festival**

The second day of the festival is called *Khilü*. On the morning of *Khilü*, the mother takes a few paddy grains from each barn, pounds them, and cooks them with a little water and salt. As she does this, she recites a blessing: "Lord, bless my belongings this year." She then places the cooked rice at the base of the foremost post of the house. All these rituals must be completed before sunrise.

On the morning of *Khilü*, everyone retrieves the fish they had stored behind the village gates the previous day. Before entering their homes, they share the fish with the poor and needy. Once the fish is brought inside, it becomes taboo to give it to anyone else. The fish is then cooked and enjoyed in a feast, marking the first meal of the new paddy with the fish collected that morning. They consume the cooked fish over the next two days. Any leftovers after this period are buried at the base of the foremost post of the house. This practice ensures that everyone in the community is treated equally.

***Vatü*-The third day of the festival**

The third day is called *Vatü*, a day dedicated to performing a ritual focused on the judicious consumption of one's harvest. On *Vatü*, people eat only sparingly. It is a day of rest and prayer, where no work is done. The community prays for God's blessings upon the paddy and the food they have harvested, ensuring that their resources are used wisely and sustainably.

***Meve*- The fourth day of the festival**

The fourth day is called *Meve*. *Meve* is an act of reconciliation with wildfire, and on this day, it is strictly taboo to make any smoke. This ritual symbolizes an act of worship and a plea to nature for the protection of property from destruction caused by wildfires. It reflects the community's respect for nature and their commitment to preventing such disasters.

***Utheve*- The fifth day of the festival**

The fifth day is called *Utheve*. This ritual represents an act of reconciliation with the formidable Tiger (*Uthe*), revered in folk beliefs as the great big brother of man. Traditionally, the Chakhesang people believe that their ancestors had a fraternal bond with tigers. This ritual originated because, in the days of their forefathers, tigers occasionally attacked or killed cattle and sometimes even humans. To this day, tigers are considered as big brothers of man in Chakhesang folklore.

***Gaphüh Chieswüh*- The last day of the festival**

The final day of the festival is known as *Gaphüh Chieswüh*. On this day, everyone ventures into the jungle to gather thatch, which serves as the primary material for building roofs. In the Chakhesang community, houses are constructed using thatch exclusively, and during *Gaphüh Chieswüh*, it is a tradition for each individual to collect thatch for their own use.

Khilünyie holds dual significance as both a festival and a time for annual rituals. As part of this tradition, women refrain from consuming anything except rice beer served in *Theü*, a cup crafted from banana leaf. The festival, also known as the Fish Festival, is distinguished by its exclusive celebration of fish. Steeped in tradition, *Khilünyie* marks a time of renewal and serves as a symbolic New Year festival.

While the original context of the festival's rituals may have shifted over time, the villagers continue to honor their forefathers' traditions by observing *Khilünyie*. This enduring adherence to ancestral customs ensures that the festival retains its cultural vibrancy and significance. Consequently, even those not residing in the village eagerly anticipate joining the festivities each year, signifying the festival's enduring appeal and communal spirit.

Cultural Significance of the *Khilünyie* Festival

The *Khilünyie* festival captures the rich cultural heritage of the Chakhesang Naga community through its symbolic rituals and deep-rooted traditions. *Khilünyie's* significance as the Fish Festival highlights the cultural significance attached to fish within the Chakhesang community. Fish, traditionally seen as symbols of prosperity and abundance, are central to the festival's culinary offerings and rituals. This emphasis on fish highlights the community's close connection to nature and its bounty.

The festival's rituals, such as refraining from consuming anything except rice beer and using *Theü* cups made from banana leaves, showcase the meticulous observance of traditional practices. These rituals not only reflect the community's adherence to ancestral customs but also serve as reminders of the cultural identity and values of the Chakhesang Nagas. *Khilünyie's* association with new beginnings and the New Year signifies a sense of renewal and hope within the community. The festival acts as a time for reflection, gratitude, and seeking blessings for prosperity and growth in the coming year.

The festival's communal nature, where everyone comes together to celebrate and partake in rituals, fosters a sense of unity and solidarity among the Chakhesang people. It becomes a platform for social bonding, sharing stories, and passing down cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. Despite modern influences, the continued observance of *Khilünyie's* traditional rituals highlights the commitment to preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Chakhesang Nagas. This spirit in upholding age-old customs reflects the enduring strength of Chakhesang cultural identity and heritage.

Conclusion

The *Khilünyie* festival stands as a demonstration to the rich cultural heritage of the Chakhesang Naga society. Through its exclusive celebration of fish, meticulous rituals, and symbolic significance as a time of renewal and new beginnings, *Khilünyie* embodies the spirit, values, and identity of the Chakhesang community. The festival's enduring appeal, rooted in age-old customs, serves as a testament to the rich cultural tradition of the Chakhesang Nagas. The documentation of the *Khilünyie* festival has been an attempt at celebrating the rich cultural heritage and tradition of the Chakhesang Nagas while also serving the purpose of preserving and promoting the dying oral traditions propelled by the fast paced modernization.

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