CHAPTER 2
TRADITIONAL MANAGEMENT OF WATER RESOURCES

The traditional method of water management among the Naga Hill tribes in the pre-colonial period, their use by local communities, the continued existence of people dependent on the land and water, the degree of control by the individual community, village, khel, clan and family; have been a continual focus in this chapter. The Naga tribes in general have more similarities than differences in traditional practices, customs and beliefs. Each tribe in the period mentioned above had a well defined territory and within that space permanent inter-village land demarcations except in a few instances, was a determining factor as how the water that was drawn naturally became in course of time the subject of all sorts of rights, rights of purchase, of custom and of inheritance. For this study, although emphasis has generally been on the Naga Hills as a whole, in depth focus is on traditional water management in four regions namely Mon District, Kohima District, Wokha and Mokokchung district taken as case studies.

In Nagaland, for defence purposes the earliest Naga Villages made settlements on top of high hills and ridges. In their natural state these hills were covered with evergreen forests. The first settlers selected this site both because of its strategic location on top of a ridge and also because of the availability of natural springs, other than just the rivers and streams flowing in the lower valleys. Usually the priest together with the inhabitants of the new village performed elaborate cleansing ceremonies for good fortune of the colonists. Water was regarded as a very valuable property. Since the land and the forest provided everything to them, villagers jealously protected the land of the forefathers from neighbouring villages and enemies’ occupation.

A.W. Davis has stated that, “For tribes like the Angamis, Lhotas, and Aos, who live in permanent and large villages, and amongst whom land is none too plentiful, we find that the rights of individuals to property in land are well known and well recognized, and the rules as to inheritance and partition of such property settled by strict customary laws.”34 The general pattern of the traditional land holding, its locale and division among the various tribes and the diverse villages was correlated to the nature

of water usage and ownership. Further intricacies such as kinship connections through tribe, village, *khel*, clan and family involved in a range of support, sharing of resources and expertise led to not just the interpretations of water rights and ownership of various Naga tribes but with striking differences evident in the sphere of cultivation and the use of water.

Most of the tribes regarded rivers or streams flowing through their country as belonging to the very villages through whose territories the water flowed. The village considered it as common property and no individual rights could be established in such instances. Villagers without any restriction could access the forest of the village. They were allowed to hunt, fish, draw water from rivers or streams, make use of forest resource by collecting medicinal herbs or even cut down trees to be used as building materials for various uses. For domestic purposes, villagers dependent on pond water for cooking, washing, drinking, usually collected by women who carried the water on a bamboo vessel. Community labour was involved in the construction or repairing or improvement of bridle-paths through the forest connecting the village with other villages and paths leading to the rice fields. In the same way, village water tanks, and traditional water wells or ponds were repaired or maintained well. Every *morung* member took the responsibility for cleaning and use of the water source. If a person failed to join the community without reasonable excuse on that day he was fined accordingly.

The lands of each village were well defined, except in a few cases and fish-bearing streams were also well defined areas. Between different villages, sometimes there were disputes over the boundary and fishery cases. In an early case of conflict in the Ao country, ‘the people of Mübongchokü (Molodubia) village claimed absolute rights to the Mēlāk River, for some forty miles, because that stream had its source near their lands.’ 35 However, there were also instances where in some portions in a river two villages shared the river boundary. In such cases villagers from both villages could practice fishing without any conflict. About once each year a village will turn out as a whole to go fishing; and, several kinds of bark, roots, seeds, or nuts, pounded into a pulpy mass and mixed with mud, were dumped into the stream to poison the

water. The poison either killed the fish or stupefied the fish. To prevent the fish from floating away, a bamboo fence was built across the stream some distance down. Neighbouring villages were given pre-hand information before any communal fishing was organized.

Tribes such as the Aos, Lothas, Semas, and trans-Dikhu and Tizu tribes cultivated their fields by *jhuming*. The jungle growing on the hill-side is cut down, and the undergrowth is burned, the larger trees being left to rot where they lie. The ground is then lightly hoed over, and seeds of rice, maize, millet, Job’s tears (Coix Lacryma), chillies and various kinds of vegetables dilled in. The same plot of land is cropped for only two years in succession, and then allowed to lie fallow for eight to nine years. Further cropping would be liable to destroy the roots of *irka* and bamboo, whose ashes serve for manure when the land is next cleared for cultivation, while after the second harvest weeds spring up with such rapidity as to be a serious impediment to cultivation. Cotton crop was grown on the northern ridges, by the Lothas and the Aos.36 The land left fallow, and which had been taken up again were defined with markers such as stone boundary, trees or other marks. Trespassing was dealt with seriously and no one cut wood or bamboo on the land of another.

However, those from southern part of Nagaland exhibited the wet-rice terraced cultivation, using an elaborate system of terracing and irrigation, connecting it to water sources by channels sometimes even measured in miles; but it is practiced side by side with *jhuming*. As early as 1840-41, Robinson gave a description of agriculture in the Naga Hills thus, “every portion of cultivable land is most carefully terraced up the hills, as far as rivulets can be commended for the irrigation of the beds; in these localities.” 37 From the rivulets and water splashes, the main source of irrigation, channels of enormous length were dug to carry water and overflow the terraces. Bamboo pipes sometimes served as supplementary irrigational means down the slopes where terraces are located.38 There was no knowledge in the past of the use of the plough animals among the Naga tribes for wet cultivation. Difference in the

37 W. Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, p.390.
38 H. Bareh, Gazetteer of Nagaland, Kohima District, p.100.
cultivation methods of the Naga tribes led to the evolution of water rights peculiar to their own country, sometimes leading to very complicated, litigious water affairs.

Cultivation of crops was dependent on rainfall; absence of enough rainfall foretold poor harvest for that year and therefore specific elaborate rain making ceremonies were performed by most tribes. For instance, the Ao tribe calls this ceremony *Tsükulemmong* which literally means ‘water worship’ ceremony. Prayers were offered to *Anungtsüngba*_ - the god of sky and rain, to send more rain for that period of scarcity. The Naga world was full of spirits, every tree, shrub, hillock or body of water in the forest, harboured a spirit or demon. The cause of all natural phenomena such as illness, rainfall, wind, thunderstorms was attributed to these spirits. Man was considered an integral part of this animated nature. Therefore it was essential to appease these spirits through various ceremonies, and rituals and to make amends, thus redressing the natural balance. The belief of the Nagas was such that a person did not view himself as standing outside nature but as dependent on it. Festivals were also divided into two broad categories: spring festivals at sowing stage involved purification and renewal and harvest festivals were performed in thanksgiving to the godlings at harvest time.

**Mon District.**

The Konyak Naga inhabits the country between the Brahmaputra valley on the north and the Patkoi Range bothering Burma. In the pre-colonial era, like most of the other Naga tribes, the Konyak villages were established on a hill top, mostly for defence purpose. The villages were encircled with bamboo fences and usually only one gate was used as entrance to the village. Each village had control over their own specific forest and river water resources. The traditional management of water resources was almost the same in the entire Konyak Naga region, with only a slight variation in some villages. Pongkong Village, Wanching Village, Totok Village, Tamlu Village, Longkei Village has been used as illustrations for Mon district. Important rivers flowing through its forest areas of the villages mentioned are the Dikhu River, Tesand and Teyüp rivers, Tapi River, and Tenang and Tesang rivers.
1. **Pongkong Village** shares boundaries with Tanhai, Langkei, Oking, Kongan and Namthai Village. These traditional boundaries permanently handed down from their ancestors shares boundaries with many villages. Even in such an instance, Pongkong Village had specific boundary demarcation for hunting, fishing and use of the forest and water.

2. **Wanching Village** shares boundaries with neighbouring villages like Wakching, Chingtung, Chingphoi, Tamlu, Kongan and some Phom Villages. Dikhu was the main source of water for the Wanching people and the village had large areas of forested area. Wanching villagers owned a large part of Dikhu River flowing through its forest and at the same time shared the river water with neighbouring villages for fishing purpose.

3. **Totok Village** shares boundaries with Chinglong, Chi, Langmeang, Chaozu and Sheanghati Tangten Village. Like all the other Konyak villages, the people of Totok Village settled on hill-top and mountain. Tapi is the main source of water for the villagers and they owned a large part of river flowing through its jurisdiction.

4. **Longkei Village** has a large expanse of forest and water resources under its control, which their forefathers had acquired while opening the Longkei Village. Tenang and Tesang are the two important rivers for the villagers where they get everything for their livelihood. Longkei Village shares boundaries with villages like Tanhai, Pongkong, Leangnyu and Hongphoi.

5. **Tamlu Village** shares boundaries with the Ao’s, Phom’s and some Konyak Villages. Dikhu River flows through Tamlu forest areas.

6. During the pre-colonial era, Tamlu as well as **Wakching village** shared fixed boundary demarcation with all the neighbouring villages.

During the ancestral past, forest and water resources defined power, wealth and fame of the village. No other village had the right to go for fishing, hunting or cut down trees in their forest area. Nokoi, a senior citizen from Longkei Village stated that, “Longkei village with a large expanse of forest and water resource under its control, acquired by the forefathers ever since the inception of the village, has both the Tenang and Tesang Rivers flowing through the area. The villagers depended wholly on their forest land and these two rivers. The Village had nine farming forest areas, and in
these areas, apart from Longkei villagers, no other villages have the right to use or farm on Longkei Land.” 39 Boundary demarcations were fixed between villages. Within the village also, boundaries were fixed according to clans and this was further sub-divided to individual level. For instance, ‘The territory of a village such as Wakching extended over a large area, and comprised virgin forest, cultivable land partly overgrown by secondary jungle, and wasteland unsuitable for economic use. Within that territory all members of the village community were entitled to hunt, irrespective of the rights of individuals to specific cultivable plots. Apart from the arable land which was privately owned, there were also some plots which belonged to particular men's houses, and such morung land was cultivated jointly by the members of the morung. A man's holdings were never contained in a compact block, but were scattered over the village territory. The richest men of Wakching owned 250 plots and even men considered poor owned land in several places.’ 40 As common property forest and water resources were wholly controlled and looked after by the villagers themselves. For instance, according to Longmeth from Pongkong Village, “the Pongkong village comprised of three morungs and every morung member took the responsibility for cleaning and use of pond water.” 41

The village forest resources were shared among villagers and they privately owned and used the shared forest area for farming and growing food crops. The Konyak system of shifting cultivation made a dispersal of holdings necessary, for each year the village took a clearly defined and carefully chosen area under cultivation and within this tract each family owned land sufficient for its needs. Neighbouring villages were informed in advance before cutting or burning of jungle for cultivation. In the following year an adjoining area was cleared of jungle and cultivated alongside with that tilled the previous year. The result of this system of rotation was that each field was cultivated over a two-year period, and then left fallow for several years. As large stretches of land was available in the Konyak country, jhum cultivation was the mode they adopted as cultivation can alternate with long periods of fallow. ‘In many areas slash-and-burn cultivation on frequently shifted fields is associated with a system of communal ownership of land and often also with a considerable instability

39 Interview with Nokoi, 96 Years, Longkei Village, Mon District - 21st November 2013.
41 Interview with Longmeth, 80 Years, Pongkong Village, Mon District - 25th November 2013.
of settlements. Ownership may be vested in a territorial group, a village, a clan, or a chief, who, though nominally the proprietor of the entire village land is under an obligation to distribute it for cultivation to his subjects. Tribes, such as the Aos, the southern neighbors of the Konyak, recognize private as well as communal rights in land. Water was not used for cultivation purpose as in the case of the tribes in southern part of Naga Hills. Its usage was mostly for domestic purpose, such as cooking, cleaning, washing etc. The villagers, usually the women folk collected water in a bamboo vessel known as Yeangli in Konyak dialect from the river, stream or pond located below the village. Since water, at least, had to be fetched even on feast days, women enjoyed far less leisure than men.

Villagers went for hunting and fishing together within the jurisdiction of the village. Inangam, Citizen Chairman from Tatok Village mentioned that, “Totok Village owned and controlled large part of Tapi River, but there were certain portions on the river which they shared with neighbouring village while fishing. Again, Tatok villagers were not allowed to go fishing at the Tapi River which flowed entirely through Langmeang forest area. But there were some portions in the river where both villages shared the river boundary and can practice fishing by both.” Neighbouring villages were given pre-hand information before going for fishing. In general, the Konyak villages respected and preserved their forest and water resources with great honour and dignity. In case of conflict, villages usually fought till victory in order to reclaim the disputed land/water areas; i.e., boundary, forest or river. For instance Nokloai, from Longkei village states that, “Longkei Village boundary and forest areas expands around Tenang and Teshang River/forest areas. Its forest and water resources were wholly controlled and looked after by the villagers. During the pre-colonial era, conflicts arose between Longkei and neighbouring villages over boundary, forest or river issues. In such cases, Angh and village elders tried to settle the dispute.” The Anghs and the village elders were the final authority and judge in conflict situations and usually fines were imposed to the defaulting party. Thus, if a man accidentally set fire to a piece of forest, he had to pay a fine of one big basket of rice, or give a pig, which was consumed by the village councilors. The man whose forest got burned

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43 Interview with Inangam, 68 Years, Tatok Village, Mon District - 27th November 2013.
received no share in the fine and no compensation. However, when negotiations failed, war and head-hunting between villages was the final solution. As a head hunting tribe, conflict situations proved irresistible and villages fought to expand their territory and also to reclaim the disputed land or water spots.

Although many ritual practices were prevalent, those concerning water were mostly done during dry season or even during famine. If there was no rain for more that 3-4 months, then the village elders would perform ritual practice to appease the Mother Nature. The most important deity was Gawang, ‘Earth-sky’, to whom offerings were presented on all important occasions. Other deities of the forest, of the water, and the earth were also placated with various offerings through rituals. Inangam from Tatok village has cited a ritual practiced by their forefathers, “if there was no rainfall for three to four months, then villagers went to a nearby river and made a bamboo boat, on top of which they would make fire and ask for blessings and rainfall from Mother Earth.” Nokloi, from Longkei village refers to another ritual from his village, “our forefathers used to dig the earth four to five feet deep and covered the hole with bamboo and other means. They would jump around the hole, and in return it would produce a thunder like sound, by which the villagers believed that the Mother Earth will hear and their cry and would provide rain for farming and other purposes.” Villagers would present offerings, and perform various rituals/ genna and not work on that day and the whole day they showed their sadness and grief to the nature and asked for abundance blessings.

**Kohima District**

Mezoma, Phesama, Viswema, Jotsoma, Jakhama, Kigwema and Khonoma villages has been taken as illustration for this study. Most of the Angami villages, as of now, had at least a river or two in close vicinity while some obtained its supply of water from a spring outside the village. The use of forest and water resources differed from village to village. A big village would frequently have several water-holes, but in some villages the supply being scarce, the labour intensive work caused the people to apply economy in its use.44 Thepfürülie Zutso, from Kigwema Village gave the example of his village stating that, “Kigwema was said to have migrated from

Kezhakeno since time immemorial. Jakhama and Phesama are its neighbouring villages. Within the village there are five *khels*. Like the other villages, every *khel* had its own water tanks constructed below the village. The traditional well and the natural spring wells were used from forefathers’ time. People would also go to field to wash and to take bath. The land was inherited and the forest and rivers were the main boundaries for the village between the clans or individuals. There was a story of two true friends in the village called *Seca* and *Pfükha*; such were their closeness that they even shared a common forest area.”45

Initially the forest and its resources was all common property, later it was divided into parts i.e., clans and family to individual. Mhiesizokho Zinyü, from Khonoma Village elucidated, “Forest and water resources belonged to different *khels* in the past. In some small villages like Dzöleke or Menguju in Western Angami area, the entire forest as well as water resources belonged to the community, but in large villages like Mezoma, Khonoma and Jotsoma, ownership is claimed by different *khels*.”46 Krorovi Peseyie from Jotsoma Village further stated, “Villagers take the view that Jotsoma shares twelve boundaries with villages from Japfü to Tsiesema to Meriema till Mengujüm village and had no disputes land with neighbouring villages. Water and natural resources for the construction of canals was not prohibited and villagers who discovered ponds usually named it after themselves. Underground (spring) water was used in Jotsoma from the earlier period. In terms of ownership, there was some dissimilarity. Rivers had no ownership whereas ponds and lakes had ownership.”47 People considered water as a free gift of nature and copious. Water was free of cost, it did not have a price however, and the water which flowed through a particular stretch of land was taken as belonging to the land owner. From Mezoma Village, Zapuvisie Lhouşa highlighted the background of his village, articulating that “Mezoma is a village of ‘kekuo krhie’ which means it has historical importance for the Angami Nagas. It comprises of three *khels* and every *khel* has its own morung. It has a river flowing through its forest and this river later joins with the Khonoma River and finally flows to Dzüda. People in the past days got water from the canals which were

45 Interview with Thepfürülie Zutso, 55 years, Kigwema Village, Kohima District. - 22nd December 2013.
46 Interview with Mhiesizokho Zinyü, 66 years, Khonoma Village, Kohima District. - 7th December 2013.
47 Interview with Krorvi Peseyie, 77 years, Jotsoma Village, Kohima District - 19th December 2013.
brought from the river and every khel had one such provision. However, the most common place for easy access to water were ponds near the village or lakes. It is also said that villagers were advised to use water judiciously and not waste water as it was a precious commodity.” 48 Pukron Kikhi from Viswema Village affirmed that, “There was freedom to access water anywhere in the village forest. Even in the case of scarcity, water was not sold, people could get it from within the village, sometimes even from another khel, free of cost.” 49 As water was considered as common property, the people were not allowed to sell their property to people outside the village. An individual could only sell or exchange his forest (area) to anybody in case of poverty.

Water was used mainly for agriculture purpose. Rainfall being very heavy in the region, the Angamis and its neighbours in the north followed an elaborate system of terracing and irrigation. According to the local traditions, the Angami terrace system is as old as the tribe itself, the system believed to have been brought from its ancient home. The Angami Naga villages were surrounded by admirably constructed terrace fields cut up along the rugged hills sometimes high up to over 6,000 feet. It was built up with stone retaining walls at diverse levels, and irrigated by means of skillfully constructed channels, which distribute the water over each step in series. Terraces leaned up against the stone retaining walls at different levels get themselves protected from the soil erosion and facilitate regularize distribution of irrigation. This system of cultivation is believed to have extended northwards from Manipur and to have been adopted by the Angamis (as some would believe), partly from their desire for better kinds of grain than Job’s tears and millet, as jhum rice does not thrive well at elevations much exceeding 4,000 feet and partly from a scarcity of jhum lands.50 H.H. Godwin Austin in his survey report, mentions about his astonishment at beholding the Angami countryside for the very first time, saying, “Where the steep rise in the slope commences, the spurs are at once more level, and are terraced for rice cultivation; not a square yard of available land has been left, and the system of irrigation canals is well laid out. I have never even in the better cultivated parts of the

48 Interview with Zapuvisie Lhousa, 81 years, Mezoma Village, Kohima District- 21st December 2013.
49 Interview with Pukron Kikhi, 83 years, Viswema Village, Kohima District - 20th December 2013.
Himalayas seen terrace cultivation carried to such perfection, and it gives a peculiarly civilized appearance to the country.”  

During his visit to the Angami country in 1936 with J.P. Mills, the Deputy Commissioner of the administered Naga Hills; Haimendorf described a fascinating scene of water tapping to irrigate the terraced fields,

‘The water flows down from one terrace to the one below, and a complicated system of water rights governs the distribution of the precious liquid. The share in a spring can be bought in exactly the same way as a field. Nocturnal theft of water, by illegitimate tapping of the channels, often caused quarrels that ultimately came before the Deputy Commissioner’s court in Kohima.’  

Channels of water from some stream or torrent, irrigated the terraced rice-fields sometimes measuring into miles which fed many fields on the way. Traditional ponds were dug for drinking purposes near the village. There was access to water anywhere in the village and villagers could go to any village spring to fetch and carry water in their clay pots. A village with vast land area used it more for jhum cultivation than wet-terrace type cultivation and such a village could even spare land for the neighbouring village to cultivate and earn their living. Water rights in an Angami village were made complicated by the fact that ownership of terraced fields was not communistic but strictly individual. The first man to dig a channel tapping some new stream claimed ownership to the water drawn from the channel to the exclusion of anyone else wishing to tap the stream higher up; the water which flowed in their land belong to them. However, certain large streams like the siju were regarded as common property. The water that was drawn naturally became in the course of time itself the subject of all sorts of rights, rights of purchase, of custom and of inheritance. Water is divided up, either by tapping the channels or by portioning them into two or more runnels, and rights of overflow, tapping, etc., may be transferred. It may thus happen that one man’s fields will be dry while those immediately adjoining will be flooded, or a field at the end of one line is dry while that immediately above is full,

the water had to go right away round the spur of a hill and back again before the dry field gets its share.53

The forest and rivers were the main boundaries for the village between the clans or individuals. But there were no restrictions for hunting; fishing and water. Hunting rights were usually admitted to be conterminous within the land belonging to the village, subject to the right to pursue a wounded animal on to the land of another village, but there was no strict custom on the question. In the same manner rights of fishery were usually recognized as ending with the boundary of the village lands, streams flowing between two villages being fished in by both; but fishing did not play such an important role as the other tribes such as the Semas, Lothas or the Aos. Although the use of “poison” was very common with the other Naga tribes, the Angamis usually preferred to dam the river so as to leave half of it dry, when the fish are taken by hand and unlike the Lothas, the Angami women were allowed to come and participate in the community fishing. The fishing rights over wet rice terraces, which contained a number of small fishes, were even open to the village though the land was privately owned.

Pheluokhwe Kirha, from Jakhama Village stated, “There were eight khels in Jakham village and each khel had a traditional well. The women would fetch water for household needs from these wells only in the morning. Water was fetched from a pot called Meshü.” There was no scarcity of water in the village. The villages had clear cut demarcations and plenty of resources; therefore there was no fighting over forest and water. The villagers and the clans collectively construct water tanks where the land owner donates land for free. However, more common property was found in forests as compared to water resources.”54 If there were any conflicts within any village khels or between villages, it was usually settled through dialogue by elders of the villages with equal representatives from the various khels. The spot in question would be visited first before pronouncement of any kind of judgment. Kenyū which means taboo was strictly used in such cases. Fines imposed consisted of seven times (se thenie) of the item stolen (may be articles, or wood, or bamboo, or stone etc.).

53 J.H. Hutton, op. cit, pp.73-74.
54 Interview with Pheluokhwe Kirha, 81 years, Jakham Village, Kohima District – 22nd December 2013.
The Angamis were animists in the past and many rituals performed were tied and related to the forest and water. Chief among the deities or spirits is the Kepenopfü or the Ukepenopfü. The spirits specially associated with the forests and water was: Dzûrawü / Dzûraü -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 etc. Thepfürülie Zutso, from Kigwema mentions that “certain rituals were practiced in Japfü Mountain where villagers gathered to pray for rain. They had the belief that they would be blessed with a good amount of rainfall and also water from the mountain.” But worship of any object such as wood, stone or water source was not known. For most sowing and reaping ceremonies, the village priest would bathe in the river water as a process of ritual purification. During the Sekrenyi festival only the man- folk were allowed to fetch water for rituals to purify their souls.

**Wokha District:**

The Lothas who call themselves Kyong are situated to the north-east of the Angami and Rengma country, having the Semas to the east of them and the Aos to the north-east. They are divided into two divisions, Liyo, comprising the villages to the north of the Doyang River, and Nrüng/Ndrüng, those located to the south of it. Like the rest of the Naga tribes, a Lotha Village was invariably built on the very top of a ridge, it was essential in the selection of the site that it must be easily defensible and near a spring. Keen fishermen and expert swimmers, numerous Lotha villages were formed along the banks of the Doyang River and its tributaries. Riphyim Old Village, Riphyim New Village, Changsu Old Village, Changsu New Village, and Lakhuti Village have been used as illustrations for this study.

The use of forest and water resources differed from village to village and each had their own specific forest and river water resources. Womomo Patton, from Old Riphyim village stated, “In the forefathers’ era land was plenty and therefore whoever claimed it first, the land became their property. This was especially common in the case of jhum cultivation. The villagers treated the forests reverently. Even random burning of forests was not acceptable, only in case land was cleared for cultivation was it acceptable.”55 Chenisao Patton, from Old Riphyim village added, “sharing of

55 Interview with Womomo Patton, 72 years, Old Riphyim Village, Wokha District – 25th September 2013.
land within villages was prevalent. Some of the bigger villages like Wokha village having abundance of land and forest area sometimes allowed smaller villages like Humtso and Elumyo to cultivate in their land, provided that after harvest, such certain amount of rice was paid back in the form of rent.”

The land inclusive of the forests and water resources could be held either by the village, a morung, a clan, or an individual. There were often several morungs in a village. The Lotha Nagas were experts in swimming and diving and at fishing. The forest wasteland and resources close to the village was considered common property, and as also was water right; such as “poisoning” in certain pools. The common “poisons” used were juice of a creeper (niro) used to stupefy catfish, cheti (berries of a tree), pitsü (a creeper with small leaves), opyak and achak (the bark of two species of trees) mmenthi (berries), and müüzü (a creeper). Community fishing was an event held once or twice a year and all the villages who had the right to “poison” in a certain pool agreed to combine to do so on a certain day; however women were prohibited to participate as it was seen as bringing bad luck for the fishing trip. Nets like big landing-nets were made out of twisted strips of bark from the erhingya tree. They are fitted onto a circular frame to which a long handle was attached, and were used to land the stupefied fish which come to the top when a river was “poisoned.” They were made by men, never by women. Fish-traps were of various kinds. Two types of traps by the name osa were used, as also a third kind called eyinga.

Usage of water was mostly for domestic purposes and villagers dependent on stream or pond water for cooking, washing, drinking purpose. Bigger villages had more than one pond in the village. Springs issuing from the side of the hill below the village supplied Lothas with their water. Sometimes it was drawn from the muddy pool of unappetizing greenish water, but often there was a good flow into a basin dammed up with rough masonry. Small fish were put into the Niroyo basin, and were carefully preserved in order that they may keep the water clear of scum. At almost all springs there was a small dam, and over it a low fence so that women who drew water stood

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56 Interview with Chenisao Patton, 65 years, Old Riphyim Village, Wokha District – 22nd September 2013.
below and not in the supply from which they drew. Unlike the Ao, the Lotha did not fancy water after the village has washed their feet in it. When path from the fields did not happen to pass near a stream, water was often led in it in bamboo pipes from a long distance in order that men coming up after the day’s work may have a drink and a wash.57

T. Hayithung Odyuo, from New Riphyim Village stressed, “Forest and water resources were open to all villagers and there were no restrictions on fishing or hunting. In certain cases, one or more villages jointly held fishing rights over a particular stretch of water as determined by customary law. Most of the forested land in the Lotha country belonged to the clans and any water body passing through such land belonged to the clans.”58 Boundaries of villages were sometimes demarcated by a river passing through it. Individual persons from the clan were not allowed to sell off what they had inherited. Only by consultation within the clan, land could be divided and privately owned.

Most of the Lotha country practiced jhum cultivation or shifting cultivation. Land was cultivated for two years and then allowed to lie fallow for eight to ten years. The whole village cultivated in one block, each man having his own piece of land. Therefore, unlike the Angami Nagas, they did not use water for cultivation purpose. It was only in the Baghty region and Bhandari region consisting of plain areas that the ground was tilled and water was used for cultivation of paddy. Mr. A. Porteous, Deputy Commissioner Naga Hills, in his tour diary of 1890, mentions that ‘the Baghty Valley was once occupied by refugee Assamese in the time of the Burmese troubles and traces of their cultivation still exist’. 59 Moreover, Nrisao from Lakhuti village said, “wet rice cultivation was not common during our forefathers’ time. Even in the case of Baghty valley, it was probably only from the 1940’s that such a practice was introduced on a wide scale by Lakhuti villagers.” 60 In the case of Bhandari also, A. Porteous, has made a mention of the origins of wet rice cultivation; by stating that, ‘I started early for Bhandhari. On the roadside, at the foot of the hills, on the Merapani, four Kacharis have started a little hamlet, and made a small clearing in the

58 Interview with T. Hayithung Odyuo, 50 years, New Riphyim Village, Wokha District – 23rd September 2013.
59 Tour Diary of Mr. A Porteous, Deputy Commissioner Naga Hills, 1890. (Secret Department).
60 Interview with Nrisao, 83 years, Lakhuti Village, Wokha District – 25th August 2013.
they have some wet cultivation, and say they intend remaining permanently."  

In the pre-colonial era, there were no cases of conflict over water. The Lotha country being close to the Doyang River and with smaller rivulets flowing through many of the villages, water scarcity was not a key issue. The Lotha Nagas are known to have made dug-out boats which they used on the Doyang. No other tribes in the Naga Hills made boats of this sort, though the Aos and Konyaks of Tamlu make bamboo rafts. 

Marcus, from Lakhuti village opined, “Villages such as Pangti, Lakhuti, Sunglep, Yunchucho, Sanis etc., traditionally shares a linkage with the Doyang River, being close to it. From ancestral times such villages have benefitted from the use of the water as well as resources from the river. Other villages which were not connected to the Doyang by land, even they benefitted from its use. However, no village had ever put a claim to it.” Common springs in the village which was open to all, satiated the needs of the villagers. Mills relates an instance where he had asked a Lotha why they had no village boundary disputes like the Semas and the Angamis, to which he replied, “It would be a shameful thing. Everyman knows where his own land is, so how could there be a quarrel?” 

Nchumbemo Kithan, from Old Changsu village affirmed that, “conflicts were extremely rare, in fact we can say that there was no conflict at all between villages because each had their own traditional boundary which was well respected by the neighbouring villages. The only kind of conflict that was seen sporadically were conflicts within a village be it between khel to khel or clan to clan.” However, if there were border issues between two villages, boundaries were fiercely guarded. Some traditional punitive customs were also in place, whereby in case of a crime leading to bloodshed in the village, the culprit was not allowed to draw water from the common source.

Among the Lotha Nagas also, all important ceremonies of the tribe whether it was for settlement of a new village, or to supply the new village with water were attached to the appeasing of the godlings of nature and the forest. In another ritual a priest (pvüte)
would be selected, and this pvüte in an elaborate ceremony would throw a cornelian bead into the spring which is to supply the new village with water, and offer prayers that the young men and the maidens of the village may be strong. He would then make animal sacrifices, and involve the new colonists in rituals announcing their occupation of the village. Further, to ensure a good water supply in their home they were required to bring water in a freshly-cut section of bamboo from the spring of the old village and pour it into that of the new. 66

In sowing and the ceremonies connected with it, and also in the reaping ceremonies of the different Lotha villages, elaborate ritualistic ceremonies were performed although the formulae used in ceremonies varied considerably in different villages. These ceremonies were especially to appease or gain the favour of the Ronsi (god-lings). To every village and every man was attached a Ronsi, by whose favour the crops are good. Before reaping, a Lotha would utter some charms, praying to all Ronsis belonging to men who were busy fishing or snaring birds by the pools or were hurt (i.e. all men who did no cultivation and so had no need of Ronsis, together would all the Ronsis of the hillside to come and help him. For instance, a man, from Akuk village would utter this charm repeatedly:

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“Satung ramping Ronsi Tchhüchi
Fishtrap hunter’s deity, water-side
Rhempi Ronsi lipphu liteng Ronsi,
Wanderer’s deity, hillside company’s deity,
Tsatso rüku mpito Ronsi rencheli
Hurt wounded men’s all deities come out of hiding.” 67
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J.P. Mills in his monograph ‘The Lotha Nagas’ recorded some age old beliefs of the same, “among the Lotha tribes, just as crops and wild game have their genii, so have the rivers and streams in Tchüpvüo (‘water-master’), a being like a man with hair of enormous length, who lives at the bottom of deep pools and uses human skulls as hearth stones. One is believed to inhabit a pool called Tchüpvüo izzü in the Doyang below Morakcho.” 68

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67 Ibid. p.55.
68 Ibid. p.115.
Before the fields were cut for the next year’s cultivation, some villages would perform a ceremony called *Pyotsoja* in honour of *Tchüpvüo*, the godling of the rivers. The first catch of the river was offered to *Tchüpvüo* to appease him and the rest were divided among those present.\(^69\) Perhaps to show a man’s spiritual tie with the water godling, even in death ceremonies in certain villages of the Northern Lothas rich men were frequently buried in wooden coffins called “boats” (*orhung*), cut out of one log of wood, with a representation of a hornbill’s head and tail at the head and foot respectively. This symbolic feature is unique as the *orhungs* were made in villages which do not make dug-out canoes.\(^70\) As with the Ao tribe, a custom prevailed with the Lotha tribe, whereby if any person died an unnatural death, very strict purification rites had to be performed. Especially in the case of death by drowning, any relative performing the late rites of the dead had to throw away all ornaments and clothing he was wearing at the time. Each man as he leaves the river flicks the water with his right hand and says, “Take away all evil, O river.” Any person entering the village would symbolically wash his hand before entering the village, lest he should bring with him the evil with which he is contaminated. Rites such as these were performed to appease *Tchüpvüo*.\(^71\) Lotha folk tales also frequently mentions stories of the Water Spirit *Tchüpvüo*.

**Mokokchung District:**

The territory occupied by the Ao Nagas on the north-west extends to the plains of the Brahmaputra valley, where it touches the Sibsagar district; on the south of the boundary is the territory of the Lotha and Sema Naga tribes; while on the east and north are the lands of various Naga tribes, collectively called “*Miri*” by the Aos. The whole territory consists of one mass of hills; there are no level stretches, but hill after hill, and ridge after ridge with deep valleys between. The hills rise gradually from the low ranges skirting the Brahmaputra valley until in the inner ranges there are some peaks above 5000 feet in height. The hill on which Lungkam (Longkhum) village is situated has an altitude of 5340 feet.\(^72\) Mrs. Clark, (wife of American Baptist missionary Rev. E.W. Clark), doubtless the first white woman to come to the Ao country wrote, “our route, was simply a Naga trail, first across the lowlands where


grow in such profusion the tall, feathery, waving bamboos, intertwined and interlaced, forming pretty fantastic arbours across our path, and not infrequently necessitating the cutting of our way. On and on we went, up and down, through forests of stately trees, with delicate creepers entwining their giant trunks, their branches gracefully festooned with vines, and orchids swaying in the breeze.”

Most of the Ao village settlements were made near Rivers such as the Dikhu, Disoi, Tsurang, and the Melak. These rivers were of little practical use so far as navigation was concerned. For they were mainly swift mountain currents, tumbling over rocky beds, rising quickly after a rain and again quickly subsiding. The Aos exhibited great engineering by climbing up a big tree overhung the river and descending to the other bank by means of a bamboo ladders. For crossing the smaller streams, they constructed small bamboo bridges or just used a single tree trunk to cross over.

For this study Chuchuyimpang Village, Ungma Village, and Longsa Village have been used as illustrations for Mokokchung district. In the Ao country the selection of the village site was done according to the fertility of the soil/land and utmost importance was given to availability of water and placement on a strategic location; secure from the enemy’s attack. Rivers, mountains, hills were used to demarcate boundaries with neighbouring villages. Every village had their own approach to the use and control of forest and water resources divided among the different clans in a village. Different clans had their own water source in any Ao village. There was no individual ownership; resources like land, water, forest, belonged to the community as a whole and sharing of water resources, usually river water between boundaries of two villages was also found. Takatuba Longkumer from Ungma Village elucidated, “Almost the entire villages in the Ao Naga area have the same system of using forest and water resources. Forest and water resource were defined as the main source of life in the ancient past. The community has always played a pivotal role in utility of such resources. The village land selections were made by the elders represented by the leaders of the clans (Jamir, Longkumer, & Pongen clans). The land was selected chiefly based on the availability of resources specially water and rich forest. Ungma Village is divided into 10 khels (mepu). Khel based division of forest and water

73 M. M. Clark, *A Corner in India*, p.27.
resources were prevalent; however there were no restrictions imposed on usage of water and fishing. All members of the community participated in the cleaning of the water source.” \(^{74}\)

This has been reiterated again by L. Meren Longkumer from Longsa Village said that, “there has never been a private ownership of water resources. The people of Longsa had a community feeling and all the people worked towards the prosperity and upliftment of the community as a whole. There were four khels (mepu) in Longsa village. The first khel was located at the topmost side of the village called Sangpu mepu. The community in this block shared a pond called Awatsü. No personal ownership of pond or any other water body was seen. Next to Sangpu mepu is Longsati block. Here there is a pond (for the community) called Longsati Tsübo. Another name Tsüboti/NokrabaTsübo was also named after the same pond. The people of the third khel Longti Mepu shared water from the same pond called Yimana Tsübo – (pond of two khels). This pond was big enough to quench the thirst of at least two khels so the name was given Yimana Tsübo – two khels pond. The Yimsenmüpu khel was formed the last among the four khel so it is called New-Village-khel or Yimsen Mepu. The people of Longsa have no water scarcity due to this distinct division.” \(^{75}\)

The lands of each village were well defined, and forest and water resources considered as common property. Community fishing tzu-ayok occupied an important place in the life of the village. After selection of a particular river to be poisoned, leaders of the morung are informed of the decision by the Putu Menden. All the male members would go to the forest to collect arr which was the “poison” usually employed to stupefy or kill the fish; this was anything from creepers, barks or fruit of some particular trees. Aos did not generally build weirs in which to set fish-traps. The fences which they made across the streams at places where it was divided into two branches round an island were purely temporary. Such a place was identified as an ideal fishing ground, and rights in stretches where streams divide were jealously

\(^{74}\) Interview with Takatuba Longkumer, 91 years, Ungma Village, Mokokchung District – 25th October 2013.

\(^{75}\) Interview with L. Meren Longkumer, 67 years, Longsa Village, Mokokchung District, 22nd October 2013.
guarded by the villages owning them. Fishing disputes between villages were often settled by taking oath.

The Ao country widely practiced jhuming or shifting cultivation. Jhum cultivation was considered as beneficial and there were no records of any kind of destruction caused by jhum cultivation in the Ao country. Practice of wet rice cultivation was also found in some pockets of the Ao country were there was plain areas/valleys; although this practice may have been introduced at a later stage. The Ao villager was careful to leave enough trees standing to regenerate the jungle, and therefore, enjoyed land which was being no longer worked out now than it was at the beginning. The lands were put under jhum cultivation at intervals of not less than ten years with anything from eight to fifteen years, or occasionally even longer. The more land a village had, the longer the interval period. The villagers left enough trees standing; therefore it was not unusual to have thick jungle growth in such areas. Takatuba from Ungma Village mentioned, “Cultivation of land was divided clan wise, but plantation of trees were not seen in the early traditional management of forest. It was learned from outside influence only much later. The traditional administrator (putu menden) decided the place and time as to where or which part of land should be cultivated and when to cultivate.” Jhum cultivation commonly practiced in Ao areas did not require an elaborate irrigation network. Where there was no stream or spring near fields; water for the use of agriculturists was led to the path of fields from long distances in aqueducts of split bamboos. The pools which were often seen alongside the paths leading up to villages supposedly had effect on the crops. However, many villages with settlements on higher ridges had to depend on rain for agriculture as well as daily needs such as washing and cooking.

Conflicts between villagers over sharing of forest or water were usually amicably settled through dialogue by arriving at a common consensus by the elders of the clans. In some instance, Ao villages bordering the Dikhu River faced some conflict with their neighbours over sharing of water. A. Nungsang Imsong from Chuchuyimpang Village stated, “In the past Chuchuyimpang Village had conflict with neighbouring Sangtam Village over fishing rights and ownership of water in the Dikhu River. But
the conflict was resolved through mutual understanding between the two sides.” 76 Aoyanger from Longsa village confirmed this account by saying, “there had been some conflicts with the Sumi and Sangtam tribes on land and forest ownership issues, but this has been solved through dialogue and in peaceful manner.” 77

The Aos observed a large number of festivals dedicated to sowing and reaping and the cultivation process as a whole. Moatsu festival after sowing was celebrated over six days; it was done to appease the spirits or godlings to shower more blessing on the crops. Tsungrem Mung ushers in harvesting and special sacrifices are offered to the deities for a good harvest. Ceremonies or amongs were considered sacred and both public and private were performed with reverence. For instance, to name a few among numerous ceremonies; to mark the beginning of jungle clearing for the new jhum was called alu leptonmong; sowing –tendentmong; weeding- mo-reptenmong; worship of sacred stones- long Kulemmon, etc.

Since water sources were scarce people performed elaborate rain making ceremonies to bring down the welcome showers. In particular a ceremony dedicated to water was Tsükulemmong, which literally meant “water-worship” ceremony. Prayers were offered to Anungtsüngba – the god of sky and of rain- to send more rain; this was particularly during drought. A stream was “poisoned” or fished with due rites, or sacrifices offered to sacred stones scattered around the Ao country. In fact, to meddle with or insult these sacred stones would entail a violent storm. Standing as remnants of the powerful rituals of the past, today these sacred stones are still found standing tall in some Ao villages such as Longkhum, Longpha, Unger, Waromong and Dibuia, Sungratsu and Impur, etc.

Even in religious beliefs and in all other traditional practices, water was regarded as a very important component by the Ao tribe as it was used for purification rituals. Aos believed that, ‘in the beginning of things the Aos had no water, so they drank the juice of the rattan. When water was found they made an offering of a male pig, and ever since then they have made offerings to the deity who controls springs. No one has

76 Interview with A. Nungsang Imsong, 89 years, Chuchuyimpang Village, Mokokchung District. 17th October 2013.
77 Interview with Aoyanger, 67 years, Longsa Village, Mokokchung District – 22nd October 2013.
ever seen him, no one knows where he lives, but every year they propitiate him by offering up a pig. 78

Among Chongli, Mongsen and Changki clan of the Ao tribe and the subsequent subdivision of scores of phratries of these clans, the Chami phratri of the Chongli clan is regarded as specially connected to water. For this reason Chami women are usually called Tsungalar (“water finders”) to this day, and certain duties in connection with water ceremonies are assigned to men of this phratri. 79 J.P.Mills mentions of a rite called Awaotsung külem (“pool sacrifice”) commonly performed every three years in Ungma village illustrating the connection between the Chami phratri of the village and water. The story narrates that in the old days men did not know there was such a thing as water; all they had wherewith to cook their rice was the sap of creepers. It was a man of the Chami phratri called Yimsangperung of the Tsüwar clan who first found water through the prompting of a bulbul who urged him to drink water. He found a spring of water under a rock and cooked his rice in it. This secret he later shared with his friends who also sacrificed at the particular spring. At such, it is said that on that hot, cloudless day he created all the rivers of the land such as the Dikhu, Doyang and the Melak Rivers. 80

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80 Ibid. pp.129-130.