CHAPTER 1
CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WATER

Water, together with land and air constitutes a matrix which is essential for the sustenance of all life forms. In the words of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), water is ‘the stuff of life and a basic human right’.¹ For centuries, great Civilizations of the ancient world thrived on river banks which supplied perennial water to its plains, sustaining a growing population by increasing the acreage of land under irrigation. This age-old harmonious relationship between nature and man and the perception of an unlimited water resource has however been greatly disturbed in recent times.

In the 20th century, the advent of the industrial revolution and the subsequent dawn of Western materialism have led to a non-traditional commodity-based perception of nature’s resources. While water resources are finite, water demands are increasing dramatically, driven by the relentless growth of human activity in recent decades. Population growth and global warming have both played a major role in raising the demand for and availability of potable water. All aspects of human development—agriculture, industry, health and advancement of socio-cultural life—depend upon natural resources. According to a 2006 Human Development Report under UNDP, 1.1 billion people do not have access to water. Some parts of the world, including the breadbaskets of India and China, the cotton belt of Central Asia and swaths of the Middle East, are reaching the physical limits of their water supplies. Sub-Saharan Africa, the world’s poorest region, has lacked the financial means to build dams and irrigation systems to get water to farms and homes in rural areas where most live.

In recent years, a realization has dawned that water resources constitute an indispensable support system, not only for human development but also for all living species on earth. Increasing populations and demographic pressures on the prevailing economic systems, rapid industrialization and urbanization – all these exert tremendous pressures on the already scarce water resources. As the water crisis

intensifies in the local, national and international levels, traditional laws defining riparian rights are being challenged and governments worldwide are under pressure for commoditization and mass transport of water. Proponents of water privatization say that a market system is the only way to distribute water to the world's thirsty. But experience shows that selling water on the open market does not address the needs of poor, under-served people. On the contrary, privatized water is delivered to those who can pay for it, such as wealthy cities and individuals, agriculture and industries. Who owns water and how much they are able to charge for it will become the question of the century.

On another dimension, Social scientists are warning that global warming and the decline in drinking water sources will lead to an increase in conflict, violence and social unrest. Marc Levy of the Centre for International Earth Science Information Network at Columbia University's Earth Institute in New York makes a strong link between droughts and violent civil conflicts in the developing world. Levy and colleagues used decades of detailed precipitation records, geospatial conflict information and other data in a complex computer model that overlays all this onto a fine-scale map of the world. Levy is careful to say that droughts don't directly cause conflicts but are more likely triggers in regions where there are already tensions or low-level conflicts. Areas with a high risk of conflict in the year (2007) due to extremely dry conditions, according to his model, were Cote d'Ivoire, Sudan, Bangladesh, Haiti, and Nagaland and Manipur in India.

In the Indian sub-continent major river systems are so overused that fishermen and farmers are being forced to migrate as local authorities’ battle over water rights. For instance in the Indus basin a series of grandiose schemes on the river, intended to boost production, have so damaged the water flow that the country (Pakistan) is now forced to import an increasing volume of grain to survive. According to official statistics, a shift is already occurring from water-intensive rice to cotton. Drought and rising population have worsened the problem. Cattle are now being replaced by camels.

There are more than 3,000 dams in India’s Narmada River Valley. These dams flood vast areas and displace hundreds of thousands, mostly peasants and adivasi (tribal/indigenous) people, while promises of relocation and resources usually prove
to be illusory. Just one of the dams, Sardar Sarovar, could uproot as many as a half-
million people.

Projects interlinking major rivers in India have also gained momentum in order to
supply water to two or more states sharing the same water source. Territories and
bioregions by diverting existing sources to artificial carriers have grave implications,
resulting in the depletion and salinization of the river and devastating agriculture on
the side of the river. Although, the programme of the Government is to provide an
extensive irrigation system which will bring electricity and water to areas of the
country suffering from drought: it cannot be denied that traditional economic and
social practices have been disturbed radically. Submersion of traditional grazing
grounds and the destruction of surrounding ecosystems are just the tip of the iceberg.
Numerous social problems are emerging as indigenous farmers and peasants, with a
set cultural and social interrelationship and distinct social ties and arrangements, are
forced to desert their lands and migrate to other areas.

Even in the case of a relatively small state such as Nagaland, there are signs
foretelling the likely scenario, as predicted by environmentalists and policy makers
that water is sure to be one of the challenging issues in the immediate future. In view
of these developments, it has been important in this chapter to focus on the ecological
perspectives and its theoretical underpinnings; to develop a socio- anthropological
understanding of the Naga tribal ways of interacting with water and other natural
systems associated with it; and to understand the lives of the Naga tribes before
colonization it has been found imperative to briefly describe the Physical features and
topography of the lands and forests they inhabited, as it was during the period under
study.

**Physical Features and Topography**

The chief abode of the early Naga tribes was the inaccessible jungles, hill-tract and
fence land of the country occupied by them. Many diverse tribes inhabited the Naga
Hills, immediately bordering the plains, comprising of a succession of long parallel
ridges, generally being north-east and south west, divided from each other by streams
or rivers, the hill ranges increasing in height from the low ranges bordering the plains,
at not more than 2000 feet in height which at Saramati and other points attain a height
nearly 13,000 feet above sea level. In the old maps of Assam, these are shown as divided into districts, or in the vernacular, ‘Duars’ and they were arbitrarily named by the Assam Rajahs as Dup-duar-ias, Pani-duar-ias, Hatogorias. It forms an irregular plateau with the elevated ridges and peaks. The Barail approaching from the south-west, happen to break up by the influence of the meridional axis of elevation which protrudes from the Arakan Yoma. The hills, a continuation of the Burma Arc joins with the Sub-Himalayan ranges in the north and stretches into the hills of Manipur. The central portion commands a view of the open rolling mountains but the eastern and south-western portions have a more complicated terrain, impassable at certain places. The early Naga country was heavily wooded and the ranges were very narrow along the ridges, making ascents and descents very steep; yet they abounded in fascinating games, varied flora and fauna. There were also lower hills, almost entirely free of trees and covered with long grass or weeds. Near the plains on the western side were valleys. For instance, in the south is the valley of Ghaspani earlier covered mostly by forests, mid-west in the Lotha area are Baghty and Bhandari, both very fertile valleys; Merapani valley adjoining the Sibsagar plains of Assam, Lakhuni region in Ao country, and the thickly forested Tiru valley in the Konyak area, the northernmost region.

Area and boundaries

As early as 1841, in one of the first gazetteers on Assam, William Robinson, an educationalist, has mentioned of the Nagas, a border tribe, saying, “That large extent of mountainous country, bounded on the west by the Kopili river, the great southern bend of the Barak, and the eastern frontier of Tipperah, in nearly east longitude 83° on the north by the valley of Asam; on the east and the southeast by the hills dividing Assam from the Bor-Khamti country in longitude 97°, and the valley of the Kyendrens; and on the south by an imaginary line, nearly corresponding with the 23rd degree of north latitude, is inhabited by numerous tribes of highlanders, known to the Asamese, Bengalees, and the Manipuris, by the general name of the Nagas.” Later after the

Colonial government formed the Naga hills district in 1866, the Naga Hills under Assam was taken as an area situated between 26° 31’ 20” and 25° 14’ 40” North latitude, and between 92° 45’ 10” and 94° 15’ 10” east longitude, containing an area, as estimated in 1876, of 5,300 square miles. On the north it was bounded by Nawgong; on the east by Sibsagar, the Dayang River, and the Singpho and Abar country; on the south by the native state of Manipur and Cachar; and on the west the Nowgong and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

**Rivers**

The hills generally take the shape of a succession of steep ridges, but because the expanse of the hills being not very large, the few rivers and streams separating the deep valleys are generally small both in width and length. The main drainage system, Doyang, Dhansiri and Dikhu Rivers flows westward into the Brahmaputra. The Tizu River flows eastward and joins the Chindwin River in Myanmar.

A principal river in the east is the Tizu, which has its source from Suruhoto area in the Sema region. Entering the region from the north, it flows southwardly until the southern boundary is reached, from where it winds eastwardly and again northwardly to debouch for Tuensang; the river makes an eastwardly bend in southern Tuensang till it leaves the eastern frontier for Burma which is emptied, after a long course in Chindwin, a tributary of the Irrawaddy.6

Milak River the longest river flowing a cross the Ao area flows northward until it leaves the hills and turns westwards from the plains above Amguri and flows through Sibsagar district. Tsurang is an important tributary of the Milak River.

Dikhu River has its source near the Nurato Mountain in the Sema area. This river is known as Longa or Nanga by the Sema tribe and as Tsula by the Aos. The river flows westwards and enters the Ao area in the west of Longsa Village. It flows further northward forming a traditional boundary line between the Ao, Sangtam, Phom and the Konyak tribe. The river flows northward through the hills of the Konyak area and flows down the plain area near Naginimora. Nanung is the main tributary in the Langpangkong Range of the Ao area.

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North of the Doyang is the Disai, a principal stream and tributary of the Doyang. It is called Tsurang by the Ao tribe. It flows southward, cuts through the Ao area and the northern part of the Lotha area. It bends westwards and thence northward, further flowing northward until it leaves the hills for the plains of Changtang. Tsukok has its source from Changtongya area and flows through Asangma and Merangkong villages and joins the Milak River. The Menung River has its source at Minkong forest. It flows through various villages in the Ao area and joins the Milak.7

Dzulu River is a principal river which drains the central portion; it rises southeast of Kohima near the southern boundary and flows northwardly, when on leaving Kohima for the Mokokchung a region, it comes to be known as the Doyang (Diyung) or Tapu in the Wokha region and after travelling throughout the whole central portion it finally flows into the Brahmaputra River in Assam. Sidzu (Sidju) in southern Naga Hills is its main tributary. The Tsil River of the Rengma tribe is another tributary of the Doyang in the foothills.

Dhansiri (Temaki) receives all the western and northern drainage of southern Naga Hills, debouched from the North Cachar Hills, it bends in an eastwardly direction and flows past the Rangapahar-Dimapur plains, it flows northwardly and is joined by the Doyang near Golaghat in Assam until it falls onto the Brahmaputra.

With the exception of the Doyang, all the other rivers are mountain streams. Most of the rivers with the exception of the Dhansiri are rapids with high velocities or current, and are not navigable. At the time of formation of the Naga Hills District in 1866, the Dhansiri was made navigable by digging the banks, so as to widen the riverbed for the purpose of carrying transport from Golaghat upstream to Dimapur during the rainy seasons.8

There are no waterfalls of any significant size on any of the rivers, except the small waterfalls which appear during the rainy season and get dried up within a short time. Lakes are few in number, a natural lake is the Lachem in eastern Chakhesang, east of Meluri and the Dzudu and Chida lake both in Phek region, Awatsung lake, a historically important lake for the Ao tribe, in Mopungchuket village, and Amokmelu/

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7 S. Soyhunlo, *Geography of Nagaland*, p.45.
Amoklushi lake in Chuchuyimpang village, both in the Ao country and the Totsu-Wozhu lake in the Phiro area of Lotha country.

Traditional boundaries like small streams, watersheds of ridges, or stone pillars often divided the villages. Rarely was a large stream taken as a boundary because, after land, water was the most precious resource and no village would want to share it with another village. In cases when perishable things like prominent trees were used as demarcating pillars and it decayed overtime, instances of disputes occurred between villages or tribes.

River Traffic
There are no rivers navigable by large boats throughout the year, but rivers like the Doyang and Dhansiri, were navigable by boats upto two ton weight in the rainy season. Very little cultivation was seen along the banks of any of the rivers in the Naga Hills; in most cases sense forest jungle grew down the water’s edge. No village with a community living by river traffic was found. The trade carried on by means of water-carriage was comparatively petty, and consists chiefly in the importation of rice, salt, oil, cloth, beads, etc.; and the exportation of Manipuri and Naga cloth, bees-wax, cotton, and occasionally a little ivory. The Angami Nagas were the only inhabitants of the District who utilized the river water for irrigation purposes. These people cultivated their rice crops on the hill slopes, the sides of the hills being cut into terraces from base to summit. For the purpose of irrigating such terraces, water was often conducted along artificial channels for a considerable distance. No fisheries were leased in the Naga Hills, nor any rivers or marshes embarked for the purpose of cultivation. Along the marches were found reeds, canes, which grew spontaneously in the swamps and along the river beds throughout the district.  

Flora and fauna
In their natural state the hills were covered with dense evergreen forest; and where this forest had been cleared for cultivation, high grass reeds and scrub jungle sprung up in great profusion. 

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by J.N. Masters, while passing over the portion of the first ranges of the Naga Hills, lying between the Dikhu and the Dhansiri Rivers.\textsuperscript{11} He observed on the lower levels of the hills several species of plants common to Assam, but growing to a larger size in the hills, such as the Naga Bhe, Gordonia integrefolia, Roxb. In this region with tropical broad-leaf vegetation, some trees reached the top canopy in gigantic height. For instance, even the little ornamental flowering shrub called by the natives ‘Phottiki’ of ‘Phootkola’ (species of Melastomae) seen in the ravines of hills of 3,000 feet elevation assumed the character of small trees. On the higher levels, the Botanist observed the following plants. Mesua ferrea, Careya arborea, Ficus elastic, F. Scabella Dillenia speciosa, Chaulmoogra odorata, Emblica Officinalis, Artocarpus integrifolius, A. Chaplasha, Xanthochymus Pictorius, Liristoma Assamica, Gaurea binectarifera, Calumus hostiles, two species of Goldfussia, Pladera, Beaumontia. Numerous trees common to Assam, besides, oak, fir, birch, larch, apple, and apricot, were found in a great variety. In 1845, Captain John Butler’s discovery of indigenous tea plant while on a commercial mission brought great joy to the Colonial Government.\textsuperscript{12} The Naga Hills in general resembled the sub-Himalayan type of vegetation, with different kinds of flora depending on the altitude of the forest belt. At 1000 to 4000 feet were found species such as chestnut (castanopsis spp), Michelia champaca, Schima wallichii, Gmelina arborea, Albizzia spp and members of meliaceae. Along the Rengma foothills adjoining the Sibsagar plains were found deciduous riverian canes and bamboo grooves. At an altitude of 3,000 to 4,000 ft. were found pine trees but in the south-eastern region only. Oak and rhododendron were also associated with it. On a 5,000 ft. altitude; Betula, Rhododendron, Magnolia, Juglans regia and Runus were the main species. The consistent attempts to discover the vegetation yielded some desired results for the British however they themselves admitted of their limited reach and knowledge by saying: “In so large an extent of mountainous country as that occupied by the Nagas, the useful vegetable and mineral substances that are produced in it, must undoubtedly be numerous; but our imperfect acquaintance with their territories will admit of out particularizing only a few.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} For. Deptt. Pol-A, August 1844, no.34.
As regards the fauna of the Naga Hills, the major part of the region being covered by forest and jungles, there were plenty of animals, and birds. W.W. Hunter had listed upto 29 wild animals in his *A Statistical Account of Assam* and Major Godwin Austin in 1870-73 listed upto 51 birds found in the region.

**Forest Products**

In their natural state the Naga country was covered with evergreen forest, except for the occasional cultivation fields torched and denuded along the precipitous hill-sides for *jhum*\(^{14}\) cultivation. Where there was no cultivation, the vegetation was both dense and varied. The forest products consisted of bee wax, several dyes, a variety of cinnamon, and several kinds of fibre called by the Nagas *labhe*; a description of nettle (*ganin*); and a sort of creeper (*lakui*).\(^{15}\) In the jungle there were a variety of wild fruits, such as bananas, mangoes, crab apples, figs, limes, oranges, raspberries, strawberries, cherries and others. The Naga tribes depended on the forest produce primarily for food by way of cultivation, usage of trees and plants, animals and other livestock. They also used it for making traditional medicine, for fodder, for house building, for making implements.

**Agriculture**

Agriculture was carried on in a primitive manner by means of implements which consisted of a *dao* (a plain heavy machete) to cut the jungle and a hoe for digging. The principal crop grown in the Naga Hills was rice, which was of two varieties. *Kezi* rice is sown in the months of April and May and reaped in June and July. It is a coarse grain, consumed chiefly by the Nagas, and can be cultivated on any description of the land. *Thedi* or *chedi* rice was sown in June and July and reaped in October and November. This rice was much finer and of better flavour, and was generally preferred by the people of the plains. On the higher ranges the rice crops were grown in terraces, and the soil was well irrigated by artificial water channels. It was not uncommon to see a hill-side thus cultivated from top to bottom, the whole presenting an unbroken succession of steps covered with a luxuriant crop. On the lower ranges, cultivation was almost entirely restricted to *jhum* system, by which a patch of land

\(^{14}\) Jhum cultivation involves a slash and burn type of shifting cultivation; forest land is burnt and cleared for cultivation.

was cleared of jungle, and cultivated for two or three successive years until the soil was impoverished, when new land was selected and cleared, and the old clearing was allowed to relapse into jungle. The other crops raised in the Naga Hills were: Indian corn grown to a small extent; a small species of grain, called suthe and kesithe by the Nagas; a few vegetables, yams, chillies, ginger, garlic, a few cardamom plants and cotton. Cotton cultivation was restricted to the lower ranges lying north of the Barel and Rengma hills. The tea plant is indigenous to the Naga Hills, but large scale cultivation was not known. The Nagas made use of the fibres of the bark of a species of nettle, which they wove into strong, substantial sheets to be exported to neighbouring places. They also knew the art of dyeing and several dyes, yellow, black, blue, and one a brilliant scarlet, were extracted from the bark of various trees and creepers.16

Habitat

To establish a new village, several factors were put under consideration; the geographical topography of the new site and its picturesque view. A place having moderate climate, with plenteous of springs for water and vast forested land for cultivation was nearly always selected for a new village site. The fertile land and its resources enabled the tiny hamlets to live off its bounties and flourish. Living in a space represented by a confused assortment of magnificent mountains and forests and narrow valleys, watered by innumerable hill streams generally forming the boundaries of tribes; the Naga tribes had been left isolated by their unique culture, manners, language and a universal abhorrence for domination and thraldom. Its isolation magnified because of its dense verdant forest cover, impenetrable ridges, and often rain swollen river ways. Free from the intrusion of the outside world such a milieu, presented an opportunity to the various tribes to explore their habitation and to initiate a prolonged symbiotic relationship with the forest.

Early tribal political organization

The traditional Naga Society was a unique well-developed social structure with mature, resilient, egalitarian and heterogeneous networks that underpinned and sustained community activities. The various Naga tribes had their own traditional

16 Ibid. p.192.
political organization. The tribes were broadly divided into two groups: those under
the institution of chieftainship and those without it and naturally differences and some
variations in customary practices were prevalent because of this division. It appears
that the Nagas of the eastern hills, consisting of the present tribes of Changs, Phoms,
Semas, Sangtams, Khiemnungans, Yimchungers and Konyaks were from the former
group. For instance, the Konyak tribe had hereditary kingship/chieftainship
system and the king was called Ang. There was more than one Ang for the whole Konyak
tribe. The Angs controlled and ruled over all the villages under their control. As such
authority was vested in the Ang to settle disputes between villages or individuals,
impone fines, or oust a criminal out of the village. Village elders also exercised some
administrative powers in case the Ang became incompetent or had fallen to
insignificance. In the non-chieftainship society no individual or group was recognized
as a privileged class. For instance, other Naga tribes like the Ao’s were administered
by a system of Putu Menden which consisted of a council of elders, selected from
each khel of the village. Its main task was to lay down laws and regulations for
political and social administration of the whole village. Each member of the Putu
Menden served the council for one generation that is for twenty five years as generally
was the case with the Mongsen phatry. In the case of the Chungli phatry, the members
served for 30 years. The Lotha tribe also had a similar organization called ngti
consisting of representatives of the different khels and clans. The Angamis and the
allied tribes such as the Chakhesang etc. did not have such village government but a
system based on an extremely loose form of democracy. The same form of political
relations existed among some villages but this was more or less in the nature of peace
treaty.

Each village was a social and political unit, but the most effective social unit was the
clan. No clan had any recognized chief, but each was divided into khels (a term
borrowed from the Afghan border), and exogamous sub-division of which there were
several in each village. Very elderly and wise people were selected by consensus of
the village to perform important gennas. For instance a woman was selected to

17 Khel is a subdivision of the village.
18 Mentioned in a booklet originally written in Ao local dialect by L. Imti Aier, with the title ‘Ao Naga
Social and customary genealogy.’
perform *gennas* relating to cultivation and men for festivals and other things. Otherwise, the whole village acted together against any crises, natural calamity and external danger.

The Sema tribes were different from all other Naga tribes in respect of village organization. 21 They migrated frequently and several wealthy Sema’s would venture out to set up a new village either within the Sema area or even in the territory of other tribes. The founder of the new village was considered to be the chief and the lord of the village and he was the government. Though he may have had some villagers advising him or consulting with him, officially there was no other village organization. 22 Most of the other Naga tribes also had their village administered by representatives of *khels*, selected by consensus and often of a hereditary nature.

**Community life**

The early Naga tribes essentially led a community life. Each tribe had rights over well defined areas of forest, hunting grounds and fishing spots. In the past the village was their country and its organization was their Government. The village was the primary social and political unit, but the most effective social unit was the clan. On all important matters the clan community as a whole functioned in a democratic manner and the elders presided over the meetings. Each clan member had certain duties towards the clan, according to age and ability. The clans were divided into *khels* and finally came the family unit. In some instances, there was great rivalry between the *khels*, which, prior to British occupation, led to bitter blood feuds. 23 However, such rivalries did not deter the village from coming together in case their security was threatened by other villages or tribes. An important social institution was the *morung*. 24 Each *khel* had its own *morung* and it was used to prepare young men for impartation of disciplinary training for manhood. Every *khel* occupied well demarcated areas and functioned as a homogenous socio-economic unit in perfect accord and fraternal spirit.

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24 The *morung* was a bachelors hall or boys dormitory. The inmates of the *morung* were young boys assigned to perform certain menial duties for the community.
Networks of social interaction were created and reinforced through the activities of everyday life and cultural rituals centered on the forest, creating interpersonal ties and affirming community boundaries. The villagers would cultivate their fields, roam free in the forests and collect daily essentials to maintain their hearth in the village. With no restrictions imposed within their own village boundary, they freely collected firewood or food such as wild roots, fruits or leaves from the thickly covered forests. The residential site located on the ridge of a mountain spur was usually surrounded by small tracts of forests and bamboo grooves. Next to them were the jhum fields or the wet-rice terraced cultivation practiced in particular by the tribes on the southern part of the Naga Hills practiced side by side with jhuming. Beyond the cultivation fields were the deep forests. For both jhum and terrace type cultivation, villagers would go to the fields’ together, khel–wise and work on these fields the whole day, returning only late in the evening.

Community and the forest
Traditionally since time immemorial tribals and other forests dwellers generally protect not only individual trees but also forests, and even their entire ecosystems because they have deep rooted vested interests in doing so. Such vested interests are usually institutionalized in the form of well established practices enforced by various social control mechanisms. This is because, for the tribals and many other forest dwellers, their forests are essential for their very survival.

According to traditional law, there is no land without an owner. But ownership of land, and therefore also of forests, is private and is vested with the village, khels, clans, and individuals. Ownership rights of land as well as the forests in the Naga Hills were clearly recognized and protected by their own tribal customary law. Since the community control over the forests and water resources was complete, and clearly sanctioned by the traditional laws, for Naga tribes their usual claim for unrestricted right over forests and water resources, was totally justified and legitimate.

Each tribe had a well defined territory. Within the tribal territory, every village had a well demarcated territory. Further, the village territories were usually classified into

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two areas: a) Primary or agricultural land (and forests) and b) subsidiary or building and reserve land. The village territory was again divided into four holdings.

1) Common Village land: The village land inclusive of forests was the joint property of the village and the right to use them rested with the village council.

2) Clan Land: Every clan had sites for construction of houses and also plots for cultivation within the forest. The eldest member of the clan was the custodian of the clan land and he exercised a titular right over the clan land. Every clan member had a right to use such land according to seniority of age with reference to the number of sites or plots available.

3) Linaege Land: There were certain lands in the village owned by a kin group, which neither can be termed as clan land nor as individual land.

4) Individual land: In all villages there was also some individual owned land either inherited or acquired. The individual had absolute right over his land. He had a right to a share of the produce of the land, to transfer holdings, to alienate and to grant rights of use to others.

In the case of chieftainship society, a good portion of the land within the village territory belonged to the Chief. It was his duty to see that plots were allotted to those persons in the village who had no plot for cultivation.26

The inert-village demarcations including forest and water resources were permanent and undisputable. As the Naga tribes regarded forest and water resources as a gift from God, they felt at ease to fiercely protect it and also to utilize and manage it for their own disposal and needs. The sanction enabled them to develop a culture that ensued a proper balance between human and ecological needs. Forests were treated as a renewable resource and as a life support system that had to be preserved.

The best part of the forest was considered as common property. For hunting; fishing and usage of water, there were no restrictions within the village forest. Occasionally the whole community would hunt or fish together. Community fishing occupied an

important place in the village. Preparations for such events were made a few days before the actual date selected. The village elders selected a particular river to be poisoned. The next day the villagers went to the jungle to collect creepers, barks or fruits of some tree appropriate for poisoning fish. Even for such a practice, there were slight variations among the tribes. While some tribes allowed the whole family to collect the items required for poisoning the fish, the Ao tribe and some other tribes allowed only the male members to do so. Certain ceremonies were performed usually by an older man of the village before the pounding of the creepers, barks, or fruits to release the poison. In some villages the system was to make only one camp for the occasion but in some villages separate camps were constructed clan wise. Individual hunting was common; however the community also organized hunting expeditions in case of big game such as an elephant, tiger or bear. After spotting the hideout of the game, a day was fixed for hunting in which the entire khel or village or several villages participated together, depending on the size and number of the game. Even the hide of the wild animals killed on hunting expeditions were put into judicious use. ‘They have a shield, or ‘phor’ made of buffalo or boar skin, and often ornamented by goat’s hair dyed scarlet, or by cowries. It figures in their war dances…the bunches of hair and feathers on the topi’s are all usually mounted on thin slips of buffalo horn exactly like the whale bones.’

Other requirements such as fodder for animals, medicinal herbs from the forest, timber for implements and houses, fences for their fields were usually collected from their own khel, and clan forest within the village territory. If any individual wanted to cut down a tree which belonged to the other clans of the village, he had to take permission first and then use the resources.

Various mechanisms for preservation of ecosystems were applied as this link was seen as important for the continuity of the tribe, thus making the preservation of forests coincide with the conservation of their village or tribe. Khonoma village in the Angami country, started an alder tree (Rupuo in Angami) – based jhum system since their ancestral days and they perfected this practice overtime. Using this particular species of trees in the jhum cycle, enabled enhance crop yields and reduce soil

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erosion. Though normally, a nine year jhum cycle enables two times cultivation of
fields, the usage of alder enabled the Angami cultivator two harvests in two out of
every four to five years. In addition to more productive agriculture, this system make
possible for wood to be used in various domestic needs such as fuelwood, charcoal
burning and timer for construction. Even the leaves shed were found useful as mulch
and to add humus to the soil. There was no disturbance caused to the ancient forests
as the 7-9 years cycle of rotation of cultivation and letting the area lay fallow
permitted the soil to regain its fertility.

Thus, for the Naga Hill tribes, the forest and its resources formed the basis of all
forms of communal cultural practices, including incessant inter-tribal territorial
warfare in Naga Hills. All resources of the forests were used to protect their hamlets
in the forests and also to prevent enemies go through their territories. John Butler, in
his, ‘Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam’ written in 1855, makes
mention of an expedition and foray by British soldiers into the Naga country and the
breach made into strong embankments of the Naga village, compelling the natives to
later desert it, but not without resistance. He mentioned: “The next day, after
searching for the well dome distance from the village, when the whole party had
partaken of the water they experienced very unpleasant effects, being afflicted with a
dizziness and heaviness of the upper eyelids which made it difficult to keep them
open. On examining the well or reservoir, it appeared that the enemy had bruised and
steeped a poisonous root in the water. The Nagah prisoners said, that while the root
was fresh its effects were what had been experienced; but, if allowed to rot, it would
kill all who partook of it in three or four days.”

This symbiotic relationship with the forests indicated their total dependence on the
forest and its resources for their very existence and in turn the forests dependence on
them for its preservation and continuity. For instance, in the Angami tradition, in a
section of their history, is a legend describing their belief in the intimacy and affinity
of the entire cosmos with man and nature; how ‘a long time ago’ when the world was
young, gods, men and beasts dwelt in peace, and how a god, a man, a woman, and a
tiger lived together.28 In the broader milieu of this symbiotic relationship, it signifies

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the tremendous value, both material and religious, attached to the land and the forest by the tribal people. Such bond arises out of the intimate relationship between indigenous and tribal people and their land, a relationship that is best described in the following words: “Indigenous peoples ancestral territories are not just their economic base, these lands are intimately bound up with their cosmologies and identities as communities, and as peoples. The landscape that they occupy is at once their home and the sacred abode of spiritual beings whose invisible presence explains the functioning of the invisible world. They see themselves as stewards holding the land of their ancestors in trust for future generations.” 29

**Tribal religion and the forest**

The early British explorers could not fathom the religious beliefs and practices of the Naga tribes, and hence many dismissed it with a casual abandon in their reports about the Naga tribes. ‘The Nagas have no established form of worship; they have no temples erected in honour of their deities, and no ministers peculiarly consecrated to their service. They have the knowledge however of several superstitious ceremonies and practices handed to them by tradition; and to this they have recourse with a childish credulity, when roused by any emergence from their usual insensibility, an exited to acknowledge the power and to implore the protection of superior beings.’30

R.G. Woodthorpe, remarked that, “the Nagas in general have very vague ideas of religion or of a future state.” In the same paper again, Lieutenant Holcombe is quoted by Woodthorpe saying that the Naga tribes, “believe that in heaven they will have cultivation, houses and work; the poor will be better off they think; and although they have a name for God, they do not seem to worship a supreme being.”31 However, for the Nagas religious myths and traditions around nature, forests and water, linked to the very identity of the tribe led to their balanced use. Legends, fables, omens and beliefs, were all connected very closely to nature. They believed that forest was an abode of the spirits, and looked at it with certain unease and apprehension. Appeasing the spirits of the forest, was therefore of vital importance for them. The belief in the existence of spirits occupied the core of their religion. But the system of incantation

and appeasement of the deified spirits varies from tribe to tribe and from village to village, as also from one household to another.

The traditional animistic religion practiced by the Nagas and its system of ceremonies, particularly of *gennas* illustrates how this traditional religion provided an abundance of spirits and gods of lakes, trees, and rocks. The pantheon comprises of both benevolent and malevolent spirits. Most tribes believed in a Creator who was seen as a benevolent spirit and the existence of creation was attributed to be the work of the Creator. The malevolent spirits were seen to have been more engaged in everyday life of the people, by inhabiting the village, sacred stones, lakes and streams, ranges, mountains and fields and forests. The goodwill of the spirits was, therefore, sought by offering necessary sacrifices on all important occasions for fear of being provoked into destroying the individual, his family or the entire village. Priests received special training for warding off evil spirits and for the conduct of ceremonies. Several practices were held to avert epidemics, believed to be a representation of an evil spirit’s shadow, which in cases of failures of being appeased, had come to ravage the village. In cases of sickness pigs and fowls were sacrificed in large numbers, in order to appease the particular spirit to whose malign influence the sickness is supposed to be due.

Many Naga tribes believed in the existence of a group of spirits that inhabited the dense and foggy forests and man eaters who carry off the human being to unknown destinations, usually towards the rivers. The Angami tribe in common with the other tribes, believed in the supernatural but made no attempt whatever to produce in carving or picture the image of the deities (*terhoma*) or spiritual beings. Chief among them is the *Kepenopfü* or the *Ukepenopfü*. Among the legions of *terhoma*, a vast majority are unknown by name, unspecified, vague inhabitants of the invisible world. Among the pantheon, were several pertaining to the forests and water such as *Dzūrawü /Dzūraü* who was goddess of fishing and *Chiehie* god of wild animals; *Kechi-ke-kho* the spirit or species of spirit, which inhabits stones and *Tekhu-rho*, a god of tigers held responsible for the loss of missing persons in the jungle, etc. He is also believed to avenge the death of tigers or leopards killed by men, if the dead animal is not prevented from telling him the name of the man who killed him. This may be done by wedging open the mouth of the dead tiger with a piece of wood and
putting the head into a running stream at some distance from the village. When the
tiger tries tells the Tekhu-rho who has killed him, all that the spirit can hear is a
meaningless gurgle in the water.32 During hunting expeditions, Tsükho and Dzürawü
two spirits, male and female, husband and wife, represented as dwarfs, who preside
over all wild animals, were offered prayers such as; “In your name have I come out,
and in hope of your aid, I pray that ye will discover and give unto me of the animals
in your keeping.” 33

The Konyak tribe also had deities at the family, clan and village level. The Konyaks'
view of the world of supernatural forces resembled the religious ideas of Naga tribes
in the sense that they saw their environment as inhabited by innumerable spirits,
partly friendly and partly hostile to man, but controllable by the performance of the
appropriate rituals. Chief among their deities was Gawang who denoted not the
spiritual essence of the universe but a deity of highly personal nature associated with
the sky more than with the earth. Prayers and incantations were offered to appease
Gawang for individual or collective blessings. As compared to Gawang, the spirits of
the earth, the forests, and the rivers were not very important, though at times it was
essential to placate them with offerings of chickens and pigs.

Among the Lotha Nagas, Ronsi was the name given to the many godlings. To every
village and every man was attached a Ronsi, by whose favour the crops are good.
Ritualistic prayers were chanted to the Ronsi for protection while fishing, hunting, and
working in the fields etc; they believed that such acts of appeasement would lead the
Ronsi of the hillside to come to their help. The Lothas also have a godling for streams
and rivers in the person of Tchüpvüo (“water-master”).

The Ao tribe also performed elaborate ceremonies and offered prayers to different
Gods of nature, but they were commonly addressed as Lijaba Tsungrem. Since water
sources were scarce people performed elaborate rain making ceremonies to bring
down the welcome showers. A stream was “poisoned” or fished with due rites, or
sacrifices offered to sacred stones scattered around the Ao country. Among Chongli,
Mongsen and Changki clan of the Ao tribe and the subsequent subdivision of scores

33 Ibid., p.196.
of phratries of these clans, the *Chami* phratry of the *Chongli* clan is regarded as specially connected to water. According to an Ao tradition certain duties in connection with water ceremonies are assigned to men of this phratry. Perennial natural springs were considered as something more or less magical, with therapeutic value, and therefore associated with exceptional purity by most of the Naga tribes. These springs which had religious connotations also, are still an important part of traditional purification rituals during local festivals.

For almost all the Naga tribes the landscape that they occupied was both their home and the sacred abode of spiritual beings whose invisible presence explained the functioning of both the visible and invisible world.