
Socio-Cultural Practices and Environmental Management of Sumi Naga Tribe

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ABSTRACT:

The idea that mankind is never apart from nature or the environment that surrounds him, seems to be deeply rooted in the history of Sumi Naga culture since time immemorial. Much like most of the indigenous people all around the world, they do see culture in nature and nature in culture. This concept is evidently exhibited through their dance, songs, folklores, myths etc. As such they display sound environmental management techniques in their daily social and cultural activities. The principles and concepts behind their cultural practices can contribute to present socio-cultural systems in maintaining the well being of humanity and conservation of natural environment. Thus, in this context the documentation and recognition of the age old cultural practices of indigenous people could potentially act as the catalyst in managing and conserving the environmental resources for future generations.

Keywords: Sumi Naga, socio-cultural practice, environment, management

INTRODUCTION

Environmental management and conservation has emerged as one of the most important fields of study in recent years. This rise in concern is mainly because of the fact that the world is losing its biodiversity and its associated ecosystem at a brisk rate putting the existence of humanity at risk. As a result, protected parks, wildlife sanctuaries, biosphere reserves etc., have emerged as an ideal approach to manage and conserve the ever degrading environment. However, interest in managing environment and conserving biodiversity outside these protected areas is growing rapidly with the realization that “reservation of even 10% of national territories will not be enough to conserve most biodiversity”¹. It is also because of the fact that most of the earth remaining biodiversity is found in indigenous peoples land, where the people own the land and not the government. Another reason is because of the fact that majority of the protected areas exist only in theory/paper and many a time act against the will of the local people thereby victimizing them.

For centuries, throughout the world various kinds of community-based environmental management practices have developed since ancient times in connection with a multitude of diverse cultural practices. Restrictions on access and use of such cultural practices may reduce or even eliminate human environmental impact and thereby help protect species and various habitats. Nevertheless, only in the last two decades has the potential of community-based land and resource management systems to conserve biodiversity begun to be recognized by anthropologists, biologists, conservationists, environmentalists, and others (Sponsel, 2008).

Studies have revealed that most of the biodiversity of the world today occur in places inhabited by indigenous people. The reason could simply be attributed to the socio-cultural and traditional practices of environmental management by the local people over ages. The

traditional code of conduct in village societies gives more to nature than what it takes from it (Singh, R.R., ed. 1995). Thus, the role of indigenous people in managing their environmental resources has become significantly important.

The need to preserve the remaining biodiversity for future generations while trying to understand and document the indigenous knowledge of resource management practices has become a critical issue today. Thus, in this context the documentation and recognition of the age old cultural practices of indigenous people could potentially act as the catalyst in managing and conserving the environmental resources for future generations.

Sumi Nagas belong to one of the 16 major ethnic Naga tribes of Nagaland. They are found to be settled in most of the Naga inhabited areas. However, Zunheboto district forms the main cultural center of the Sumis. Culture has always played a dominant role in shaping the Sumi Naga society. Their custom, passed on from generation to generation provides guidelines for peaceful and harmonious coexistence between members of their community and their environment. Their love and respect for nature is profoundly manifested in their folksongs, folklores, festivals etc.

The principles and concepts behind the traditional knowledge system can contribute to present socio-cultural systems in maintaining the well being of humanity and conservation of natural environment. Thus, an attempt has been made to analyze and document the traditional socio-cultural practices and environmental management of Sumi Nagas of Zunheboto district which can serve as a medium to modern day conservation and management programme and policies.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on experiences and collected information from different primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from different villages through questionnaires, interviews and discussion with village elders who are the holders of traditional knowledge and practices. All together 15 villages were selected randomly and visited for obtaining the primary data. Various books, newsletters and journals were consulted for obtaining secondary data.

STUDY AREA

Zunheboto district with a population of 1, 41,014 (2011 census) and area of 1, 255 sq km is the traditional homeland of Sumi Naga tribe of Nagaland. It is situated between 94°20'E to 90°95'E longitude and 25°45'N to 26°15' N latitude and is bounded by Kohima and Phek in the South, Wokha in the West, Mokokchung and parts of Tuensang in the East. The district is characterized by lofty mountain ranges with a variety of relief features, drainage systems, soil types and vegetation cover. The most important river of Zunheboto district is Doyang, which drains the northern part, while the other two rivers viz, Tizu and Tista drain the Southern and Eastern parts of the district. Besides, it has many other perennial rivers and streams. The district experiences an average annual rainfall of 200 cm while the temperature remains quite low and cold in winter. Their socio-economy revolves around shifting cultivation which is the dominant form of agriculture. *Tuluni* and *Ahuna* are two main festivals celebrated by the

Sumis. The social life of Sumi Nagas is community based. Almost all the decisions pertaining to cultivation and other social activities are taken by community as a whole.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While trying to understand the socio-cultural practices and environmental management of Sumi Nagas, it is important to first understand the concept of land ownership within the Sumi community. This is because to them ‘land is their identity’, signifying wealth and prestige since time immemorial. Everything springs forth from the land, the forest, natural resources, agriculture etc. It is the most valuable natural resources that provide livelihood and subsistence to the people. The dynamics of land (forest) ownership is quite different from the rest of the Naga tribes. In the case of Sumi Naga, almost the entire village land is mostly owned and controlled by the *Akukao* (Village chief), though there are individual lands also. For instance, in

Location Map (Not to be Scaled)

India Map



Nagaland Map



Zunheboto District Map

Lumami village, the chief owns about 60% of the land and the rest 40% are owned by a handful of other villagers (George, Jacob, 2008).

The idea that mankind is never apart from nature or the environment that surrounds him, seems to be deeply rooted in the cultural ethos of Sumi Nagas since time immemorial. Similar to most of the indigenous people all around the world, they do see culture in nature and nature in culture. This concept is evidently exhibited through their dance, songs, folklores, myths etc. They display sound environmental management techniques in their daily social and cultural activities.

The socio- cultural lifestyle and practices of Sumi Nagas are so closely linked with their surrounding environment. This is evident from the fact that even the name of the district is named after *Zunhebo* (*Leucoseptrum cannum*) plant which grows abundantly in the district. Besides, *Aghacho* (Hornbill) is used to signify man for its majestic and masculine looks. In the same way *Achita* (local dialect) bird signifies women as it is believed to be more caring and loving than other birds, like a woman's love and care for others. This bird also has an *amini* (mekhala/wraparound cloth used by the Sumi women) called *achita mini* named after it. *Achita mini* is made and used in order to remind the younger generations of its significance and so that they will protect and conserve the bird.

The relationship between man and environment is a matter of spiritual concern to the Sumis much like the rest of the Nagas. Big trees, stones, dense forests etc were considered to be the dwelling place of spirits and deities. Thus, they make sure that such places were protected and remain untouched because of various superstitious belief and taboos associated with them. Besides, their festivals which form an integral part of their cultural life is mostly associated and devoted to their surrounding environment.

Like the rest of other Naga tribe, Sumi Nagas have always shared an intimate and spiritual relationship with their immediate surroundings. Their respect and love for nature is manifested excellently in their traditional folk lore, folk songs, myth and legends. As such they have been conserving and managing their resources sustainably intentionally or unintentionally through various cultural practices. The Sumi Nagas were known to have lived in harmony with their environment. Their culture, tradition and rituals were all related to forest, agriculture and land.

Even though shifting cultivation is practiced throughout the entire Sumi area, they make sure that the surrounding environment is properly managed and protected by keeping the jhum cycle long for as many as 15-20 years. They make sure that vegetations are not destroyed along the side of a river or stream surrounding the jhum field, thereby not disturbing the aquatic organism and also leaving ample scope for speedy regeneration of the forest. Further,

they ensure that trees are never uprooted in a jhum field and the offshoots springing out of the tree trunk are never cut.

The cultural practice of keeping forest, trees, stones etc as sacred has also contributed significantly to their environmental management. They believed that these places are the dwelling place of spirits and deities and hence they abstain from cultivating and collecting anything from these areas. Even today, there are places and areas where collection or extraction of materials is avoided because of this belief. Whenever these spirits were offended they would appease the spirits by worshipping them offering chicken, eggs, dog etc. During necessity rituals were performed seeking permission from the spirits to cut or collect natural resources from these areas. For instance, '*Mukakuki*' in Lumami village is one such sacred place believed to be the dwelling place of a woman spirit. When people try to quarry the place, the spirit disturbs them in dreams by putting in them the spirit of fear. Thus, knowingly or unknowingly their fear of the spirits and keeping various places as sacred have contributed profoundly in their environmental management and conservation.

Again the Sumi Nagas are known for their prowess in hunting which forms an important part of their tradition and culture. Management in hunting is done by observing seasonal restrictions and various taboos and genna among the villagers. In the past hunting was done with the help of bow, arrows, spear and dao (machete), hence there was limited killing and destruction of animals and their habitats. Besides, they make sure that wildlife and birds were never hunted during gestation period. By doing so, they believed that misfortune will befall upon the hunter and his family. Thus, with strict taboos and restrictions they were able to profoundly manage their wildlife resources.

CONCLUSION

For centuries, Sumis and Nagas in general have always lived in close proximity with their natural surroundings. The development, conservation and upkeep of their resources are always within the preview of their cultural life. However, with the onset of modernization, the shift in belief system and the impact of the increase of population on the land, their traditional practices are challenged relentlessly today. The pristine cultural practices are fast waning away specially among the younger generation. Thus, in this present scenario it would be advisable for the policy makers and conservationist to correlate the valuable indigenous knowledge system with modern strategies while adopting various acts and laws for the management and conservation of the environment.

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FOOTNOTES

ⁱ <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/227253714>

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