



Earthkeepers Project: Noklak Border Mission

TÜMÜZO KATIRY, KEVIDE LCHO, SAKTUM WONTI, CATRIONA CHILD
The Highland Institute

This article describes exploratory fieldwork in Noklak District, Nagaland, conducted by the Earthkeepers team based at The Highland Institute, Kohima, in April 2023. The Earthkeepers Project is an environmental humanities initiative funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, and the team comprises three Canada-IDRC Myanmar Research Fellows and one coordinator. Broadly, the Fellows are mandated to carry out climate-change-related research along the Indo-Myanmar border from the Indian side. Specifically, the team is collecting indigenous ecological knowledge and farmers' perceptions of climate change. In this report, we describe our Noklak study area and the Khamniungan community residing there, give short notes on the villages visited, and briefly record our observations on the local people's climate change perceptions and the challenges facing a community divided by an international border.

Keywords: climate change, indigenous knowledge, Indo-Myanmar border, Khamniungan, Nagaland, Noklak

Introduction

The Earthkeepers Project is an environmental humanities initiative funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, and based at The Highland Institute (THI), Kohima, Nagaland, India. The Project supports three Canada-IDRC Myanmar Research Fellows to carry out climate-change-related research along the Indo-Myanmar border, from the Nagaland side. Under this broad heading, the Fellows are focusing on documenting oral histories, songs, proverbs, indigenous ecological knowledge, and farmers' perceptions of climate change. We intend to use the data to help develop effective responses to environmental and socio-economic challenges in the region, while also providing valuable records for the villages concerned.

This article is based on preliminary fieldwork conducted in four villages in Noklak District from 8 to 12 April 2023. Although the survey was of short duration, the team was able to collect a wealth of information to build on in future field trips. The aim of the preliminary visit was to build relationships with the communities, introduce our work, and broadly assess the local farmers' understanding and experience of global climate change.

Ethical practices

With honourable exceptions, much research in Nagaland has been of the ‘extractive’ type. Researchers from other Indian states and foreign countries, drawn by Nagaland’s fascinating cultural and biological diversity, have collected information from villagers (some of which could be valuable intellectual property) and returned to base to write career-enhancing articles without sharing their data with the villages that assisted them. Today, tribal and village authorities are taking steps to avoid exploitation by ‘outside’ researchers. The Highland Institute is committed to upholding only the highest standards in fieldwork ethics and has its own Ethical Review Board to approve study designs and paperwork. The Earthkeepers Project is committed to working collaboratively with the villagers and ensuring that all villages can access the data they have provided.

Study area

Our preliminary study was carried out in Noklak District, in the easternmost part of Nagaland State (Fig. 1). Inaugurated on 20 January 2021, it is one of Nagaland’s newer districts and covers approximately 1152 square kilometres. The terrain is rugged, with steep parallel ridges and deep valleys running roughly northeast-southwest. While Noklak’s District HQ lies at an altitude of 1,524 metres above sea level, its highest mountain, Mount Khülio-King (also known as Khelia King), in the Patkai Range, rises to 3,462 metres. The Indo-Myanmar international border lies to the east, running nearly 92 km through forested hills from Boundary Pillar (BP) 139 to BP 146.

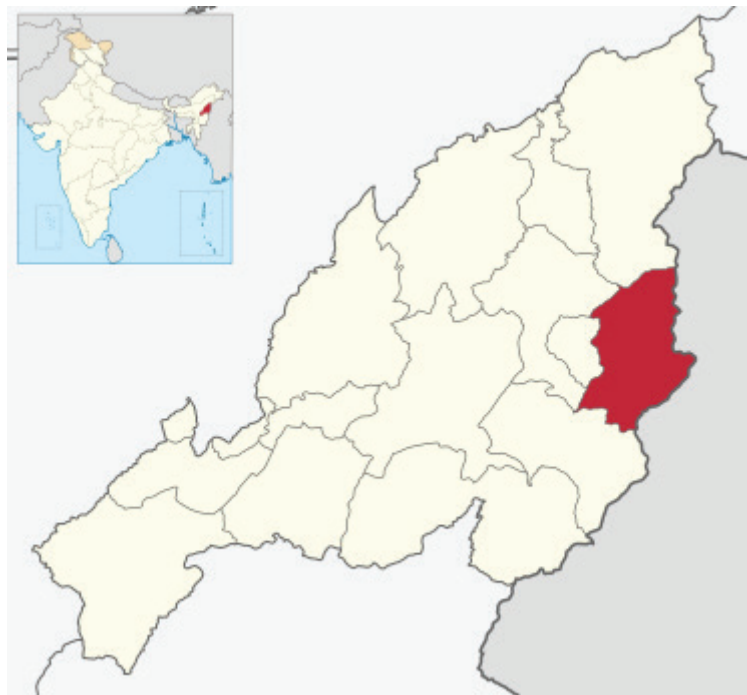


Figure 1: Maps of Nagaland within India (small map) and Noklak district within Nagaland (large map)

Free Movement Regime (FMR)

When we visited Noklak District in April 2023, a Free Movement Regime based on an agreement signed between India and Myanmar in 2018 was in force. The agreement mandated the issuance of border passes

to residents of both countries living within 16 km of the international border, which they must always carry after crossing the border.¹

However, on 8 February 2024, the Indian government suspended the FMR pending negotiations with Myanmar over an eventual termination.²

Development

We observed that Noklak District is much less developed than districts in the west of the state and that the infrastructure, especially the road connectivity, is extremely poor.

Population size and ethnic composition

Noklak District has between 55,000 and 60,000 inhabitants (the census of 2011 put the population at 55,434). Most inhabitants belong to the Khamniungan community, although the Yimkhiung tribe is in the majority in Thonoknyu Sub-Division. The Khamniungan community is not confined to Noklak District. In fact, most of the people in this major Naga tribe live over the border in Myanmar. We were told by local people that approximately 25 per cent (around 46 villages) of the Khamniungan community resides in Noklak District, India, while 75 per cent lives in the Self-Administered Zone in Sagaing, Myanmar (more than 145 villages). The community maintains strong cross-border relationships, reinforced by robust economic ties.

Khamniungan literally means ‘source of great water or river’ (*kham* means water, *nui* means great, and *ngan* means source), and we observed that Noklak District was indeed well endowed with streams and springs. According to Buhio Lam, a Khamniungan historian, the oldest village of the Khamniungan Nagas was ‘Khamngan Nyukthang’, which lies under the cultivated area of Thang (Noklak Village) and is now abandoned. The Khamniungan traditional chant ‘Khamngan ko pong’ meaning ‘originated at Khamngan’ refers to this first settlement.

Data obtained from informal interviews

Our preliminary fieldwork was conducted in four Khamniungan villages: Dan, Old Peshu, Wui, and Langnok. Of the four villages, only Peshu did not share a boundary with Myanmar. The team visited these settlements only after obtaining permission from the relevant authorities. Saktum Wonti, one of our team members, hails from the Khamniungan community, which greatly facilitated our work.

Brief notes on the villages³

Dan

This village lies in the northern part of Noklak District and shares a border with Myanmar. Due to its border location, an International Trade Centre (ITC) was established here in 1996 (Fig. 2). However, constant

1. See <https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/2019/01/27/ar-lecture-on-free-movement-regime/>, accessed 3 April 2024.
2. See <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-suspends-free-movement-regime-with-myanmar/article67824429.ece>, accessed 3 April 2024.
3. Villages are listed in the order in which we visited them.

armed conflict between militant groups and the Indian Army in this region made trade impossible. The village lies within Indian territory, but its shifting cultivation lands (*jhum* fields) are in Myanmar. Border crossing here, therefore, remains a daily necessity, and the villagers deeply resent the division of their land between countries. An unfinished border fence (Fig. 3) stands testament to the village's strong resistance to the partitioning of their territory. The village has important historic landmarks and structures dating back to World War II (WWII), such as bunkers and a helipad (Fig. 4) used by the British, as well as helicopter and plane crash sites.



Figure 2: Research team at foundation stone for Dan International Trade Centre



Figure 3: Abandoned border fence at Dan Village



Figure 4: *Jhum* fields of Dan Village in Myanmar (back) and overgrown site of WWII British helipad (centre)

Old Peshu

A striking feature of Peshu is its traditional architecture. Here, it is still possible to see the slate roofing that was once typical of many Khiamniungan dwellings. Today, the slate is often combined with other materials, such as tin or palm thatch, or used only on one part of the roof (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Traditional slate and palm thatch roofing in Old Peshu

Wui

This village is known for its unique dialect, which no one from any other Khamniungan community can speak or understand. According to some of our interviewees, it is unlucky for anyone who is not from Wui to learn the dialect unless they marry someone who was born there. The village is also known for its blacksmiths, pottery, and traditional iron-ore extraction. The manufacture of *daos* (Naga machetes), axes, and spears was once a primary source of livelihood (Fig. 6). While metalworking is the preserve of men, only women are allowed to make the clay pots, known as *lala-phao* (Fig. 7). March, the end of the dry season when the earth is hard and firm, is the best time for pot manufacturing.



Figure 6: Blacksmith's hut in Wui and the raw material for *dao* manufacture



Figure 7: Kitchen in Wui with clay pot (*lala-phao*)

At Wui, we were told that a ‘tiger’ had killed some cattle a couple of months before our April visit. Thangsoi M. Khamniungan, a local naturalist, later explained that the big cat was more likely to have been a clouded leopard.

Langnok

This village is notable for the rich biodiversity of its forests, which extend to the Indo-Myanmar border. When asked about common wild animals, the villagers listed the following: Asian palm civet, deer, fox, leopard, monkey, porcupine, tragopan, wild boar, and wild cat. At Peshu, the villagers had lamented the loss of their traditional medical expertise. However, at Langnok, the Head *Gaonbura*⁴ is renowned for his knowledge of herbal medicines. The village has a World War II relic in the form of an aircraft propellor, which is housed in the Village Guards’ office and used as a bell (Fig. 8). According to the military historian Dr Robert Lyman (pers. comm.), the propellor is ‘almost certainly (from) a C46 transport plane, almost certainly the one that crashed over Pangsha (Dan) in August 1943’.



Figure 8: Part of WWII aeroplane propellor used as a bell in Langnok

4. The institution of *gaonbura* dates back to the colonial era, when the British appointed influential persons in villages to oversee matters relating to land and revenue in a particular area (Wouters 2018, 129). Today, *gaonburas* have fewer powers but act as custodians of customary law and order.

Climate change perceptions

In each village, we asked the people if they had noticed recent changes in weather patterns. All the villages reported that temperatures had increased and that rainfall was now less predictable. As to more specific information, the village authorities at Dan said that 2021 had been a particularly dry year. At Peshu, the villagers informed us that they began noticing weather changes in 2003, when the temperature rise seriously affected the paddy crop. Without any other information to go on, they attributed the changes to ongoing road construction. We found that no attempt had been made by the authorities to inform the farmers that the changes they were seeing were part of a global phenomenon. The Peshu authorities told us that they were experimenting with different crop varieties and planting schemes to try to overcome the problems caused by weather change.

At Langnok, the villagers informed us that they had been experiencing warmer temperatures for the past five years, which has led to poorer harvests. They quoted the example of the cardamom crop. In the early years of the cardamom plantations, the farmers had seen significant returns, but the income from this product was now significantly reduced due to the drier weather.

Climate-change effects on traditional agricultural knowledge systems

We were keen to find out how climate change had affected the traditional systems used by the village authorities to plan the agricultural cycle. In Peshu, we were informed that the traditional weather forecasting systems had been extremely accurate in the past. The elders could tell when it would rain and when it would be sunny. However, the villagers said that the rainfall was now unpredictable. In Wui Village, Sheying Lam, the *Gaonbura*, told us that, previously, the elders had predicted the rainy season from the position of the sunrise at Mt. Khülio-King, but the system was now not as reliable as it had once been.

Border issues

Everywhere in Noklak District, we were aware of the paradox that we were not only in a frontier area, but also in an unbroken tribal (Khamniungan) territory that stretched from eastern Nagaland to the Chindwin and beyond. As mentioned earlier in this article, Noklak District lies within the Free Movement Regime (FMR), or rather, it did until the Indian Central Government decided to scrap the scheme in February 2024.

At the time of our visit, there were two key indicators that we were in the FMR. The first were the swarms of unmarked Burmese dirt bikes crossing the border daily in both directions, laden with people, rice sacks, and other household goods. The appalling road conditions mean that trucks cannot ply, and the sturdy bikes⁵ (Fig. 9) and small vans are the only vehicles available for cross-border trade. Regarding the bikes, a charming detail is that many of them carry a chicken in a traditional bamboo basket, which the traveller offers to the family who will host him (or her) on the other side of the border.

The second indicator is the trail of people, mostly women and children, walking from the Myanmar side to Noklak town (District Headquarters). Upon inquiry, we learned that Khamniungan people from Myanmar who are unable to afford the bike fare travel several days to India to purchase salt, medicines, or to sell mats and baskets. Many come to Noklak to work, where they are paid 200 rupees per day. Parents are forced to send their children to India or towns and cities in Myanmar for education, and because they cannot afford the fees, the children work as helpers in rich households.

5. We were told that the bikes could carry up to 200 kg at a time in the dry season, but that in the monsoon, they are often unable to travel, causing considerable hardship to the people depending on them.



Figure 9: Unmarked Burmese bikes carry goods and people across the Indo-Myanmar border

The multiple challenges posed by the imposition of an international border on the Khamniungan lands were of great interest to us, and we have written about the issues in detail in two blogs.^{6,7} On our return to Noklak District in November 2024, we will explore the topic in more depth and probe the likely effects of the proposed end to the FMR.

Photos by Earthkeepers Team

References

Wouters, Jelle J. P. 2018. 'Performing Democracy in Nagaland: Past Polities and Present Politics'. In *Democracy in Nagaland: Tribes, Traditions, and Tensions*, edited by Jelle J. P. Wouters and Z. Tunyi, 123–40. Kohima, Thimphu, Edinburgh: Highlander Books.

6. See <https://highlandinstitute.org/2023/06/22/bothered-by-the-border/>, accessed 28 March 2024.

7. See <https://borderlab.eu/blog/sleep-in-india-reap-in-myanmar-how-villagers-defy-division-on-a-porous-border/>, accessed 28 March 2024.