

Architectural Narratives: A Discourse On The Traditional Tenyimia Naga House

Sepole Hesuh

Assistant Professor

Department Of Tenyidie

Kohima Science College, Jotsoma

Abstract

In the face of rapid modernization and the erosion of traditional practices, this paper raises awareness on the importance of documenting and preserving the Tenyimia's architectural heritage. The paper has been drawn with an aim to safeguard the community's oral traditions and cultural identity through a discourse on the cultural significance of the traditional Naga house. This effort is crucial in ensuring that the rich heritage of the Tenyimia Nagas is not lost to future generations, providing a resource for cultural education and continuity in an increasingly globalized world. The Tenyimia, a prominent group within the Naga community, are bound by the Tenyidie language and a rich oral history that forms the bedrock of their cultural identity. Traditional Tenyimia houses, with their distinctive architectural styles and locally sourced materials, serve as tangible manifestations of this heritage. Each component of the house, from the shape and structure to the intricate carvings and decorative elements, holds deep cultural meaning, reflecting the community's values, social structure, and historical continuity. The paper explores the various symbolic elements incorporated into Tenyimia houses, such as roof designs that denote social status and wealth, and facade decorations that commemorate achievements like the Feast of Merit. These architectural features are not merely aesthetic but are imbued with cultural significance, representing virtues like bravery, honor, and prosperity.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Tenyimia Naga, Traditional House

Date of Submission: 28-05-2024

Date of Acceptance: 08-06-2024

I. Introduction

Oral tradition is vital for preserving cultural identity in tribal communities, transmitting knowledge, history, and values across generations through folktales, myths, songs, and proverbs. In Naga society, oral traditions encompass folklore, rituals, and practices, maintaining the community's collective memory. However, modernization and global changes threaten these traditions. As M.V (2014) opines, *currently the culture among the modern generations is deviating from the sanctity of traditions, customs and practices with science and technology*. Younger generations, pursuing education and jobs, often adopt English and Nagamese, leading to the neglect of native languages and oral traditions. Digital media further shifts focus away from oral narratives, causing a cultural disconnect. Many young Nagas grow up disconnected from their heritage, seeing ancestral practices as irrelevant.

This cultural erosion necessitates documenting and preserving Naga oral traditions. This paper aims to contribute to this effort by focusing on the traditional house construction practices of the Tenyimia Nagas. By documenting these practices, the paper highlights the architectural, cultural, and symbolic significance of traditional Tenyimia houses, preserving a vital aspect of Naga heritage for future generations.

An Overview of the Tenyimia Nagas

The *Tenyimia* people, an indigenous ethnic group in Northeast India, primarily inhabit the regions spanning Nagaland, Manipur, and parts of Assam. This collective term, "*Tenyimia*," encompasses several tribes, including the Angami, Chakhesang, Zeliang, Rengma, Mao, and Poumai, among others. Today, the *Tenyimia* group consists of the tribes of the Angami, the Rengma, the Zeliang, the Pochury, the Chakhesang, the Mao, the Maram and the Poumai (Liezietsu 2009). Despite their distinct identities, these tribes share a common ancestry, linguistic heritage, and cultural practices, which form the backbone of their collective identity.

The *Tenyimia* tribes speak dialects belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family, with *Tenyidie* serving as a lingua franca among them. This linguistic connection reinforces their shared heritage and facilitates

cultural exchange. Oral traditions, folklore, and communal festivals play a vital role in preserving and transmitting their rich cultural narratives from one generation to the next.

Architectural Heritage of the Tenyimia People

One of the most distinctive aspects of *Tenyimia* culture is their traditional house construction practices. The architecture of *Tenyimia* houses is not merely functional but also deeply symbolic, embodying their cultural values, social status, and spiritual beliefs. The construction of these houses involves intricate craftsmanship, knowledge of local materials, and a profound understanding of their natural surroundings.

Traditional *Tenyimia* houses are typically built using locally sourced materials such as wood, bamboo, and thatch. The construction of a traditional house among the *Tenyimia* is more than just building a shelter; it is a cultural event imbued with rituals and symbolism. Every aspect of the house, from its orientation to the decorative elements, carries cultural significance. For instance, the placement of the hearth, the central pillar, and the use of specific carvings and motifs are all imbued with symbolic meanings related to protection, prosperity, and ancestral reverence.

Feast of Merits and House Designs

The Feast of Merit holds profound significance in *Tenyimia* Naga culture, intricately linked to social status and house design. It is not a single event but a series of increasingly elaborate rituals and celebrations conducted over years, even a lifetime. (Neihu, 2024). Successfully completing this series elevates a person's social standing within the community, earning them respect and prestige.

In the time of the forefathers, wealth was measured by the amount of paddy and livestock owned. When a person became rich, they did not hoard their wealth but shared it by hosting feasts for the village. This act of generosity showcased their ability to provide and was regarded as an honorable achievement, conferring high social status. Such individuals received full respect and honor from the community. Achieving this status required many years of hard work to accumulate sufficient wealth to host a merit feast.

The feasts involved sacrificing animals, with *mithun* being the most valuable, and feeding the entire village. Each successful feast in the series unlocked the right to display specific design elements on the house facade. These elements included unique patterns, carvings, or motifs that distinguished the house from others. The special house designs became visible markers of the homeowner's social status and accomplishments within the *Tenyimia* community. These design elements served as symbols of the host's generosity, ability to provide, and their esteemed position in the social hierarchy.

Materials Used

Typical *Tenyimia* houses are constructed using lightweight, locally available materials such as bamboo, wooden planks, and thatch. The traditional construction system involves bamboo or wooden posts inserted into the ground, serving as compression members. These posts are secured with horizontal bamboo or wooden girders, tied together using bamboo ropes (cane), creating a sturdy and properly shaped frame. The use of bamboo in *Tenyimia* houses speaks volumes about the people and their resourcefulness. Bamboo is one of Nagaland's most vital resources, extensively used in various aspects of Naga life, from agricultural tools to food and shelter. Notably, bamboo shoots are considered a delicacy among almost all Naga tribes, highlighting the cultural and practical significance of bamboo in their daily lives.

Compartments of the Tenyimia Traditional House

Traditionally, the *tenyimia* Naga houses have the following compartments; *Kifukhro* (Veranda), *Kiluo* (Hall), *Mhachaki*, (Kitchen), *Kinu Tshkou*, (Most inner room)

Kifukhro (Veranda): In the veranda, firewood is mostly stocked up in piles. Some people rear their livestock like chicken and ducks in the verandah. It is also used to receive and entertain guests.

Kiluo (Hall): The hall is primarily used as a granary to store harvested paddy. This is typically the largest compartment, occupying half the length of the house. It functions as a storage space for the harvest, with paddy stacked in baskets along the walls. It also houses a traditional grinder table for grinding paddy and other items such as maize and millets.

Mhachaki (Kitchen): In the traditional *Tenyimia* house, the kitchen is centrally located, with the hearth positioned in the middle of this space. Adjacent to the hearth is the sleeping area, which functions as the bedroom. Historically, the kitchen itself also served as the sleeping quarters, highlighting its central role in daily life and the multifunctional nature of the space. Above the hearth, a bamboo or wooden platform is suspended for drying and storing meat, vegetables, grains, firewood, and tools. The lowest portion of this loft is used for storing firewood for immediate use, the middle section for drying and seasoning meat and grains, and the top portion for storing other daily-use items. Additionally, it is a local tradition to hang various items like meat, grains, and dried vegetables from the roof frame, maximizing the use of space and facilitating preservation.

Kinu tsekou (Most inner room); This is the most private room, serving as the storehouse for valuables. It is common to see jars of rice beer stored in this innermost room, reflecting its importance and multifunctional use in traditional *Tenyimia* households.

The significance of *Thehouba* (Morung)

The *thehouba*, or morung, holds a place of profound significance in traditional Naga society, particularly among the *Tenyimia* people. This structure is built right outside the house and serves as much more than a physical space; it is a central institution for cultural transmission and community cohesion. The *thehouba* is essentially a platform for sitting out, typically elevated between 3 to 4 feet, though sometimes higher. These platforms are meticulously constructed from heavy mason bricks without the use of mortar, showcasing traditional building techniques. Architecturally, the *thehouba* is characterized by its bamboo matting walls, with the back wall positioned lower than the front, and a roof that slopes nearly to the ground on both sides, offering protection from harsh winds.

The *thehouba* functions as a general meeting place and a parade ground for ceremonial occasions, emphasizing its role as a community hub. It is here that members of the community gather to share and learn folklore, social customs, songs, and dances. This makes the *thehouba* an essential venue for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and cultural practices, ensuring that traditions are kept alive and vibrant. Beyond its physical and social functions, the *thehouba* symbolizes a place of learning and a ritual center for the community. It represents the collective identity and continuity of cultural heritage among the *Tenyimia*. The rituals and gatherings held in the *thehouba* foster a sense of unity and belonging, reinforcing the social fabric of the community.

However, with the introduction of Christianity and formal education, it has largely become a thing of the past. The *Thehouba* today has lost its sting and serve merely as a sitting place. (Neizovou and Mahanta, 2023). Despite this decline, there is a growing recognition of the importance of preserving such traditional institutions. Documenting and revitalizing the *thehouba* can provide valuable insights into the cultural heritage of the *Tenyimia* people and offer a way to reconnect with and sustain their rich historical and social traditions.



Fig.1: Thehouba

Different Types of roof

Fümie: This is the standard roofing method.

Fübou: This roof features an edged bargeboard about one-third the length of the full board at the front end of the house. It is used by individuals who can distribute pieces of meat (*khrie muo za*) to all households in the village.

Füge: This type of roof has two bargeboards running from the eaves to the roof's peak at the front edge. It is reserved for a man who has given a merit feast (*Sha*) twice to his village.



Fig.2: Fuge Roof

Kikia (House-Horns): 'Kikia' refers to two large wooden horns. This roof is for a man who has hosted merit feasts three times or more. The *kikia* is carved from a single piece of wood to resemble animal horns or a bird's beak, typically with a round hole at the ends. These holes, known as the "eyes," reduce wind resistance and the risk of damage. *Kikia* roofs always face east towards the sunrise and signify the highest prestige, reserved for the wealthiest man in the village who has fulfilled all rituals and hosted multiple merit feasts.



Fig.3: Kikia

The Rich Men's House

The front of the house of wealthy men in the *Tenyimia* community is adorned with symbols of their riches and status. Prominently displayed are the skulls of *Mithuns* (a type of bovine) slaughtered for feasts, indicating the owner's wealth and generosity. Additional house gears include various symbolic elements: *Khriluo* (full moon), which represents manhood and the ideal of a growing population, symbolizing fullness and prosperity; the Star (*Themvü*), signifying outstanding performance and believed to be the destination of a good man's soul after death; the Horn, representing glory and honor; the Head of a Man, symbolizing bravery and warrior status; the *Mithun* Head, indicating wealth and the prosperity of livestock, and signifying that the owner has hosted feasts for the village; and *Zhiesha*, (waist band used to carry *dao*) which stands for truthfulness and honesty. These symbols serve as visible markers of the homeowner's social status and accomplishments within the *Tenyimia* community.



Fig. 4: Front-house of a rich man

The Chief Priest's House

The Chief Priest's house (*Kemevo-ü ki*) is another notable type of *Tenyimia* dwelling. Unlike other houses, it is constructed with rough wooden shingles instead of thatch. The roof includes house-horns that are pointed at both ends rather than palmated. The construction of the Chief Priest's house is a communal effort, completed by villagers within a specified period of three days. (Lohe, 2011) Despite the unique roofing materials, the structural design and construction methods remain consistent with traditional practices.

II. Conclusion

The *Tenyimia* people, bound by the common language *Tenyidie* from the Tibeto-Burman language family, have a rich tradition of oral history that intricately weaves their cultural identity. Traditional *Tenyimia* houses were built with a specific architectural style using local materials, embodying a sense of community and belonging. Every aspect of the house, from the shape of the roof to the carvings on the doors, held cultural significance and served as a visual representation of their identity. These houses were designed to be sturdy and functional, lasting for generations, and often large enough to accommodate extended families, signifying the importance of familial bonds in *Tenyimia* society. Owning and maintaining a well-constructed house was a source of pride and reflected the family's history and social standing within the community. Through their

architectural narratives, the *Tenyimia* people's houses stand as enduring symbols of their heritage, values, and social structures, preserving their cultural legacy for future generations

References

- [1] Liezietsu, S. (2009). Ura Academy And The Evolution Of Tenyidie. In Kedilezo Kikhi, Et.Al (Eds.). Angami Society At The Beginning Of The 21st Century. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House. Pp. 1-10.
- [2] Lohe, K. (2011). Naga Village: A Sociological Study. Guwahati: Eastern Book House Publishers.
- [3] Neizovou And Mahanta, 2023. Impact Of Westernization On The Naga Society. IJCRT, 11(9).
- [4] Neihu, Ketholenuo. Naga Tradition And Culture: Understanding The Feast Of Merit, Morung Express, 2nd June, 2024.
- [5] M.V, Jessymol. 2022. Need For The Conservation Of Tribal Culture: With Special Reference To Southern Angami Nagas. IJCRT, 10(6).