

**“EMBRACING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: REDISCOVERING
ANCESTRAL ETHOS AND PHILOSOPHIES THROUGH ULTRA TRAIL
RUNNING”**

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Abstract

This paper seeks to highlight the philosophies and ethos of the Zeliangrong-Inputi community through qualitative research based on a personal narrative from a trial run conducted in 2022. The study highlights the concepts of Chakhuang, Ginki-Phai-Pam, and Gansu-gan-dai as encountered during the trial run. The paper presents an insider ethnographic insight and demonstrates how these cultural values could still serve as a guiding framework for modern-day life. The paper also paves the way for the coming generation to reconnect with their roots, document, and make meaning of indigenous knowledge and practices as a survival tool for modern-day living. The paper argues that by not discarding these philosophies, contemporary society will benefit and promote compassion and unity in an increasingly fragmented and distraught world.

Introduction

"Trust the trail. Many have come before you that know the way." Trails are a link to the past and a route into the future. Trails are the best metaphor for life. A trail is a path or track, usually formed by repeated footprints on the ground. In the Naga territories, the term was historically used to refer to a route through deep forests that people used to travel from one village to the next. Metaphorically speaking, a trail is a journey through life. Trails provide us with a sense of place and orientation in our lives.

As cited in *What Philosophers Have Said About Hiking and the Outdoors* by Rebecca Solnit, in her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, "Solitude in the city is about the lack of other people, or rather their distance beyond a door or wall, but

in remote places it isn't an absence but the presence of something else, a kind of humming silence in which solitude seems as natural to your species as to any other, words strange rocks you may or may not turn over.”

The Zeliangrong-Inpui Nagas, comprising four cognate communities, are among the indigenous groups in North-Eastern India. Their rich cultural heritage is preserved through oral literature, arts and crafts, dance, festivals, folk songs, material culture, costumes, and foodways. This study investigates the concepts of Chakhuang, Ginki-Phaipam, the hosting of the sojourner, and Gansu-Ganthai, the traditional elder, as encountered during a trial run in the Zeliangrong-Inpui region of Manipur.

There is a dearth of research into the connections between physical endurance, such as trail running, and cultural heritage. The rich traditional wisdom of the people remains unexplored due to residual colonisation of the mind and the lived experiences of indigenous people. This study hopes not only to shed light on age-old practices that resonate with contemporary contexts but also to encourage the next generation not to discard the enduring relevance of traditional knowledge for postmodern living. It offers insights into how reconnecting with ancestral paths can invigorate one's sense of place and identity. This paper will attempt to showcase the enduring relevance of indigenous knowledge in navigating both literal and metaphorical trails in today's world.

Research Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research approach to explore and elicit insiders' perspectives on the interrelationship between ultra-trail running and the philosophies of the Zeliangrong-Inpui community, with a particular focus on the concepts and ethos of 'Chakhuang,' 'Ginki-Phai-Pammei,' and 'Gansu-Ganthai,' as well as the respect shown to elders. The literature review drew on interviews and existing texts, including ethnographic studies, articles, and online resources. The author's personal experiences during an ultra-trail run in January 2022 served as the primary data source. Insights from people's lived practices were used to illustrate practical applications in real-life scenarios. Field observations were conducted during the trail run, with notes recorded on encounters with villagers to document the nuances of cultural practices and social behaviours observed during the ultra-trail run. Thematic analysis was conducted reflexively throughout the data-gathering and research process to maintain an unbiased stance and ensure that the voices of the

Zeliangrong-Inpui community were represented authentically, respectfully, and without glorification, while adhering to their cultural contexts.

The Trail Run

In January 2022, I went on an ultra-trail run to visit one of the ancient villages of the Zeliangrong- Inpui community. I had planned to undertake this demanding journey for many years and had trained diligently for six months. After thorough planning, I, along with a few running friends and a guide, set off along the well-trodden path, navigating through twisting roads, old forgotten routes, shortcuts, and bamboo trails beside winding rivers. We crossed the Ahu (Barak) River and then faced a steep climb into the depths of ancient mountains. Many people we met along the way asked why we chose to travel on foot when vehicles were available these days to take us to our destination. Without time to explain our reasons, we simply replied that we wished to retrace our ancestors' footsteps to experience what they had.

We met kind and welcoming people on the trail and passed through several villages. In one village, after a steep climb, we tried to rest briefly in a house. A young man, around 19 or 20, went to the kitchen and cooked napnaeng (purple-coloured sticky rice) for us. Napnaeng is one of the best types for boosting energy and endurance. It contains natural anthocyanins, which have been shown to reduce the risk of serious diseases such as cancer and obesity, and which have antiviral, anti-inflammatory, and anti-ageing effects. (Supapohn Yamuangmorn and Chanakan Prom-u-Thai)

Before cooking napnaeng for us, he had given us a large bunch of bananas and a mug of cool water. We carried some snacks and gels, but something different from a home-cooked meal was precious. It renewed our energy to carry on. He did all this without expecting anything in return. It made me think again about how wonderful and practical it would be to apply our traditions and worldview to modern life.

Since our guide had not travelled after this point for many years and was unsure which way to go, the young lad offered to take us to a certain point. The evening was setting in, and we wanted to take shortcuts wherever possible. Our new

guide now led us up a hill at an 80-degree incline. Like a sure-footed goat, he went ahead, leaving us huffing and puffing our way up the slippery slope. Vegetation at this point was sparse and nothing to hold onto, so it was tough for us.

As the sweat dripped into my eye, I wiped it away irritably. Why can't we keep pace with this young man? We had trained for months. To avoid negative thoughts, we kept telling each other that this is what we were aiming for- to face hardships like those faced previously. We are almost reaching the hilltop. This is what trail running is all about. It is mind over matter. Our ancestors in those days had no choice of quitting halfway. Runners' terminology DNF, 'did not finish,' was unfamiliar to them. There were no vehicles to carry them back home when they decided to give up mid-way. Ultra-trail runners now learn to cope with physiological and psychological factors to complete the race, drawing on the experiences and lessons from their ancestors. Successful ultramarathon runners had higher levels of self-efficacy, mental toughness, and emotional intelligence, and lower mood variability. With the rapid rise of technology and reduced physical activity, lifestyle diseases, "diseases of affluence," are increasing in frequency not only in first-world industrialised countries but also in developing countries. "Many studies have reported that prevalence of these diseases has reached alarming proportions among Indians in the recent years due to rapid economic development and increasing westernization of lifestyle in the past few decades including overweight and obesity in recent years even though undernutrition continues to be an important public health issue even in the 21st century." (Mary Grace 'D' Tungdim)

Theipou-tatmei, the runner who goes to report a death in a village to another village, runs all the way without stopping. This task was usually entrusted to the strongest and bravest. The runner achieved this through years of discipline and consistency, not only in running itself but also in physical labour and repeated uphill and downhill climbs as part of their daily work going to the fields. One cannot simply get up and run long distances. The only way to run long distances is to train, stay focused on the present moment, remain mindful, direct the mind's focus to the feet while walking or running to boost efficiency, and learn to be fit and successful. This is achieved by doing it repeatedly over the years.

Returning to our trail progress, after some tricky climbing, we crested a hill, thinking we were back on the trail, but with a sinking feeling, we realised we still had to climb one or two more hills to reach it. The path ahead was described as 'very technical' in trail terminology, as it appeared to be covered with vines and dense foliage. Straight ahead, I saw rays of evening sunlight filtering through a thick forest canopy, making the leaves shimmer and stirring strong emotions in me. The going was difficult, and at this point, we were all at our lowest. I had even doubted that the young guide had lost his way. Much later, we found out that we had all been thinking about surviving the night in the forest. We had not brought a lighter, and we needed more food. However, we had our sleeping bags with us. We continued to push on and eventually came across the old village trail. Whew. What a relief. I will never again doubt the navigational skill handed down to the youths living in the mountains. There was an interesting account about how the Nagas of Khonoma outwitted the British soldiers during a siege in 1879. Under Brigadier General Nation's charge of more than 1200 rifles and more than 2000 men surrounded the villages of "Jotsoma, Mezoma and Sechuma, cutting off all lines of retreat...The British had their cannons but the men of Khonoma were protected by the natural world they had always live so close to....while holding off the soldiers (British), fifty-five warriors marched through the Zeliang territories into Assam, raided the Baladhan tea garden...and returned to Khonoma safely" (Easterine Kire pp 101-105).

Trail running is the ultimate expression of freedom and the greatest metaphor for life. In life, much like trail running, we go through some peaks and valleys and might even get lost along the way. But if we persevere and finish what we started, we will eventually find ourselves. At this point, we had to part ways with our young guide. I offered him some money to thank him for his efforts in guiding us, despite the inconvenience it caused him. He flatly refused to take my offer. I will keep in mind 'Lau-Guat,' a concept of repaying a favour in the Zeliangrong-Inpui traditional ways, to return the favour to him. The Zeliangrong-Inpui people value genuine, reciprocal connections over strictly transactional exchanges. Repaying kindness is usually done informally through food, practical assistance, or casual help when needed, by the recipient or by his or her descendants. Things have changed a lot due to development, capitalisation, and globalisation. People now look for material gains rather than bonding and relationships forged through unselfish help.

We continued our way. The Sun had by now set behind the cliffs. It was getting cold, and the trail was hard to see and rough. We trudged on silently, bereft of any thoughts. The only aim is to continue. As we came to a clearing, we could make out the bamduan and see some people with torches, and their conversations got louder. Turned out they were from the village we were headed to. They were looking for some escaped cattle. They offered to come with us. Fortunately for us, they were from the village we were headed to. As we all continued our journey, it became apparent that we were holding them up. We told them to go ahead, we would be ok on our own, but they would not let us go by ourselves because it was pitch dark by now. The moment we saw the village water hole, the pain and suffering turned into thrill and exhilaration. The villagers who had walked with us from the bamduan saw us as far as the house where we were to stay.

The moment I stepped onto the veranda of the house, an overwhelming sense of achievement washed over me! Our bones and joints ached, but we did it, covering 45 kilometres one way and gaining 2,955 metres of elevation. Endurance running is all about discovering what you're truly made of because the trail will eventually reveal who you really are, physically, emotionally, and mentally. And the most rewarding lesson was that there are so many who still practise the age-old ways of living a meaningful life, uncorrupted by the modern world.

When we arrived, our host informed us that the village elders had come to enquire about us. We were touched by their care and concern for us. They were worried that we might have gotten lost somewhere. This motley bunch of city slickers undertaking this difficult journey must have piqued their curiosity. The Internet was patchy, and we could only be contacted briefly. Our hostess readied hot water for us to wash up and fed us spicy chicken. We had one of the best dinners by the fireplace. Our bones and souls were warmed. We had wonderful conversations about our ancestors and today's young people. We had a good night's rest and embarked on the return journey early the following day.

This offering of food and drink to us, the boy refusing to accept money for his trouble, the villagers slowing down to accompany us, the host gladly welcoming us without expecting anything in return, our guide who volunteered to accompany

us on our adventure, and the villagers who joined us from the bamduan- all this is what we know as Chakhuang.

This trail running was the catalyst for a reconnection to the ancestral path and its worldview. This paper is the outcome of cultural roots and crystallised lessons re-learned, embedded along the trail of people whose way of life has been relegated to irrelevance and a lack of modern outlook. As an informed insider, an attempt is made to give voice to the 'redundant culture' and traditions of the people

Philosophy Of Chakhuang

Chakhuang, practised by the 4-cognate communities, Zeliangrong-Inpui Naga, is a way of life in which one thinks first of others' welfare. It is intangible, a way of life permeating every aspect of life for the Zeliangrong-Inpui community. Chakhuang embodies all the invaluable virtues a society strives to maintain in harmony, as well as the spirit of sharing among its members. It is there in Latsah-luhsuan khou, in the way they speak, taantan mei khou, in the way they do work for others, tipatmei khou, in their giving and charity, and tu-jaangmei khou, in the way they partake of food.

Another aspect of lived experiences where we see Chakhuang is in how elders are addressed. It is taboo, nu-neimei, to call elderly persons, male or female, by their given names; instead, they are called by their children's names or, in the case of unmarried elders, by their nephew's or niece's names as uncle or aunt of so and so. This tradition might reflect that the other's individualism is mirrored in the person; the so-called hemeiyang nei, or pou, is indirect: by being called someone's aunt or uncle, the person is automatically conferred the role of a mentor to the younger person. Additionally, the individual constantly represents the people they come from. An individual's broader societal identity takes precedence over their personal identity. Consequently, individuals portray or reflect their families, and this phenomenon extends to villages, districts, and regions. This encourages the individual to uphold the highest moral standards and exemplifies the virtues most valued by the community.

Having Chakhuang demonstrates concern and care for one's neighbour by recognising that we are all interconnected in ways that may be imperceptible to the untrained eye; that there is a unity among humanity; and that we share ourselves and

our resources with those who, in turn, care for us. Chakhuang exists because people cannot live in isolation. They must co-exist to survive. Having Chakhuang shows care and concern for one's clan, maternal mother's clan, and the members of the village and other villages.

“Chakhuang: It is the respect a man gives to someone older than him. It is his gallantry and stoicism when he sacrifices his needs and interests for the well-being of the weaker ones and the elder, who speaks, eats and drinks first and walks in front of him....Those without chakhuang are considered coarse and uncultured.” Namthiubuiyang (p 50)

The concept of prize or reward within the Zeliangrong-Inpui community is unique. The concept of Chakhuang is also closely related to 'Tathuan or Thuan-kei-mei'. This Thuan-kei-mei is a treat the winner offers to the people. The winner in any competition is respected.

Chakhuang is the respect you give the other person, in which you let them be fully themselves while you diminish yourself. The show of respect and honour, and the very philosophy of the Zeliangrong-Inpui community, is built upon. It is not simply letting the other person eat first or giving up the seat that goes beyond that. Chakhuang is not expected of individuals; it is not equivalent to taboo, but rather something not done. It was not the laying down of rules, for the people did not learn this Chakhuang from the elders' teaching as a text but learned from their attitudes and mannerisms over generations. It is not something expected of an individual. It is not laying down the norms of a community in hard-and-fast rules. What happens when you do not follow or have Chakhuang? There is no penalty for not following. But when you do not have Chakhuang, your reputation is at stake. The word spreads, and one's relationship with fellow clan and community members is adversely affected. These are all subtle things that society follows. Practices of Chakhuang start from home.

Another example of Chakhuang can be seen in the election of a leader. In the community, one does not volunteer to lead; instead, others suggest that you can lead. When asked, the proposed candidate declines, stating that better people can lead. Yet, the proposers insist and pledge their support. As a result, the leader is elected with the understanding that everyone will support and cooperate. When

things go wrong, collective responsibility is accepted for the failure, because people recognise that the leader has done his or her best in the situation. Unlike in the West, when a child gets into trouble with another child, the parent or ward will discipline only their own child, not the other person's. There is a concept similar to Chakhuang in African culture, known as Ubuntu. "Ubuntu conveys the idea that one cannot realize or express one's true self by exploiting, deceiving or acting in unjust ways towards others. Without the presence of others one is not able to play, to use one's senses, to imagine, to think, to reason, to produce works, or to have control over one's environment." (Lesley Le Grange)

Chakuang-Champoumei (Act Of Showing Respect With Honour)

Chakuang is further elaborated in the compound noun-hyphenated term Chakuang-Champoumei. An adage states that to be recognised as a human is "to affirm one's humanity by accepting the humanity of others and, on that basis, build respectful human connections with others." The second adage says that if given a choice between wealth and another person's survival, one should choose to save that person's life. The third adage states that the merit-seeker, or suan lomei, owed his standing, to some extent, to the clan he belonged to, a fact embedded in ancient ideology. The collective will of the clan governs an individual.

For example, going back to the Morung days, how mid-level leaders were designated and addressed. In the community discussed, there is ingan-kapi, the boys' leader, and tuna-kapi, the girls' leader. This practice of honouring and acknowledging others' roles can also be practised in our day-to-day lives. For example, when we tag someone on FB, the prefixes 'apou,' 'anei,' 'elder,' etc., can be used before or after their names. Seeing young adults directly call elders by name is strange and rude to a Naga being. Some people have openly criticised this way of addressing elders (as somebody's father/mother/uncle/aunt, etc.). We can not only adapt to technology but also evolve to suit the community's ways.

Ginki-Phaipam (Hosting The Sojourner)

I mentioned that food was offered to us while we were resting in one of the houses during our ultra-run. This way of offering food to the sojourners reminded me of the concept of Gin-ki- Phai-Pammei, the hosting and feeding of sojourners practised by the four cognate communities. Naga hospitality is one of the best in India. Ginki-phaipam is the Zeliangrong-Inpui concept of showing hospitality to

sojourners passing through the village or to those who have come to seek shelter there. It refers to how guests are treated and the hospitality they receive. Hosting a guest is seen as a privilege and a blessing, and the act is praised and honoured. Gin-ki is hosting and feeding guests, and Phai-pammei means, loosely translated, 'embracing the leg. So, it means, in essence, welcoming the sojourner's-tired legs.' In the book 'Back to Folkways, Folkways and Institutions of Zeliangrong Naga, Jimmy Poujuanlung Pamei also mentioned this concept. "Hospitality to guests and strangers termed Giin-kiy phaai pamhmei is a culture dearly associated with the Zeliangrong community....It is believed that hosting and welcoming guests into one's homeGinki-phaipammei is hospitality of the utmost importance, in which guests or travellers are welcomed into the family circle, even if they are strangers. Hospitality was taken seriously in the Zeliangrong-Inpui community. It is still being practised in some villages. To feed the guests, not from one's own village but even those from other villages, every household contributes rice/food items or pays some money towards the 'Gin-ki-Phai-pam thaeng, the contribution for feeding guests. "This term is... with the way the Zeliangrong treats or takes care of the guest. Taking a journey or travelling is part and parcel of life.... Hosting a guest is considered a privilege and a blessing to the host." Ramkhun Pamei in 'The Zeliangrong Concept of Meaning of Life')

The maxim "Inkhuang hiuna kabaidat bamsini guang dat nitaram me," even if you beat the drum and invite, there will come a time they (guests) will not come (to stay in your house). Recent examples: During the pandemic lockdown, villagers from the Zeliangrong-Inpui-inhabited regions brought truckloads of vegetables and fruits to the towns and distributed them for free to townsfolk who did not have their own kitchen gardens. All these practices stem from the Zeliangrong-Inpui culture that ensures no one goes hungry.

Gansu-Ganthai (Elder)

In Naga culture, elders are revered and regarded as people with wisdom gained through experience and contribution. A proverb states, gaanthai baa rui lai phoumei nkat tuang nge- Elder's excrement can mend a broken pot. Such adages clearly illustrate the vital role that traditional elders-rather than just seniors-play and the honour bestowed upon them. For critical issues or disputes, elders offer solutions or judgments by drawing on their own experience and that of past generations to

advise on the matter. They also serve as custodians of culture and history, responsible for passing community values from one generation to the next. Older people are respected and revered not only for their age but primarily for what they possess: knowledge and experience. They are seen as the embodiment and authors of culture and traditions, and are expected to educate younger generations about their society's customs and values.

Slowly, modernisation, globalisation, and the use of modern technology have brought about new ways of life, and the elders have less and less of a role to play. For all their talk about human values, the West does not really value humans for who they are. They love them for what they either give or purchase. Once individuals are no longer either producers or consumers, they lose their worth. A whole new discourse can be taken up on how to be a modern elder.

Conclusion

This brief study underscores the relevance of indigenous philosophies such as Chakhuang, Ginki-Phai-Pam, and Gansu-Gan-Thai, emphasising their potential contributions to contemporary society. There is a rich repertoire of traditional and cultural wisdom in songs, proverbs, and textiles, among other areas, that warrants further research to illuminate how ancestral wisdom can guide modern living. This wisdom offers depth and profound insights that foster interconnectedness and survival lessons. Further comparative studies among Naga communities can assess the effectiveness of intergenerational knowledge transmission. Longitudinal research on cultural practices and traditional concepts can examine how they evolve with globalisation. A quantitative case study examining the health benefits of integrating indigenous dietary practices, such as the consumption of napnaeng, alongside physical activity could offer a framework for promoting indigenous foodways and their benefits in contemporary nutrition. By considering these lines of inquiry, future research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between cultural heritage and modern living, reinforcing the notion that reconnecting with our roots can foster a more compassionate and unified society.

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