

# Microtoponyms and Oral Tradition: A Toponymic of Nagas of Khamsum (Kisumai) Village

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**Abstract:** Toponyms serve as a historical depository of settlement, culture, habitation, ecology, belief systems and topography. They contain a wealth of socio-cultural information about the inhabitants and the geographic realities of the landscape. Place names function as descriptions and references to the physical environment, reflecting the interactions of the name-givers with their locale. Consequently, toponyms are filled with meaning and values, acting as a window into the world of the people who inherit them. Furthermore, the study of microtoponyms, which primarily exist in oral tradition and are often unknown to outsiders, offers rich insights into the socio-cultural, geographical, and linguistic contexts of specific communities. This paper employs ethnographic methods to explore microtoponyms of Khamsum (Kisumai), a Poumai Naga village in the Senapati district of Manipur, as a significant aspect of its cultural and geographical environment. By deciphering naming patterns as reflections of how people engage with their social and geographic realities, this study aims to enhance understanding of worldview of the village's inhabitants and the Poumai Naga community more broadly.

**Keywords:** Microtoponyms; Culture; Oral tradition; Poumai Nagas

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## 1. Introduction

In the study of names and naming, the discipline of toponymy investigates the act of naming and makes sense of how the names are positioned in each landscape. Toponyms provide various socio-cultural data about the inhabitants and geographic realities of the landscape. They are filled with knowledge about the history of settlement, culture, habitation, ecology, and topography, and further provide a glimpse of the customs and tradition followed by the natives [1]. Thus, toponyms are the storehouse of ecological and other knowledge systems of the natives [2].

Various existing literatures situate places as sites of memory, identity, and culture. Hoelscher and Alderman [3] opine that the place provides a framework to study the cultural and physical worlds of those who reside there. Place names act as a window to the world of the people and are constructed by the people rooted in their culture, tradition, and knowledge about the lands. At present, the study of toponyms offers a wide range of contexts for a broader scope of debates in critical human geography [4]. The expansive field for the study of place names provides an opportunity to examine toponyms like objects or artefacts which are close linked to social and political struggles.

Through naming, people name their realities; it is always done to achieve or establish something else other than the act of naming itself. Bringing in Austin's speech act theory where he proposes, locution – the word and its literal meaning; illocution – the speaker's intention behind the word; and perlocution – the possible effects and outcomes of the speaker's utterance

on the hearers; it can be understood that utterance of a place name can mean more than just the meaning of the word itself [5]. Applying pragmatics in understanding the intention of name-givers and users of place names, it can be deduced that place names are not just attached to a given location; however, it is assigned with a conscious mind to understand the socio-cultural implications and political environment of the location. It thus makes sense to look beyond the lexical meaning of place names. Whether it is a human being, a mountain, or a stream, name becomes a part of identity. Place names convey a wide range of cultural and geographical information such as the topography of the landform, sites of historical events, location of religious and customary practices, and migrations. Consequently, various place names of cultural and historical significance are marked as heritage sites, while many place names are well-documented and mapped out in official records and cartography of countries and specific regions [6] (p.287). However, there are place names, created and used by inhabitants of a particular village, town or city which are usually undocumented and unknown to outsiders. The paper examines such microtoponyms imbued with the physical environment and day-to-day cultural realities of the inhabitants.

### *1.1. Microtoponyms*

Microtoponyms are those non-standardized names of places or sites, orally used by the locals and are generally left unattended in toponymic studies [7]. Microtoponyms can consist of cultivation areas such as fields, forests, and pastures; water bodies like ponds and brooks; landforms like hillocks, slopes or cliffs; residential localities; paths and lanes, etc. which reflect geographical, social-cultural, and linguistic features of the inhabitants [8].

Against this backdrop, the paper examines the microtoponyms of Khamsum (Kisumai) village as a significant aspect of the cultural and geographical environment. With no proper written records and documentation, oral tradition is still the sole means of passing down historical records, and the community's social values and norms. Therefore, studying place names can provide priceless information about the geography, history, culture, and language of the people. Moreover, the study of toponyms can assist in understanding the heritage and linguistic structures of the language used by the locals as toponyms are storehouses of geographical appellations.

According to Stewart [9], place names came into existence based on the life and lifeblood of those who had passed away; they are closely bound to the land and the adventures of the people. Furthermore, in the present-day era of harsh and rapid climate change, with increasing demand for conservation of lands and resources for future generations, the need to understand and study social and geographic realities of the lands with the help of the natives has become inevitable [10]. The practice of naming places reflects the way in which people have dealt with social and geographic realities. As such, through the study of place names, at a broader level, the paper attempts to facilitate an understanding of the worldview of the Poumai Nagas and their ways of life.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Site of Study: *Khamsom (Kisumai) Village*

Situated in the Senapati district of Manipur in Northeast India, *Kisumai* (officially known as Khamsom Village) is a Poumai Naga village. According to the 2011 Indian Census Report, the village has 255 households with a total population of 1772. Traditionally, the Poumai Nagas reside in three administrative zones i.e., *Paomata*, *Lepaona* and *Chilüvai* [11]. *Kisumai* comes under the *Lepaona* administrative area. Tracing back their routes of migration and settlements, it is believed that after the dispersal of various *Tenyimi* Naga tribes from Makheli, the progenitors of *Kisumai* consisting of *Raomai* and *Lanamai* clans journeyed to their current territory and after shifting seven times around their territory for strategic reasons, they finally settled at the present-day village settlement area. Currently, the village has two settlement areas, the new settlement area was established in 1960 and is known by the name *Kisumai Huphüi*. However, the antiquity of the *Kisumai* lies in ambiguity with the absence of proper documentation of the history, culture, customary practices, and geographical features of the village. The traditional narrative about place names is one of the few remaining ways through which the history of the place can be explored.

### 2.2. Methods

According to M. Ganong, ‘to find the origin of place names is easy, but finding the true origin is often difficult or impossible’ clearly stating the issues faced in the investigation of the origin of place names [12] (p.34). Given the changing nature of names, it is necessary to trace and find the dynamics of these changes. Thus, the paper aims to investigate and explore socio-cultural, and geographic elements of place names through collection and analyses of microtoponyms using ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnography allows the researcher to discover the structures, patterns, and setups of the culture, language, and space of the society they study without the need to depend on ‘assumptions’ and ‘superficial analyses’ [13] (p. 37). The approach offers a better advantage to researchers investigating well acquainted cultures, or their own cultures, as it can give further scope for observation with reference to their research. However, it is also vital for the researcher to understand the shortcomings of researching familiar or one’s own culture. The necessity of having an outsider’s view to carry out objective research and the importance of being watchful and not overlooking subtle nuances of their own culture and avoiding jeopardizing their study should be well maintained [14] (p.89).

The site of this study, *Khamsom (Kisumai)* village is conveniently selected as no research work on its culture and history has been found. Moreover, the study of place names has regrettably been neglected. Due to a lack of archival sources, the data collection exclusively relied on fieldwork. The initial contact with the village was not a major issue as the researcher is an inhabitant of the village; however, the purpose of the study and the author’s role as a researcher was aptly conveyed beforehand. As such, fieldwork is conducted through a careful approach to evade preconceived notions on interpreting cultural, geographical, and linguistic patterns; and giving due respect to the place names and lived experiences of the people.

The main method of data collection in this study was through interviewing. Between December 2024 and January 2025, individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGD)

were conducted among the villagers to understand the significance of place names in their cultural and geographical context. Employing purposive and snowball sampling techniques, 30 informants (20 male and 10 female), and age ranging between 20-80 years were selected for the interview and FGD. This provides a scope to gain different opinions while exploring how place names were understood and used. Instead of being fully structured, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. The advantage of this structure is to cover the topics addressed by the interviewer and provide flexibility to obtain ‘insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important’ [15] (p. 320).

In FGD, the informants were able to supplement and add on to the meaning and origin of the place names which otherwise might have been forgotten or neglected. However, the possibility of having been influenced by other informants (which in the case of individual interviews could be avoided) is possible in FGD. Similarly, the probability of yielding to one’s own personal interpretation of place names and their significance is more likely in individual interviews. Additionally, telephone interviews were also used to substantiate the data collected. According to Auerbach and Silverstein, ‘theory is a description of a pattern that you find in the data’ [16] (p.31) and for Hymes ethnography is described as a mission that requires the development of theory instead of just being descriptive [17] (p. 33). While analyzing the data, these ideas permit them to have an inclusive analysis. Cross-analysis of place names and their meanings from different informants provides vital information on their usage and significance. Further cross verification and analysis facilitates in validating the data without which misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the place names may occur.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### *3.1. Significance of Microtoponyms in Khamsom (Kisumai) Village*

For the inhabitants of Khamsom (*Kisumai*), their landscape is like a living stage, it reverberates the love and attachment of the people to their lands through folktales and folksongs, and in words and gestures they use in everyday life. The names they assigned to various landscapes bear testimony of their knowledge about their history, past events, topography, ecology, migration, and navigation routes. The place names assigned by the natives reinforce a strong bond between the people and the land, they are an essential medium to pass on information and emotion about their history, and legends, and a means to educate the youths, conveying the teaching of the elders. Like many indigenous peoples, place names in Khamsom (*Kisumai*) act as mnemonic devices, representing their history, spiritual and environmental knowledge, and information about their territories and boundaries [18].

Place names are not static, they get transformed, renamed or restored with time and factors like power shift [19]. Thus, they carry a range of cultural, linguistic, and geographical information and are of different types. Within territory, sites are named, assigned, and utilized for various purposes, and spots are allotted for farming, hunting, grazing, or settlement. In general, the place names of Khamsom (*Kisumai*) are both descriptive and commemorative in nature, transmitting the purpose and reason for being named so.

### 3.2. Place Names Related to Geographical Features

Names describing various physical features such as vegetation, landscapes, and waterbodies are reflected in many place names of Khamsum (*Kisumai*) village. The name *Kisumai* which was coined by the villagers as their village name, reveals a lot about the landscape and the ancient migration routes of the people of *Kisumai*. In *Poula* (Poumai language), *Kisu* means ladder and *mai* means people, translated as the people who established their village by climbing ladders. It was said that when the early settlers of the *Kisumai* village came to their present-day territory, they had to use ladders to cross over the huge and high rocky terrains, which later served as a fortress from attackers and provided a haven for them. Likewise, the name *Ngaphü* (*Nga* – clear and bright; *phü* – site, plot) one of the residential localities in the village reflects the bright and open hilltop location where it is situated, making it the first spot in the village to receive sunlight.

According to Stewart [9] (pp. 4-5), when the lands were nameless, names were assigned from the shapes and features of the landscapes in the region, and names were used as signposts distinguishable from each other. Various place names of the *Kisumai* are also assigned using such descriptive features. Though the origin of the names remained untraceable, the villagers believed that the early settlers assigned those names describing the features and shapes they saw when they first discovered the place. For instance, *Khuhouzi* is a hill (*zi*) named for its similarity to the nose (*hou*) of a stag (*khu*). In the same manner, *Houchu* is another hill named after the comb (*chu*) of a rooster (*hou*).

Place names also act as memory tools for the inhabitants, the people of *Kisumai* heavily rely on the navigation routes of wild animals, the habitat of various vegetation and animals, and types of soil while navigating around their territory. Gorges, ponds, streams, hills, and fields are assigned names bearing in mind the topography of the landscape. *Paohurei* is the name of a stream between Khamsum (*Kisumai*) and Tingsong (*Shaomai*) village, the stream marks the boundary between the two villages. Deciphering the meaning of the name reveals that the stream was named so because in the past, elephants (*Pao*) used to gather and rest around the stream (*rei*). *Zaikhaolurei* is another example of identifying the significance of geographical features in the territory. The stream (*rei*) lies near a saline spring (*zaikhao*), where wild animals gather around providing a good hunting ground for the people. In addition, saline water from the spring was also used by the villagers for consumption. Though at present there are no sightings of elephants or collections of saline water from the spring, using the names in everyday conversation evokes the memory of the place and the relationship they share with their lands. *Laichitao*, is named so based on the habitat of bee/wasp (*laichi*) hanging (*tao*) on rocky cliffs, honey and the larvae are used by the inhabitants for consumption and medicinal purposes. *Haobitu* is another location named after the type of vegetation found, the hollow teems with gooseberry trees (*haobi*) often collected by the villagers for consumption. Likewise, *Paadaotu* is named after a specific type of rock found in rocky hills used for making mortar (*paadao*) an essential tool used for grinding rice, grains, spices, and other food items. The name of these places not only locates the presence of habitats, plantations and types of soil and rocks, but they also help in understanding the significance of these elements in the daily lives of the villagers.

### 3.3. Place Names of Cultural Significance

Place names also reflect the socio-cultural features of the people who named them based on the significance and circumstances of the locale. As such, place names become necessary in studying the cultural geography of a region as they facilitate in understanding the cultural landscape of the people [20]. Numerous place names in Khamsum (*Kisumai*) village are influenced by the social practices, belief systems, and moral norms of the inhabitants.

Gray and Rück [10] (p.3) observe that indigenous place names are historical accounts of how landscapes are inscribed with meanings, they are filled with teachings of how to live in harmony with others and their lands. Exploring the word *Huphü* reveals the history, background, and influence of Christianity in the formation of the new settlement area. When Khamsum (*Kisumai*) was divided into two parts in 1960, the newly formed part added the word *Huphü* to the existing name *Kisumai*. *Hu* means together and *phü* means plot or site, the name means the site where both Christians and followers of the indigenous belief system resides together. Christianity was already introduced to the people of *Kisumai* in the year 1940, and many had converted to the newly acquired fast-spreading religion. However, there were few who still followed the traditional belief system and with the increasing need to expand settlement areas with the rise in population, a new site was picked to meet the requirement. They decided the place should be accessible to everyone irrespective of whether one is a Christian or follower of indigenous religion. As a result, the word *Huphü* was added, and a new village was established.

Stewart also states that several mythological names may have been possibly derived from exaggerated and distorted adventure stories like hunting or war exploits [9]. However, the teachings of elders about ways of life, respecting nature and honoring every being are encapsulated in place names [21]. As in the case of Hopis, several place names carry a range of cultural information like historical events and legends [22] (p.101). Similar patterns are found in place names of *Kisumai*. The name *Bühu* was assigned after a legendary figure *Bü*, believed to be one of the founding fathers of the *Kisumai*. He is known for his bravery and strength and is highly revered by the people of Khamsum (*Kisumai*) till today. However, the place named *Bühu* tells a different tale about this hero. The place literally means the site where *Bü* faced his final moment of life. It was told that one day as *Bü* was about to embark on his adventure, one of his sons who wished to follow him began to wail as the father was unwilling to take him along. As the child became uncontrollable, the father consoled him by promising that he would bring him the ear on an elephant as a gift when he returned. Woefully, on that fateful day, *Bü* was chased down by an elephant which injured him and ultimately killed him. The site where he rested gasping for his final breath of life is known as *Bühu*. For the *Kisumai*, invoking the name *Bühu* not only identifies the resting place of a legendary hero, but the story is also often told as a reminder to be humble and respect every being irrespective of how great one might be, lest he be killed like *Bü* because of his pride and disrespect for other beings.

Places are also named based on the significant purpose they serve for the inhabitants. *Savaphü* a name of one locality within the village is named so, as the open space and convenient location of the area is used for celebration (*Sava*) of festivals and other public gatherings. Likewise, the area where the village school is situated is named *Doulu* (to learn) *phü* (site) indicating the purpose and the importance of education.

Though variations can be there on naming, the microtoponyms explored in the paper provide the dominant narratives of the villagers. They expressed that the names and the narratives discussed are generally accepted names, used to identify and mark different places closely linked to their day-to-day community life. Thus, it is evident that place names are the results of creative processes. However, this creativity comes with the responsibility of bearing in mind the historical, geographical, cultural, and linguistic facts of the people who assigned names and took care of the places. The names assigned by the local inhabitants are not merely a sound used by the people of the village for identification. The names are filled with knowledge and information and a constant reminder about their past, purpose, uses, and significance. Furthermore, it conveys the topographical features and geographical realities of the territory. Documentation of such valuable linguistic, geographical, and cultural elements will not only facilitate the preservation of the language and culture of the people but will also help in acknowledging the environmental and ecological beliefs of the people of the region.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Citing these few cases among numerous others, it can be understood that microtoponyms are an important element of the local cultural heritage, containing geographical information on landscape and historical accounts of the community. People speaking the same language or residing in the same community are bound to have some attachment to the place names, as they become their linguistic and community identity. Through oral narratives about the history of the place and how names are assigned to these places, memories are created, and attachments are developed with the places. These place names are not only meaningful to the people who named them and used them, they become keepers of the names. Microtoponyms are also filled with unique information specific to the region's ecosystem. Therefore, understanding the meaning and significance of the names can help in navigating the local natural environment, and facilitate in promotion of sustainable development and conservation of environment.

#### **Multidisciplinary Domains**

This research covers the following domains: (a) Onomastic studies, (b) Indigenous knowledge system, (c) Cultural geography.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Declaration on AI Usage

This manuscript has been prepared without the use of AI tools.

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<sup>i</sup> Every Naga tribe has their own distinct narrations about their origin and routes of migration and settlement. Many of the Naga tribes believes that their ancestors appeared from caves, seaside, etc. Some of the popular migration narratives of the Nagas trace their roots of origin from Mkahel, Khezakenoma, Lungterok, etc. Those Nagas who were believed to have their roots in Makhel are Angami, Chakhesang, Rengma, Zeliangrong, Mao, Poumai and Pochury were collectively known as ‘Tenyimi’.