# A Tradition of Singing at Work in the Sümi Naga Community

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In many indigenous cultures around the world, singing was a necessary tool for smooth work coordination and social cohesion in our ancestors' agrarian society. Songs made work easier. Singing and working in a paddy field created team-bonding and work efficiency. Hands and feet moved in tandem with voices as the earth was ploughed, seeds sown, weeds removed, and crops harvested. The songs engaged the heart and energised the body; time passed, work progressed, and the monotony of hard manual labour was conquered.

*People working in a Jhum field in a Sümi village: Photo by J.H. Hutton, 1913-1923 (Pitts Rivers Museum Archive, Oxford)*

Every worker had a part to sing and every singer had a plot of land to work on. It is said that when people sing together at work, morning transforms into evening and no one really notices, nor are people exhausted and the quality of work also improves. In the villages the songs would come to an end and so would the day's quota of work. Songs and tunes changed according to seasons and the type of work to be done.

A specific genre of songs called *alulokuhu le* or working-in-the-field songs were meant for agricultural work and were sung according to the season of the agricultural calendar in the traditional system of shifting cultivation. In the Sümi Naga tradition some of the agricultural songs from sowing to harvesting in a chronological order of the seasons are *luu le* (land clearing song), *phushe le* (ploughing song), *thigha le* (breaking lumps of soil song), *hango le* (sowing song), *moza le, lotisa le, hunga le* (weeding songs), *ghilelo kuhu le* (harvest songs), and *liphi le* (cleaning of old fields song).

As was the norm in most traditional folk songs, the lyrics of the working songs were presented in metaphorical style and were generally lamentations, eulogies for warriors who were head-hunted, songs about stepmothers and stepfathers, tributes to parents, ancestors and orphans, love ballads, and tales of unrequited love.

All work songs were sung in groups; the working population of the village was teamed into formal work groups of 15 to 20 people called *alojis*. As farming was the primary source of livelihood for the community, all able-bodied persons participated in agricultural labour as members of some type of *aloji*. The *aloji* system was not only the lifeline for food production and sustenance but was also an agency for practising and perpetuating traditional songs and poetry fostering cooperation and communal harmony at work. In our traditional system of jhum agriculture, a common forest area was cleared and divided into plots for each household so that the whole village could farm together in one part of the ancestral territory. This made it ideal for collective work and group singing. *Alojis* motivated or even competed with each other as they heard the other groups singing and knew from the stanza or verse being sung how far the other *aloji* had gone with the day's work.

In the present day, the tradition of singing in the fields has disappeared as people have abandoned the traditional system of shared farmlands and work groups. We can only imagine how musical the fields must have been when everyone worked and sang together as they tended to their crops. The fields are

silent now and these songs are presented by cultural troupes or professional singers during festivals or on special occasions.

The working songs and chants passed down from our ancestors, transmitted orally from one generation to the next through memory, are our repositories of ancient knowledge, our way of life as indigenous people. They tell us how we negotiated our existence and sustenance in relationship with the cycles of nature, our natural resources, and our political and socioeconomic arrangements within and with other communities. The work songs also show the distinct division of labour between men and women and the assigned gender roles in agricultural work.

Most of the agricultural songs were performed by mixed-gender groups in their respective *alojis*, although males outnumbered females in the main *alojis*. This was because major agricultural tasks that required more physical strength such as clearing new jungles, ploughing, harvesting, and threshing were assigned to men. Married men, males above 16 years, and unmarried women teamed up while married women formed separate groups. Women's work was not recognised as equal to men's labour in the fields. Married women worked in separate groups called *topulojis* (*topumi* means married woman, *aloji/loji* is group) who were traditionally assigned with *topu toghu kumla*, a term that roughly translates into 'women's miscellaneous work' including farm work, which they executed every day in the fields in addition to a major chunk of household chores, tending to pigs and fowls, cloth-making, and care-work that they did at home. Because married women carried out farm work in unorganised teams, they had less or no participation in the mixed-gender work songs.


*Photo from author's Sümi Oral Traditions Documentation Project:*
*A workgroup singing at Khukiye-Lukhai village*

Most of the seasonal agricultural songs were sung by men with two or three unmarried women in their *aloji*. However, some songs were sung only by women according to the work that was allocated to them. Tasks such as harrowing and breaking up lumps of soil after it was ploughed by men were done by women. So the song *thigha le*, the soil breaking song, is a women's song and *liphi le* is a song for cleaning and burning the previous year's fields which was done only by females.

*Photo from author's Sümi Oral Traditions Documentation Project:*
*Women performing Thighale at Shoipu Village*

Another song sung by womenfolk is the rice pounding song called *thisho le*. In ancient Sümi villages, chiefs or wealthy people owned large rectangular rice pounding tables that were over 10 feet long and about 2 feet high carved out of a single tree trunk with round holes chiselled in a straight row along the middle of the table. On special occasions, 8 to 10 women stood in pairs facing each other on either side of the table with tall wooden pestles and pounded the paddy in alternating motions as they sang the *thisho le*. The alternating thrusts of multiple pestles against the mortars set the pace for the song and the rice pounding work, synchronising the singing and working in a rhythmic beat.


*Photo from author's Oral Traditions Documentation project:*
*Women of Khukiye-Lukhai village, Nagaland, performing thisho le*

In *thisho le* women usually sang about their agonies and hardships. They also paid tribute and bid farewell to those women and friends from their village who had been taken away in marriage by men from other villages and whom they would never see again.

Lullabies too were women's songs since the task of putting babies to sleep was women's work (although it was not recognised as 'work') and therefore, these songs were exclusively sung by women. The lyrics of the lullabies were usually about work or messages conveyed in the form of a song. One such lullaby is about a warning message from one woman to a guest to escape as he was about to be killed by her village people. The woman pretending to put her baby to sleep delivered this warning in the form of a lullaby.

One popular humorous lullaby talks about working with yarn, which is also exclusively women's work and goes like this:

*O Aqhi o pe pe*
*O Aye o pe pe*
*Ilimi no saghü, saghü*
*Pujo te*
*Aye te*

O moon, you shine, shine
O stars, you shine, shine
(like) Maidens sparkle, sparkle
(with their sparkling urine) urinate
(and with it) starch yarn

Singing at work was not limited only to farming activities. Songs, chants, and reciting or conversing in a poetic form called *leshe* was also an essential element of the traditional work routine and daily life and was a reflection of the social conditions of those times depicted in a *leshe* like the '*Inakha ngo Ghonili kuyixa*'– the divorce of Inakha and Ghonili. Inakha left his wife Ghonili for another woman called Chevili, and in her sorrow Ghonili sang this song because she was made to leave her only child and return to her parents' home.

In the ancient Sümi Naga social structure, young men and women after the age of 16 or 17 had to move their sleeping quarters from their parents' homes to dormitories called *iliki*' (*ili* which means maiden; *ki* is house) for girls and *apukis* (*apumi* meaning 'young man') for boys. Induction to the dormitory was a rite of passage to adulthood and for embracing the roles that came with coming of age. This was also where the young people learned songs, chants, and poems. In their respective dormitories, the young people were trained in social norms, customs, and skills assigned to their respective genders such as learning the war dance and basket and weapon-making for boys, and tasks like pounding rice or weaving for girls. The traditional institution of gender-based skills-training from early teenage years dictated precise roles for men and women in the home and in the community's social life.

Learning to spin cotton was one of the main activities at the *iliki*s. It was also a space for exhibiting feminine skills, preparing for motherhood, and competing for prospective suitors. 'My mother and her mother and grandmothers before her lived at the *iliki*. She said that girls were judged on how organised they kept their work stations and sleeping areas. The ladies would secretly compete with each other on who could wake up the earliest and leave the dormitory without a sound to quickly execute household chores at their parents' houses and prepare for the day's farm work. Those who woke late had lower chances of getting themselves a smart husband,' laughs Satoli Swu, a 60-year-old Sümi woman elder, who like all her contemporaries was born after the dormitory system was discontinued.

Swu recounts her mother telling her that evenings at the *iliki* were mostly meant for cotton spinning work and singing. Young girls sat around a blazing hearth in the centre of the room with their baskets of raw cotton, a small oval stone, and a smooth bamboo stick and carried out the task of processing cotton for spinning into yarn for weaving cloth during daylight on the loin loom. This was when they sang *ayekuzu le*, the cotton spinning song. On full moon nights, the girls put up a show for the village folk who gathered at the *iliki* to watch the spinning and singing performance. Members of the audience could make special song requests and stayed till late hours listening to the melodies that filled the moonlit night in the village.

*(Photo from author's Sümi Oral Traditions Documentation Project: Sümi women performing ayekuzu le at Rotomi village)*

In modern times, cotton cultivation has stopped and we no longer process or spin cotton. However, newer versions of cotton-spinning songs have been invented. The new *ayekuzu le* that is widely performed now during almost every cultural event is a combination of a song and an enactment of the traditional process of cotton spinning, from how cotton is cultivated and harvested, cleaned, fluffed, and spun into yarn and woven into a textile. The lyrics incorporate the instructions of the traditional spinning method; the new song-skit has been created as a medium of sorts to store the memory of this traditional women's art.

*Women from Lazami village waiting to perform ayekuzu le at the annual Sümi Totimi Hoho Conference (All Sümi Women Association): Photo from author's Oral Traditions Documentation project*

Singing at work in the traditional Sümi Naga community has a utilitarian purpose: to effectively manage labour and work without boredom so that daily tasks are accomplished efficiently. Group singing is a natural leveller: no one is greater than the others, every singer is important, men and women, young and old, all parts and tunes are necessary for creating harmony or the song will not work. However, the representation of women in traditional *aloji* group singing was limited to two or three females, and women had their own groups and songs.

In our oral tradition, what is significant is not only the tune or the lyrics of a song, or the verses in a poem but also the story around its origin, why it is sung, and what circumstances led to the creation of the lyrics or a poem. How someone died or how an incident occurred that had to be immortalised in verse for posterity or how a song was learned. Because without a writing medium, our memories are our history books in which our songs and poems are the chapters. What we have now are a few songs and poems that have withstood the ravages of time, have been passed down from ear to ear, and they serve as living conduits to a way of life that we come from.

The background story of *lotisa le*, one of the working songs of the Sümi Naga community, sung during the second round of weeding paddy fields around the month of June, is a reminder of how the stories that have been passed down to us

are still relevant today, teaching us what it is to be human, that what unites us is greater than our pursuit of dominance over others.

In a time when head-hunting and occupation of new territories decided the survival of a people or a clan; a time when the number of enemy heads chopped as trophies was directly proportional to a man's honour and status among our ancestors, a tale of how a song became greater than accumulating enemy heads survives, now engraved in our memories:

> A village was going to war; they gathered their men, the chiefs, and the strongest warriors armoured in striking war costumes: bright red woven sashes with tassels of dyed animal hair swayed across their naked chests as they performed a literal war dance. Long, black hair that once belonged to dead enemy-women they had head-hunted swung from side to side hanging from small baskets tied to the warriors' backs. Loin cloths embellished with *cowrie* shells and embroidered leg bands adorned their bodies. Sharpened spears and blades glistened in their hands as they roared the war chants and offered prayers to the spirits of the house, the fields, the sky, and the earth. Women packed hot sticky rice cakes, fattened piglet stew, and poured rice beer into dried gourd vessels while singing mournful songs fearful that their men may not return.
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> The men set off for war trekking in the thick mountain jungles, moving stealthily, alert and determined to leave no head un-chopped. On nearing the enemy territory, they halted to organise themselves for the ambush. Then they heard a song. The enemy, unaware of the danger lurking around, was working in the paddy field singing—a melody that the attackers had never heard—a spectacular arrangement of group singing; a harmony that required the voice of every worker, equally significant; a synchrony of tunes and movements as they toiled on the mountainous terrain together so that no person was left out in the teamwork of 'work song.'
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> The attackers mesmerised by the song stood camouflaged in the jungle spending their entire D-day learning the enemy's song and returned home without a single head but armed with a new song to teach their people. All their ferocious weapons and intimidating war finery, the hostility, and blood-thirsty search for glory and dominance were invalidated by an *alulokuhu le* that day.

All it needed was a song to change the course of a war.

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