

Tokhü Emong: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of the Lotha Naga Harvest Festival

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Abstract—This paper examines Tokhü Emong, the principal harvest festival of the Lotha Naga tribe of Nagaland, India, as a site of cultural expression, social integration, and identity formation. Celebrated annually in early November, Tokhü Emong encapsulates the Lotha worldview rooted in agrarian subsistence, communal reciprocity, and spiritual thanksgiving. Drawing on anthropological frameworks of ritual and festivity, this study explores the festival's historical origins, ritual practices, socio-religious significance, and its transformation under Christian influence and modernization. The paper argues that Tokhü Emong continues to function as a cultural institution sustaining Lotha identity and reinforcing social cohesion in a rapidly changing socio-economic milieu.

Index Terms—Tokhü Emong, Lotha, festival, harvest, culture, Wokha.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nagaland is one among the seven sisters of the Northeastern States of India situated at the Naga Hills of the Purvanchal Range, which is also called as the Eastern Mountain¹. Diverse in every aspect of life religion, culture, language, tradition and food habits the Nagas are known for their unique sense of culture and festivity. As such, Nagaland is rightly called the 'Land of festivals' (Ao, 2001)². With agriculture being the main occupation of the Nagas, majority of their festivals revolve around agricultural activities or farming (Ao, 2001; Imchen 2005; Government of Nagaland, 2020).

1.1 Tribal festivals of the Nagas

Nagas consists of 17 major tribes, each distinct in their customs, including attire, ornaments, language and festivals. Some of the major festivals of the Nagas are as follows:

Sekrenyi, a major festival of the Angami Naga community celebrated in the month of December for prosperity and abundance. It also involves activities marking process of purification for both the body and the soul.

Sukrenye, is celebrated by the Chakhesang tribe in the month of January to celebrate the blessing of harvest season and to welcome prosperous new year.

Moatsu Festival, is celebrated in the month of May to mark the end of the sowing season. It is an occasion of celebration, feasting, bonding and cultural display. Traditional activities such as dance, music, story narration and exchange of gift are commonly performed in the festival³.

Tuluni festival is the main festival of the Sumi Nagas, celebrated in the month of July. It is a post-harvest festival, celebrated to mark season of plentiful harvest. Tuluni Festival is also called as "ANNI" meaning season off plentiful crops. The festival is featured by exchange of gifts, feasting, displaying cultural events and hosting of feast between betrothed couples⁴.

Aoleang festival is a festival celebrated by the Konyak Naga tribe. It is celebrated in the month of April, to mark the end of a year and the prospect of starting a new year with the arrival of Spring. The festival is also meant to usher in plentiful harvest⁵. Cultural activities

¹ Wikipedia (n.d.). *Purvanchal Range*. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved March 28, 2026, from

² Ao, A. (2001), *The Cultural Heritage of Nagaland*, Kohima, Directorate of Art and Culture.

³ Kaziranga National Park Assam. (n.d.). *Celebrate and dine with the legendary Ao tribes – The festival of Moatsu Mong, Mokokchung, Nagaland, India*. Retrieved March 28, 2026, from

⁴ District Administration Zunheboto. (n.d.). *Festivals*.

Government of Nagaland. Retrieved March 28, 2026, from

⁵ Department of Tourism, Government of Nagaland. (n.d.). *Tribes and festivals*. Retrieved March 28, 2026, from

such as folk-dance, songs, feasting, tribal sports and art are performed during the festival.

II. WOKHA AND THE LOTHAS

Wokha which literally means Census is one of the hill districts of the Nagaland situated at 26.1° North Latitude and 94.27° East Longitude, with area of 1628 sq. kms (census 2011)⁶. Wokha is basically divided into three ranges – upper, middle and lower range. According to 2011 census, Wokha has a population of about 166343, with an average density of population of about 102 per sq. km. Wokha is also known as the Land of Plenty for its richness in vegetable products.

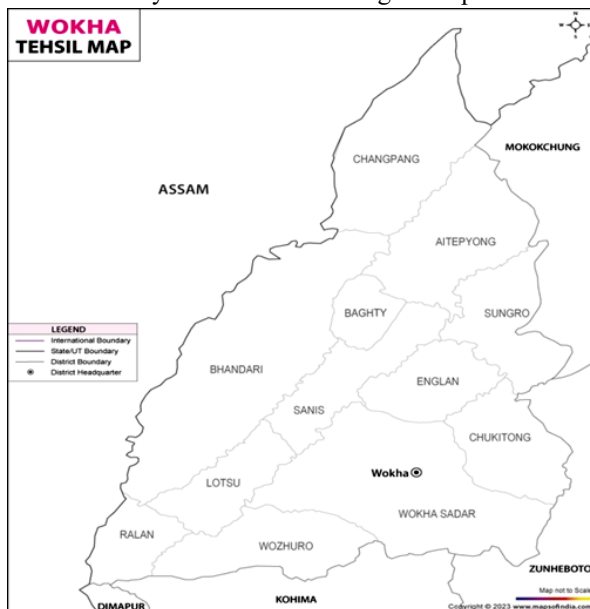


Fig: 1: Map of Wokha

The Lothas who are also known as 'Kyongs' are one among the major tribes of Nagaland hailing from the district of Wokha⁷. The Lothas a tribal community is identified by its distinctiveness in terms of their language, taste and culture (Egyonkosh, 2023). The Lothas maintain a distinct trait in them by nature, habit, custom language and attire from their brothers from another tribes. Residing in a hilly terrain, the Lothas have traditionally depended on farming for their livelihood, since the topography poses serious

challenges to industrialization. Majority of the population are still village dwellers even to this day. However, majority of the younger generation are more drawn towards the town and urban centers for better education and livelihood.

The Lothas are fond of elaborate and colourful festivals since time in the past. Before the arrival of the Christianity in Nagaland, Nagas practiced animistic religion and worship of ancestral spirits. During festivals, prayers and rituals would be offered to conciliate these spirits for blessing and provisions.

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Scholarly engagement with Naga festivals has largely emerged within the broader framework of anthropological and ethnographic studies on indigenous cultures of Northeast India. Early foundational works such as R. R. Shimray (1985) provide a descriptive account of Naga origin, culture, and social organization, emphasizing the centrality of ritual practices in sustaining tribal life. Shimray highlights that festivals among the Nagas are intrinsically linked to agricultural cycles and spiritual beliefs, functioning as mediating structures between the human and supernatural realms.

Similarly, A. Ao (2001, 2002) offers a comprehensive sociocultural analysis of Naga tribes, identifying festivals as key institutions that reinforce community cohesion, cultural identity, and moral values. Ao underscores the role of agrarian festivals in regulating social life and maintaining continuity in traditional practices, even amidst socio-economic transformations. From a theoretical perspective, classical sociological contributions provide critical insights into the functional aspects of rituals and festivals. Émile Durkheim (1912/1995) conceptualizes religious rituals as expressions of collective consciousness that generate social solidarity through shared beliefs and practices. This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding Tokhü Emong as a mechanism of integration within Lotha society. Likewise, Marcel Mauss (1925/2002), in his seminal work *The Gift*, theorizes exchange practices as systems of reciprocity that underpin social relationships. His framework is applicable to the communal feasting and exchange of goods observed during Tokhü Emong, which foster mutual obligation and social bonding.

⁶ District Administration Wokha. (n.d.). *About district*. Government of Nagaland. Retrieved March 28, 2026, from <https://wokha.nic.in/about-district>

⁷ Wikipedia. (n.d.). *Lotha Naga*. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved March 28, 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lotha_Naga

Recent scholarship has shifted towards examining the dynamics of continuity and change within Naga festivals. Lanusangla Kikon (2018) specifically analyzes Lotha festivals, including Tokhü Emong, highlighting their role as repositories of cultural memory and identity. Kikon argues that despite the transformative impact of Christianity and modernization, traditional festivals continue to adapt by incorporating new meanings while retaining core cultural values. This adaptive resilience ensures the survival of indigenous identity in contemporary contexts.

Further, studies such as I. Imchen (2005) and publications by the Department of Art and Culture, Government of Nagaland (2020) document the diversity of Naga festivals and their evolving forms. These works emphasize that while certain ritual elements have diminished, festivals remain vital platforms for cultural expression, social interaction, and intergenerational transmission of traditions.

However, despite the growing body of literature on Naga culture, there remains a relative paucity of focused academic research specifically on Tokhü Emong. Existing studies tend to treat it within broader discussions of Naga festivals, thereby overlooking its unique socio-cultural dimensions within Lotha society. This gap underscores the need for a more focused analytical study that situates. In addressing this gap, the present study contributes to the existing literature by providing a detailed socio-cultural analysis of Tokhü Emong, integrating classical theoretical frameworks with contemporary ethnographic insights. It seeks to highlight the festival's continued relevance as a dynamic institution that negotiates the interplay between tradition, religion, and modernization.

IV. TOKHÜ EMONG

Tokhu Emong is one of the premier festivals of the Lothas Naga. It is a post-harvest festival celebrated every year since the ancestral time. The word Tokhü means 'feast' or 'festival', while Emong means 'rest'. So, basically it is a festival of rest and thanksgiving for a good harvest. Prior to the advent of Christianity and the modern way of life, Tokhu Emong was celebrated to mark the end of the agricultural cycle. It was an occasion to give thanks to God for the plentiful blessings throughout the year. The opening of the festival will be heralded by the Pvuti (chief priest). The

Pvuti will be assisted by young men (Chumpo Khyongro) from the village for the conduct of the ceremonial rituals. Their role involves collecting un-husked rice from the villagers and trade it for money to be used for the buying a pig and preparation of rice beer (Zarenthung, 2023). During Tokhu Emong, various kinds of community activities are also performed. Traditional sports such as tug-of-wars, high jump, long jump, javelin throw, wooden kart race and pole climbing. The festival is also marked by vibrant dances, singing and folktale narrations. The community dresses up colourfully in traditional attires. The older male folks dress up with Longpensi while the younger male folks Phanrupsi. The women folks also dress up with traditional wraparound and shawls. The most commonly with 'Tokhu Surum', which is a pair of traditional wraparound and shawl worn by Lotha women especially during Tokhu Emong. The designed replicate a wild flower which blooms during the festive season called 'Tokhu thera'.

The festival is celebrated to promotes unity, forgiveness and friendship within the community, Christian beliefs and modern values have become interwoven with traditional customs to reflect the evolving identity and tastes of the community (Ao, 2002).

With the arrival of Christianity and the modernization of the society, the festival is now celebrated as a reminder of the rich culture values of our forefathers. However, in contemporary context, Christian beliefs and modern values have been interwoven to reflect the evolving identity and taste of the community (Ao, 2002). Thus, the festival's endurance underscores its adaptive capacity and symbolic centrality in Lotha identity.

V. TOKYU EMONG RITUALS AND PRACTICES

- Pre-festival activities

Before the onset of the seven-day festival, the villagers engage in the preparation of rice beer (Chumcho), collecting of agricultural goods such as pumpkin, millet, sticky-rice a yam (Shimray, 1985) Feasting is a big part of festival. Therefore, the community would engage in hunting and killing of domesticated animals popularly pigs. Mithuns' (Tsuro) meat is also regarded as a delicacy during the festival. These activities are for the preparation of the rituals and feasting associated to the Tokyu (festival).

- Community feasting and reciprocity

One of the main parts of Tokhü Emong is feasting. The community comes together as one irrespective of social status or ranks to celebrate and engage in a community meal. This activity is done foster the feeling of sharing, love and brotherhood. The community also takes apart in exchanging of gift and goods such as cooked meat and rice, fruits and vegetables, symbolizing expression of reciprocity and social solidarity. This practice aligns with Mauss's (1925) theory that gift exchange functions as a system of social obligation and cohesion. Marcel (1925) in his study revealed that such activities enhance community ties and the sense of togetherness.

- Reconciliation and Social renewal

One major aspect of the festival is the effort to restore and renew friendship during Tokhu emong. Rivalry or animosities between clans or family or the community in general are normally addressed during this festival. Conflicts relating to family ties, land disputes or fight within the community are normally settled during the festival. Songs and chanting are made during the festival to foster the sense of reconciliation, oneness and brotherhood. 'Thyingta-Rata Tokhu' is a common phrase or expression associated to the festival to signify reconciliation, forgiveness and the revival of relationship that were once marked by rivalry or conflict (Kikon, 2018).

- Cultural display of various arts

One of the integral parts of the festival is the community engagement in cultural dance and songs. These performative acts function as repositories of collective memory, transmitting cultural knowledge across generations (Kikon, 2018). Some of the common forms of art include fire making, weaving, and basket making.

A: Lotha traditional Dance



B: Traditional art of fire making and weaving



C: Traditional Sports – Pole Climbing and High Jump





Another important activity marking the festival is tradition sports. Tradition sports such as Tradition cart race, pole climbing, high-jump, tug of war, pole climbing.

VI. SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TOKHU EMONG

A. Agricultural and Economic dynamics

Tokhü Emong signifies the successful completion of the agrarian cycle. The communal sharing of produce affirms the redistributive ethos of Lotha society, mitigating economic disparities and ensuring social welfare.

B. Religious and Spiritual dynamics

Originally rooted in animistic beliefs, the festival has undergone significant transformation with the spread of Christianity. While ritual sacrifices and spirit worship has declined; the core theme of thanksgiving persists in the form of church services and prayers (Ao, 2002). This reflects a process of cultural adaptation rather than cultural erosion.

C. Social Cohesion and Identity Formation

The festival functions as a ritual of integration, uniting individuals and clans within a shared moral universe. It also serves as a marker of ethnic identity, particularly in diasporic contexts where Lothas use the festival as a means of cultural preservation and representation.

D. Transformation in the Modern Era

Modernization, urbanization, and religious conversion have reshaped the festival's form and content. While certain animistic rituals have diminished, community feasts, cultural performances, and church services have

replaced them. In urban centers, Tokhü Emong is celebrated through cultural programs, exhibitions, and academic seminars, reflecting both continuity and reinvention.

The formal recognition of November 7 as Tokhü Emong Day by the Government of Nagaland further institutionalizes the festival within the state's cultural framework (Government of Nagaland, 2020). This transformation demonstrates the adaptive resilience of indigenous cultural practices in the face of socio-economic change.

VII. CONCLUSION

Tokhü Emong reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in indigenous Lotha society. As both a ritual of thanksgiving and a social institution, it reinforces values of reciprocity, hospitality, and communal harmony through practices of feasting, exchange, and reconciliation. These functions align with Émile Durkheim's (1912/1995) concept of ritual as a source of social cohesion and collective consciousness, as well as Marcel Mauss's (1925/2002) theory of reciprocity.

However, the transformation of the festival under Christianity and modernization indicates a process of cultural adaptation rather than decline. While certain indigenous ritual elements have diminished, the festival has been reconstituted through hybrid forms that sustain its relevance in contemporary contexts (Ao, 2002; Kikon, 2018).

Thus, Tokhü Emong continues to function as a resilient cultural institution, preserving Lotha identity while negotiating changing socio-cultural realities.

Declaration Statement

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this research article.

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