



We Went to Film: An Account of the Making of the film *We, The Zeme* (2021)

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*“Hezeme Leusiname
Haimena chi lelau
Anuize zichum teu kepeibe
Nagaland ge kai, Manipur ge kai, Assam gelei bamdi
Anui lungneu lei
Leusi chilu aize teleu wangzu kei.”*

*“All the Zeme Students, please note this
We are given in 3 names
We are placed in Nagaland, Manipur as well as in Assam
This is so regretful
Let’s become educated and put things right.”*

(Folksong written and sung by the late Pauheu Newme)¹

The aim of this Photo Essay is to use photographs from the field to reflect on the making of the film *We, The Zeme* (2021) in Nagaland, Northeast India.²

- *Theoretical considerations regarding Visual Participatory Methodologies and Victor Turner’s concept of liminality.*
- *Reflecting on the use of audio-visual technologies as part of the fieldwork process in terms of preproduction, production, and postproduction used in anthropological fieldwork.*
- *Collaborative and participatory approaches to ethnographic filmmaking.*
- *Film as tool to a focus on area of social life that gives insight into wider beliefs and social practices: organisations, family, institutional structures, geographical infrastructure, and connections between them.*

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“...road building has always been an act of power, which has at different times been aimed at smoothening relationships, securing borders, (dis) connecting people, enabling trade, creating spaces of contestation, or diluting boundaries between varied ethnic groups.” (Zilpao 2020)



I took this photo to remind me of my personal and professional journey to join the Zeme Nagas for the First Zeme Olympics (ZO). It was with excitement and trepidation that I embarked on the trip with my family in tow. The image also reflects the famous work written by Ursula Graham Bower in 1950, *The Naga Path*.

Who are the Zeme?

The Zeme Nagas have been greatly affected by state and geographical boundaries since Indian Independence in 1947. The Zeme Naga tribe of NE India, also known as Zeliangrong and Jeme, are one of the Naga tribes living in Nagaland, Manipur and Assam in the Northeastern region of India. There are around 90 Zeme villages in the North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao District) of Assam today. The Zeme people in Manipur are distributed in two districts having 22 villages in Tousem, a subdivision of Tamenglong district, and 15 villages in Senapati district. There is a total of 37 Zeme villages in Manipur. Many representations of the Nagas in European museums settle upon their

existence as witnessed by Western anthropologists and travellers throughout the twentieth century. My fieldwork experience with the Zeme has highlighted the importance of understanding them on their own terms, through their own voices. It is also clear that the museum is perhaps not the best place for us to learn about communities who are constantly evolving and transitioning. The Nagas were part of the expansionist enterprise of British imperialism and their material culture and folk stories were collected and as part of the strategic endeavours to map, manipulate and master an empire.



This is Jeme, a Zeme filmmaker, documenting his people at the Opening Ceremony of the First Zeme Naga Olympics.

The Zeme Nagas who appear in the film *We, The Zeme* are individuals from multiple types of communities that stretch over a large, mountainous region, all of whom share a frustration in the lack of road infrastructures that make

travel difficult and treacherous. My account of the filming demonstrates that the Zeme, like all tribal communities, have ambitions of their own far beyond the limited agendas of European institutions. Staging the First Zeme Olympics was a decision made by some of the Zeme community leaders to bring together their tribe the first time since Indian independence. The Zeme Nagas have been traumatised by both the British and Indian control of their territories, and it is an important moment in their history to begin to have a voice beyond Northeast India. My aim was that our co-created film would put the Zeme Nagas in the spotlight and celebrate sports as a unifying activity contributing to the wellbeing of the individual and the communities.



Zeme women of substance: from left to right Hungaule Hegeu, Dr. Abole Zanne, Azai Thou and Pinky Mpame- members of the organising ZO Committee who worked tirelessly to create the event and ensure that it ran smoothly over seven days.

Theoretical considerations regarding Participatory Research for Visual Methodologies³ and Victor Turner's concept of liminality.⁴

Self-determination in tribal affairs is a contested space, as boundaries are drawn and contexts not easily understood by outside forces. This paper highlights how anthropological insights of liminality (Gennep 1909: 1960; Turner 1967; Shields; 1991; MacDougall 2020) informed the collaborative method used in making the film, *We, The Zeme* (2021). Here I discuss the role of social media as a collaborative fieldwork experience and as a key factor in the organisation and management processes of the event.

Reflections on the audio-video recordings collected by numerous attendees of the event in Jalukie Town and Perren Town in Nagaland led to digital discussions about the power of platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp used as networking agencies for the Zeme communities. Before 2019, my knowledge of the Nagas was based on reading anthropological accounts and watching films about them, usually from the point of view of a Western anthropologist or explorer. I was keen to share archival footage I had digitized at the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford with the Zeme, and record their reaction and stories first hand. As I prepared to leave for the field, I joined the ZO Association Facebook group and created a WhatsApp group for the filmmaking team that included young Naga filmmakers, whom I would only meet for the first time the day before we would all join as a team to create a visual document of the event.

I witnessed how social media platforms played a central role in bringing together the Zeme tribe, and other interested parties from three separate states of Nagaland, Assam, and Manipur in a unique setting in the First Zeme Olympics. Held from 10 to 17 December 2019, it was an occasion of celebration. Time and resources were saved because of using social media as a medium of communication. It was noted that the engagement and response to this event came mainly from younger generations who are active on social media, but a major drawback was that there was a limited response from the elder generations. However, overall, social media played a significant role in the success of the event.



Three generations of women from Poilwa Village watch the sports in Jalukie Town, Nagaland.

Sharing the Screen in Visual Anthropology

I first encountered the Naga tribes of Northeast India when I came across a dozen or more containers of 16mm reels of film in the archives of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford in 2007. I applied for and was awarded a grant from the National Digital Archive Fund and proceeded to digitise two sets of film reels made by women in the 1930s and 40s. One of these women was Ursula Graham Bower; she had entered Nagaland as a colonial tourist in 1937 and left eleven years later having taken the only film footage of the Naga tribes that exists from the pre-WWII era.⁵ She also contributed to Naga society through medical aid and winning medals for her bravery at the Battle of Kohima in 1944. She is remembered by the Zeme Nagas with great affection. During the making of my film *Captured by Women* (2011)⁶ I interviewed her daughter, Catriona Child, and shared with her the recently digitised footage over Skype. It is through her that I have met members of the Zeme tribe and became interested in the Zeme Naga collections in European museums. I met Jeremiah Pame, a Zeme leader and president of the Zeme Olympic Association, in January 2019 at the University of Delhi. I was delighted to be invited to make the official documentary about his ambitious project-to hold the First Zeme Olympics later that year. It seemed fitting that more than eighty years after the arrival of Ursula Graham Bower, I would continue this Anglo-Naga friendship to create another recording of an important moment in their history.



Here I am sharing some of Ursula Graham Bower's film footage with the young Zeme Naga filmmakers, who collaborated on the film. This was the first time they had participated in making a documentary, and together we went on to co create the film footage: their language skills and local knowledge proved invaluable to the team: interviewing local residents, audience members and participants in the games. Photo by Seth Kahn

Victor Turner classifies sport as a 'limonoid phenomenon', in contrast to genuine liminality. He breaks down the temporal elements of the moment as liminal, meaning 'in the zone', liminoid, meaning sharing the aspect of the liminal experience, and Communitas, as moment of 'anti-structure' when part or all of the community is participating in a ritual that is separate from their normal routines. In anthropological study, sport is considered in the realm of ritual.⁷

Influenced by Turner's definition of liminality, I consider the First Zeme Olympics as a demonstration of emerging networks of digital power among the Zeme Nagas through the digital exhibition of their own recordings on social media outlets such as Facebook, WhatsApp and You Tube, as the event produced a high density of digital material that underlined the importance of their indigenous identity. There were several levels of activity that could be classified as liminoid phenomena at the Zeme Olympics.



I took this photograph to show the combination of the ZO Team streaming the event live with an interview with the wrestling champion by Azai, who was part of the ZO committee, and Ethan filming her conducting the interview for the film- three recordings of the same moment, two on film and one with a stills camera.

Cyber space, for many, is outside the traditional realm of decision-making and creates a meta layer to the event before, during and after the closing ceremony. The ZO still exists in the imagination and online, and discussions surrounding the event still occur today, even in relation to this piece. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook allowed for collaborative, transparent and networked decision-making that considered the needs and requests of communities that had been disconnected for many years. It also affected the expectation of the event and was witnessed online through Facebook's streaming services that reached to the outer regions of Naga territory to people who could not attend the event in person. Furthermore, the making of the film with indigenous filmmakers working as a team with the Oxford Documentary Film Institute's team made the filmmaking part of the event.



I took this screenshot from the film footage that captured a moment of pause in the wrestling event. It was used as the poster for the film as it provided a visual encapsulation of the prowess of the younger generation, and the spirit of the event: the spectators and participants equally important to its success, both locked together in space and time, proving resilience and strength in that bond.

The audience formed an integral part of the success of the ZO. They acted often as a single body defining boundaries of the watcher and the watched, the active and passive forces in place on the newly created sports fields. The audience also performed a role in the filmmaker process on social media, as

many members of the ZO Facebook community contributed to knowledge about the traditional ceremonies that took place at the opening and closing of the games, and as active performers in songs and interviews recorded during the games.



A volleyball match in progress during the ZO. The juxtaposition of the teams and the surrounding spectators created a new space of identity for the tribe and the sports teams, where players and villages gained recognition: sports and sportsmanship crossed boundaries of dialect, religion, and politics. Photo by Seth Kahn

The younger spectators became active on social media and made the filmmaking process part of the event. The filmmakers themselves, a crew of eight young Zeme men and the ODFI crew also became spectators of the event, sharing news and insights, and informing each other of interesting ideas and characters for the film; the Zeme filmmakers also supported their respective villages in the events, involving themselves at an additional level. The event produced an inversion of traditional behaviour as the young Zeme became the focus of the film. Acquiescing the centre of attention to the younger members of the tribe gave a confidence to the young as their achievements became a priority of the event. This is also an example of a liminal temporal and physical

space found in the Turner's definition of an event becoming an anti-structure that challenges societal norms. Modern sports and traditional sports activities were placed with equal importance, heralded in and out with elders performing traditional rituals.



The Opening Ceremony of the First Zeme Olympics, Jalukie Town, Nagaland, 10 December 2019. See the ceremony here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsQ9MWY4AfA>



The Zeme tribal members performing the famed *Rehoi* song at the Opening Ceremony 10 December 2019. Please see film link to see the dance and hear the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsQ9MWY4AfA>

- *Reflecting the ofusing audio-visual technologies as part of the fieldwork process in terms of preproduction production, and postproduction used in anthropological fieldwork.*

A methodology based on participatory and collaborative actions were put into action during the filmmaking process.

Guiding Principles of Pre-Production

- Constant communication with main subjects of the film
- Discussion before a camera is used about the nature of the film and who the stakeholders are
- Team-building of local talent and introductions to representative voices from the community
- Clearing of rights to the footage
- Identify the social structure within which one is working
- Creating a workflow and allocation of responsibilities
- Listening to concerns and ask each other questions
- Explaining intentions for the production stage



Omar was one of the more experienced Zeme filmmakers. His contribution to the cohesion of the group helped to create a kind and thoughtful atmosphere. He took on multiple roles for the film team. I saw him explaining the purpose of the film to onlookers, he has the skills of a natural communicator, and he was always looking out for others, including my children.

Guiding Principles of Production

- Establishing daily routine for filming
- Defining expectations, roles
- Creating camera crew teams
- Covering the themes, events, interviews
- Watching footage daily, archive footage in clear way with titles and days
- Building up a relationship between film crew and local informants
- Preparing food, eating, and cleaning up afterwards together

Guiding Principles of Post Production

- Use social media with community members to show clips and ask questions
- Share footage to translate interviews
- Ask for names of everybody who contributed in any way at all
- Show each edit to your main informants and subjects
- Show edits to the film crews and ask for feedback
- Screen the film to the community before showing it to anyone else
- Share the footage on an open access archive if appropriate



Two signposts for fieldwork collaboration demonstrated here: children breakdown barriers and reach out in ways that touch hearts and minds; preparing food, eating together, and cleaning up afterwards creates an egalitarian atmosphere, and a true spirit of community and friendship.



Every night the film crew and members of the ZO Committee were invited to a host family to eat and drink together. At the heart of the event the spirit of community and friendship shone through. Everyone smiled even though they were exhausted.

- *Collaborative and participatory approaches to ethnographic filmmaking.*

‘Seeing is one thing, looking is another.’ (MacDougall 2019, 15)

Conditions for collaboration need to be seriously considered before embarking on a visual anthropological project. Sometimes an attitude for empathetic thinking and acting is grounded in the visiting cohort and the community through a common event or common understanding of shared rituals. Local societal decision-making can be separated from national governance and responsibilities by organised events such as the Zeme Olympics. It is an important part of any organised event that includes many stakeholders to document the process, as looking back at archive audio and visual recordings offers space to reflect on societal decision-making models. In the making of *We, The Zeme* due diligence was carried out by the hosts and visitors regarding expectations of the film crew and the logistical arrangements were communicated between the ZO Committee and the film crew in WhatsApp groups. The success of the event and the relationship between the film crew and the Zeme community was based on trust and accountability of

each person to each other as part of a team. Devolved power within the film team was at work as inexperienced crew were given guidelines and autonomy to film content in teams of two or three, which I reviewed on a daily basis. Members of the team were valued equally, and we took advice from each sector of the organising committee in each phase of the production, including feedback on the rough cuts of the film. Interviews facilitated our understanding of how people viewed our presence at the games, and all the film crew had the capacity to join in discussion throughout the production and postproduction process, as it was conducted in a common language, English. Local inclusive, collective, community-building was key to the shared experience and shared success of the film.



The Zeme Olympics provided a shared space for inter-tribal communication as the games sparked the curiosity of local villagers, and some travelled great distances to be present. In our international film team, we see here Omar, a local Zeme filmmaker, and Ethan, from the Oxford Documentary Film Institute.

Film as tool to a focus on area of social life that gives insight into wider beliefs and social practices: organisations, family, institutional structures, and connections between them.

The event of the First Zeme Olympics played an important role in building bonds and bringing a sense of belonging to each other. Although it might not be dealing with the political boundaries and road networks directly, the positive use of social media platforms for a common cause are bridging the gaps of Zeme histories and identities.

Concluding thoughts: What new light can the concept of liminality shed on our ongoing fieldwork and on organisation and management processes? What more recent theoretical and conceptual developments mean for our understanding of the concept of liminality? How can we use liminality further as part of the process and methodology in ethnographic filmmaking?



Forming friendships for the next generation of international relationships. Here we see the Pastors children, Yilunghangbe and Yintipbe (younger boy) with my sons, Seth (aged 10) and Lukas (aged 7)



One of my treasured photos, and highlights of my life. I was privileged to be given the traditional Zeme ladies' outfit to wear with pride.

Please note that all the names of the people in these photos cannot be found for this piece but I am in contact with all the organisers of the Zeme Olympics who gave permission to publish these photographs.

Notes

1. Please see the film links below to hear the song.
2. Please see links to the trailer and the full film here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf6veW2WKPk>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsQ9MWY4AfA>
3. By participatory research we mean there is an explicit recognition that both subjects and researchers are co-creators in an experimental process of knowledge generation.
4. Etymologically, liminality - as used by van Gennep (1909; 1960) - may have been derived from the Latin *limes* which denotes 'threshold'. It might also have come from the Latin *limen*, meaning 'boundary' or 'limit'. Both *limes* and *limen* derive from the same Latin root, *limus*, and, as can be seen, the two meanings overlap significantly (Turner, Edith).
5. Please see some of the unedited films here: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/film-collections>

6. Please see here for *Captured by Women* (2011)
<https://vimeo.com/88989157>
<https://vimeo.com/88989110>
<https://vimeo.com/88989015>
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7. For further information please see Rowe.

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