



Voices from the *Releiki*: A Study of Female Dormitory Institutions of the Zeme Nagas

Yihingle Ndong¹

Collecting stories of moments from the past when young Naga women used to meet and socialize is not often talked about in oral traditions. This short essay briefly gives a glimpse of how 'ordinary' moments and traditional folk singing intersect in the world of Zeme women in the past. The narratives and life worlds of the female dormitory are brought in for this study. This is an ongoing work in understanding the role of women in Zeme oral traditions.

Keywords: Nagaland, Zeme Naga, oral tradition, folk music, storytelling, women's stories.

Introduction

In today's world, folk music serves as a dynamic platform for documenting the stories of women who have contributed to the collective history of their community or village. Indigenous communities in India, like the Nagas, practice folk music as a form of storytelling. The Naga tribes comprise over 60 communities across Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh in India, as well as the Sagaing Region and Kachin State in Myanmar. This essay throws light on the tribe known as the Zeme. The Zeme Nagas are predominantly found in the southern part of Nagaland, the contiguous areas of Dima Hasao and eastern Karbi Anglong in Assam, and the Senapati and Tamenglong regions of Manipur.

This short essay forms part of a completed research project initiated in March 2024, funded by the Zubaan Publishing House under the auspices of the "Zubaan Publishers Research Grant for Young Researchers from the Northeast 2023–24". This grant is awarded to individuals engaged in research, writing, photography, and the arts, specifically focusing on fostering knowledge production from the perspectives of Indigenous

1. Zisaji Presidency College, Kiphire, India.

feminists in Northeast India and its neighbouring regions. The grant prioritizes work on gender and oral histories, particularly those that have been marginalized. It facilitates disseminating such work through diverse mediums, including storytelling, podcasts, visual formats, and scholarly publications. Within this broader context, this project contributes to preserving the memories of women from a generation deeply rooted in oral traditions.

My research seeks to explore folk music as a site of storytelling, particularly stressing the narratives of Zeme women. The project aims to document and translate the folk songs traditionally sung by women, collectively or individually, in settings such as female dormitories, which are called *releiki* within the Zeme community. These songs will be transcribed into written music to preserve and make them accessible to the community and beyond. Central to this study is the documentation of the lived experiences of Zeme women raised in these dormitory institutions, which played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of collective identity and belongingness. The decline of these institutions has imperiled the community's knowledge systems and cultural heritage.

The term 'ancestral', corresponding to the Zeme expressions *kecing nam-tum* or *pau-pai nam-tum* (village established by the forefathers), refers to villages established through a traditional ritual known as *bungtak*.² In response to war-induced migrations and dispersions that shaped the tribal communities of Northeast India in past centuries, the Zeme people explored the southern Naga Hills in search of new land. The *bungtak* ritual, involving a semi-domesticated bison known as the *mithun* (*Bos frontalis*), was essential to claim lands to establish new villages.³ Notable Zeme villages in Nagaland established through this ritual include Peren Namgo, Benreu, Poilwa, Puiwa, and Punglwa.

Significance of the Dormitory Institutions

The 'dormitory institutions', frequently discussed in anthropological studies of Naga tribes in India in the works of Fürer-Haimendorf (1950, 1972), for instance, serve as sites of social interaction. They functioned as spaces for producing, practicing, and transmitting the worldviews of Naga villages across generations. The dormitory system encapsulates the tribal village as a sacred collective of clans and sub-clans, where individuals receive physical and intellectual training alongside instruction in traditions, politics, and history. In this context, the dormitories are much more than just sleeping places, as understood in contemporary times.

The dormitory system is a sacred part of Zeme village culture. Traditionally, each clan had male and female dormitories. In Zeme ancestral villages, the young maidens slept in the girls' dormitory, bonded with their peers, and engaged in collective voluntary welfare services until they were fit to marry. The 'seed-sowing festival' (the community's biggest festival) that culminates with wedding ceremonies is central to the idea and role of female dormitories among the Zeme. Soon after the marriage of the young women, it is considered taboo to frequent the female dormitory or wear garments traditionally

2. This ritual, a cornerstone of Zeme culture, was essential for establishing new villages. The *bungtak* is revered as the basis of all sacred rituals and belief systems of the Zeme. Without the ritual, villages could not have been established in the past because it ensured the well-being of the people, land, and their livestock.
3. The *mithun*, which had a stone slab tied to its neck with straw, was required for the *bungtak* ritual. Wherever the beast lay down and the stone simultaneously loosened from its neck, the territory could be claimed as a site for a new village.

reserved for unmarried girls. Young girls would shave their heads until marriage, signifying innocence and chastity. This practice distinguished them from married women. In the past, the institution of marriage was seen by many young girls as a symbol of experiencing womanhood, where even growing their hair was treated with privilege and regard. Stories of Zeme women resorting to short-term marriages to experience such ‘privileges’ that may appear ordinary to contemporary women was a common practice in a few ancestral villages. These cultural trends point towards how women used to subvert ‘mundane’ gendered norms even in matters concerning marriages.

The Zeme call the female dormitory *releiki* and the male dormitory *rehangki*, respectively.⁴ An average *releiki* housed around five to twenty women. Depending on the number of clans, there could be anything from five to twenty male and female dormitories in a village overall. A family from the same clan, with good social and economic standing, is usually approached to host the female dormitory for one agricultural season, a year or more. Thus, members of the family may assume the role of the *kizeupui* (house mother) for the female dormitory or *kizeupei* (house father) for the male dormitory of the respective clan. Although many dormitories remain preserved in villages, their role as vital social institutions and centres of learning has been overtaken by their current portrayal as mere relics of a bygone era.

The project aims to document the lived experiences of Zeme women who grew up in the *releiki*. These reminiscences are now rare because few of these women are alive today. The collective memory of villages has primarily erased the narratives and contributions of the *releiki*, especially in the absence of the physical structures that once affirmed the existence of girls’ dormitories. The marginal representation of the *releiki*’s contributions to Zeme villages’ oral histories and knowledge systems makes the erasure of this aspect of traditional Zeme culture particularly concerning. Anthropological works on the Nagas (Fürer-Haimendorf 1950, 1972) often highlight this development, whereby the focus on male dormitories overshadows the presence of their female counterparts. The oral histories of the Nagas rarely recount women’s narratives or the significance of female dormitories.

Modern education and Christian worship gatherings have replaced the sense of collective belongingness that dormitory institutions promoted, reducing the possibilities of perpetuating certain art forms, including folk music. As Christianity spread and schools mushroomed, dormitory institutions slowly lost relevance, removing the spaces for continuing traditional art forms. In areas where folk singing persisted, women lacked the liberty to gather, sing, teach, and perform folk songs. The scope for leisure and art-making began to weaken in women’s everyday lives. Unfortunately, women folk singers gradually began to sing ‘without an audience’, foregrounding the logic of the ‘insignificance’ and ‘irrelevance’ of women’s knowledge and capacity as tellers of the community’s history, culture, and politics.

Considering these developments, the project pursued by the author of this essay is of utmost importance to the Zeme community for several reasons. It focuses on documenting the narratives of *releiki*, the withdrawal of women from folk music, and how that process unfolded. Similarly, the revival of folk songs creates an opportunity for initiating conversations about women’s memories and, crucially, their worldviews, which remained hidden for decades.

4. The Zemes are geopolitically divided into Northern and Southern belts based primarily on geography and linguistic variation. The Northern Zeme refers to the female and male dormitories as *releiki* and *rehangki*, respectively. Correspondingly, the Southern Zeme calls these institutions *leuseuki* and *hangseuki*, respectively.

Mapping the Cultural Trajectory of Zeme Women in Peren Namgo

As a Zeme myself, I grew up in a small town named Peren, located at the heart of Peren district, India, where the Zeme community of Nagaland is concentrated. Less than five kilometres away is the pristine village of Peren Namgo, previously known as Tsuren by the community. Interestingly, the Angami tribe frequently used the name Beremah to refer to Peren during the British colonial regime. Between the colonial and post-colonial periods, the casualties of war and violence, combined with the Christian wave, significantly marked Peren Namgo's history.

During WWII, military operations took place in Naga-inhabited regions suspected of giving shelter to Japanese soldiers. In Peren Namgo, the older villagers narrate one such incident with horror. In this particular event, sometime between 1944 and 1945, the villagers first saw flying objects hovering over their territory. A dozen bombs fell from the air and wiped out the entire village in no time. Five locations, including Lungsangpei kiso, Hezopeing tai, Gongningkam, Kwaksuining tai, and Mhau renei, were bombed on mere suspicion and wrong information gathered by military intelligence.⁵

The arrival of Western culture coincided with these disruptions in the region, changing the traditions that the community had guarded with their lives. A network of English schools, along with basic infrastructure and outposts, was developed in many remote villages. This paved the way for the Christian church movement to spread. The changes even subsumed the practices related to the vibrant tribal institution of dormitories.

In the past, the Zeme community followed a tradition that explicitly stated and overtly practiced male dominance. Social norms and values corresponded with the role of men as the providers and protectors of the village. By contrast to the *releiki*, boys could remain part of their respective male dormitory even after marriage. Thus, married men could sleep in the company of unmarried men in the dormitory for as long as they wanted (or were required to). This was so mainly because of the frequent village raids and feuds that occurred in the past centuries. To protect the village, the Zeme men were trained to sleep in the *rehangki* and be prepared for any surprise attack at any given time.

Similarly, the cultural life and traditions built around belongingness, community, land, and agriculture conformed to patriarchy and sacred rituals. Küchle (2019) finds a resemblance between Naga agricultural practice and the notion of 'ritual mode of production' propounded by Roy A. Rappaport (1999). The concept underscores the importance of rituals for structuring social relations.

The roles of men as 'protectors' centred around the display of physical and mental agility. Such roles included hunting down ferocious wild animals and human intruders as well as displays of athletic strength, such as *kebui-dok* (mithun hunt), *hebak-nim* (pig scramble), *hepo-poh* (wrestling), *hezo-zo* (long jump), *heram-nram* (high jump), *tsucing-toh* (shot put), and *tsinglei-hiah* (spear throwing). Agricultural ceremonies and rituals performed during seasonal festivities were also led by men. In the *rehangki*, the menfolk plotted warfare strategies, discussed tribal matters, made political decisions, and hosted festivals and social gatherings.

Women were excluded from the men's domain, as their inclusion was associated with bad omens or misfortunes. Women and girls were strictly prohibited from touching

5. As recorded by Suitei Ndang dated 2nd March, 2010.



Photo 1: A modernized version of the *rehangki*, the male dormitory of the Ndang clan in historic Peren Namgo village, is depicted. The image shows the late Mrs. Haikiahingle, then aged 86, a venerable individual who, in her younger days, frequented the *releiki* of the Ndang clan. The photograph captures her walking to the church, embodying a symbolic representation of continuity and cultural resilience. (photo by the author)

weapons or sharing meals of hunted prey with men. They were not allowed to freely frequent, sit, or lie in the male dormitories.⁶

Agricultural practices were deeply rooted in gender roles, which fuelled fears among Zeme villages about the impact of the formal education system introduced by the British. Traditionally, young girls were confined to domestic roles, such as *keteei-kenei ketelei* (caregiving), *heta-tah* (field cultivation), and *henah-lung* (procreation). With modernity, a significant shift occurred for the male children, whose trajectories were altered by the introduction of formal education. With the decline of male dormitories, boys were sent to school with promises of modern jobs. This exacerbated the gap between the male and female sections of the community. The shift occurred concurrently with changes in the tribal economy, in which a money-based currency replaced the traditional barter system. This transition particularly impacted women, as their roles and status remained unchanged from the pre-colonial period. For many decades, women remained entrenched in domestic work and paddy field work.⁷

6. When a clan member successfully hunted prey (e.g., deer, venison, or wild boar), some parts, such as the head and entrails, were cooked and eaten with other clan members at the *rehangki*. After this, each *rehangki* member present took their share (enough for one meal) to their respective homes. Such strict practices were a matter of pride for the male dormitories and the clan.

7. From an interview that I conducted with my grandmother in Peren Namgo in 2019.



Photo 2: The *Heriempeiname rehangki* or *kiangki* (male dormitory of the Herie clan) in Peren Namgo village. This *rehangki* is one of the only dormitories preserving the architectural structure of traditional dormitories of the past. As one of the prominent sites of the village, it is frequented by tourists, government officers, and researchers. (photo by Rangro Herie)

Women “Filling the Gaps” in Folk Songs and Oral History

I recorded a song with my grandfather in his kitchen a few years ago. My grandmother, seated beside the kitchen hearth, appeared withdrawn and avoided attention as she listened to her husband sing. Because of his advanced age and declining memory, my grandmother subtly intervened during the pauses when he struggled to sing the lyrics as effortlessly as he once did. She interrupted him in disapproval of the muddled lyrics and corrected him in between the recordings when he fumbled. This seemingly minor yet significant interaction highlights how women in the community actively “fill the gaps,” contributing their knowledge to preserve a more comprehensive understanding of the community’s oral narratives and knowledge system.

In a subsequent session, I asked my grandmother to sing some folk songs, and she agreed to teach me a short poetic musing about yarn-making, among other songs. She explained that the clan’s women traditionally sang this specific song when they gathered to spin cotton yarn for weaving. The song is in the Zeme language.

Kelang Lei
“The Song of Cotton Yarn”

Kelang teilai eh mieh bamlei,
Lo! I come with the spindle in my hand,
Caune mta bamlai!
How can I rest idly?
Zuchu a kileimena lang nlumpuiria kum beu lo.
Beloved sisters, pass me the sacred thread — let me partake in it.
I apai daklu reluigeuna kum lune,
The shawl I wove shall bear the grace of a fine buffalo hide,
Lukedet ke ba, lukedet ke ba,
Gliding it back to front, back to front,
A kileimena lang nlumpuiria kum beulou.
O sisters of Releiki, pass me the yarn; I may partake in it.

(Translated by Suitei Ndang and Yihingle Ndang)



Photo 3 (l.): An elder of the village, Mr. Kieziuying Lungalang, showing the size of the main wooden pillar at the entrance of the *Lungalang rehangki* at Benreu village. Buffalo horns hang above, also depicted by the wooden carvings on the pillar. The heavily embellished wooden door is carved by their clansman. (photo by the author)

Photo 4 (r.): Partial view of the interior part of the same *rehangki*. This quaint male dormitory is maintained by the Lungalang clan. Visible are objects of everyday life of the past, including the rice granary, horns and skulls of hunted prey collected over the years, and wooden sitting planks in the corners. (photo by the author)



Photo 5: A modernized *rehangki* (male dormitory) of the Ndang clan in the village of Peren Namgo. The building represents a community trying to face modernization by preserving the *rehangki* institution while adopting modern cultural and architectural trends. (photo by the author)

The song depicts a weaver's small universe and relationship with her creation. The weaver explains that idleness is unknown in the craft of yarn-making and weaving when a lady is with her friends. She asks her peers from the clan to make her yarn as smooth as *nlumpuiria*.⁸ The song also describes how the weaver feels when she wears a shawl woven with her bare hands. She compares it to the fur hide of the buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*), an animal considered a valued asset in the community. She talks about the pleasure felt by the weaver as she repeatedly moves the shawl back and forth on her shoulder.

Fragments of everyday interactions across time and space, including the brief time I spent with my grandparents, illuminate the nuanced roles of women in oral history. To construct a more comprehensive understanding of oral history, it is both crucial to incorporate the lived experiences of women, who often occupy marginalised positions, and, to understand how Zeme women navigate these complexities within their community and daily lives.

8. Sleek thread-like vines found in the forests of Nagaland.



Photo 6: The author with her grandparents at Peren Namgo. The couple, who are in their late 80s, are among the last survivors of the WWII bombs that were dropped on the village in the mid-1940s. Older couples in the community act as guardians of the village's history, politics, and traditions. (photo by the author)

References

- Küchle, Andreas. 2019. *Class Formation, Social Inequality and the Nagas in North-East India*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rappaport, Roy A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814686>.
- Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph von. 1950. 'Youth-Dormitories and Community Houses in India: A Restatement and a Review'. *Anthropos* 45(1/3): 119–144. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40450833>.
- . 1972. "Recent developments in Nagaland and the north-east frontier agency." *Asian Affairs* 3 (1): 3–13.