



# Regazing Cultural Past: Documenting the Vanishing Artifacts of the Zeme of Northeast India.

**K. Suteihangbe**

**Abstract:** *The coming of the museum wave in the late 18th century brought about a seeming shift in curating archaeological evidence, ethnological belonging, vintage repositories and cultural objects of findings in India. This paper aims to investigate the possibility of expediting curious and fascinating artifacts that are already on the verge of vanishing in today's time due to the lackadaisical utility of appreciation and preservation by the community. Among the highlanders of the Naga Hills, the Zeme tribe of Senapati district, Manipur, North-East India is instituted with cultural wealth and objects cocooned by the innocent ignorance of conserving and protecting the material remains of ancient belonging. Acknowledging the deficiency and dearth passage of knowledge among the local populace has done much damage to the material wealth, some beyond restitution and replenishment. Uncontacted and isolated from the academic theatre, this field resonates with the treasure hoards wanting an inquisitive perusal. The resurgence of minute telescoping in gathering the cultural wealth of Zeme, with special limelight to Senapati district, has earned a profound place in the coliseum of academic discourse in the last decades, appraising intellectual interrogation to formulate documentation on the hidden knowledge of the time-honored items.*

**Keywords:** *Ze-Mnui, Repositories, Vulnerable, Artifacts, Nostalgia, Preservation.*

## Introduction

Artifacts are the gateway to the past. Many ancient cultures did not have active written records that could shed light on the history of the past. Artifacts and cultural remains provide necessary clues and pieces of information to reveal how people lived in the past. Documentation of ancient sites by archaeologists and scientists has unearthed manifold information that enhanced reconstructed and structured history and cultural writing. A historical object is a value-loaded object carved and shaped by human sapiens for their utility and purposes in the past that has cultural quintessence. Artifacts encompass a tangible form of artistry, tools, textiles, stones, jewelry, coins, seals, *et al.*, that embody an entity and time-teller.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the foment shriek for collecting cultural assets from colonized countries consanguine Asia, Africa, and Oceania by the European masters became a badge of prestige. Upon expediting the Northeast frontier, the Naga highlands of the Brahmaputra valley stand tall and engage the collectors, approximating archaic items that represent a natural emporium of artifacts in the utmost state of pristinity. Present literate elites profusely lament the vanishing material culture of the *Nagas*, finding too little or no efforts were

initiated by the colonial agents to document and preserve the astounding traditions and wealth vanity, except some artifacts collected as tokens of souvenir are now displayed at Pitts River Museum, University of Oxford and few other parts of Europe's as an exotic historical and anthropological item (Kanungo 2014, 490). The colonial troops, usually after successive expeditions, frequently burnt down the villages and houses to which manifold artifacts and cultural items were destroyed. A similar fate is ostensibly applicable to the given rough topography of the *Zeme* frontiers, where rich cultural assets in their natural state are laid decayed and rusted as no researcher has reached the region in dire time. *Zeme*, being sparsely populated by geographical extent, is among the last indigenous tribes to be brought under colonial administration in India. Uncontacted earlier by outlanders, noticing copious objects of the natives, the British hoarded cultural assets from the ignorant locals on the pretext of scientific experiments and engross documentation. Numerous destructions of cultural representation were also recorded during colonial outreach to the tribal hills for their rebellious nature as a sign of authority over the tribal and their land. (Mackenzie, 1979, 99).

The bygone history of the *Zeme* people is the remnant of the old world, whose uncatalogued lifestyle remains unattended and passively buried. Visibly, artifacts are showcased as the material manifestation of a culture that holds an interpretation of its meaning, uses, and symbolic processual. To germinate the past into the present, exploration of the cultural properties facilitates the shadowed information to resurface historical clues into the academic theatre. The physical endurance of the inherent properties constitutes to gives us a cultural entity existence transcending beyond time and boundaries by showcasing their durability to the core of materiality and substance.

### **The Curiosity of *Ze-Mnui***

During the mass dispersion of *Zeliangrong* from *Makuilongdi*, the *Zeme* pervaded into the highland of the barail ranges from the ancestral homeland, and migrated elsewhere into Assam, Nagaland, and a bunch remains settled in Manipur (Kamei, 2004). Presently, the *Zeme* is settled in three states of Northeast India, viz, Assam (Dima Hasao, formerly N.C. Hills), Manipur (Senapati and Tamenglong), and Nagaland (Peren) and elsewhere. The *Zeme* people are conventionally hill rangers. They belong to a sub-family of *Zeliangrong* and a sub-tribe of Nagas (Hutton, 1969, 7-8). Their *lingua franca* belongs to the Naga-Bodo subdivisions of the Tibeto-Burman-speaking group (Grierson, 1909). The *Zeme* is quintessentially a patrilineal society. The agnatic structure of a father's line is prioritized in inheriting a descendant's wealth and fief. The *Zeme* community was officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in India through the Constitutional Order Amendment Act in 2011 (Gazette of India, 2012).

Nestled with nature and fascinating old-time traditions and customs, the site resided by the *Zeme* in Senapati District, Manipur, provides an enchanting panoramic calling for historical and anthropological digging. The *Ze-Mnui*<sup>1</sup>, also known as Yangkhullen, is one of the oldest hamlets of *Zeme*. It is popularly dubbed as '*The Hanging Village*', given the topography set up of the village on a steep and rugged cliff. *Ze-Mnui*, situated 75 km away from the district headquarters and 135 km from the first city, Imphal, is aligned by National Highway 129A, which connects Manipur and Nagaland through the Maram-Peren spur (Ministry of R,T&H, 2018). The highland frontier of *Ze-Mnui* is located at the longitudes of 93.95° East and latitude of 25.52° North and an elevation of 1,652 metres,

*i.e.*, 5419.96 feet above sea level. *Ze-Mnui* is bounded by neighboring Maram villages in the East, Bakie in the West, Poilwa in the North, Dzuko ridges in the Northeast, and the river Barak in the South. Predominantly, in the line of religious contexts, *Mnui Zeme* can be classified into three categories: The *Roman Catholic*, the *American Baptist*, and the *Paupai Renet* (ancestral religion/animism). The conformity of Christianity brought about a rapid change among the people incorporated by trends of education and modernity, leading to the alienation and abandonment of their cultural institutions. The *Ze-Mnui* people are actively an independent community scarcely contacted by higher civilization and still practice distinctive traditions, narrowly bypassing the modern touch. An ideal cup of exploration site for historical and archeological quarrying.

Maidan expeditions by outsiders to the *Ze-Mnui* frontier were recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, meddled by Maharaja Khagemba in 1633 A.D., who tried to establish suzerainty over Zeliangrong frontiers across the great Barail ranges. In 1831-1832, expeditions to the Northern *Zeme* confines and periphery were also accounted for by colonial troops such as Lt. Grant, R.B. Pemberton, and Francis Jenkins and further recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba* during the reign of King Gambhir Singh (Kamei, 2004, 58-59). However, the Manipur king did not succeed in his plan of subjugation due to the interiority of the village and the introduction of a government exclusion policy, Inner Line Regulation, in 1873, to all Naga Hills, further barring the Indigenous dwellers from the outside world (Mackenzie, 2004, 89).

### **Constructing Provenance through Methodology**

Heritage is inching closer to a local phenomenon than a global phenomenon. Artifact preservation is becoming increasingly digital due to advanced technology and the growing innate of deterministic principles and artifact analysis. Applying deterministic models to this paper has enhanced a wider analytical understanding of material, cultural, and contextual analysis of objects. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are meticulously applied to the study area, substantiated by primary and secondary data. Firmness of purpose is a human behaviour that chooses to react to the causation of an object (Carr, 1961, 99-100). Time-old assets found at *Ze-Mnui* and periphery villages are value-loaded with information that communicates cultural representation and age-old tradition. Cultural wealth contains critical clues and information that relate to the purpose of custom and societal advocacy. Material possessions placed around the study area in this subject cannot be disregarded as they play an agent of conscious reconstruction of memory in offloading cognitive recognition in enabling investigators to organize and study the evolution of culture pensively. Collectors in the early centuries fueled by the desire for artifacts, navigated their route beyond the seas to gather items to showcase and inform the home crowd, with a motive of item accumulation from the far zone having a capturing audience (Potvin *et.al*, 2011, 283-285). The focus of this paper on materiality is also propel by the aesthetic sensory for exotic taste and directly relational to *Zeme* cultural exposition and notions of objective sensuality.

The investigator has applied critical observation as an integral dimension in artifacts analysis. The term 'Artifact' is derived from the Latin words, 'arte' meaning 'with skill,' and 'factum' meaning 'to create.' Artifacts are products of humans, which are tangible things, representing the utility purpose of sociality. Construing the provenance of survey artifacts to a resurgence in an academic landscape is a critical process of materialising an

essential entity to derive its authenticity and mannerism (Lowenthal, 1989). To manifest a framework of theoretical discourse in cementing material studies, academic discussions offer a broad and varied approach through the historiography of object agency and materiality (Nanoglou, 2019, 158-159). As interviewed with gatekeepers and informants, artifactual found in ancestral sites of *Zeme* villages in Senapati were conspicuously examined to produce evidence of objects' narratives representing a genuine picture of the subject and study area. Introspecting biographies of objects sheds light on how the community responds to the environment to meet their cultural prescription from an environmental bound. The concern of cultural repositories is raised with fathoming the enigma of artifacts as cultural wealth and disciplinary resources are historical propositions (Samuel, Alberti, 2005).

Maneuvering personal observation and interviewed knowledge into this paper has enormously contributed to the construction of this artifactual study. *Ze-Mnui*, a heritage vessel tucked away in the hinterland of the Barail ranges, still showcases the world as a mirror of ancestral artifacts richly. The material biographies of the vintage site have lavished the researcher with a discursive insight and narrative catch. Representing a natural avenue of the museum, the *Zeme* ancestral villages eventually display a web series of cultural impressions and interactions. Objects examined in and around *Zeme* villages of Senapati district are a cultural construct that outlines the social images of the past, whose value in due course weighs beyond the material bounds and replication. Some material cultures have upheld generic shifts of meanings and values over time and context. The repository's objects are fast fading away due to an inaccurate heraldry narrative and indiscrete exploitations (Mytom 2003, 111). People nowadays have indifferent behavioral concerns toward residual remains, and rampant amalgamation of fashion and outside culture has become an adaptable trend in deteriorating cultural symbols. Biographic elements and the provenance of physical items are eventually required to pass through the aspects of sociocultural practices, religious frequency, and aesthetic parameters (Samuel 2005, 560).

## Native Essence and Material Nostalgia

Cultural objects in the early days of *Ze-Mnui* were associated closely with religious faiths and cultural phenomena (Longkumer, 2020, 85). *Ze-Mnui*, ostensibly one of the oldest villages among *Zeme*, before Christianity, was remarkably fascinated by an old heritage that is possessed by the meaning of the past. To mention some, they are *Herieki* (stone fortress), *Bakktie Taksuo* (archaic wooden ladder), *Miezi-fui Taksuo* (wealth goddess ladder) *Rehangki zoi* (morung's giant wooden bed), *Zau-lou Devung* (wine log jar), *Teipoi* (menagerie trophy), *Vuhnia* (locally invented spinning wheel), *Langmui* (cotton spinning device), *Luakpi* (cotton shooting tool), etc.,. These artifacts will be further interpreted and put to light in the following paragraph. To *Ze-Mnui*, the grandeur qualities of artifacts stress on what has been valued for centuries by tribesmen and younger generations, taking pride in culturally generated symbolism, which significantly relates to cultural essence and also as a shared token of identity.

***Rehangki zoi:*** *Rehangki zoi* (giant morung's bed) laid in the youth's dormitories (boys and girls) is solely made from a single tree trunk large enough for a dozen youths to sleep. *Rehangki zoi* comprises two beds and is usually placed in an L shape. The longer bed is known to be *Liangdi*, which is the most distinguished space of the morung, and the shorter bed is known as *Liangsing and* has similar features. *Liangdi* usually measures the length of 25 to

30 feet, 4 to 6 feet in breadth and thickness of 4 to 5 cm inches. *Liangsing*, though shorter in length approximately 8 to 9 feet usually has the same breadth and thickness as that of *Liangdi*. The size and length of Morung's bed vary from morung to morung and village to village. Another type of dormitory bed is found at *Ze-Mnui*, featuring a bed with wheels known to be *Lianghuun*. A wheel is attached to *Lianghuun* with a purpose, if any unforeseen fire breaks out few members can effortlessly pull out the bed siding away from damage and movement of the bed plank can be more convenient. Another type of morung's bed is found at *Bakei* village which is made of two fairly mature and giant tree trunks conjoined and customized pattern and shape. There is a taboo attached to *Rehangki zoi*, that female is strictly prohibited from climbing or touching the wooden plank of the bed, following the beliefs of pollution and patriarchal demeanor. Paradoxically, there is also *Relieki*, girls' dormitories, where there is no such restriction on boys. This cultural institution and property, which was once the focal point and well cherished, has now been left with meagre sanctity and negligible values in today's spaces.

***Baktie Taksuo:*** *Baktie Taksuo*, an old wooden artifact ladder that holds a deep historical narrative and generic orality of village establishment associated with the wooden ladders. *Baktie Taksuo* has an old commentary that the first pioneers and sojourners to *Ze-Mnui* came to the present site through the direction of *Riangpoi* (*Rapeiname-ki Kangrunn*), navigating hostile terrain using *Baktie Taksuo* to scale the rugged cliff. The elderly account holds that difficult terrain obstructed them from penetrating higher, that they chopped down a tree that had a Y shape and placed it invertedly, tying a wooden stem against it, making a ladder, and passing the terrain. In early times, *Ze-Mnuime* chose a harsh landscape with the motive to keep themselves away from hostile incursion and raiding from their adversaries. Natural shelter was their safe haven in the early days of their ancestors.

***Miezi Fui Taksuo:*** *Miezi Fui Taksuo* is another archaic wooden ladder associated with wealth and goddesses. The *Paupai Renet* narrative orality of the *Ze-Mnui* village holds that *Miezi Fui* is a mother goddess of *Ze-Mnui* who blesses the village economy with prosperity. *Miezi Fui*, (Crops Showering Mother), a deity that favours wealth, prosperity, and fortunes to the villagers, is believed to have come through the wooden ladder, which is placed at *Kiliangnei*. The wooden ladder is believed to be the portal gateway between the spirit and the living. In the early days of *Ze-Mnui*, economic prosperity was considered the most important thing above all due to the rarity and hardship of livelihood. Every year, *Ze-Mnui* greatly awes and reveres the mother goddess for the favour of a bountiful harvest. This wooden artifact still stands and is maintained and preserved by the villagers.

***Teipoi:*** Collection of *Teipoi* menagerie trophies (*animal skulls*) is associated with hunting and the agility of skill. The wild game caught by the hunter by cartridge or snare, if the game is not lesser than to make a mark on the gallery plank for audiences, the trophy is donated to *Rehangki*, who is associated with. The members of the particular *khel* will prepare the trophy to feast and hang the skull in the gallery for display, where the audience and visitors can get a glance. Having more trophies at *Rehangki* signifies one's *khel* is talented in trophy hunting, and the social spirit of the particular clan is exhibited. To *Zeme*, the display of more heads of menageries at *Rehangki* is a mark of a good score and an indication of daring courage to neighbouring morung members. The collection of animal skulls was looked at as a badge of honour at one point in time. This culture of artifact collection has

vanished due to the depletion of wild game and wildlife regulations by the state. The people of *Zeme* are law-conscious and abiding citizens now moving forward to protecting and conserving wildlife and forests.

**Vuhnia:** The vintage cotton gin is locally called 'Vuhnia,' is a manual hand roller widely utilised by the forefathers for removing cotton seeds from raw cotton. The natural fibers during collection have to go through a segment of the primitive process where cotton in the raw state goes through intense manual labour of picking, cleaning, sterilizing, ginning, and natural bleaching. Then, the unarranged cotton pods go through the process of a seed-removing device *Vuhnia* where the fiber has to be inserted between the two-roller frame to soften and dress out the hard seeds and undesirable waste requiring a great deal of skill. During the making, a natural fabrication is applied and wax-resin fluid, which is extracted from castor seeds. Adding natural fluids smoothens the wheel presser of *Vuhnia*, preventing jams and adding silkiness and pliable stretch to the cotton fiber, producing higher product quality. 'Charka' or 'Churka' is the early Indians used cotton gin can also be traced back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century depicted in the Buddhist cave painting. *Luakpi*, a tool, arrow-like device, is also used during scutching of cotton to make a fluffy mass ready for spinning into yarn. To spin cotton into yarn, another device called *Langmui* is used to process it into thread. *Langmui* is a cubit-long spindle with a cylindrical flat stone hole to the spindle attached to the stick for spinning. *Vuhnia*, *Luakpi*, and *Langmui* are tools prominently used by the *Zeme* women in the olden days for making clothes and accessories. Once a price-possessioned item is abandoned. This vintage device, which served a course of purpose in the past, has been left forsaken and forgotten by the younger generations in the present sphere.

### Domestic, Agrarian, and Seasonal Tools

There are agrarian and cultural-related items such as *Hebau* (traditional granary), *Kelo* (weaved carrier), *Kerie* (knitted strand), *Bitwui* (cane and bamboo baskets), *Nnrei* (winnowing), *Hepaa* and *Hemiie* (wooden pounding base and pestle), and *hengie* (spears), *Hegeu-tu* (women iron stuff) *Hegoi* (shield), *Hegeu-helie* (bow), *Helavung* (calabash container), *Chingkwak* (wooden plates), *Nvuungki* (bellows) *Tangstiinie* (stone pestle), *Chingpiak-te* (wooden spoon), *Tantunei* (musical instrument), *Terie* (flute), *et al.*, The people of *Zeme* are an art-loving community that they hold onto their old-time tradition of craftsmanship and handicraft as an enthralling profession to these days. Protection and restitution of old relics is an accumulation of material things for the future audience and intuitive subject matter for constructive analysis. The creation of physical relics cannot only be attributed to technology solely but also as a sign of credence to humanity's feelings for the foregone antiquities.

**Hepaa, Hemiie and Hevoh:** *Hepaa*, a wooden pounding base, is an indigenous technology of husking rice used by the *Zeme*, where the chaff is separated from the rice. The tools of hulling paddy include *Hemiie* a pestle-like pounder made of wood as well. The length of the base measures from 4 to 5 feet, the width from 2 to 2.5 feet, with two to three husking holes, and the length of *Hemiie* (a hand pestle) measures from 3 to 5 feet, which is lifted up and down manually to hull out the paddy. There is also an L-shaped hand pestle known as *Hevoh* for pounding and crushing cereals, pulses, and other nutritional seeds for consumption and preservation purposes. The abundance of fertile land and agricultural alluvial soil gives voluntary opportunity benefits of choice for increased food production among the *Zeme*. In resultant of surplus crops and grains, the *Zeme* community consumed

agricultural by-products lavishly through different styles and methods of consumption some by beveraging rice, millets, maize, and pulses into *Zau* (rice-beer), roasting, drying, and salt preservation methods of certain grains, fruits, herbs, leaves, meat, and other perishable foods for future consumption, medication, and health benefits. *Hepaa* and *Hemiie* were a tool that was part of everyday life in the olden days but have now been on the brink of losing their existence and have been replaced by today's mortar mills and pestle machines.

***Nnrei***: *Nnrei* is a traditional woven cylindrical tool used for separating rice from the husk. After hulling or milling of grain, the hulled grain is placed on the winnower and is lifted manually with two hands placed over one's abdomen for balance. Lifting the grains, it throws a wind to separate the rice from the husk. *Nnrei* is made utilising *Sehap*, *Herui*, and Bamboo. Bendable bamboo is coiled cylindrically, making it a holder and brim to keep the grains from falling, to which knitting of *Sehap* or *Herui* is done with dexterity and precision, making no gap or hole to hold the grain. *Nnrei* is used for several other domestic purposes, such as drying food, berries, leaves, meat, etc. *Nnrei* is drastically losing its utility and existence in this present space due to the arrival of mechanical rice mills, and other advanced winnowing technology. Competition with the advanced technology and upgradation of rural lifestyle has brought much change and alteration to the traditional way of life.

***Hebau***: *Zeme* primitive granary (*Hebau*) is a crafted container for the storage of crops which are usually made from *Sehap* (cane-*Lomandra Longifolia*), *Rekeu* (acidosasa), and *Hebei* (bamboo) materials, cane native to the tropical rainforest with fine fibre foliage and *Rekeu* and *Hebei* abundantly found in the region foothills. *Hebau* is designed in a way that crop sustainability and moth-free storage are facilitated with tempered air covering and intertwined row and column alignment designed for the crop's and seed safe keeping. It has a unique feature of inner design to keep the crops safe from vermin and nuisance pests as well as dry moisture control. *Zeme* usually keeps *Hebau* a little distance away from the main roof of the man's shelter as a measure of precaution from unforeseen fire and for hygienic purposes. Traditional *Zeme Hebau* has a mushroom shape and an opening from the top with a well-crafted lid. There are separate granaries or compartments for *Chiie* (paddy), *Hetwui* (foxtail millet), and *Hechi* (Job's tears millet), which are the staple food crops of *Zeme*. Traditional granaries with different designs are also found throughout East and Southeast Asia. For example, the *Rangkiang* granaries styles of *Minangkabau* Highlands, West Sumatra and the *Leuit* style of *Sundanese* Western Java.

***Kerang***: *Kerang*, a carrier basket on men's posterior, was used intensively in the earlier days by the highlanders. To the *Zeme*, *Kerang* is the main carrier especially for women, while carrying out domestic work, agricultural activities, carrying foods-wine, carrying firewood, heavy loads, distant journeys, and outdoor works. *Kuset*, *Kelou*, *Chingfung Kerang*, and *Heboi Kerang* are three types of *Kerang* made by the *Zeme*. The process of making basketry is called *Hechenta-ketei*<sup>2</sup> by crafting, twinning, and weaving pliable fibers of *Sehap*, *Heriu*, and *Hebei* into desired shapes and sizes. *Kerang* has several ways of designing, by wicking, plaiting and coiling. The weight and longevity of utility depend on the craftsmanship and material quality of furnishing. *Hechenta-ketei*<sup>3</sup> was once the finest craftsmanship profession; old and youth would choose skilling and perfection in collecting material and designing. Other tribal areas in India also have their own basketry known as "Tokri Bunna," commonly made from

vines, reeds, leaves, and grass. *Kerie*, a knitted strap made from *Heriu* and *Sehap* is attached to *Kerang* for carrying goods in back posterior bounded to forehead.

**Tantunei:** *Tantunei*, and *Terie* are important *Leitei-nii* (musical instruments) of *Zeme* made and designed to produce musical sounds and melodies. *Tantunei* is played by biting the instrument mostly made of *Rekeu* and *Regai*. This musical piece is mainly played by women folks and children. When played, it makes the sound of a serenating cicada. In a romantic culture, when a lad is in love with a lass and wants to express his feelings to the maiden, he will make a good piece of *Tantunei* and give it to the girl as a gesture of love. *Tantunei* is a valued item where a father, uncle, or friends give this musical instrument to one another as a gift and gesture of kindness. This piece has lost its place of nostalgia with the arrival of harmonica and string instruments.

**Terie:** *Terie* is another musical bamboo-wind instrument that produces sound when the flutist blows air into a hole of the flute. *Terie* is a restricted instrument solely for men, and women are stringently prohibited from touching. It is a musical piece that is played seasonally during Autumn. *Terie* is a men-related instrument, so it is kept in the youth dormitories above the bed in the ceiling. When Autumn arrives, the first sound of *Terie* is made by the experts, making a sharp, high note due to the belief that sounding low and flat noises sometimes carries bad omens. *Terie* has four hand-bored holes that produce a vibrating column of air and make a whistling and distinct timbre pitch when the stream of air flows across the hole. Fluting through *Terie* involved finger dexterity by adjusting the hand-bored holes to produce a melodious tune and melancholic aerophone sound. *Terie* is a cubit long in length and is made from *Tengnie* by choosing a straight and long stem. According to the tradition of *Ze-Mnui*, *Terie* can be played only during the early autumn season, and by the arrival of harvest time, they reckon to stop playing due to the social taboo that blowing *Terie* invites natural pestilence and vermin to destroy the standing crops prior to harvest. A dichotomic practice is visibly applied by the people of neighbouring villages, who were the last generation to uphold the culture of playing *Terie*, and they had no such restriction to seasons.

**Hengie:** *Hengie*, spear to *Zeme* in early days, spears are a weapon a youth and elderly men used primarily for warfare and hunting. *Hengie*, is a warrior's polearm weapon, fitted with a pointed socket lozenge iron head at both ends of the wooden shaft. *Hengie* is usually 4 to 4.5 feet long and ornamented with fur and hairs at the central part. The shape of the spearhead for the elders is normally a triangle, whereas the shape of the youth's spearhead will have serrate teeth or sharp barbs, which give an advantage for thrusting. *Hegeu-tu* (women's iron stuff) is an arm pole used by *Zeme* women while going to the field and distant travel. *Hegeu-tu* acts as their third leg and a part of their custom. *Hegeu-tu* serves other purposes such as clearing pathways, siding unwanted thrash in the pathway, and chasing or protecting from venomous and harmful creatures. Spears, once used for warfare and hunting purposes, are now discarded due to the fleeting shift of cultural relevance.

**Hegoi:** *Hegoi* (shield) is the first armour of protection held by hand, intercepting attacks and strikes. *Zeme*, during the early days, faced frequent raiding from the adversaries, for which they used it as a protective layer. *Hegoi* is normally made from the skin of a bear as it is strong, resistant, and lightweight. Those who could not afford bear skin, go for an alternative material. The utility of shields is also displayed on the day of *Rowdi* (Auspicious Feast

Day), when the youth and elders with fierce temperate will exhibit warfare tactic of using shields against the villagers.

## Vanishing Costumes of Aesthetic Value

There are decorative accessories called '*Befwo*'<sup>4</sup> and domestic tools that possess the virtue of eliciting pleasure value. Notably *Tsula/Poirwa* (head gears), *Teiba* (beads), *Tangjok-rie* (hairdo-thread), *Loupie* (threaded necklace), *Kumli* (earrings), *Hfwongou-tah* (armlet), *Poidurie* (women's hairband) *Hcheu-ni* (kilt), *Taang* (anklet) *Kiekang* (belt) have now drastically diminished and some to the point of vanishing, which once well cherished and valued. Deciphering past 'things' involves the process of interpretation with quintessential experience defining the reality of society's creativity, and the portrayal of the artifacts directs us to heightened respect for material substances.

***Tsula/ Poirak:*** *Tsula/Poirak* is a headgear worn by the *Zeme* on occasional days for socio-cultural norms and religious conventions. The *Zeme* wear *Poirak* to imply social standards and aesthetic values on the day of ceremonies and celebrations. *Poirak* is also known as *Tsula*, a term from Angami. Wearing *Poirak* has a deeper meaning and an encrypted message to the audience of one's testimony. A male member who wears *Poirak* with a single string indicates he is in a state of virginity, whereas if the headgear has two strings, it indicates they are in a relationship or a mark that they are a married man. In the early days, headgear also gave out a warfare message to the people; if a person had a plain feather in his headgear, it indicated that he had secretly taken an enemy's head (avenging the adversary during peacetime). A type of headgear carries a message conveying to the people and the spirits about his clandestine act of killing.

***Kumli:*** *Kumli*, an earring, is a decorative piece of jewellery worn by both males and females for self-embellishment and admiration. Spotlighting the male-sided narrative of wearing *Kumli*, there are different types of earrings worn by male members. In ancient times, according to *Zeme* tradition, a male who has accomplished a remarkable task individually could wear *Kumli* made from a bird's entire wings on both ears to show his achievement. This marks the status and social standing among others. To some, it also signifies religious and aesthetic affiliation. Whereas an individual who has not accomplished any distinction are not eligible to have the earrings made with a full set of a bird's wings. However, youth and elders can wear a single feather earring, usually picked from *Njia*'s wings (Bluebird), as an element of beautification and adornment. Another type of *Kumli* is made of thin and tiny bamboo needles-like shape where a colourful solo bird's feather hangs and dangles when pinned to the earlobe can be worn by all youth and elders. All decorative items of a person worn from head to toe in *Zeme* culture have a meaning attached to them.

***Poidurie:*** *Poidurie* is a *Zeme*'s women's accessory worn in the hair and back of the head to hold hair away from dropping into the face and eyes. *Poidurie* is made from the fallen hair of women. Women's hair that fell from the head while washing and combing is kept and stored for making *Poidurie*. Women collect the strands of hair and interlace using their dexterous fingers. After twisting and braiding, the strand of hair is interlaced into a longer strand, forming a bunch with an egg shape and size on the top for holding. To make *Poidurie*, the hair of the same lineage of maternal bloodline can be used, and hairs from the outside kinship cannot be used for making the

hairband (not from the husband's bloodline). *Poidurie* is a rare accessory for a married woman, and the newly wedded woman will be gifted with *Poidurie* as a token of love by the mother-in-laws immediately. (According to the culture of *Zeme*, in early times, girls are restricted from keeping long hair due to social and religious obligation).

***Hfwongou-tah:*** *Hfwongou-tah*, is an armlet worn by the male members of the *Zeme* community. In cultural context and application, *Hfwongou-tah* in forefather times was worn by family members who had merit-based achievements known as *Hequi-Haa*. The items resemble a rank of royalty and a symbol of a higher position. Females wore an armlet called *Tasuoh* in their upper arms, made of brass metal. Another bracelet for females is known as *Tabieh*, a spirally coiled between the elbow and the lower part of the hand. A wealthy family member can afford to give an extra accessory to a daughter known as *Bakap*, worn in wrist joints.

## Vanishing Objects of Religious and Social Significance

***Bachum and Pichum:*** *Bachum* and *Pichum*, a protective gear or shield covering of the hands and legs, respectively, is a type of sheath worn by a male member who had an established status by the accomplishment of the *Hequi-Haa*<sup>5</sup> mission. Wearing of *Bachum* and *Pichum* has an immense religious connotation and immutable beliefs attached to it. It is also a sign and merit challenge to the other members of their living statutes and testimony. The gauntlet provides protection from external exposition to heat, cold, and damage. However, in the long run, wearing *Bachum* and *Pichum* is an exhibition of their religious conduct and commitment. Initiation rites of *Bachum* and *Pichum* to a person are done meticulously by plaiting round the forearms with *Hechen-tah* by the phratries elder who also has good conduct in life. Observing the covering, if the person fulfilled the complete sets of religious conventions he will be bestowed with generational blessings and prosperity. Caveat, it also has a dichotomic repercussion; if a person does not abide by the sets of norms there is a belief attached to it that hands and legs will be cursed to the extent of skin rotting and maggot infestations. When two or more people go through this initiation, it also becomes another sort of religious competition on who wears longer, during that phase the family members give them preferential treatment of caring. The person who goes through this process and succeeds is eligible for initiation of *Vungtak-Renet* (religious practice of living supreme sacrifice).

***Hcheu-ni:*** *Hcheu-ni*, is a kilt-like cloak worn by men in the past by the *Zeme*. It is a garment with a mini-skirt shape wrapped around the thigh and knee-up with a string attached to the garment to hold the wrapping firm. *Hcheu-ni* is woven out of black yarn and is designed with well-embroidered *Hcheu* (cowrie shells) in two or three parallel lines. In olden days men that worn *Hcheu-ni* with some peculiar pattern and design means to indicate a three-score accomplishment in life of dating 70 girls, hunting 70 wild trophies (excluding civets and simians), and catching 70 *Haalie-bak*, and *Zaulou bak* (feast pigs and mithuns). Wearing of upgraded motif of *Hcheu-ni* will be initiated by *Kizoi-Pei*, an elderly man who is the caretaker and nominal overseer of custom. *Hcheu*, to *Zeme* in the past is a symbol of cultural presence and identity.

***Zau-lou Devung:*** *Zau-lou Devung*, wine-log-jar, is primarily associated with the feast of merit in the *Zeme* tradition. *Zau-lou devung*, according to the tradition of *Zeme*, can only be possessed by the family that has achieved something distinct from the others. The making of the log-wine jar undergoes a ceremonial procedure. The

particular tree *Nngaa* (*Phoebe Hainesiana*) is to be chosen, a tree fairly without flaws, cut down and moulded into a log jar. The status of *Hequi-Haa* is conferred upon a family or individual when they host a feast of merit for the entire village. In other words, only wealthy families can go for the rites, a sign of royalty. It is a prestige that the giver of the feast gets from the community. The wooden wine jars are made from aged and mature trees that can hold gallons of wine, having natural preservation properties, and where the wine brews faster to produce a pleasant taste. The wine log jar possessed a symbol of inexhaustible rice-beer during the feast hosting, and the term of the feast derived from the rice-beer (*Zau*) itself. A family abundant with livestock and grains entered into the initiation of *Hequi-Haa*, how bountifully hosts the extravaganza feasts for the entire village and relatives from far and near. The family and children of the feast giver are revered and regarded by the villagers as they have achieved the hall of fame.

**Taang:** *Taang* is an anklet coil or string ornament of men, made of carbon steel or *Hechen-tah*, which is decorated between the knee and calf during social events and ceremonies. It is made of strips of alloy rattan tied or coiled together. A white colour paste made from pudding rice will be smeared on the lower part of the leg, drying, which produces a white colour for aesthetic value. Physical artifacts drive the communities to regazed the ancient past and long for the continuity of distinct possession by uniting the spirit of fetishism and spectral historical realities. *Taang* is worn on special occasions and ceremonies by men.

### **Diabolical Representation of Artifacts**

The paradoxical representations of the past by artifacts are ghastly depleting and narrowly making their existence. These artifacts, once commonly adored and valued by the *Zeme* community of everyday life, have lost almost their existence and usage due to deteriorating changes over time and the evolutionary process of ideas. With the arrival of modern innovation and ideas for creativity, primitive material is conveniently replaced by a modern touch. Preserving aged old properties symbolises an old warrior mentality and barbaric attitude in the Christian worldview, which often contradicts faith as well. Archaic pieces of jewellery, textiles, shawls, and embroidery accessories of tradition are losing their place in the ever-trending cultural spaces by becoming subject to stigmatisation and negation. Back in the late 90s, during the peak of revival awakening, missionaries saw cultural artifacts as an obstacle to their doctrinal teaching, which led the ignorant believers to either disown or brunt the objects. Possession of material things became an impediment to spiritual growth as cultural objects were frequently utilised for rituals and ceremonial initiation. Several artifacts that possess cultural symbols were targeted during the purification process in believing that bad spirits manifested in the objects when pre-Christians performed rituals and events either through wearing or utilizing them (Longkumer 2018, 16). Providing the case, the material wealth of *Zeme* having social memories and voices was put to silence and is edging towards perishing space because of the clash entangled between different notions. This negation of thought led to the disruption of material appreciation and cultural institutions simply by not representing the old world.

Imitation and introduction of outside influence led to the use and abuse of tribal institutions and material depletion. Material items have more implications and significance when it comes to preserving the artistry of humankind, as the past is mostly determined by material objects. Through human agency, heritage is an invention

of tradition to create an intellectual sphere and ideological influence on the spectators to understand the past through applying present research perspectives on the experience and value (Lowenthal, 1987). The notion of safeguarding objects in the present context is establishing the documentation of material assets that are on the brink of loss and destruction. The negligence and indifference towards cultural items must be addressed with greater care and guidance while reviving the past through exhibition and safeguarding.

## Conclusion

Lowenthal contended preserving things also creates wealth (Lowenthal, 1989). The language of cultural heritage has made a place in the social and political arena in contemporary space through the agency of international institutions such as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), National Agencies such as Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, National Academy of Art, Northeast Zone Cultural Centre, Non-profit organisations, and other cultural institutions dedicated in preservation and propagation of art and culture. Revival of heritage and preservation of material artifacts can tremendously demonstrate the past by representing it through the form of substances and documented memories. Community attempting to revive heritage by implanting nostalgic elements like festivals, dances, folk songs, stories, and traditional orality, reclaiming the past produces at least passive stories and accounts of life. Unaware of distinct cultures, particularly the *Zeme* of Senapati district, has buried many of its artifacts, and is experiencing a dying tradition. The resurgence of academic research and documentation of ethnic lifestyle, customs, tradition, and religion is at a critical juncture in bridging the past and contemporary spheres. Without academic writings, the coming generation will not witness the colourful culture in an ever-changing society. Belongingness and emotional attachment to objects and their meaning are gradually disappearing, which acts as a blander and emotional shock. Cultural trauma and uncertainty, along with disorientation, surround one's milieu. Preservation and documentation of physical properties can serve as a material schema in guiding the behavioural approach to the community.

Consciously examining the cultural livingness of the community, the investigator has concluded that the past must not only be the means to serve today's interests but also be navigated to understand the deeper contexts. Documentation has been upheld to accurately capture the essence of the subject, avoiding misinterpretations that distort its original meaning and significance. The search for antiquities has been a universal practice by enticing hunters since the early centuries, with the instigation of romanticism to connect the past to the present. Lately, the collective conscience has stirred the community to prioritize the restoration and preservation of revered monuments, relics, and cultural heritage sites that are threatened by destruction, negligence, and ignorance. The exploration and findings of cultural assets have yielded significant values, highlighting the importance of traditional wealth in understanding the collective heritage.

## Notes and other terms:

1. *Ze-Mnui*: *Ze-Mnui* also known as Yangkhullen is a small town in Senapati district in Manipur which is famous for its natural beauty, historical past and magnificent traditions. Some 75 km north of Senapati town, *Ze-Mnui* is a historical town and a tourist destination in Senapati district. Lies on a steep cliff, *Ze-Mnui* is surrounded by mesmerizing landscapes that make it one of the popular places of tourist interest in Senapati. Moreover, the entire valley that surrounds the place proffers some enthralling sights that are definitely a treat to eyes. The serene surrounding and the beautiful attractions of the place truly delineate the rich historical past of the town. Besides, what attracts the tourists' attention the most are the centuries-old culture and traditions that are still observed by the locals of the town. The locals

play a significant role in preserving the natural habitat of this beautiful place and letting tourists savour the exquisiteness of this place. On your visit to Yangkhullen, you can also expect to see a number of rare floral species in the town. If you are in a search for some family destination to spend a few days in Senapati then Yangkhullen is a candidate of your choice (Info@tourmyindia). The *Ze-Mnui* of *Zeme* is one of the kindred tribes of Zeliangrong, predominantly inhabiting the three Northeastern states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. They have a common history of origin from the place called Makuilongdi, which sustained 7777 households once upon a time. During the great exodus, the *Zeme* migrated towards the north direction and settled across the river Barak in the northern frontier and some gradually migrated towards Assam Barak valley, today called Dima Hasao district, and Peren district of Nagaland.

2. *Kenna*: *Kenna* in *Zeme* vernacular is a term attributed to prohibiting or forbidding any activities, a sanctified day observed by the community. A sacred proscribing principle is applied to regulate religious and socio-cultural ceremonies, maintaining social and moral codes. *Kenna* is also known as *Genna* generically by some writers and Naga tribes.
3. *Hequi-Haa*: *Hequi-Haa* is a central feature of traditional *Zeme* practice, which conferred a hallmark of social recognition and status to a person who has achieved a milestone Feast of Merit. *Hequi-Haa* is associated with a batch of badges of honour and hierarchy symbols to which social and cultural royalty is attributed.
4. *Befwo*: *Befwo* is a decorative item that has an aesthetic quality with a deeper philosophy of beauty and fashion. *Befwo* incorporates local material and cultural traditions to adorn themselves with colours and texture during festivities and celebrations.
5. *Hechentah*: *Hechentah* is a traditional crafting profession where the old and elderly male undertake the craftsmanship as an old-time art. *Hechenta* can be a seasonal or all-time line of self-employment where materials such as *Sehap*, *Herui*, *Hebei*, *wood*, etc., are used for making basketry and handicrafts.

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