

A Study on the Establishment of a Liangmai Traditional Village

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Abstract: Migration and residence changes are universal phenomena that have occurred throughout history and continue to take place today. People move from one place to another in response to economic, environmental, and political pressures. Establishment of a new village is one of the most important activities among the Liangmai communities of northeast India. Every Liangmai village is established after careful consideration of the physical environment, security defences, water, and places for agricultural and other vital activities. They will adhere to very elaborate rites and precautions during the entire process in order to ensure the safety and prosperity of the new settlement. Generally, the Liangmai built their village on a hill top to keep safe from potential conflicts with the neighbouring tribe and unfavourable supernatural forces. The ritual of establishing a new village will generally begin with a special offering ceremony to the deity, followed by various prayer rituals to ensure the well-being of the community. The entire process involves multiple steps, each associated with its own unique set of rituals and activities. Interestingly, the village is seen as the centre of the Liangmai world, as it is believed that these villages are protected by gods and spirits. As such, they will call upon the living and non-living things as a way of announcing their arrival during their rites and rituals. This paper analyses the unique process and procedure for the establishment of a new traditional village, along with the important rites and rituals involved in it. Moreover, it also discusses the socio-political aspects of a Liangmai village, including the selection of the village site, etymology, village size, and the changing attitude towards the practices.

Keywords: Liangmai, village, *Makiwpao*, *Manuangbui*, *Namsan thoi*, *Sangbam*, *Nampao/Chawang*.

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I. Introduction

Since the earliest times, man has been on the move from one place to another, whether it is in search of new opportunities or out of necessity. Migration and residence changes are universal phenomena that have occurred throughout history, and continue to take place in the present. People move from one place to another according to the needs of the community and its various political, economic, and social factors. Conflict, food scarcity, poverty, the desire to escape hunger, and natural disasters were among the primary reasons for human migration in the early stages of civilization. However, the 21st century has seen a new set of migration patterns, which are largely driven by economic factors and the search for better education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Different cultures around the world practice different methods and ways to establish a new place of settlement, but the underlying aim remains the same: to find a better quality of life for their families. Moreover, all tribal groups settled and lived on the hills and mountains, which provided them security and safety from their enemies.

At some point, every civilization progressed from a simple food gatherer to a more complex society with increased interaction and knowledge sharing. Each society went through a developmental phase, from simple village life to an advanced urban environment. The Cambridge Dictionary defines a village as “a group of houses and other buildings that is smaller than a town, usually located in the countryside”. A village is a tiny rural community with a basic way of life and complex social systems. Since most tribal members have connections to their land and traditions, the village remains a powerful place in many societies.

Today, many villages still hold a special place in society, as they represent a unique way of life. The village is an essential part of tribal society. Similar observations on the Naga were made by A. Nshoga in his book “*Traditional Naga Village and Its Transformation*” (2009) in which he writes, “The Nagas are predominantly confined to village life and are greatly attached to it. The identity of a Naga is identified through his village”. (Nshoga: 2009, 5). People settle in a new place according to their needs and necessities, and the Naga's attachment to their village life is no exception. One of the Naga sub-tribes, the Liangmai, also takes a very unique approach to establishing a new village. They follow very elaborate rites and precautions during the

entire process of establishing a new village. The Liangmai are closely related to their kinder tribes, the Inpui, Rongmei, and Zeme, known collectively as the Zeliangrong people, who are believed to have descended from a common ancestor. Liangmai, like many other tribal communities around the world, relies heavily on oral tradition to trace their origins, migrations, and cultural practices. Their culture and tradition mostly evolved around the nature and environment that surrounded them, and their spiritualism and belief in nature played an important role in the development of their cultural values. As such, most of their traditional practices are based on their surroundings.

The Liangmai primarily inhabit Paren district in Nagaland and Manipur's western region, which includes Tamenglong and Senapati districts. They speak a language called *Lianglad* or Liangmai (ISO 639-3: njn), a branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family (Widini bou, 2017:1). After carefully examining omens and signs from *Apou Charawang* (the Supreme Being), the Liangmai established a village. The founding of a new village is one of the most important activities among the Liangmai. Usually, a new village is established by moving away from one's village. There are a variety of reasons why Liangmai establishes new villages. The most common reasons include geographical reasons, war strategies, disputes between villages, divine intervention, natural disasters, etc. However, Liangmai prefers to live together as one unit, or as a village, in this sense.

II. Liangmai Village Social System:

Every Liangmai village consists of two or more clans. They share equal opportunity in every sphere of life. They follow a patriarchal system where males assume the role of head of the family. The practice of the caste system is not seen in society. In a village, every family is the smallest social unit, consisting of parents and children interacting with each other. The clan comes next. A member of the same clan stands together and helps each other in times of need. Every village has an important institution called *khangchiu* (men's dormitory) and *liuchiu* (women's dormitory), headed by *khangpi* and *liupi*, respectively. Namthiubuiyang writes, "It is the highest installed social institution of the Liangmai. The future of boys and girls heavily rested on his days at the *khangchiu* and *liuchiu*" (Pamei, 2016:32). In the same vein Babul Roy also mentioned that, "Dormitories are the only institution to impart necessary training to the youth on various skills" (Roy, 2011:4). *Khangchiu* and *liuchiu* are places where young people are taught every important ethical principle, skill, and way of life. Some villages also use "*chungkhangnah*" and "*chungkynah*" (junior dormitories) for younger boys and girls (Daimai, 2018:45-46). Young boys and girls who have not qualified to join the senior dormitory gather at "*chungkhangnah*" and "*chungkynah*", respectively.

III. Liangmai Village polity:

Every Naga village is an "independent unit" (Mills, 1992: 96). Similarly, each Liangmai village is a separate "village-nation" (Maisuangdibou, 2015: 26) ruled by the "*Nampao/Chawang*" (land owner/king) and his assistant *Wangpen* (Daimai, 2018:29). If *Nampao/Chawang's* heir dies, *Wangpen* (assistant) will take over and elect another *wangpen* from the village. In every typical Liangmai village, there is an important council called the *apai* (village court). The council is headed by *akupiu* (head priest), and the members are represented by their respective clans. *Akupiu* is the oldest man in the village. Every judicial function is carried out by *apai* based on customary law. As such, they preside over cases and disputes, and their decision is final and binding. *Nampao/Chawang* (land owner/king) occupies the highest position; he appoints all the dignitaries, including *akupiu*, *apaimai* (councillors), and *khangkiangmai* (elders), and makes every decision after consulting the *apai*. They also have *kangkiangmai/phuam* (elders), headed by *akupiu*, who look after the rites and rituals and other secular and religious ceremonies.

IV. Construction of a New Traditional Village:

As mentioned earlier, establishing a new village requires a lot of intricate processes and precautions. They will have to consider the location of the village from the perspective of defensive security, the availability of water, a forest, sufficient land for cultivation, and the physical environment. It is believed that a single mistake in the recitation of the ritual will bring misfortune to the people and the village. Therefore, they observe omens and seek the wisdom of God at every step. As it requires a lengthy and elaborate process and procedure, shifting a village is hardly done by the people. Likewise, Roy writes on the Zeme in his book "*Zeme Naga from Polytheism to Monotheism*" he writes "Since construction of a Zeme village requires lots of preparations and elaborate ritual performances, shifting of a village site perhaps was never a frequent practice" (Roy, 2011: 4). Similarly, the establishment of a new village is an activity that occurs less frequently among the kinder tribes, the Liangmai.

a. **Location:** A Liangmai village is generally located on a hilltop where meandering rivers, thick forests, and undulating hills surround it. They established a village on unoccupied land with the availability of water, a place for cultivation, security, and a suitable environment for human settlement. Every Liangmai village is

generally located on a hilltop, which gives them a sense of security and is mostly inaccessible to neighbouring villages. One of the prominent scholars of the community Maisuangdibou, in his book “*Liangmai and Christianity*” brings out three reasons why Liangmai villages lie on the hill. According to him, firstly, it is for security reasons; secondly, it is based on the belief that evil spirits dwell in the plain region, and thirdly, hill spirits protect the village (Maisuangdibou, 2015: 26). After the selection of a site, they will begin the preparations for the establishment of a village.



Figure 1:- A stone slab found at Kuilong Village

4.2. The etymology of the village name:

Another important Liangmai event is the naming of a village. The village name always has a deeper connotation for the people. Before the establishment of the village, they will look for a suitable name. The name will be given after careful consideration of the surroundings and landscape of the village. Sometimes the village is named after the founder of the village. Lemta/Renta, for example, is one of the villages in Liangmai named after the landowner, Renbung. If the name of the village is given with inappropriate rites and rituals, it can lead to catastrophic consequences for the villagers. It is believed that misfortune and other disasters in the form of death, a plague, drought, and famine will befall the people of the village.

4.3. Size of the village:

There is no set standard for measuring a village in Liangmai. However, the size of a typical Liangmai village ranges from a minimum of twenty to a maximum of a thousand households, with space for other livelihood activities. Every Liangmai village will have four parts of village land: *kiluang ram* (village/settlement area), *rambow* (reserve area), *taten ram* (cultivation area), and *mariwram* (forest)¹. *Kiluang Ram*: This is the area where humans settle and build barns and other structures to house their livestock and store grains. It is located within the perimeter of the village gate. *Rambow* (reserved area): This zone, or belt, is located about 2 kilometres from the village area. Generally, *rambow* surrounds the village with a thick reserve forest. In this zone, it is taboo for anyone to cut down any trees or hunt any kind of animal in the area. Without exception, no human activities are allowed in *rambow*. This zone/belt serves as a defensive wall from any natural calamities, including storms, wildfires, etc.

The third zone or belt is the *taten ram* (cultivation area). In this zone, human activities are permitted. This portion of land is used for cultivation and agricultural activities such as growing crops, raising livestock, etc. The last zone, or belt, is the *mariwram*. In this portion of land, hunting and fishing are permitted. The end of *mariwram* is the border of a village. The Liangmai use both moveable and immovable objects to mark their inter-village boundary. They will use rivers, streams, mountain ranges, and valleys or erect stones and boulders.

4.4. Preparation:

Before they move out to look for a suitable place of settlement, they will observe an omen through their dreams and rooster. Unless they receive a good sign, they halt and wait for *Apou Charawang* (the Supreme Being). They will listen to the sound of the rooster, and if it ends with “*wanglo*” (come), it’s a good sign. With this, preparation for choosing a site will begin. They will prepare and gather every material vital to the rites and rituals. First, they will look for a *kabui* (mithun) without blemishes and a slab of stone about one foot tall. On the fixed day, they will move out and begin to look for a new place of settlement. In Liangmai tradition, finding a new place for a village establishment is done by *Apou Charawang*. They will be guided by *kabui* (Mithun), who tied the stone slab to the back. They follow the bull until it lowers down and the stone slab falls. A place

¹ See Daimai Kaikhamang, "Land Use System of the Liangmais." in N. Lokendra Singh (ed.) *Land Use System in Manipur Hills*. 28-34 for further reading.

where the stone falls will be the new site of a settlement. As such, a new village will be established where the stone falls². They will observe the omen by keenly observing the stone slab.

4.5. Pre-entry: After they find a place for the establishment, they will construct a temporary tent or settlement before they move into the new village. There they will prepare everything, including cleaning the forest for the construction of a house and other important places. Some elders will go and look for a suitable site to perform various rituals. They will prepare for *chawangphung* (the king's courtyard), *sangbam* (the village shrine), *akhun* (the pond), *tajuangphung* (the jumping ground), etc.; they will also construct two village gates, one facing the direction they come and one facing the opposite direction. *Makiwpao*³ (the leader) will fast and pray as they settle into their temporary location until they move to the new location. During this period, *makiwpao* will observe signs and omens through his dreams. If the omens are good, he will lead the people and move into the new site. Some signs are the growth of new hair and teeth, dreams of clear water, and seeing fish that are considered favourable and good. In the meantime, they will also fix the entry day. However, if there is more than one candidate for *makiwpao*, they will observe an omen by watching a rooster. All of the competitors will bring a rooster and ease for the evening. At dawn, the owner of the fowl that crows first will be the *Makiwpao*. Following this, they will prepare for a ceremonial ritual. A day before the formal entry, young boys will go and collect wood and other materials, accompanied by young girls, and elders will prepare rice beer and other ritualistic elements.

4.6. The entry: On the entry day, preparations for the ceremony will begin at dawn. All the materials, including wine, ginger, *maramnui* (*Thysanolaena*), *chiuchangriang* (a precious necklace), *manuangbui* (a sacrificial mithun), etc., should be rechecked one last time before the ceremony. They will also dig a small pit or hole near the *sangbam* (the village shrine) for ritual purposes. As the sun rises, they will look for an omen by observing the position of the legs of the cock. The cock will be strangled to death as a sacrifice to God; observe the position of the legs. If the right leg rests on the left leg, it is considered a good omen (Kamei, 2004: 324). In some villages, they will sacrifice a pig and check for the spleen. If the spleen of the swine is without blemish and in good shape, they consider this a good sign. Following this, the formal entry will begin; *Makiwpao* (the leader) will enter the newly built village gate and move near the *sangbam* (the village shrine), assisted by *makiwpao-nkha*⁴ (*Makiwpao's* helper). He will then perform a ritual invoking the gods and goddesses of earth and sky and announcing his arrival. Another cock will be sacrificed to *Apou Charawang* (the Supreme Being) before the ritual. Then he says, "*Hey kadii si apui, tingkaku si apiu, eh thainai naliu tu magiang ne*" (Hey, Earth is my mother, the highest hill is my father, today I am marrying this land) [literal translation]. Then he invokes plants, rocks, air, water, and other elements and says, "*Hey, tasing-tatu, thinhai, tadui-tingnai, eh naliu tu magiang ne*" (hey, plants and rocks, wind, water, and ocean, today I am marrying this land) [literal translation] and pours wine and *kabiwtam* (ginger paste) into the ritual pit. He will call upon every element, including living and non-living things, and perform the same rituals.

² One of the oldest villages, Kuilong, of the Zeliangrongs was established by observing this omen.

³ He is the leader and founder of the new village. After the establishment of the village, he will assume the role of *Nampao/Chawang* (Land owner/King). He will be responsible for leading the village in a moral and respectful manner, ensuring that it is prosperous and self-sufficient.

⁴ Later, he will assume the role of *Wangpen* (next to the village chief). He will assist *Nampao/Chawang* (Village Chief/King) in everything. As part of his role, he will need to be a capable leader, demonstrate loyalty to the tribe, and be willing to make decisions for the good of the entire community

Makiwpao (the leader) will then perform another ritual for his people called *Namsan Thoi* (Blessing for the New Village). *Namsan thoi* is a ritual for the well-being, prosperity, fertility, strength, livestock, and harvest of the people. He will move a step or two and pronounce the ritual, “*Hey apou charawang, thainai nathoileng pat genne, anam maidung tu ajiubilo, aban bilo. Lungsu chagariang niu maluung khe maguikum, nchuk kathum kum bamne chakai-chakik. Tadui kaluang then, chamii kakha then anam thiu taalak. Amiikha niu sangwanjeng gom bamne khatdi amiikha du ngoulu amikreh mai mareh lulo. Chalun kawi, alin-tara kawii, chahot-tatan madat patbo nam thiu bamne, hey Apou Charawang*” (Hey, Apou Charawang! Today, we invoke your blessing. May you protect my people and keep them safe. We will prosper as *chagaariang* circles the mountain, and our offspring will multiply like *nchuk*. Our village will be established until the water runs dry and the smoke rises. My smoke will cover the skies; let my enemies flee as they see the smoke. Let my people prosper; let every field reap a hundredfold, and let you bestow strength and bravery upon my people. Hey, Apou Charawang) [Literal translation]. After the ritual *namsan thoi*, the rest of the people will enter the village gate and touch the *chiuchangriang*⁵ (precious necklace), symbolising sanctification and acknowledgment as a member of the village.

When everyone is inside the gate, young boys will bring *manuangbui* (sacrificial mithun) for another ritual sacrifice. As they pull the *manuangbui*, they will perform ho-hoing till they reach the *sangbam* (the village shrine). Later, *Manuangbui* will be killed and sacrificed to the gods and goddesses of the land and sky. This is the first animal sacrifice. *Makiwpao* will proceed and kill the *manuangbui* by piercing it with a bamboo spear⁶. As he proceeds to kill, he will pronounce it, saying, “*Hey Apou Charawang, anam maitu pijiu n-biuruak, ahangruak, n-ngu ruak, kading ruak, nsit ruak, ntou kham lulo. Anam-anah mai chakha-chagaa suang kengbilo. Chalun gainam ka-phakkum, biuliangkum liangjiu bamne*” (Hey Supreme Being, let my people block the water bodies of *n-biuruak, ahangruak, n-ngu ruak, kading ruak, and nsit ruak*. Let our descendants outnumber fish and crabs. May our people be as prosperous as *Gainam* and as sharp as bamboo slits) [literal translation]. The



Figure 2:- *Chiuchangriang* (Precious Necklace)

stomach of the *manuangbui* (bull) will be removed, and contains will be spread across the length and breadth of the village territories. It will be thrown in all directions in the village. They will also throw in every important place, including waterholes and ponds.

Finally, *makiwpao* (leader) will perform the final rites called *chamii-malapbo* (making a new fire) at the *sangbam* (the village shrine). He will make a new fire using a dry bamboo slit by rubbing it against the wooden stick. The fire will be shared by every family, who will light a new fire in their home as a sign of a new beginning. Following the *chamii-malapbo* (making new fire), men will congregate at the *chawangphung* (king's courtyard). After which they will perform ho-hoing.

4.7. Post-entry: After the formal entry, the newly established village will set up different social institutions, including *khangchiu* (male dormitory), *liuchiuky* (female dormitory), *chungkhangnah* (children's dormitory), *apai* (village court), etc. *Makiwpao* will be the village's *nampao/chawang* (landowner/king), with *makiwpao-nkha* as his *Wangpen* (assistant). The oldest male will be appointed as the *sinku* (priest), and some elders will be chosen as the *Khangkiangmai/phuam* (elders) of the village.

V. The Changing aspect of the Liangmai village establishment system:

The cultural practices of the Liangmai had changed as a result of modernity and rapid development. With the dawn of the 20th century, followed by the introduction of Christianity among the people, there has been a tremendous change in many cultural and social structures, resulting in a new way of living of the Liangmai. The indigenous religion of the Liangmai was closely knit with their cultural practices and rituals, which were closely followed by the people. Changes in their belief system have deeply affected their culture. For instance, in the past, every rite and ritual was accompanied by animal sacrifice and the oblation of wine and *kabiwtam* (ginger paste). This was done primarily during the establishment of a new village. However, such practices are no longer common in modern days. Instead, there is a well-mixed culture of both indigenous and new belief systems that have blended together to form unique expressions of worship. Today, a converted Christian will

⁵ It is one of the most precious assets in the community. To establish a village, *chiuchangrang* (precious necklace) is one of the important materials that are required.

⁶ They will use bamboo spears instead of metal/iron as a sign of honour. It is believed that humans and mithun are brothers because they both spent ten months in their mothers' wombs. Likewise, in this case, *Manuangbui* is sacrificed instead of a man. See also Niumai Z. Khangdi, *Hamai Chakhiucham* (2019), 20-21 for further reading.

pray to one Supreme God, Tingwang (God)⁷, and carry out all other activities in accordance with their religious beliefs' teachings and norms. When a new village is established, the people will make an offering to God in the form of money or goods, along with a prayer offered by a religious priest. They will sanctify the vicinity by reading scripture and praying. Ordained priests will assume the role of *akupiu* (priest) and perform every duty. Every complicated practice is shortened and tailored to religious teaching. Traditional methods, however, are still used by some people who practice indigenous religion.

VI. Conclusion:

The movement of people from one place to another has been a universal phenomenon since the dawn of human civilization. They move to a new site of settlement in search of food and protection. Generally, most of the tribal groups settle in hilly regions for different reasons. The Liangmai, established their greater country in the hills and mountains where meandering rivers, thick forests, and undulating hills surround it. They follow a very lengthy and enormous procedure in establishing a village. To establish a village, they must first clear the land, harvest and collect materials for houses, decide where the new village will be located, and then carry out rituals such as ancestral worship to officially declare it a Liangmai village. They follow a very strict code of conduct during the entire process of establishment. Liangmais are also inextricably linked to their environments and surroundings. As mentioned above, there are three important rituals that Liangmai performs during the establishment of a new village. They will perform a ritual invoking the gods and goddesses of the land, including the living and non-living, as they enter the new site. The second ritual is the *Namsan Thoi*. They perform it for the welfare of the people, prosperity, fertility, livestock, and harvest. The final ritual is the one in which they sacrifice *Manuangbui*. It is both a beneficent and a malevolent spirit sacrifice.

They also clearly mark their inter-village boundaries with both moveable and immovable objects. Thus, inter village boundary disputes hardly erupted among the Liangmai. The intricacy of the rituals and rites may be what they will perform with every procession. However, with the coming of modernity and Christianity, most of the traditional practices have been abandoned by the people. However, one can see the mixed culture of both traditional and Christian ethicists. Most of the ritual has been replaced with a prayer to God, and animal sacrifices are no longer done. Whatever the reason may be, the Liangmai still follow some important procedures, such as looking for the site, naming the village, and invoking blessings, including *namsan thoi* and *chamii malapbo*, as they establish a new place of settlement.

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⁷ Another name for the Supreme Being used by Liangmai and Zeme, on the other hand, *Apou Charawang*, is used for every ritual and rite.