



## A Changing Continual Trends in Sumi Naga Village Establishment

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**Abstract:** In every society, villages serve as the basis of human development and progress. Likewise, the Sumi Nagas being one of the major tribe among the Nagas has a unique custom of establishment of villages and its settlement pattern. In the midst of witnessing major changes with regard to cultural practices and traditions among the Naga tribe, the Sumi Nagas continued to witness the custom of village establishment with new ideologies, concepts and purpose. This very nature can lead to understanding of how a Sumi Naga society is shaped, structured and characterizes their behavior in various aspects. As in the past, the Sumi Nagas lacked the practice of writing and had no written records. Their traditions and customs were passed down from generations through oral tradition. With the decrease of the older generations, many knowledge and cultural practices are on the decline. Therefore, there is a need to undertake a thorough research of the traditional practice of village establishment and analyze the factors resulting to the changes and the continuity in the current context and bring out more information with regard to this unique practice, therefore, the study.

**Keywords:** Village Establishment, Sumi Naga, Custom

**Received :** 19 September 2023

**Revised :** 10 October 2023

**Accepted :** 02 November 2023

**Published :** 30 December 2023

### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Tovikali Yepthomi Sumi  
2023. A Changing Continual  
Trends in Sumi Naga Village  
Establishment. *Skylines of  
Anthropology*, 3: 2,  
pp. 99-110. [https://doi.  
org/10.47509/SA.2023.  
v03i02.03](https://doi.org/10.47509/SA.2023.v03i02.03)

### Introduction

Human society has undergone enormous changes from pre-historic times to the present era. It is known that change is the very nature of man. Man's progress and development are always in motion. The study of progress and human evolvement is a subject of interest for many scientists, anthropologists, historians etc., as to code and decode the various factors resulting in these phenomena. Naga society in general has no less undergone many changes over the years. Though many studies have been conducted and some are in

the process, there are many questions that are yet to be understood about the history, society, and cultural practices of the Nagas. Sumis in particular, are without exception, and have very limited research work, recorded documents and studies conducted to have an absolute understanding of the people, culture, customs and traditions. Therefore, to gather more knowledge and understanding of the tribe, it is vital to understand the basic unit of social structure from the base.

Village settlements serve as the basic component and foundation for every Naga society. After the phase of migration of the Nagas from various routes, settlements in the form of villages took place among the Nagas and those villages are existing till today, though there are cases of some which have been abandoned or moved to a different location. Thus, the objective of this research paper is to understand the village settlement, which is at the base of the social structure of Sumi Naga.

## **Methodology**

This research was conducted on the Qualitative method for data collection with primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are the information based on oral interviews, personal observation, official information and local sources. Major data on this work is based on primary sources. The secondary sources are literary sources like books, published and unpublished materials; data collected from the libraries, documents, souvenirs and records. Books, folklores and journals records available in Sumi dialect (vernacular) are also used.

Sumis are the most widespread tribe amongst the Nagas in terms of settlement. Their head-quarter is at Zunheboto, located in the central part of Nagaland. It is surrounded by all the other tribes of Nagaland. According to 2011 census of India, Sumi Nagas number around 300,000 in population. Sumis are also present in different districts such as Dimapur, Kohima, Wokha, Kiphire, Mokokchung, Tuensang etc. There are also seven Sumi villages in Tinsukia District of Assam. There are a total of 382 Sumi villages spread across Assam and Nagaland state. According to Swu (2003) in his book Sumi Xhughili, the distribution of the Sumi villages shows 21 villages in Upper Assam, 177 villages in Zunheboto District (eastern area), 169 villages in Dimapur District (western area), 1 village in Tuensang District and 14 villages in Kiphire District (Swu,2003).

## **Distribution of Sumi Villages**

Sumis are the most widespread tribe amongst the Nagas in terms of settlement. In terms of the village, Sumis have the highest number of Village among the

Nagas. The villages listed out region-wise according to Sumi Hoho Publication '*Sumi Puthekuwo eno Axhulhe*' (2021);

1. Atoizu-Saptiqa Area -21 villages
2. Aphuyemi/ Pughoboto Area-23
3. Aghunato area- 32
4. Akuluto-VK Area-20
5. Eastern Sumi (Kiphire-Tuensang District)-16
6. Northern sumi-32
7. Suruhuto-Asuto Area-32
8. Satakha-Satoi Aarea- 33
9. Zunheboto-17

Based on this source, altogether there are 210 villages under the Zunheboto district and 16 villages in Kiphire- Tuensang District.

Currently there are 157 Sumi Villages in and around Dimapur and about 20-21 un-recognised Sumi villages affiliated under Western Sumi Hoho. Sumis are also present in different districts such as Dimapur, Kohima, Wokha, Kiphire, Mokokchung, Tuensang etc. There are also seven Sumi villages in Tinsukia District of Assam.

### **Concept of Sumi Village Establishment**

Village settlement is one of the important features of the Sumi tribe. As compared to the other Naga tribes, Sumis practiced the establishment of villages more than any others and this practice is found in recent years as well. This continuity has developed my interest in this particular subject to bring out more information and to understand this cultural practice in a broader sense. Though there is continuity in this practice, many changes have come about in the present.

The practice of village establishment among the Sumi Nagas can be categorized into two phases. The period before the advent of the West and the period of Nagas contact with the West. The events of Nagas conversion to Christianity in Nagaland was one of the factors that led to the process of change in the establishment of villages. The traditional ways of life were influenced by the western lifestyle. The village officials, like the chief priests were replaced by Christian evangelists. The erstwhile rituals and sense of reverence have been transformed to the power play of polity, economy and other modern aspirations. One of the important factors for the establishment

of new settlements is largely for economic purposes. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to analyse and discuss the changes and purpose of village establishment among the Sumi Nagas in the past and at present.

There are various aspects of village settlement pattern. Traditionally, according to the Sumi Nagas new villages are mostly established by the existing village chief's son or from the chief's bloodline. However, there are also cases of establishing a village by conquest. It is the custom for the sons as they grow up to start new villages on their own account according to Elwin (1969). But it is not restricted strictly to the chief's bloodline to establish a village, as any man who has the capacity to establish the village could do so with prior permission from the then village chief. Apart from the customs, there are various rituals, rites, ceremonies and norms associated with the establishment of a new village. In many accounts, new villages are established pertaining to the increase in population, insufficient land, fire or epidemic diseases or conflicts amongst the villagers. Naga villages are often named after the significance of the location. But in case of the Sumis, the village is usually named after the founder of the village.

In the past, settling in new places and establishing new villages was not easy. It involved observing rigorous norms of traditional rites and rituals as well as labour and tremendous investigation for a water source, location, land suitability and fertility etc., In some cases, migration is carried out in peace, unity and understanding. But in some other cases, new villages are established due to differences between the brothers and also the rich decide to go their separate ways and form a new village.

In some instances, the chief marrying more than one wife leads to the ill-treatment of the younger sons by the older which prompts the younger ones to seek out for new places and establish their own village. The older ones do not treat the younger ones fairly and the younger ones cannot serve and please the older ones all the time which leads to the establishment of new villages.

Based on the account of the norms to be fulfilled in establishing a village, it can be understood that no ordinary or common man can easily establish a village. For a Sumi to set up a new village, one has to be wealthy not in terms of money but someone who owns a good number of cattle, pigs, cows, and an abundance of paddy etc. In order to establish a village, the first thing for the proposed chief to take a step is to survey the area to check the possibility of establishing a village and visit the site. Once he finds the location satisfactory, he returns back home and makes preparations to proceed with his plan. He inform the then Village Chief about his plans and desire and seek

his permission to set up his own village after which the village elders will be called for a meeting. They will discuss the matters and grant permission for a new settlement. The proposed Chief will then consult the members who wish to migrate with him to the new village. Thereafter, the proposed chief gathers all of them and makes a declaration that 'I have decided to migrate and you all have agreed to follow me therefore we will make plans and prepare for the migration. The chief analyses and chooses a capable and abled person to become the second chief after him so he will be entrusted to gather more members to join their migration group. With the agreement between the two, the second chief will gather his own members to join the group. If in case the migration group becomes large in number they choose another chief to be third in line of chieftainship. In case there is no capable person to fill in the position, then the proposed Chief can hold the position of Chieftainship by himself.

There was a saying that whether the new village is established in peace and unity or with differences, when the new group is about to migrate, temporary fences are made in the direction of the route the migration team was to undertake. After which there will be a light wrestle between the two groups and the new group will cross over the fence and go on their way. This act is carried out so that the new migration group will not take away all the fortunes with them.

In the case of the Western Sumi i.e., Dimapur area, it has its own circumstances that lead to the village establishment. Before any habitation took place in these areas, it was mentioned that the place was a dense forest with wild animals and evils in the forests. Due to this no man or group made an attempt to explore these areas for settlement. It was only in 1911, that the first migration to the western part of Nagaland was succeeded by Asu Kiyezu after he was granted permission by the British Government. Followed by Nihokhu, Nikhekhu and many more. Approximately, there are about 9-10 villages established with permission granted by the British Government. After India got independence around 10 villages were given permission to establish villages and the settlements increased gradually. Pherima for example, which is located on the highway between Kohima and Dimapur, was supposed to be inhabited by the Angami Nagas but they could not live peacefully because of wild animals and some other problems which caused the population to cease which is termed as '*Pighive*' in Sumi dialect. After which, Sumis came and settled down in that area. In the 1970's, cases of Sumis encounter with Assamese have taken place for the settlement. Migration towards the western region was encouraged because of the availability of land during those days.

Another special group of Sumis who are inhabiting the Margherita Sub-Division, Tinsukia District of Assam has their own history of settlement in this locality. Currently, there are about 7 villages. In between 1880's and 1890's, many strong and abled man were taken down to this region by the British official for war against Abhor, for felling trees, construction of roads and to make them work in Digboi, Assam oil factory. The British officials found them to be very brave and fearless. It was said that, Sumis use large size *Azuta* (machete) which enabled them to cut down big trees, for which the Britishers took them down to fell trees. Many stayed behind and did not return to the Naga hills. They sought the permission from British official and set up their own villages and settled there.

### **The Selection of Village Officials**

During the process of migration, whoever proposes to form a new village constitute the village officials called *shexhixelimi* (colleagues). They decide who will be *akukau*, *chochowu* (spokesperson), *awowu/achinetou* (priest) and *kichelapumil/Lapu, Amoshou*. The number of post to be filled are not uniformly followed as it was arranged according to the condition suitable for the migrating group. After fulfilling all this requirements, they begin to make preparations for migration.

Village officials was not chosen from one particular clan alone for practical aspect. Usually a person who is wise, brave and smart or someone who is disciplined, obedient and respectful of elders are chosen to hold the different official positions of the village. For the chief to select the officials amongst his own brother is meaningless because since he holds the position of the chief, he is representing all his other brothers and the other brother also enjoy certain rights and privileges due to which they don't feel the need to choose the official from amongst the family of the chief. To do so will invite criticism from the rest of the village members of unfair treatment. Any decision will be consulted from among the members and the final word will be given by the chief so it can be understood that the Chief also doesn't act arbitrarily and dictate his subjects. With regard to officials, they are all chosen from different clan members of the village.

### **Demarcation of Boundaries for the New Village**

Before a village was established, consent was taken from the surrounding villages and boundaries was demarcated to establish a new village. Without a clear consent for the boundaries it was not possible to establish the village. The chief of the village initiates to mark the boundary with stones. Yet, in most of

the cases, the boundaries between the villages are carried out by overlooking at the area as far as their eyes can see and claim the boundaries locating the mountains and forests lands as the boundary.

### **Chieftainship and its Impact on Village Establishment**

The most important reason for the Sumis establishment of villages is due to chieftainship, which renders many privileges and power. To cite an example, G.B Hekuto Yeptho of Sukhalu Village was appointed as the GB area council chairman of *Tizu* for three years. During his tenure, he strictly monitored the *Tizu* river area and prohibited the fishing and collected many fines for violating it, which resulted in good yielding of fish. But after his tenure as chairmanship came to an end the successors could not impose the strict prohibitions so fishing activities has begun randomly and people started selling fish for Rs. 1000/- per 1 Kg of *Tizu* fish. Many using the generators and electricity run machines for fishing which has greatly declined the number of fish in the river. This example is cited to understand the importance of the role of *Kukami* in the community. Therefore, the incapability of the *Akukau* to strongly execute his power is also adding to the split and division in the village.

The case of abdicating the position of a chief is a rare occurrence but there are possibilities where if the Chief of the village is incapable in exercising his authority then he can be replaced. For instances, when the chief of the village imposes too much of his arbitrary rules and exercise his power excessively over the members of the village, instead of members abandoning the village and leading to the decline of the village, the chief will be replaced by amongst his brothers.

In terms of chieftainship, those who holds this position with the blessings of the elders are blessed with good fortune and longevity but those who take over the position by other means are believed to have short life or misfortunes.

Whatever issues arises within the village are discussed and decisions are rendered according to the tradition and custom of the past. Changes have come about in this case. In the past, the chief gave permission to the *Chochou* to carry out necessary actions, and if any man rejected *Chochou* or retaliated him, then that person was expelled from the village. Approximately around 25 percent of the chief's role has now been transferred to the Council of the village.

There is another important factor which is prevalent in the component of Sumi Naga village which adds to the possibility of establishment of a village. This is in the case of the presence of a group of people known as '*Anukishimi*' and '*Aqhu- axhe*'.

### **Anukishimi (Adoptee)**

The term '*Anukishimi*' is referred to those who never pay and live free of cost under the chiefs. They address their '*Alu pighiu*' (landlord) as '*Ampeu*' (master) or '*Apu*' (father). It is said that '*Anukishimi*' plays a vital role in the formation of village among the Sumi Nagas. When a village is established, the chief distribute the land to the important people of the village as forest land and fields. But to those followers of chiefs known as *Anukishimi*, who seeks the protection of the chiefs will live as dependants of the chiefs. During the time of '*Asu-ye*'- land distribution for cultivation, the *Anukishimi*, usually offer clothing and game hunted to the *Ampeu* to favour them and get good portion of land in return for cultivation.

### **Aqhu-Axhe (Dependants)**

The conditions regarding the *Aqha-axhe* is quite different from *Anukishimi*. In the case of *Anukishimi*, they can be freed from their *Ampeu*(owner). But for the case of *Aqha-Axhe* it is believed that it is *pipichi-chine* which means it is a taboo for them to leave their *Ampeu*. *Aqhu-Axhe* is made up of two words. In case of marriage, gifts like kitchen utensils, domesticated animals, rice and traditional clothes are given to start a new home by the father or their elder family members which is called as *aqhu* (aiding or laying a foundation for the new couple to set up their new life).

'*Axhe*' means paying 'bride price'. In case the owner '*Ampeu*' pays the bride price for marriage is called *Axhe*.

So *Aqhu-Axhe* does not sound pleasant but in conditions where they do not have any options, they sought the help of the people who can help them and thus remain obligated to those family. Even if they wish to pay their debts and wishes to be free from their *Ampeu*, it was considered a taboo. They can be referred to as 'dependants'. But at present, these concept has changed with the influence of Christianity and now some are paying off for their freed status.

### **Issues on the Continuity of the Village Establishment**

Sumis are mostly known to be very brave, strong and courageous. They are ever ready to fight for their right and cause. They are mostly driven by *Aju-Aje*. Every clan has their own *Kukami* and has a '*Kukami Lagha*'. At one point of time, there was a decline in the village establishment with the arrival of British Colonial rule. No other Naga tribe ventured out to the border region of Assam i.e, at present the Dimapur area due to dense forest, wild animals and evil spirits. Yet, the British Government learned about the Sumis who were found



to be very brave, fearless and courageous. For which, they granted permission to Akukau Kiyezu to migrate and establish the village in the present Dimapur area in the year 1911. Except in the Western region, towards the Eastern side, the establishment of village by Asu Sukhalu at Puru (Pungro) village can be considered as the last village established among the Eastern Sumi Nagas. There are no new villages established in the recent years in actual traditional norms.

In the context of Sukhalu village, the founder of the village Asu Kuhozu made a statement that none of his sons or grandsons should on any account divide the land among themselves. Even if one has to leave the village, he can do so and his share will remain as it is but the land should never be divided among the brothers. Because if they divide among themselves, they may sell off the land as it becomes the personal property. Therefore, the land will remain in the name of the founder so no brother will have the right to claim over it. Due to this wise decision given by Asu Kuhozu, till today they have kept his word intact. Even though some other villages in the vicinity has divided their land, villages like Khukishe and Sukhalu village have not done so.

The more the villages are established, the problems of land disputes, tribal conflicts and misunderstandings are created. Therefore, in this case, there is not much necessity to establish new villages among the Sumi Nagas. The main reason for the Sumis in establishing a village is to hold the power and not just to acquire the land. In the past, most of the villages were established to seek for chieftainship but in the current scenario, villages are established to avail government funds like VDB provisions. In the past, unless a person has gone through the migration process and took part in migration and stepped his foot in the new village, one was not eligible to become the chief. Even though, the person enters the village on the second or third day he was not eligible. But at present, even if a person has not undergone migration process and joins as the member of the village after years of establishing the village, chieftainship is offered to that person.

According to the opinion of many Sumi elders, Sumis should consider the practical aspects and consider if it's really necessary to continue to establish villages because in the past villages were established through one's hard labour and wealth and prestige earned. But in the present context it is more of dividing the village and enjoy certain privileges and avail funds. The position of *Kukami* is also given to those who have money and are able to please the *Akukau*, but in actual sense chieftainship can never be bought. Most of the villages established in recent years are mostly found to be the breakup or dividing the village into two or more parts. The more the village is divided the more differences arises among the people.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a continuity and change in the system of village establishment among the Sumi Nagas. The thought on traditional practices and its continuity is very complex and cannot be brought to a comprehensive conclusion. This argument is relatable with regard to this topic as well. In the past, village establishment was an important customary practise of the tribe and it was encouraged. With this regard, it is very vital to uphold our traditional values, customs and traditions. Whereas, over the years, the past values, prestige and norms have declined. Therefore, henceforth, one has to make a cautious effort in understanding the change and progress of the society to ascertain the practice to suit the time.

This research has gathered the knowledge of the reasons for the changes in establishment of villages among the Sumi Nagas. It highlights the issues of important customary practices and its values associated with the tribe. This work approached the issues pertaining to the custom of village establishment and its practise. Thus, a thorough understanding of the practise of Sumi village establishment needs to be analysed and looked into the matter whether it is necessary for the Sumis needs to uphold this tradition.

*(This article is based on research work sponsored under Minor Research project by ICSSR-New Delhi)*

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