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## **Migration and Settlement: A Case Study of Zeme Naga of Northeast India**

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### **Abstract**

The most common reason for the change of residence that leads to migration in the early part of civilization is connected to either scarcity of food or conflict with other communities. The Zeme Naga community in Northeast India may be studied from the above perspective as its history is the story of displacement from their place of origin and subsequent settlement in different areas of the region. The oral history of Zeme Naga has plenty of such references of displacement due to their conflict with other tribes. But unlike most other ethnic communities, the reason for migration of the Zeme people from one place to another is connected with their traditional custom and practice. It is not limited to the immediate reason of traditional practice of shifting cultivation, rather to the concept and practice of establishing a new settlement. This paper will study traditional practice of the Zeme Naga for establishment of new settlement and how it is involved with a unique process by accomplishing many rites and rituals and in the process gives a new understanding of migration issue.

**Keywords:** Migration, Settlement, Zeme Naga, Custom, Tradition.

The phrase 'Northeast' refers to the region of the eight sister states on the northeastern part of India bordering Bangladesh, China and Myanmar – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Many writers such as Harekrishna Deka and Temsula Ao have expressed discomfit with the term Northeast India. A section also strongly argues that the term is colonial and hence, an artificial construct. They argue that there is nothing called a "north-easterner" and the concept is purely geographical; it tends to homogenise an extremely heterogeneous cluster of people as there exists no common history and heritage of the people in Northeast India (Deka). There are more than sixty major tribes in the region and each of them has its own language, folktales or oral literature and songs as well as different myths about their origin.

Again, there are also a group of historians and anthropologists who consider that it is purely by an accident in history that Northeast formed a part of India. The social formation in the so-called mainland India and Northeast India is far from being homogenous and it is a forceful effort to link up with one another culturally and politically.

With the exception of Meiteis in Imphal valley and the Assamese in Brahmaputra valley, the hill people remained essentially outside the orbit of Hindu influence and caste-based societal formation. While mainland Indian society could evolve pan-

Indian homogeneities and Hindu ethos in social formation all through historical period, the hill people in North East with their diverse social alignments and group identities produced a high degree of fluidity and flexibility in their socio-cultural arenas. (Lal Dena)

Moreover, some argue that Northeast India is an extension of Southeast Asia in terms of ethnicity and culture. “For instance, the Meiteis of Manipur valley and the Ahoms of Brahmaputra valley have close cultural and ethnic linkages with the Shans of upper Myanmar and the Thais of Thailand. The Nagas of Manipur and Nagaland have their kith and kin across the border in Myanmar, the Chin Hills in Myanmar but also trace their origin from central China. The Singphos of Arunachal Pradesh have in the Kachin of the Kachin state of upper Myanmar their relations. The Khasis and Jaintias of Meghalaya have similarities in language and culture with the Mon-Khmers of Cambodia, Thailand and eastern Myanmar.” (Lal Dena) D.R. Sardesai, in *Southeast Asian History: Essential Readings* and *Southeast Asia: Past and Present*, even goes to the extent of saying that the Khmers in Cambodia migrated along with their cousins, the Mons either from Southwest China or from the Khasis hills in Northeast India. Linguistically also, most of the ethnic groups in Northeast speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Chinese family.

The Zeme Naga community in Northeast India may be studied from the above perspective as its history is the story of displacement from their place of origin and subsequent settlement in different areas of the region. They also speak a language of the same name. Other names include Ozemi, Nzemi, Zeme, Zemai, Zemei, Ziama, Jemi, Yemi, etc. The Zemes that are inhabiting in Nagaland call themselves Zeliang and those of the Manipur borders are called Zeliangrong. There are many different tribes that speak Zeme Naga even though it is an endangered language. The social history of Zeme Naga during the pre-colonial period is still shrouded in mystery. In the absence of written records it is beyond our reach to narrate the account of their original land as of now. A reading of folk narratives indicates that their ancestors might have migrated from Makuilongdi to the present-day Nagaland and spread further towards south. Some historians and anthropologists, both British and Indians, have connected them with the headhunters of Malay and races of the southern sea on the one hand and to China on the other. But they are unsure about the reason of Zeme Naga’s dislodgment from their place of origin. Contradictory to it, there are also the oral traditions, folklores and tales that clearly pointed to the fact that they are not migrant tribe. The oral traditions of the Zeme Naga revolve around the landscape, rivers and mountains of their present habited area covering part of Manipur hills, Assam and Nagaland. C.A Soppit in his book, *A Short Account of the Kacha Naga (Empeo) Tribe in the North Cachar Hills, 1885*, mentioned that the Zeme Naga was not a wandering race or tribe unlike Kuki but the earliest inhabitants of the land they now occupy. (Soppit 421) Varrier Elwin in his book, *The Naga in the Nineteenth Century*, also mentioned that the Zeme Naga were the first inhabitants of the Cachar area. (Elwin 409)

The ethnonym ‘Zeliangrong’ is traced back to the three kindred brothers: the *Zeme* (dwellers of the warmer) or *Mejahme* (lower region), *Liangmai* (men of the North) the original Northerner. The Zeme, Liangmei and Rongmei residing primarily in the districts of Peren in Nagaland, Tamenglong and Senapati districts in Manipur, Haflong and other parts of Dima Hasao in Assam. A section of them also reside in the parts of the Barak Valley in Assam, Kohima and Dimapur in Nagaland, Loktak, Bishnupur and Imphal in Manipur.

The topic of migration has led to extensive research and intense theoretical

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discussion. In some of the founding texts that have marked the field in the last fifty years, one can observe the developing theories on contemporary migration. The first question that needs to be addressed is the very definition of migration. In a seminal study aimed at clarifying different definitions and typologies, Alan Simmons suggests the use of three main elements in describing migration, namely a change of residence, a change of employment and a change of social relations. (Simmons 73-92). The first factor – change of residence – is the main criterion used in general. Simmons suggested extending the concept and rapidly gaining ground with his novel idea, especially in research on macro-structural dimensions.

The most common reason for the change of residence that leads to migration in the early part of civilization is connected to either scarcity of food or conflict with other communities. The oral history of Zeme Naga also talks of their conflict with other dominant Naga tribes viz. Angami and Ao and there are plenty of such references which give us information regarding number of incidents of displacement of Zeme Naga people from one part of land to another due to their conflict with other tribes. But unlike most other ethnic communities, the reason for migration of the Zeme people from one place to another is connected with their traditional custom and practice. It is not limited to the immediate reason of traditional practice of shifting cultivation, rather to the concept and practice of establishing a new settlement.

Generally, the peace loving Zeme Naga Community used to stay in group in a particular village. They maintained social harmony within the village and maintained cordial relation with neighbouring villages. With the passage of time, the village population multiplied and a time came when they had to look for new settlement. At such a time some farsighted, courageous and able men from among them step out in search of virgin and vacant land for the establishment of a new village. Traditionally the Zeme Naga never established their village by way of any war or conquering other's territory. Traditional practice of the Zeme Naga for establishment of new village is involved with a unique process. It is accomplished by many rites and rituals. As in case of other occasions, there are many restrictions to be meticulously observed while performing rites and rituals. Unfortunately, there is no written record of the first established village of Zeme Naga. Religious practices of the Zeme Naga have undergone tremendous changes in recent time after religious Reforms introduced by Rani Gaidinliu. Accordingly, there is a change in the process of village establishment after religious reforms. Let us first look into the sequence of rituals followed in setting up a new settlement as well as other procedures according to the pre-reform tradition.

1. HERATU RIGUTPE: In the first place, the one who were supposed to be the founder of a new village needs to find a suitable location for establishing a new village. As per established tradition, it is advised to choose a partner from different clan (Hepum Peu) and fulfill all the demands made by him. After fulfilling the demands made by his partner, they cleared the forest where people were allowed to choose a plot of their personal choice to settle down. Before they start migration from their earlier settlement and living in the new village, first and foremost, the villagers collect the best stone to be placed as the altar stone for conducting the ritual of long jump and it is permanently placed at the heart of the village after performing certain rituals. Zeme Nagas pay full respect and honour to the altar stone of village which is installed for conducting long jump. It is believed that the village deity resides in that stone. So, it shows the preference of the community for sports like long jump and its association with their ritual and in the process is connected with their migration and settlement.

2. HINGKAP SUM BE: On the day of Hingkap Sumbe, the whole villagers have to move to the north of village by early dawn and wait for the other people who also want to settle in that village. Thereafter, the man who married a virgin woman (woman from a clean clan and respected woman) has to lead the people and enter the village from north along with mithun/buffalo by chanting “Rehoi” (HOHO). There are two ways of Hingkap Sumbe, one is when the new village is established and the other is when the old village is renewed. Renewal of the village usually takes place when that village faces some unforeseen calamities and affliction like sudden and repeated death of the village priests etc.
3. MEGAU KAMGUTPE: As an agriculturalist clan, the Zeme Naga people practice shifting cultivation and thereby herding from one place to another and also seek convenient places for their livelihood. In the process, sometimes they also choose to settle in the cultivated or jhum areas after finding the topography and suitable environment for human habitation. As the people settled in the particular area, the settlers expand their families and intimate their erstwhile neighbours and co-workers to join them in newly established village.

There are mainly two different sections of Zeme Naga tribe - the Herakas – the section of the Zemes who profess the reformed brand of the Zeme religion propagated by Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu; and the Christian converts. In Dima Hasao district of Assam, the majority of the Zemes now profess Heraka. Elements from both Hinduism and Christianity have been incorporated among the Zeme Herakas. Although the gradual spread of Christianity has eroded the traditional religious and cultural heritage of the Zemes, yet the larger section still honour their traditional festivals connected with agricultural activities and other social institutions.

According to Heraka hingde, to establish a new village first of all the elders have to find out the area which will be suitable for establishing the village. They need to make sure that the intended area for establishing the village has to have all the facilities like water, communication long duration of sun shine etc. After that, the people have to clear the area. Before clearing the area they have to chant the intangible hymn as given below:

ndi gepau nneu lau  
Nnai ye-e lung hang  
Ndi than ye:  
Man sai yi nneu ye.

After chanting this ritual, people pray to almighty God Tingwang for His blessing and then people proceed to clear the forest.

There are certain procedures and steps to be followed while searching a site for establishing a new village.

1. First of all people have to gather at Paiki (the designated place for performing holy rituals) early in the morning without eating anything.
2. Secondly, after reaching the site for establishing a new village, the elders have to mark the area by walking around the area in a circle.
3. Thirdly, they have to find a suitable place for installing Hejuadekung (holy altar stone for long jump), in the heart of village and thereafter, the Village Head and elders select a suitable location for village temple.

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HEJUADEKUNG

HEJUA

NCHINGKANG

4. Fourthly, villagers have to chant the “NDI GEPAU NEU LAU” ritual for thrice and plant a cross mark (Piterang) there. It symbolizes that the place is reserved for installing a holy altar stone as well as for long jump.

5. After all these, they have to return to their respective homes and wait for the convenient day to clear the area for new village.

An inaugural ceremony of Zeme Naga’s new village has many rules and rituals. Firstly each and every individual built a new house in the new village. After that, the male group arrange a stone for Hejuadekung; a holy altar stone for long jump and a round stone kept nearby Hejuadekung called Nchingkang . It is the stone which is used for the traditional game known as Nching (shot put). Each and every household set up a hearth (Hemang) which is consisted of the three tiny stone pillars called Ncha. The Ncha has its different names:

1. Kesang-gauraing
2. Nchamuangbe
3. Mbangkuang:



HEMANG (HEARTH)

All the villagers must prepare a temporary hut outside the boundary of new village for a single night halt and fix the entry day. One day before the formal entry into the new village, the village youths, especially girls, collect fire wood and carry water for the ritual in advance. The important requirement for the ritual must be prepared before an inauguration of a new village. On the day the women and children shift the household needs and all other things.

On the entry day of the new village, at dawn, the priest (Tingku) and every male pray and perform a ritual which is followed by singing of hymn “Ndi Pungkum Wangra Simang” in praise of Tingwang (Almighty god) for showering His blessings and then march toward the place where the Hejuadekung (altar stone) is to be installed. They stop singing at this holy place and then the priest worships and prays for peace and prosperity, rich harvest, fertility of

people and livestock in the village. The priest installs the Hejuadekung followed by the devotional song “Ndi Namkhau Lung Mai Goi”.

Hymn:

Ndi pungkum wangra simang,  
 Kehiu kam tilau ngam.  
 Raguang kaikum ailung talak yei-i.  
 Ndi keten dampet tu kiu,  
 Aram hou thai lajo.

Song:

Ndi nam khau lung mai goi,  
 Aram hawang ngam hang keriak jai.  
 Aram zeliangrong kendi pungchi,  
 Keta ne wang tu ye.  
 Gaituang lani ngam tu,  
 Aram maina lani chui bamme.  
 Gaipui juknga damkhai lau-u,  
 Raguang hau tau nai ye.

After the worshiping is over, a new fire is burnt with Meigang and Meleuria (fire stick and bamboo string) at the right place of Long jump (Hejuabam) and distributes the fire among each of the head of the families who bring fire to their new home to make a fire. The fire called Heteimi (holy fire) must not be extinguished till the setting of the Sun. The villagers are forbidden to go outside the village and do any work as they are to perform this ritual throughout the day. At the sunset, they offer prayer followed by prayer song “Raguang Dambuung” and chant the Mantra of “Din Kiu Ming”.



Making of Holy Fire by Zeme

Following this process and rituals the Zeme Nagas establish a new village till recently. The Tingku (Priest) plays a very important role in all the activities of worshiping day and he is the oldest man in the particular village of the Zeme Naga.

The migration and establishing a new settlement is an integral part of Zeme Naga culture. The common factors of migration of an ethnic community are governed by the nature of cultivation they follow, search for a better agricultural land, conflict with other communities, natural calamities and epidemics etc. All these factors are also applicable in case of Zeme Nagas for their migration from one place to other. But even in case of absence of these factors, the Zeme Naga custom demands that they should migrate and establish a



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new settlement when the population reaches to a certain number. This unique phenomenon is corroborated by having a series of set rules and customs for migration and subsequent settlement. Of course, due to the impact of globalization and other cultures, the Zeme Nagas are also shifting away from their traditional pattern of migration and settlement and a significant number of them are drawn towards establishing permanent settlement in rural as well as urban areas. Another important factor which is also responsible for this change of the pattern of migration and settlement is the influence of Christian Missionaries. The first and second generation converts are prone to stay away from their indigenous culture and heritage which is also in a way responsible of doing away with this unique phenomenon of migration and settlement.

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### Bio-note

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