

Tokhü Emong: Ritual Vocabulary of Spiritual Purity Among the Lotha Nagas

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Abstract:

This study examines the ethnolinguistic dimensions of ritual vocabulary associated with spiritual purity among the Lotha Naga community of Nagaland, with particular reference to the post-harvest festival *Tokhü Emong*. Drawing on oral traditions, festival lexicon, and existing ethnographic studies, the paper explores how ritual purity is not expressed through a single lexical equivalent but is instead constructed through a network of culturally embedded terms, ritual practices, and moral-social expressions. The analysis demonstrates that key lexemes such as *Tokhü* (feast) and *Emong* (ritual halt) encode a temporally bounded sacred interval that enables processes of purification, reconciliation, and communal renewal.

The study further investigates semantic domains related to spatial cleansing, boundary regulation, ritual offerings, and mortuary practices, highlighting how these linguistic expressions function as regulatory systems governing social conduct and sacred order. Drawing on theoretical insights from Mary Douglas and Emile Durkheim, the paper situates Lotha ritual vocabulary within broader frameworks of purity, pollution, and the sacred–profane divide. Additionally, it emphasizes the moral dimension of ritual purity, where concepts such as forgiveness (*Nlan sita*), reconciliation (*Senjümta*), and kinship renewal (*Wopan Yenkitä*) redefine purity as relational harmony.

Ultimately, the paper argues that *Tokhü Emong* serves as a vital ethnolinguistic and cultural institution through which the Lotha Nagas sustain their identity, reinforce social cohesion, and negotiate the relationship between the human, natural, and spiritual realms.

Keywords: Ethnolinguistics; Ritual Purity; Tokhü Emong; Lotha Naga; Festival Lexicon; Sacred and Profane; Cultural Identity; Ritual Language; Social Harmony; Nagaland

Introduction

In accordance with the traditions of our forefathers, “Every year is opened with *Pihkuchak* festival which marked the beginning of the year. The year then is closed with the festival of Tokhu Emong. It literally means day of celebration of the fruits of one’s labor after a tiresome schedule of the year” (Kithan, 2022, p. 3). The Tokhu Emong is a significant post-harvest festival celebrated by the Lotha Naga community in Nagaland. Traditionally it is observed annually in early November, the festival marks the end of the agricultural cycle and serves as a time of thanksgiving, feasting, social renewal and social bonding. More than a seasonal celebration, Tokhu Emong serves as a cultural space where language, ritual performance, and collective memory intersect. It represents a vital cultural institution through which the Lotha Nagas articulate and sustain their ethnolinguistic identity.

An ethnolinguistic analysis of ritual vocabulary associated with spiritual purity among the Lotha Naga is reconstructed largely from oral traditions and festival lexicon as explicit written liturgical corpora are

limited. “On the theological part they believe in a Supreme Deity who acts as the benefactor of good souls and protector of community life of Lotha Nagas. Their ancestral religion Heraka once became an emblem of Naga identity in the face of British brutal Christianity missions” (Kithan, 2022, p. 4). Nevertheless, existing ethnographic and linguistic studies allow us to identify key semantic domains and culturally embedded terms, particularly in relation to the harvest festival Tokhü Emong, which functions as a central site of ritual purification, reconciliation, and communal renewal. Ritual purity is not encoded through a single lexical equivalent but emerges through festival vocabulary, ritual actions, and moral-social expressions, particularly during the harvest festival Tokhü Emong. It analyses Lotha lexemes and semantic fields, demonstrating how purity is linguistically constructed as temporal suspension, spatial regulation, and relational harmony.

Festival Lexicon as a Marker of Ritual Purity

According to Ezung and Ovung (2023), “There are four festivals celebrated by the Lotha’s, viz, Khyingroe Tokhu, Lanvon Tokhu, Loro Tokhu and Tokhu Emong” (277). The term Tokhü Emong encodes ritual temporality and controlled transition. *Tokhü* “Feast” denotes communal ritual feasting through consumption of food and drink (*Etsoyu lona Khümshümta*). *Emong* “Halt/ Appointed time” signifies a structured pause in profane activity, creating a liminal sacred interval. From an ethnolinguistic perspective, *Emong* signifies a ritually bounded temporal pause, a liminal phase in which ordinary activities are suspended. This “halt” functions analogously to seclusion and purification phases (*Sükying sothe/ sükying Eshi-enyi*).

Lotha Ritual Vocabulary

“The family who lost any member during the year performs the last rites during this festival” (Ezung & Ovung, 2023, p. 277). The following table synthesizes documented Lotha terms and culturally embedded lexical items associated with ritual purity practices:

Term	Literal Meaning	Ethnolinguistic Interpretation
<i>Tokhü</i>	Feast, eating and drinking	Ritual abundance; purification through communal consumption
<i>Emong</i>	Halt, rest or appointed time	Liminal suspension of ordinary time; ritual containment
<i>Tokhü Emong</i>	Feast at the appointed halt/ feast of togetherness	Period of collective purification and renewal

Ritual Action and Offering Vocabulary

Term/Expression	Meaning	Ritual Function
Offering to Sky God/ Earth God (<i>Oyak Potsow/ Liko Potsow</i>)	Sacrificial gestures to cosmic forces	Removal of impurity through divine appeasement
Prayers/Invocations (<i>Randanka</i>)	Verbal ritual acts	Linguistic purification and blessing
Rice Beer (<i>Soko</i>)	Traditional fermented drink	Medium of ritual sharing and social bonding

Offering to celestial and terrestrial deities encode a cosmological purification system, where imbalance is corrected through ritual exchange like ritual speech (prayers, invocations) performative language, and enacting purification.

Vocabulary of Cleansing, Renewal, and Spatial Purity

According to Mary Douglas (1966), purity and pollution are symbolic systems that maintain social order. Ritual vocabulary encodes what a society considers acceptable versus dangerous. Similarly, Emile Durkheim (2016), highlights the distinction between sacred and profane as central to ritual language. Indigenous tribal festivals employ a specialized ritual vocabulary centred on purification, sacred space, and moral order. Terms related to cleansing, taboo, and ritual performance encode culturally specific notions of purity and pollution, reinforcing both spiritual beliefs and social cohesion.

Spatial Purification

The village undergoes collective moral and spatial cleansing. To prepare for the *Tokhü Emong* celebration a collective purification cleaning activities are undertaken; Cleaning wells (*Jükha Ntsüngche*), repairing houses (*Epo Etha*), and renovating village gates (*Pikvüchak Epi*). These acts correspond to a semantic field of renewal and cleansing where space itself becomes ritually purified.

Threshold Regulation

The rule governing outsiders (leave or remain) encodes a boundary vocabulary of purity vs. contamination. In order to maintain village purity a strict regulation on guests/outsideers are observed. On other days of the year guests are cordially welcomed into the village and homes however during the festive season no one is permitted to welcome and entertain new guests (*Eyi Lankon*). If there are guests/outsideers must leave or remain until completion the festival. The village becomes a ritually sealed space. Boundary rules linguistically encode sacred enclosure, a key feature of purity systems.

Mortuary Purification

Performance of final rites for the deceased during the festival. In that annual year if there are death in a family, the family members are in a situation called (*Okhüp Eküimala*). Throughout the year the family members would keep a portion of food items for the dead. On *Tokhü Emong* through a ritual practice the eldest member of the family offers food items to the dead and after the festival the dead person is given farewell to the dead by sending the soul to the world of the dead. It is marked as a day of separation between the living and the dead. This indicates a lexical–ritual linkage between death pollution and communal purification, where unresolved spiritual states are ritually “cleared.”

Term/ Concept	Meaning	Ethnolinguistic Significance
Village Cleansing (Pre-festival cleaning)	Cleaning homes, wells, spaces	Physical purification mapped onto ritual space
Village Boundary restriction	Outsideers must leave or remain	Lexical encoding of purity vs. contamination boundary
House to house Practice (<i>Tokhü</i>)	Movement across households sharing food	Circulation of purity through reciprocity

In the words of Ezung and Ovung (2023), “It was the *Pvuti* (chief priest) who gives the signal for opening the festival. He was accompanied by the aides (*Chumpo Khyongroe*) for collecting un-husked rice from every house in the village” (278). The *Pvüti* (village priest) is scheduled to make the pronouncement on the day of the Tokhü Emong celebration:

Lotha Version

*O— Oyamoden,
küju-o Tokhü mongtsü mong kaje!
(Oyan kvui sana jo küju n-müng jo to n-nüng koa tüngcho)
A-ah...
wopan topvü na otsok phirümke...
Tokhü tsi-soko rütherümke je...
O...
Tokhü tsüngon kokathako,
tsüngon shi nyakthüing jo,
oyamo kyon ochiaha
yentsa yenzhülo tivotakhe je,
A-ah...
lankon lansi saria mhijüing vo,
hayiru vo ekhüpi,
kipüing dontüing lishüchako
chongi vatasi...
A-aha...
evoshav meka,
oyamo sükying ratsüka ka—
sojak-ramüing,
rajak-so ochina ha,
oyani hansü yanchungi tirheyitakhe...
Ekhyakya meka—
nungcho pancho,
esa mmvü,
nsen nsü nlithokü...
topvü na erüm taro rüma,
oyan sükying mmhontokvü eshi ennita,
mmha sothetav kila...
topvü na ndangshontakhe je...”*

English Translation

“O—oh, dear village people, our great festival draws near.
A-ah... let every family prepare—
dry the paddy, brew the rice beer.
Before the festival comes to its close,
let no one set out on journeys or errands.

A-ah... welcome no guests,
entertain none within your homes.
Take utmost care—
we are preparing ourselves
to receive God's blessings.
Bring not into the village
dead wild animals—
the prey of other beasts—
for they carry danger.
Keep far from curses and evil omens;
avoid all that may bring misfortune
upon our village.
In patience and purity, we wait,
preparing ourselves
to receive God's abundant blessings.”

Taboo Lexicon of Ritual Purity

1. *Sükying Ratsüka la* – (maintaining ritual purity in order to receive God's blessings)
2. *Sojak-ramüing, Rajak oso* – (avoiding the bringing of dead wild animals—carcasses or prey of other animals—into the village)
3. *Nuncho Panjo* – (avoiding leftovers or remnants that may invite divine wrath)
4. *Nsen -Nsü* – (unclean activities that attract bad luck, evil omens, or ritual pollution)
5. *Sarisapvü / Sari Emvü* – (dangerous impurity; the need to guard one's thoughts and actions to prevent misfortune)
6. *Sükying* – (blessings destined or in store for an individual or the village)

Moral–Social Purification: Lexicon of Reconciliation

“The social, culture and religion of *Lotha* tribe were related to a large extent because most of the practice and believes of this tribe were dedicated to some unknown supernatural power” ((Ezung & Ovung, 2023, p. 276). A distinctive feature of *Lotha* ritual vocabulary is the moral dimension of purity. *Tokhü Emong* is explicitly described as a time when kinship is renewed through reconciliation. Ritual vocabulary emphasizes relational harmony, where purity is achieved through resolution of conflict and renewal of kinship ties. The exchange of food (especially meat) operates as a symbolic lexeme of purified relationships. From an ethnolinguistic standpoint, this reflects a semantic shift from physical purity to relational harmony.

1. Forgiveness (*Nlan sita*): During the *Tokhü Emong* disputes are settled and past rancour are forgiven.
2. Reconciliation (*Senjümta*): it is an occasion to get together and celebrate with thanksgiving disposition therefore conflicts are resolved and communal- social equilibrium is restored.
3. Renewal of kinship ties (*Wopan Yenkitä*): Through a gift exchange meat sharing (*Ohan Eyanta*) old social relations are reinforced and new ties are formed. The semantic extension of *Tokhü* as movement and exchange of food/gifts encodes circulation of social and ritual purity.

Conclusion

The Lotha (*Kyong*) is a major tribe of Wokha district, Nagaland known as the “Land of Plenty” (Imchen & Ezung, 2023, p.1) and their Tokhü Emong festival reflects a unified sense of ritual, social life, and spiritual purity. Rather than being expressed through a single lexical equivalent, ritual purity among the Lotha Nagas is encoded across a network of terms, actions, and performative expressions. Lexemes such as *Tokhü* and *Emong* articulate not only festivity and temporality but also a structured suspension of ordinary life, creating a liminal sacred interval. Within this interval, practices of cleansing, restriction, and offering transform both physical space and social relations into ritually purified domains.

Furthermore, the ethnolinguistic analysis demonstrates that ritual vocabulary functions as a regulatory system governing spatial boundaries, social interaction, and moral conduct. Concepts such as *Sükying Ratsüka la*, *Sojak-ramüing*, *Nuncho Panjo*, and *Nsen-Nsü* encode a culturally specific understanding of pollution, danger, and auspiciousness. These lexical items are not merely descriptive but prescriptive, guiding community behavior to maintain harmony between the human, natural, and spiritual realms. The pronouncement of the *Pvüti* reinforces this linguistic framework, transforming words into performative acts that sustain collective discipline, sacred order, and communal identity.

Finally, the notion of purity in the Lotha context extends beyond physical and ritual dimensions into the moral and relational sphere. Through practices such as *Nlan sita*, *Senjümta*, and *Wopan Yenkitä*, purity is redefined as reconciliation, forgiveness, and the renewal of kinship bonds. The circulation of food and gifts (*Ohan Eyanta*) symbolizes not only material exchange but also the restoration of social equilibrium. Thus, *Tokhü Emong* encapsulates an integrated system in which language, ritual, and social ethics work together to sustain ethnolinguistic identity, ensuring continuity, cohesion, and spiritual well-being within the Lotha Naga community.

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