



## Stories of The Past: Songs of the Zasho of the Sumi Naga of Zunheboto District, Nagaland

INOTOLI L ASSUMI\*

### [Video Clip -Stories of the Past: Songs of Zasho of Sumi Naga of Zunheboto District Nagaland by Inotoli L. Assumi]

The ethnographic video of the Sumi Naga working in *zasho* in their Chiefs coffee farm was filmed for the purpose of PhD fieldwork in Littami New village. Ruby (2005) asserted that all visuals communicate something to the people, an inquiry that humans make for others to see. The intention of the video is to record the villagers working which opens an atomic glimpse of the culture and tradition of the Sumi Naga and their lived experiences. Keeping in mind the ethics of ethnographic filming I used reflexivity (Macdougall, 1970; Tomaselli & Shepperson, 1997; Zhimo, 2021) as an approach to record this video so that the video taken does not cause problems and hurt the sentiments of the villagers (Zhimo, 2021). The video was taken with permission and consent from the Chiefs and villagers, prior to filming I explained to the villagers the purpose of which the video was taken which was positively responded to by villagers.

The Sumi are a patrilineal society with a chief (*Akukau*) at the helm, whose inheritance and authority are autocratically passed down from father to son or his brothers after the demise of the chief (*Akukau*). They are one of the major Naga tribes living in Nagaland with a population of 140,757 with 191 villages residing in the hills of Zunheboto district located at 26°01'N94°31'E at an elevation of 1,852m above sea level covering an area of 1,225km<sup>2</sup> (Census of India, 2011). The land of the Sumi, Zunheboto, is known as the 'land of the warriors (*aghutomi*)', and is known for its war dances *aphilokuwo*, traditional martial arts, and traditional staple cuisine *axone*. The district Zunheboto interconnects with seven neighboring Naga tribes bordering its periphery- Ao in the North, Lotha in the West, Sangtam, Yimkhiung, and Chang in the East, and Chakhesang and Angami in the South. The antecedents of Sumi are

---

\* Inotoli L Assumi, Research Scholar (PhD), North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya 793022, Contact info: Email: [inotoliassumi@gmail.com](mailto:inotoliassumi@gmail.com)

agriculturists and the villages of Sumi are spread on the hill summit of two major river valleys of Nagaland that flows across Zunheboto- *Tapu* (Doyang) flowing in the West and *Tsüzü* (Tizu) flowing in the East on whom all livelihood depends.

The video is an excerpt taken from the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the year 2020 in the month of August during the unlock phase of the pandemic in Littami, New (*Aphutheu*). This is a small village in the *Tapu* (Doyang) river valley situated at 26°10'05" N and 94°22'57" E at an elevation of 890 m above sea level. The village marks the end of the Sumi inhabiting area in the extreme North-Western part of the Zunheboto district interconnecting with Wokha district in the West and Mokochung district in the North inhabited by Lotha and Ao tribes respectively.

Songs while working are an integral part of the Sumi Naga. They sing while working in the jhum fields and farms, during traditional dances, and rituals, etc. The ethnographic video is the first-hand account of the villagers of Littami New working (*zasho*, a communal paid work) in the chief's (*Akukau*) coffee farm, men and women singing melodious folksongs, chanting, and ululating while working on the farm. Beyond the music and work displayed are the deeply rooted social norms, customs, traditions, and cultures concealed in the actions of the people that are fascinating and unique to the Sumi Nagas. The visual provides an understanding of the spatial construction of the Sumi Nagas namely- the chiefs (*Kukami*) and their dependents, their work organization, gender construction, and their spatial traditional knowledge. Furthermore, the ethnographic video centers upon how the events that took place in time and history of the village and lived experiences of people in space and time are crystalized and memorialized by the villagers in the form of folk songs that are orally handed down and remembered from one generation to another generation.

### **Constructing The Fields**

Among the Sumi, the chief who is the founder of the village is customarily entitled to procure free labor services from his dependents, which is known as *Aina*. In Littami New village, where the ethnographic video is taken, the head chief (*Atokukau*) have the right to receive nine free labor services, out of whom four is given to his co-partner chiefs (*Kukami*) and one to his helper *Chochou*. Besides, there are different types of groups working organization carried out annually known as *Zasho*, which is paid work. The workers are communally paid with pigs, soybean, and money during traditional festivals such as *Tuluni*

and *Ahuna*. The other type of group work is *Aloji* which is a group of men and women who reciprocate work in jhum fields. Another type of work is *Akhúju* where a man invites the whole village to work in his field and gives a feast to show his status and wealth.

A marked gender distinction is practiced among the Sumi in manual works, traditional dances, folksongs, and while performing rituals. In this video men and women are seen working in separate groups because it is a custom and norm amongst Sumi for men and women to work in separate groups. The women folks are seen working on the hill slope which is less steep on the other hand men work on the steep hills which are difficult for women to climb. The tradition of marked gender distinction is rooted in the history and culture of the Sumi Nagas. In the past when headhunting was prevalent among inter and intra tribes protecting the women folks and children was necessary therefore it is a norm among the Sumi while leaving to the jhum fields, farms, or forests men folks lead the way followed by women and children behind on returning from the jhum fields the women and children head first while the men folks walk behind them.

The Sumi has an excellent traditional knowledge of reading time while working in the field which was passed down from their ancestors and is handed down from one generation to another orally. The work begins from the bottom of the hill, referred to as *alupukhu* (jhum leg), and ends upward at the hilltop called *alukutsu* (jhum head). For each duration of the day, a portion of the slope is assigned to complete. During the work, the villagers indicate the time of the day by navigating the position of the sun and the shadow cast upon a person and indications from nature such as the sound of the bird *chengu* (Himalayan barbet). The villagers also keep the spear (*angu*) outside the jhum hut to see the shadow cast on the spear. For the Sumi the work duration in a day is segmented into four parts where the villagers take a break from the work and eat meal (*akishina*) and drink rice beer (*aji*) (at present rice beer is replaced by drinking milk tea and red tea). *Thulusuche* is the end of the first duration of the day in the morning when the shadow is cast in front of the person. *Lhubasuche* is the end of the second duration of the day around 11 am and 12 pm when the sun is above the head and the shadow cast lies close to the body. *Phitsusuche* is the end of the third duration of the day in the afternoon. Lastly, *Akuwosuche* is the time to return to their homes in the village. The villagers navigate the position of the sun by placing their palms against the sun and on the hilltop to determine the hours of sunset to return home.

## Songs that Tell Stories

In the past, before writing was introduced to the Sumi Nagas, people's memory served as a storehouse for preserving events, knowledge, and the ancestral history of the village. This information was stored in the minds of the people in the form of folksongs, dances, and stories that are handed down orally from one generation to the next. In the video, the villagers of Littami New are narrating the historic events that took place in 1956 and 1963 which are memorialized by the people in the form of songs sung while they work in the field and farms. The song recites the pain, sorrow, hunger, and death caused by the conflict in the village during the 1950s and 1960s.

### Translation of the folksong from Sumi dialect to English

Song-1

1956 Song

(*Lhopungutsúgho le*)

<i>Lhopungu</i> Fifty	<i>tsúgho</i> six	<i>mipe</i> year	<i>ghulokiloie o o iye o he o</i> time
<i>Kiyehé</i> Kiyehé	<i>kukapuno</i> chief	<i>ghuloki lono</i> time	<i>iye o o iye o he o</i>
<i>Hetovi</i> Hetovi	<i>kukapuno</i> chief	<i>ghuloki lono</i> time	<i>iye o o iye o he o</i>
<i>Vitomo</i> Vitomo	<i>kukapuno</i> chief	<i>ghuloki lono</i> time	<i>iye o o iye o he o</i>
<i>Atolomi</i> Hill-people	<i>ghúkishi</i> war	<i>ipeghi</i> came out	<i>iye o o iye o he o</i>
<i>Ningu</i> Us	<i>sasu</i> took	<i>aghalo</i> jungle	<i>pove iye o o iye o he o</i> ran
<i>O apu he!</i> O son alas!	<i>anga he!</i> daughter alas!	<i>qhakelo</i> cry not	<i>iye o o iye o he o</i>
<i>Ime mu</i> Pain but	<i>azano</i> mother	<i>imeni</i> pain	<i>iye o o iye o he o</i>

*Alhouno*      *nisútsa*      *chiluno*      *iye o o iye o he o*  
 God            voice            hear

*Ningu*        *sasú*            *akilo*      *wovepe iye o o iye o he o*  
 Us             took             home sent

*Tiqheli*      *ale*      *hi*      *phechelo*      *iye o o iye o he*  
 Generation    song    this    sing

Explanation of the song: The song talks about the atrocities of the year 1956 on the women of Littami New when the villagers had to hide in the jungle.

Song-2

**Tapu plain song**

*(Tapuqa lo le)*

O      *Tapu qhalo*

O      Tapu plain

O      *Tapu qhalo*    *Naga pumi*    *ngoani ho*

O      Tapu plain    Naga lads    staying

*O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*

O      *Naga pumi*

O      Naga lads

O      *Naga pumi khiuno*    *ngoani ho*

O      Naga lads    who    staying

*O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*

O      *Naga pumi*

O      Naga lads

O      *Naga pumi*    *Khutovino*    *ngoani ho*

O      Naga lads    Khutovi    staying

*O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*

O      *Kholamino*

O      Outsiders

*Kholamino*    *ighi puzu ghushivoe ho*  
 Outsiders    came and war  
 *ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*

*Kholamino*  
 Outsiders

*Kholamino*    *khuno*            *veqive ho*  
 Outsiders    who                shot down  
 *ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*

*Kholamino*  
 Outsiders

*kholamino*    *Sawotono*        *veqhivoho*  
 Outsiders    Sawoto            shot down  
 *ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*

*Mlosaye*  
 Grief

*Mlosaye*        *khiunono*        *mulosaye ho*  
 Grief            who                grief  
 *ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*

*Mlosaye*  
 Grief

*Mlosaye*        *kichilimino*        *mulosa ho*  
 Grief            *kichilimi (village)*    grief  
 *ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*

*Mlosaye*  
 Grief

*Mlosaye*        *alomi*            *Ghokhulino*    *mulosa ho*  
 Grief            beloved            Ghokhuli        grief

O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye

O Ghu toluye  
O War victory

O Ghu toluye kihunono ghu tolu ho  
O War victory who war victory  
O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye

O Ghu toluye  
O War victory

O Ghu toluye Yehokhuno ghu tolu ho  
O War victory Yehokhu war victory

O Lashiluye  
O Peacemaker

O Lashilu khiunono lashilu ho  
O Peacemaker who peacemaker  
O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye

O Lashiluye  
O Peacemaker

O Lashiluye Kiyeheno lashilu ho  
O Peacemaker Kiyeh peacemaker  
O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye

O Lashilu ye  
O Peacemaker

O Lashilu ye Shiholino lashilu ho  
O Peacemaker Shiholi peacemaker  
O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye

O Lashilu ye  
O Peacemaker

- Lashilu ye Kiu pesu lashilu ho*  
 Peacemaker what bring peacemaker  
*O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*
- Lashiluye*  
 Peacemaker
- Lashiluye wudu pesu lashilu ho*  
 Peacemaker roosterbring peacemaker  
*O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*
- Lashiluye*  
 Peacemaker
- Lashiluye qhumi pesu lashilu ho*  
 Peacemaker shawl bring peacemaker  
*O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*
- Kholamino*  
 Outsider
- Kholamino ghoki-uno Kiyeheno kuani ho*  
 Outsider river side Kiyehene calling  
*O ho i lo ho, o he o i ho, iye o iye*
- Kiushini*  
 What reason
- Kiushini Kiyeheno kuani ho*  
 What reason Kiyehene calling  
*O ho i lo ho, O he o i ho, iye o iye*
- Ghimeqhini*  
 Torture
- Ghimeqhini Kiyeheno kuani ho*  
 Torture Kiyehene calling  
*O ho i lo ho, O he o i ho, iye o iye*



Explanation of the song: The song talks about the post-independence clashes in the hills during 1950s and 1960s. The song mourns a man who was shot down also praises how their Chief Kiyehé and his wife Shiholi made peace with the Indian Army by gifting a rooster and a traditional Sumi shawl for men, which saved the villagers from severity of the conflict.

### Song-3 Ending Song (Ale kiqhi le)

*O wolo wolo*

*O wolo wolo no ili ili wolo*

*O ho i lo ho, O he o i ho, iye o iye*

<i>Ipu</i>	<i>Khukiyeno</i>	<i>ghamiye</i>
My father	Khukiye	villagers

<i>Iza</i>	<i>Kishelino</i>	<i>ghamiye</i>
My Mother	Kisheli	villagers

<i>Opitelo</i>	<i>aithu</i>	<i>ye</i>	<i>hepu</i>
Your calves	pythons	pattern	mark

<i>Aithu</i>	<i>ye</i>	<i>hepui ho i ho</i>
pythons	pattern	mark

<i>Osakholo</i>	<i>amulu</i>	<i>ye</i>	<i>hepu</i>
Your hair line marked	<i>amulu</i> (bifurcate tailed bird)	pattern	

<i>Amhulu</i>	<i>ye</i>	<i>hepu i ho i ho</i>
<i>Amulu</i>	pattern	marked

Explanation of the song: This song is sung as an ending note that marks the end of the song and work followed by break time. The song praises the village men and women comparing men to the strength of a python and women to a bird *amulu* an indigenous bird with a bifurcating tail.

### Concluding Note

The ethnographic presentation of the folk songs and work of the Sumi communicates as a vehicle of anthropological knowledge for research (Ruby, 2005) on the culture and social life of the Sumi Naga. It provides a closer look

at people's lived experiences and a window to look farther beyond folksongs which are intricately embedded in the culture and social life of the people. It shows how people's work is knitted into the customary practices and norms, their socialization and their obligation towards their village chief (*Akukau*). The folk songs sung while working are a recitation of the events, history, culture and lived experiences which is an oral tradition preserved and passed down by their parents and grandparents. Furthermore, visual approaches provide an understanding of what culture is, how we can throw light to invisible and complicated things (Kahn, 2010), here recording the folksongs and transcribing the language helps to understand the discourses conveyed which take back to time and history of the life of people and the culture of the Sumi Naga for instance how the process of peacemaking is carried out culturally by gifting a rooster and traditional shawl, etc.,

At present due to changes in beliefs and the onset of modernization, some traditional practices are lost among them; however, along the way, some cultures survive and coexist with change. On the path to modernity, the people of Littami New fondly preserve this oral tradition of story narration in the form of folksongs and sing when they work in the agricultural fields that teaches the younger generation to remember the history, culture and tradition of the bygone days.

## References

- Census of India. (2011). *District Census Handbook, Zunheboto*. Directorate of Census Operation Nagaland. Series 14 Part XII A.
- Kahn, H. E. (2010). Seeing Beyond: Visual Approaches in Global Learning. *Practicing Anthropology*, 32(3), 45-48.
- MacDougall, D. (1970). Prospects of the ethnographic film. *Film Quarterly*, 23(2), 16-30.
- Ruby, J. (2005). The last 20 years of visual anthropology- a critical review. *Visual Studies*, 20(2), 159-170.
- Tomaselli, K. G., & Shepperson, A. (1997). Documentary Film, Visual Anthropology, and Visual Sociology. *Journal of Film and Video*, 49(4), 44-57.
- Zhimo, A. (2021). We Were the Others: Visuality in Colonial Writing. In Nongbri, T. & Bhargava, R. (Eds.), *Materiality and Visuality in North East India: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (pp. 23-35). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1970-0>

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

I L Assumi. (2022). "Stories of the Past: Songs of the Zasho of the Sumi Naga of Zunheboto District, Nagaland" in *Indian Journal of Anthropological Research*. Special Edition on Visual Anthropology. Guest Editor: Alison Kahn 1(2), pp. 93-102, ISSN : 2583-2417.