



The Festivals and Community Life of the Sangtam Naga in Nagaland

BINGSE

Independent Scholar, Tuensang, Nagaland. E-mail bingsethonger@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article explores the cultural significance of festivals within the Sangtam tribe of Nagaland, highlighting their role as vital components of community life and agricultural practices. Recognized for their distinct cultural identity, the Sangtam engage in a series of cyclical festivals that serve as both spiritual observances and mechanisms for social cohesion. These events are intricately tied to the agrarian calendar, reinforcing traditional governance structures and facilitating the intergenerational transmission of moral values and ecological stewardship. By examining the literature on Naga socio-cultural frameworks, this study emphasizes the importance of these festivals as repositories of intangible cultural heritage, ensuring the preservation of customary practices amidst modernization. Additionally, the findings focus on the festivals' multifaceted roles in resolving disputes and reaffirming leadership, thus bridging historical traditions with contemporary community needs. The research highlights how the Sangtams ritualistic expressions not only celebrate agricultural prosperity but also embody a profound connection to the environment, serving as foundational elements for sustainable resource management. This study chose a qualitative methodology to gain deeper insights into the social and cultural implications of the festivals through individual experiences, communal practices, and personal observation (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014).*

Keywords: *Sangtam tribe, festivals, Mungmung, agricultural rites, Hünapungpi, Thsüiti*

Received : 05 November 2025

Revised : 25 November 2025

Accepted : 04 December 2025

Published : 30 December 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bingse (2025). The Festivals and Community Life of the Sangtam Naga in Nagaland. *Journal of History and Archaeology*, 1: 2, pp. 185-191.

INTRODUCTION

The Naga tribes of Nagaland celebrate various traditional festivals throughout the year, featuring feasting, dance, and music, rooted in the community life of the people. Most festivals are related to the stages of agricultural operations. These festivals were mostly religious in nature, spiritual rites and rituals were performed, during which people predominantly offered prayers to the Supreme Being. The important festivals in Nagaland include Sekrenyi (Angami), Tsukhenyie (Chakhesang), Aoling (Konyak), Monyu (Phom), Moatsu (Ao), Tsokum (Khiamniungan), Mungmung (Sangtam), Naknyulum

(Chang), Tuluni (Sumi), Medemneo (Yimkhiung), Tokhu Emong (Lotha), Ngada (Rengma), and Nga-ngai (Zeliang), among others. Most traditional festivals are associated with religious rituals. For most of its history, Naga has been an agrarian society. For this reason, many festivals are held to pray for a bountiful harvest or to give thanks to the gods for it. There are an especially large number of festivals associated with rice farming, where the rites and rituals are performed at each major juncture of sowing of the paddy, the replanting of seedlings, prayers for rain, and harvest time. These rituals evolved into distinct festivals. The prayer and ritual offerings are to the Lijhaba gods, animistic deities unique to Sangtam in ancient times, believed to inhabit all things in nature (Festival *et al.*, 2011). This paper attempts to understand how the present society observes traditional festivals, contributing to change, no matter how small, and with the intention of reminding the youngsters of the generation to be acquainted with and appreciate Naga cultural traditions and also try to understand the impact of the socio-economic condition of the Sangtam Naga society by practising the traditional festival.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SIGNIFICANT OF STUDY

This study chose a qualitative methodology to gain deeper insights into the social and cultural implications of the festivals through individual experiences, communal practices, and personal experiences (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014). This study used both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected through interviews, participant observation, and unpublished books and articles. Secondary sources used include articles, journals, books, published and unpublished sources, the internet, and websites. This study is important because it protects and preserves a complex cultural heritage rooted in diverse ancestral oral traditions. It reframes the rich traditional and customary practices, which others or outsiders often misunderstood as a highly cultured system of governance and community survival.

THE STUDY TRIBE AND AREA

The Sangtam tribe is one of the major ethnic tribes in Nagaland (Sangtam, 2025). They occupy a vast area in Nagaland, spreading over two main districts, viz., Northern Sangtam in the Tuensang district, with Longkhim as their headquarters, and Eastern Sangtam, whose headquarters are at Kiphire Town. They are united under the common nomenclature called "United Sangtam." The nomenclature of 'Sangtam' has given rise to considerable speculation, leading to several theories, each with varying degrees of support but People have different ideas about it. According to the forefather, the people of 'Sangtam' are named after the word '*Singtang*' (elevated bamboo platform structure) (Selila, 1996). One of the most commonly accepted theories about the nomenclature of the Sangtam is that they lived in houses with raised platforms, which they called *Singtang*. When asked about their identity, they referred to the pattern of houses they lived in and said they were people living in houses on raised platforms. From that time onward, they came to be known as *Singtang* and later changed it to Sangtam. The Sangtams maintained a strong community life within the village. The village can be regarded as a free state because it has its own territory sufficient to support the entire village. In the olden days, each village was a little republic, almost self-sufficient, and an independent, autonomous unit within a tribe. Like many other tribal groups in Northeast India, due to the mountainous terrain, they practice jhum (shifting cultivation), and very few sections of the population engage in terrace cultivation. The Sangtams have observed about 12 festivals throughout the year, including some religious festivals. Except for certain taboos¹ (Mamoh), all the festivals are concerned with agriculture, cultivation, food

production, blessings, and prosperity. Among the festivals, Mungmung is one of the most important festivals among the Sangtams. The predominant objective of celebrating the Mungmung festival is to worship the spirit of the house, which they believed existed in the three stones of the fireplace.

FESTIVALS

Sangtams have a distinct culture of celebrating different festivals being observed throughout the year. Each festival has its own significance in relation to the agricultural seasons. The major festivals celebrated by the Sangtams in different seasons throughout the calendar year are described below. It is said that there were more than 12 different festivals among the Sangtams. Those festivals were celebrated with strict observance of taboos and religious rites. Among the many Sangtam festivals, twelve festivals are important. However, among the twelve festivals, Mungmung and Hünapungpi are observed more prevalently in the present day. Among these festivals, Mungmung is the most important, observed in all the villages. The festivals occupy a very important place in the social and cultural life of the Sangtams. However, with the advent of Christianity and modernisation, some of the festivals were avoided and neglected, while few are still practised. To understand the nature of festivals, we will discuss some of the most important Sangtam traditional festivals.

MUNG MUNG THSÜTI²

Mungmung thsüti is the most important festival for the Sangtams. It is celebrated from 1 to 6 September (Mungmung) every year. This is the season when the crops in the fields are ready for harvest. The main feature of these Mungmung festivals is the worship of the house spirit, Lijaba³, and the three cooking stones in the house's fireplace (Tsalong, 2014). Early in the morning of the first day, the eldest woman of every family offers cooked sticky rice, meat, and rice beer to the three cooking stones. Before this worship is performed, no one, not even the domestic animals, would be given food in case bad luck or a curse might fall upon the family. When the sun rises, water from the *Yang Kihkha* village well is drawn with great care. First, the oldest man in the village goes to fetch the water from the village well, and others follow. Each of them must cover their head with *dshümpiva* green leaves, or else they will be attacked by cholera. On the second day, the villagers do not eat maize for fear of contracting smallpox, as was superstitiously believed. The first day is called *Jangshika* (the last day of fieldwork). The first day is marked by the closure of all farming transactions, the purchase of domestic animals like pigs, cows, and mithun, the roping of these animals, and the preparation and collection of foodstuffs. The villagers also collect firewood, vegetables, and millets from the old fields. The second day is called *Singkihthsa*. The collection of firewood and water continues. The domestic animals kept for the festival are killed on the second day. After setting aside a separate portion of meat for Mungmung, the farmer groups (*ati/akhingrü*) would share it equally amongst themselves. They also cook some meat to celebrate their feast together. No one is allowed to eat Mungmung sacrificial meat for the next day, *Mamoh shuh* (taboo meat), as it is regarded as sacred. Well-off families kill animals and share the meat and food with relatives and neighbours. The third day is called *Müsüh-yangtüp* (feeding hearth). The third day is observed by feeding the three cooking stones. On the morning of the third day, the feeding of three stones is done in every house. The older women feed *müsü long asang* three stones in every house of their relatives. The worship of three stones is done in this manner: In one plate called *khole* (folded banana leaf), sticky rice, meat, liver, and wine are collected for offering to the three cooking stones. No one is allowed to eat anything before offering meat, rice, and wine to the three stones.

They believe that the creator God 'Lihjapa' lives with these three stones in every house. After offering and worshipping these three stones, all family members and domestic animals may eat. The family members eat and drink merrily in the name of the Mungmung festival after completing the feeding of three cooking stones. On the third day, early in the morning, an older woman in the village would be the first person to draw water from the village well. Other women will follow her to draw water. While carrying water in bamboo containers (*tahzi/sipong*) from the well to the house, the old woman shall place a leaf called '*dsümpiva*' between her head and the strap of the bamboo basket. This is mainly done to prevent disease. The children's groups also play different games, such as tug-of-war, top-spinning, and *khüling dheta*. Some people dance and sing folk songs on this day and enjoy the festival. The fourth day is called *Kihkhalangpi*). On the fifth day, all youths and menfolk would go and clean the footpath leading to the village well. The village priest shall be the first person to start cleaning the road. Lunch for this cleaning day is prepared by contributing meat and rice, which are cooked at the house of an older man. On this day, the housewife puts chilli, ginger, and cotton into the split plant called '*tsihdong*' and places it near their house. Some people put ragweed, a stinking plant called '*dhrongpha*', stinging leaves hanging at the projecting face of the house. This is done to be free of fever after the Mungmung festival and to protect crops in the field from natural calamities. The fifth day is called *Shiilang Wüba*, going on a journey. During the Mungmung festival, relatives from neighbouring villages pay a visit to their parents, relatives, and friends in the name of the Mungmung festival and enjoy exchanging meat and rice beer and eating together. The sixth day is called *aka singkihthsa*, the last preparation. People can start going to their fields from this day for the harvest. They can also start their daily business, go to the jungle or the field, fetch firewood and also collect vegetables from both *phi* old field and *huusi* new fields. Thus, Sangtams celebrate the Mungmung festival for six days to seek God's blessings (Sangtam, 2011).

The Mungmung thsüti is not just a time to rest from the fields; it is the ultimate moment where the Sangtam community restores harmony between the living, the dead, and the divine. It links the physical and spiritual worlds by harmonising relationships among the living, their ancestors, the agricultural landscape, and the community's economic structure. The significance of Mungmung thsüti lies in its ability to ensure that material abundance is never separated from spiritual gratitude and social justice, uniting the community through a shared belief that everything in the universe is connected, meaning people must follow strict rules to keep life peaceful and healthy.

HÜNAPUNGPI THSÜTI

Hünapung means 'rooster,' and 'bi' means 'hold.' "Hünapungpi" means rooster-holding festivals. In other words, this is the festival when every family offers a rooster to their elder relatives. The roosters should be killed at the festival. Usually, the festival falls from 15 to 18 *hünapungpi choo* August every year. The first day is called *Jangsika*, which means the last day of going out to the field to work before this festival. In the evening of the first day, every householder catches one rooster. The second day is set for giving the rooster away. A cockfight is also organised on that day. The winner is declared the king cock, and in the evening, they kill the rooster and have a rooster feast. However, the two legs of the rooster are kept for the next day. On the third day, all the children of the village gather in the afternoon in a selected place to eat the reserved legs of the rooster in the presence of all the villagers. On the fourth and last day, prayers are offered for the departed soul (Tsalong, 2014). Children and parents wait anxiously for the celebration of Hünapungpi. As the festival time draws near, the priest

visits every khel and announces the festival in four days, i.e., 'Zangnyu.' Everyone must celebrate this festival. On the first day, one rooster will be caught before sunrise in every house. Parents tied the leg of the rooster with a rope, and the other end of the rope was tied to a stick so that the rooster would not fly or run away. As the sun rises, all the children, especially the boys, would gather on the village main road or the village playground with their own people living in rural areas. Their main occupation, Jhum cultivation, is extensively practised. The main crops of this district are paddy, maize, millet, and barley. On the second day, the rooster that had participated in the rooster fight would be killed in every house and cooked in a very special way for the family feast. The parents will put one piece of liver, one piece of leg, one piece of meat called 'akhungarü-tphüni,' and rice on a banana leaf plate called Khole⁴. All the children will then enjoy the morning meal together. As a sign of respect for the head of the family, the head portion of the cooked chicken is always served to the father. In return, Father would bless the family in the name of the Hünapungpi festival. Even on the third day, no one will go to the field or elsewhere; they will spend their time together enjoying (ibid).

The Hünapungpi thsüti serves as an important practice for preserving and maintaining structural continuity within the community. Through the symbolic exchange and consumption of the rooster, Hünapungpi thsüti systematically strengthens traditional hierarchies; the gifting of a rooster or cock to elder relatives and the presentation of the rooster's head to the head of the family reaffirm kinship obligations and generate essential patriarchal blessings for the household. Moreover, the festival functions as an active space for childhood socialization. Hünapungpi thsüti masterfully connects the temporal gap between the youth, the elders, and the ancestors, ensuring that material joy is balanced by past reverence and communal harmony.

DISCUSSIONS

The Sangtam community adapts its rituals to meet current political and social needs, helping maintain cohesion and identity. Oral traditions, like folk songs and storytelling, are essential for preserving culture and reinforcing social bonds through community participation. It encourages environmental conservation as Sangtam rituals are closely linked to their environmental knowledge. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) emphasises sustainable practices, enabling resource management in harmony with nature. Festivals function as regulations on resource usage, with tribal laws preventing overexploitation and promoting stewardship. Seasonal festivities align with agricultural practices, helps to sustain biodiversity and community livelihoods. Rituals often restrict specific activities to maintain ecological balance, while shared labour fosters teamwork and unity. Integrating indigenous wisdom into modern policies can enhance social cohesion and environmental resilience. Future studies should examine how adaptive rituals respond to modernisation and socio-economic changes.

CONCLUSION

The festivals of the Sangtam tribe serve as critical mechanisms for preserving cultural identity and fostering community cohesion amid modernisation. Rooted in agricultural practices, these celebrations not only express gratitude for bountiful harvests but also reinforce traditional governance and social structures. Through intricate rituals and communal participation, the Sangtam pass down essential values and ecological knowledge, ensuring that their rich heritage continues to thrive. As venues for dispute resolution and leadership reaffirmation, these festivals bridge the gap between history and contemporary societal needs. Ultimately, they reflect the tribe's deep connection to the environment,

highlighting the importance of sustainable practices and the collective responsibility toward land stewardship. Thus, the Sangtam festivals stand not only as cultural celebrations but also as vital components in maintaining the community's socio-cultural and ecological balance.

NOTES

1. Taboo or mamoh is a caution or prohibition against supernatural objects, plants, animals, human beings who possess manna.
2. Thsüti means in Sangtam language festival.
3. Ancestors believed that "Lijaba" created the earth. "Lijaba" worship occurred once a year, for which they had to build a large hut without walls at the centre of the village, and at the centre of the hut, they would erect another small bamboo fence (the size of a pig's head). The women were not allowed to participate in rituals because, in those days, women were given a lesser role and were not regarded as equal to men. That is how most of the menfolk generally performed religious practices.
4. Khole means a folded banana leaf used for rituals.

REFERENCE

- Angangba Baptist Lathro. (n.d.). *Angangba Baptist Lathro Golden Jubilee Yukkeh* .
- Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia. (2013). In *Duke University Press eBooks*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822377306>
- Bouchery, P., & Sangtam, L. (2012). The Kinship Terminology of the Sangtam Nagas. *HAL (Le Centre Pour La Communication Scientifique Directe)*. <https://hal.science/hal-03718351>
- Chatterjee, N. (2022). Ecological ‘Self’ vs the Ecological ‘Other’: Indigenous Naga Ecotopia for the Dystopic World. *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 8(2), 29–47. <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjest.2022.14.03>
- Dixit, Y. J. A. P., Sarika. (2024). *A Study on the Lotha Naga Customary Practices: North East India, Nagaland*. <https://doi.org/10.52783/eel.v14i2.1549>
- Festival, N., Odori, A., & Festival, G. (2011). *Festivals*.
- Ghosh, B. B. (1981). *Nagaland District Gazetteers Tuensang District*.
- Law Research Institute. (2011). *Customary law of the Sangtam Nagas of Nagaland*. Gauhati High Court.
- Lipongse, S. T. (2005). *The advent of Christianity at Angangba village and its impact* [Master’s thesis, DBC].
- Mondal, A., & Pandey, M. S. (2024). Indigenous Festivals and Climate Sustainability in India: A Case Study of Cultural Practices and Performances. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n1.03>
- Pandey, D., Adhiguru, P., & De, H. K. (2019). Attachment to Shifting Cultivation among Konyak Naga Tribe in Eastern Himalaya: Choice or Compulsion? *Current Science*, 116(8), 1387–1387. <https://doi.org/10.18520/cs/v116/i8/1387-1391>
- Sangtam T. Khumjong (2011) The Significant of Mongmong Festival. *The Morung Express*. Retrieved from: https://morungexpress.com/significance-mongmong-festival#google_vignette/
- Sangtam, K. (2022). *Sangtam Naga and Christianity*. Heritage Publishing House.
- Sangtam, S. L. (2021). Are Delves on Mongmong Festival of Sangtam Naga Tribe. *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*, 9(69), 16406–16409. <https://doi.org/10.21922/srjis.v9i69.10041>

- Sangtam, T. T. (2025). The Sangtam Naga Koh thsütitüp Feasts of Merit and Social Stratification. *Studies in Indian Anthropology and Sociology*, 2(2), 241-248.
- Selila, M. (1996). *The impact of Christianity education in Sangtam Association* ,Bachelor's thesis, Senate of Serampore.
- Shimray, R. A., & Ezung, N. (2023). Naga Traditional Village Polity: A Reading from JP Mills" The Lhota Naga'. *Antrocom: Online Journal of Anthropology*, 19(1).
- Thonger, C. C. (2006). *A study on the socio-religious cultural life of the Sangtam Nagas* Master's thesis, Senate of Serampore.
- Tribes and festivals, Retrieved from: <https://tourism.nagaland.gov.in/tribes/>
- Tsalongse, C. (2014). *Traditional culture of the Sangtam Naga* (2nd ed.).
- Jaimangal-Jones, D. (2014). Utilising ethnography and participant observation in festival and event research. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 5(1), 39-55.