

Place-Name in Khurkhul

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Abstract

The current paper is an attempt to study religious believes, cultural values, environment, mythology, history, emotion etc. of Khurkhul which are carried by 'place names' i.e., each place name has their own significant meaning.

Introduction

Khurkhul is a village located in Imphal West District, Manipur, India. It is located approximately 16 km from Imphal, the capital of Manipur. The total geographical area of the village is 1227.2 hectares and the latitude and longitude are 24.939176 and 93.871865 respectively. According to 2011 Census, the population is 6,450 (which includes the present author) of which 3300 are male while 3150 are female.

The Khurkhuls come under the community called *chakpa*₁ who are one of the groups of a community called *Loi*. *Lois* are designated as Schedule Caste in Indian Constitution after Manipur became a part of India in 1949.

The Khurkhul speech is said to be a variety of Meiteilon, a Tibeto-Burman language which is a lingua franca of Manipur state (Chelliah, 2015).

The study of 'place-name' of Khurkhul is interesting because of the unique origin and different culture of the Khurkhuls. They believed, there should be a direct relation between 'a name' and 'the person/place'. Therefore, "In the Khurkhul society, personal name is not only a referent to a person; it means who he/she is in his/her family and the society" (Louriyam, 2018: 35). In a similar manner, each place name has a significant meaning that reflects its religious believes, cultural values, environment, mythology, history, emotion etc. of the Khurkhul society.

Thus, this paper is an attempt to explore the meaning of each place name of Khurkhul from the point of view of sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics.

Literature Review

So far, no comprehensive linguistics approach on place-name in Khurkhul is available. However, given that Khurkhul is a variety of Meiteilon, a work titled *Toponyms of Manipur with reference to Manipur valley* authored by Lairenlakpam Sarat Singh is mentioned here. It is a Ph.D.

dissertation which was submitted in the Department of Linguistics, Manipur University, Manipur, India in 2003. His work is focused at the valley area of Manipur, viz, Imphal East District, Imphal West District, Thoubal District and Bishnupur District. It consists of twelve chapters, some of the topics he discusses are place name after plants, place name after surname, place name related to history, place name after the major occupation of the residents etc. Though, his work includes Imphal west (as mentioned above, the Khurkhul village is one of the villages in Imphal West, Manipur), the Khurkhul village is not included. Therefore, the data used in his work does not cover the Khurkhuls.

On the other, the current paper is entirely devoted to the Khurkhuls. To the best of my knowledge, the current work is, thus, the first ever attempt to study place-name in Khurkhul from the perspective of sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics.

Research Methodology

The current study applies the unique method of participation and observation.

The primary data is collected from the informants who are between the ages of 76-95 years old. The reason for selecting them as primary informants for the current paper is, they are the oldest generation of its community who still strongly practiced Khurkhul tradition and culture, also not or less in contact with other language speakers. They are interviewed in person also; group discussions are performed.

Place Name

The study of place-names (towns, mountains, rivers, lakes and other geographical sites) is called toponyms. Many scholars of different fields are interested in this study with different approaches.

For instance, **historian scholars** are fascinated in this field of study because it can reveal lot of facts that is related to the past of a given community. For instance, many ideas and topics related to a given community are carried in the lexical term of a place name which rarely changed. For example, the ‘history of a community’ therefore, it can be treated as one of the oldest knowledges that is directly transferred by older generation to younger generation for years orally. We can simplify the above statement with an example from Khurkhul. The lexical term *lanloipung* ‘war end hillock’ is a good example to analyze here. According to one of the informants, the lexical term *lanloipung* does not serve only as a sound or word shape to represent the ‘place/location’. Also, it reminds them of those devastated seven years when Burmese₂ invaded Manipur. This lexical term signifies the dreadful phase of life of the Khurkhuls – the horrible condition of living standard when they had to live inside the hideouts they dug under their homes, the fear women folk went through from being captured and raped etc.

Regarding this, one of the informants shared an incident - during Burmese war, many women were kidnapped and raped. One woman from Heikham *sagei* ‘lineage/surname’ was one of those women. She was dragged and shoved in front of her family, *sagei*, locality, and villagers.

She pleaded everyone to save her. Unfortunately, no one came forward to help her. Out of anger and frustration she cursed upon her *sagei*, “Never have female child if you cannot protect them”. It is believed that due this curse the number of male children is much more compared to female children in Heikham *sagei*. So, basically, the lexical term *lanloipung* does not indicate only the location of a place; it rather carries the history of the Khurkhul society during Burmese war which is also known as *Awa Lan*.

Like Historian, **Anthropologist** scholars are also interested in the study of place-name. For instance, Boas who is considered the father of American Anthropology suggested that the study of place-name should go beyond the study of geographical structural. For him, naming a place name requires multiple elements, for instance, it is a method of constructing history, social and personal identities, teaching moral, social action etc. It is one of the ways to realize the complexity of a community (Boas, 1934).

In a similar manner, **Cultural and Linguistics Anthropologist** Basso believes that a place name doesn't signify not only a place but also, it is used and valued for other reason as well (Basso, 1984: 26). For instance, a place name might generate both positive and negative responds from individuals or community. For example, the lexical term *lainung* ‘inside Ichumlairembi₃ temple’- both male and female considered it a sacred place and highly respected. However, its social system allows only male to get inside while it is considered taboo for female. Therefore, it is natural that the women feel a sense of inferior and negative whereas men feel superior and positive while associating with the same lexical term ‘*lainung*’.

Based on above discussions, we could observe that the study of the place-name is widely studied in different fields with different approaches. However, for the current paper, it is focused on the concept whether the relation between a place and its name is arbitrary, or not.

According to the Swiss linguist Saussure, language is made of signs, and every sign has two inseparable sides-the signifier and signified. For him, the signifier is the sound or image or shape of a word whereas, the signified is the ideational component or concept. He further added, the relation between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. In simple words, there is no direct connection between the shape and the concept. For example, the word CAT does not need to look like ‘four legs’, tails on back and so on. According to his concept, the above-mentioned lexical term *lanloipung* indicates only the physical location of the place, it has nothing beyond it.

However, the Khurkhuls believed in direct relation between the place and its name. Therefore, the current paper is based on the concept that the linguistics expression of place-name is directly related to religious believes, cultural values, environment, mythology, history, emotion etc. of the Khurkhul society.

It is first attempt to study place-names in Khurkhul from the perspective of sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics.

The Place-Name in Khurkhul

The Khurkhul community is very concerned when it comes to ‘name’ either it is personal name or place name. For them, it doesn’t work simply as a label/tag, it is attached to many other functions like religious believes, cultural values, environment, mythology, history, emotion etc.

One of the notable examples is two different strong emotional reactions from two different groups of people when a place name *Mayai Leikai* ‘Middle locality’ was changed to *Sebok Leikai* ‘Disciple locality’ in Khurkhul. The strong reaction when a place name is changed, is often talked by many scholars (e.g., Lietz: 2009, Wetas: 2000, Light: 2004 in Helleland, 2012).

According to one of the informants, before Hinduism was embraced in Khurkhul the whole village was divided into two localities – *Awang Leikai* ‘North locality’ and *Makha Leikai* ‘South locality’. The National High Way2 (hereon, NHW2) is the mechanism to divide these two localities. The location that falls on the right side of the NHW2 is known as *Awang Leikai* and the other side is called *Makha Leikai* respectively. Here, the NHW2 is placed from Imphal, the capital of Manipur state to the Khurkhul village. But, in some context when further and smaller division is required, the lexical term *Mayai Leikai* ‘Middle locality’ is used to refer to the location located by the side of the National High Way 2 and between *Awang Leikai* and *Makha Leikai*.

However, during the reign of the then king of Manipur, Churachand (1891-1941), the Khurkhuls began to embrace Hinduism. Usham Rupachandra, was the first person to convert himself Hinduism in 1936. Latter his name was changed to *Sebok* ‘disciple’. Since then, the then king Churachand decided to name the locality where Rupachandra lived as *Sebok Leikai*.

Tamarsing⁴ who is one of the informants expressed that this incident experienced two types of strong reactions from two groups of people. Firstly, those who accepted Hinduism warmly welcome the decision also the new name. While interviewed one of them, she said, “That particular day would be always remembered. Because, it made us feel powerful and accepted though we were minority in number”. On the other hand, another group of people who did not embrace Hinduism and continued to follow their old tradition felt betrayed by the then king. While interviewed one of them, he said, “The decision was carried out by the then king himself who was the most powerful man of the state. So, we could do nothing which made the saddest part of the incident”.

Though the place name was changed in 1936, an interesting fact is found during field work. Some of them still denied to use the lexical term *Sebok Leikai* even after so many years. They would rather use the old lexical term *Mayai Leikai* or the newly coined lexical term *Sorok Mapan* ‘edge of the road’. The notion that language is power, in terms of its creative capability to make something into being to render neutral meaningful, and to give or change characters for certain things is rightly reflected here (Tuan, 1991).

Thus, it is observed that the name of a place does not function simply as a label/tag in the Khurkhul society. It has more wider functions, for instance, it describes certain properties of the place, as seen in the above example. Therefore, in order to analyze the relation between a place and its name, some place-names are taken as examples.

The examples are divided into five groups based on common properties. They are (1) *turen* ‘river’, (2) *lou* ‘field’, (3) *Ching* ‘mountain’, (4) *laipham* ‘sacred place’, and (5) *sanchapung* ‘graze field’.

(1) *Turen* ‘river’: the following are some of the names of rivers that are taken as example to analyze for the study.

- *Khanglapokpi turen*: it is a compound word of *k^həŋla* ‘a kind of plant’ + - *pokp* ‘birth’ + - *i* ‘FGM’.

The plant called *Khangla* was widely used in many contexts in Khurkhul. For instance, the young stem is eaten; it is a wrapping paper for *chakyom* ‘a meal that is prepared specially to be eaten outside home, e.g., in the paddy field during plantation, harvesting etc.’, the *naopham* ‘placenta’ is wrapped with it while burying it according to gender. If it is baby girl, it is buried on the left side of the *thongaren* ‘the front door of the house’. On the other hand, if it is baby boy, it is buried on the right side of it.

Earlier, *Khangla* used to grow in plenty by the side of this river. Therefore, it is called *Kanglapokpi turen* ‘the river that gives birth to *Khangla*’.

- *Salan ture*: according to one of Khurkhul oral stories, once upon a time, there was a man name *Thakap*.

One day, he brought a branch of jackfruit tree in order to sculpture the image of God. It was kept in his backyard. Due to his busy schedule, he forgot that a branch of jackfruit was being kept leaning on the wall of his backyard. After many days, the branch of jackfruit came in his dream. He saw it has turned snake and loitering around his lawn. The dream was so scary and unbelievable that he woke up in the middle of the night and went out to check the jackfruit branch. Unfortunately, he realized that it was not a dream but, a reality he had to face. Ever since he began to look after the snake. Latter, he named it *Salan*. Also, he pierced one side of its ear, so that, he could differentiate it from the rest of the snakes. However, after *Thakap* passed away, *Salan* began to loiter beyond his master’s lawn and moved to a river nearby. Since then this river is known as *Salan turen* ‘Salan’s river’.

- *Leimakhong turen*: it is a compound word of *ləimə* ‘queen’ + - *k^hoŋ* ‘noise’.

According to one of the informants, once upon a time, seven beautiful queens of a king used to bath in this river. It was not only a place to bath for them, but also, fun place when these seven sisters played around with each other. Therefore, it is called *Leimakhong turen* ‘the river of queen’s noise’. This is encoded in the following Khurkhul linguistics expression,

<i>ləimə</i>	<i>təret-nə</i>	<i>lao-k^hoŋ</i>	<i>nuŋai-nə</i>	<i>iru-rəmmi</i>
queen	seven-by	loud-shout (noise)	happy-ADV	bath-EVNT

<i>mərəmədunə</i>	<i>ləimək^hoŋ</i>	<i>kəu-k^hi</i>
therefore	leimakhong	call-CERT

Seven queens used to bath shouting therefore it is called Leimakhong. (Lit.)

It is named Leimakhong after the joyful noise created by seven queens.

- *Kambongpokpi turen*: it is a compound word of *kəmbəŋ* ‘zizania latifolia’ + *-pokp* ‘birth’ + *-i* ‘FGM’.

The unique feature of this river is, it is not completely a river that has running water nor a pond that has still water. This gives the correct environment for zizania latifolia to grow in plenty. Thus, it is called *Kambongpokpi turen* ‘the river that gives birth to zizania latifolia’.

- *Khonglen turen*: it is a compound word of *k^hoŋ* ‘a tree hole in the trunk that measures the height of a human body’ + *-len* ‘big’.

Earlier in Khurkhul, when people like *khullakpa* ‘the chief of the village’ died, a hollow tree which hole is measured the height of a human body is cut down from the mountain and brought through the water stream of this river. Thus, it is called *Khonglen turen* ‘the river of big hollow tree’.

(2) *Lou* ‘paddy field’: cultivation is one of the major sources of income in the Khurkhul village. The following are some of the paddy fields in Khurkhul.

- *Lairou*: it is a compound word of *lai* ‘God/Goddess’ + *-rəu* ‘paddy field’.

According to one of informants, earlier man and God used to co-live together. So, the paddy fields are owned by Gods and men. The paddy fields which are believed to be owned by Gods are known as *Lairou* ‘God’s paddy field’.

- *Ngakralou*: it is a compound word of *ŋəkra* ‘cat fish’ + *-ləu* ‘paddy field’.

Cat fish is considered one of the foods that provides healthiest nutrition. Apart of using it as a food, it is used to sacrifice to Goddess *Phouobi* ‘the Goddess of wealth’. Also, a taboo food for *maibi* ‘female local priest’. Earlier during rainy season, this place was considered one of the best places to catch cat fish. Therefore, it is called *Ngakralou* ‘the paddy field of cat fish’.

- *Kanglou*: it is a compound word of *kaŋ* ‘not a smooth surface’ + *-ləu* ‘paddy field’.

The right features of a paddy field for rice cultivation is smooth surface and good source of water supply. However, this place has nothing of it, the surface is rough and no proper water supply. Thus, this place is called *Kanglou* ‘the paddy field of rough surface’. Related to *Kanglou* there is a satirical saying in Khurkhul,

<i>kaŋ-ləu</i>	<i>ləu-gi</i>	<i>məpu-su</i>	<i>pəisa</i>
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rough-paddy field paddy field-GEN 3PP-owner-also money

pai-b(ə)-ra?

hold-NOM-INT?

Owner of the *Kanglou* paddy field also hold money? (Lit.)

If he is the owner of *Kanglou*, he is not rich.

Though the above saying ends with a question mark, it carries a confirmative sense, i.e., the owners of the paddy field of *Kanglou* cannot be considered rich. This saying gives an opposite image from its social economy system. According to its social economy system, the money or bank balance of a person is calculated based on ‘how many paddy fields he owns’. Thus, they say,

<i>ləu-jam</i>	<i>ca-bə</i>	<i>peisa</i>	<i>pai-bə</i>
paddy field-plenty	eat-NOM	money	hold-NOM

(one who) eat plenty of paddy field hold money. (Lit.)

The one who has lots of paddy fields is considered rich.

- *Ningthemlou*: it is a compound word of *niŋt^hem* ‘descendants of king’ + - *ləu* ‘paddy field’.

Until Manipur became a part of India, these paddy fields were owned by the then king of Manipur (Meitei king). He would choose some of the villagers to look after it. After each harvesting, a large amount of paddy rice was given to him. Therefore, those paddy fields are called *Ningthemlou* ‘the paddy field of the descendants of king’.

However, after Manipur became a part of India, those paddy fields were given or sold to the Khurkhuls. (Late) *Khangembam Ketho* (father of *Khangembam Thambalyaima*) was one of the last persons who used to look after *Ningthemlou*.

- *Kantolou*: it is a compound word of *kanto* ‘the name of a near village’ + - *ləu* ‘paddy field’.

The paddy fields which are located nearby Kanto village which is one of the neighboring villages of Khurkhul are called *Kantolou* ‘Kanto’s paddy field’.

- *Haorou*: it is a compound word of *hao* ‘tribe’ + - *ləu* ‘paddy field’.

The paddy fields which are located nearby the foot hills inhabitant by tribes are called *Haorou* ‘paddy field of tribe’.

(3) *Ching* ‘Hill/Mountain’: the hills are one of the elements that enrich the beautiful landscape of Manipur. It is surrounded by nine hills where the valley is placed in the center in oval shape which gives the reflection of a jewel made by nature. Thus, the first Prime minister of India said that Manipur was the Jewel of India. It is not an exceptional for the Khurkhul village either. There are three mountains that enrich the beautiful landscape of the village viz, *Koubrou ching*, *Kounu ching* and *Loyalakpa ching*. These mountains are named after the God and Goddess and considered to be *laipham* ‘sacred place’.

These three mountains sit in a row where the *Koubrou ching* sits on the right and the *Kounou ching* sits on the left side while the *Loyalakpa ching* sits in the middle of them. According to Khurkhul mythology, *Loyalakpa* who is the son of *Koubrou* and *Kounou* sits in between them in order to stop the constant fight between his parents. Therefore, Khurkhul couple often excuse their fight by saying,

<i>kəubru</i>	<i>kəunu</i>	<i>p^hao</i>	<i>k^hətne-i</i>
koubru	kounu	TRMT	fight-DECL

Even Koubrou and Kounou fights. (Lit.)

Fighting or arguing between a couple is common.

- *Koubrou ching*: according to its mythology, *Koubrou* is the son of *Kurusidaba*, the creator of universe. The mountain is named after the God *Koubrou* because it represents his abode also, himself.
- *Kounu ching*: according to its mythology, *Kounou* is the wife of *Koubrou*. The mountain is named after her because it represents her abode also, herself.
- *Loyalakpa ching*: according to its mythology, *Loyalakpa* is the son of *Koubrou* and *Kounou*. The mountain is named after *Loyalakpa* because it represents his abode also himself.

(4) *Laipham* ‘sacred place’: according to their religious believes, culture and so on, some places are considered sacred in the Khurkhul society. Some of them are given below

- *Leikhun* ‘cave’: it is a compound word of *ləi* ‘earth/soil’ + *-k^hun* ‘hole’.

According to Khurkhul mythology, *Yendrebam sagei* which is considered to be the first *sagei* of Khurkhul came out from a cave behind the temple *Ichumlairembi*. According to one of the informants once upon a time, deceased people used to come out from this cave on the fifth day of burial ceremony. One day, a mother-in law of *Yendrebam sagei* instructed her daughter-in-law to pour boiled water on her father-in-law who was supposed to come home from the cave. However, when she saw him standing there with a coffin on his head, she fainted. This incident was a great embarrassment to him, he left immediately and never return again. Since that incident, the elders of *Yendrebam sagei* had closed the cave. This cave is known as *leikhun* ‘cave’.

The descendants of *Yendrebam sagei* are still in the Khurkhul village, however, their *sagei* is changed into *Usham sagei*, thus, there is no more *Yendrebam sagei* at present.

- *Unung macha* ‘small forest’: one of the biggest festivals in the Khurkhul community is *unung laiharaoba* ‘celebration of forest God/Goddess’.

According to one of the informants, earlier, *unung laiharaoba* was done in two ways - grand celebration and small celebration. In grand celebration, the participation of whole villagers is compulsory. It is celebrated for at least two weeks. Here, majority of the functions (e.g., ritual, entertainment etc.) are held at *Ichumlairembi* temple.

However, in case of small celebration, the participation is based on the level of *sageis*. For instance, if *Usham sagei* is celebrating, it is only the members of *Usham sagei* who will participate. The forest or place used for small-scale celebration of *laiharaoba* is called *unung macha* ‘small forest’.



Image 1: *Unung Macha* ‘small forest’



Image 2: *Ichumlairembi Temple*

- *Phakhangba kom* ‘Pakhangba’s pit’: it is a small pit that is located in the forest of *Ichumlairembi* temple.

This pit is called *Pakhangba kom* because, it is believed that the God *Pakhangba* exists in this pit. In its mythology, *Pakhangba* is the son of *Atiya kurusidaba* ‘the God of sky’. The Khurkhuls believed that snakes are incarnation of *Pakhnagba* thus, it is tabooed to kill snake inside the forest of *Ichumlairembi* temple.

- *Loyalakpa Pukhri* ‘Loyalakpa’s pond’: this pond is located in the mountain of *Loyalakpa ching*.

Thus, it is called *Loyalakpa pukhri* ‘Loyalakpa’s pond’. According to them, people who roam around this pond often end up losing their ways out of it. Therefore, it is highly considered a sacred place where people are asked not to go nearby.

(5) *Sanchapung* ‘graze field’: it is a compound word of *sən* ‘cow’ + - *ca* ‘eat’ + - *puŋ* ‘hillock’. The following are some of the graze fields of the Khurkhuls.

- *Khongchaipham*: it is a compound word of *k^hoŋcai* ‘one of the tribes in Manipur’ + - *p^həm* ‘place’.

According to one of the informants, this graze field was often used as a resting place by *Khongchai*. Many of them are located at mountains which are at walkable distance from the Khurkhul village. So, whenever, they made a travel either to the Khurkhul village or another neighboring village like Sekmai, they usually rest in this graze field. Thus, it is called *Khongchaipham* ‘the place of *Khongchai*’.

- *Sonnabung Yumpham*: it is a compound word of *sonnəbuŋ* ‘pavilion’ + - *jum* ‘house’ + - *p^həm* ‘place’.

According to its social system, the Khurkhuls considered themselves as a big family. Therefore, they address each member of its community with kinship term (Louriyam, 2017). Thus, it is compulsory for every villager to participate in any occasion, e.g., marriage. Some time it became impossible for the host family to have all the participants in his own home. Therefore, this field is used as a place to construct pavilion by the Khurkhuls. Thus, this graze field is called *Sonnabung yumpham* ‘the place of pavilion’.

Conclusion

From the above examples, we could observe that the relation between a place and its name is not arbitrary. In fact, the place-names describe certain properties of the place, for examples - the history of Burmese war and its impact on the Khurkhuls. Despite the lack of written documents in that period, the place name *lanloipung* could reveal a brief understanding of the suffering of the Khurkhuls during Burmese war; the place-name *Leikhun* reveals the details of their first possible

inhabitants of the Khurkhul village, i.e., *Yendrembam sagei*; the place name *Kanglou* reveals the social economy system of its community i.e., how paddy field is used as a mechanism to form their social economy system.

Therefore, we could conclude that a name of a place does not function only as a label/tag in most of the situations, it has much more wider functions in the Khurkhul community.

ABBREVIATIONS

FGM ‘Female Gender Marker’	ADV ‘Adverb’	EVNT ‘Evidential’
CERT ‘Certainty’	GEN ‘Genitive’	NOM ‘Nominative’
INT ‘Interrogative’	TRMT ‘Terminative’	DECL ‘Declarative’
3PP – Third person pronominal		

End Notes

¹ *Chakpa*: *Chakpa* are those people in Manipur who are considered to be the original inhabitants of the place. They called themselves as *Ariba Meitei* ‘old Meitei’. Their early inhabitant is proved by the existence of *Chakpa yumpham* ‘the house plot of *Chakpa*’, *Chakpa enkaopung* ‘the place of cock fight of *Chakpa*’ etc. as sacred places in Kangla, the palace of then king of Manipur. Some of the *Chakpa* villages are Sekmai, Andro, Phayeng, Kaotruk, Leimaram etc.

² Burmese War: Manipur was invaded by Burmese many times; however, the most remarkable invasion was Burmese ruled over Manipur for seven long years i.e., 1819-1826.

³ *Ichumlairembi*: The Khurkhuls generally divides two types of Gods- *yumlai* ‘household Gods’ and *lamlai* ‘forest Gods’. The Gods of *yumlai* are placed in house where women take majority of responsibility though man and woman equally worship and respect them. On the other hand, man takes most of the responsibility when it comes to *lamlai*. *Ichumlairembi* is considered the Goddess of the Khurkhuls’ *lamlai* who looks after the welfare of the villagers.

⁴ *Tamarsing*: He is 78 years old. He is a retired high school teacher also, a *maiba* ‘local male priest’ and well-known local scholar. I interviewed him in many occasions in December 2013, May 2014, April 2016, January 2018.

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