“See!” exclaimed the gentleman in his 50s while we were enjoying our meal in a small Sumi Naga village, “Even the rice is different, the meat is different, the vegetable is different. This clearly proves that we Nagas are not Indians.” He continued to briefly explain that they had always been, and still are, a free people and therefore need not ask for independence; they always were independent. The conversation then took the turn it often does when encountering one of the representatives active for the ‘Naga cause’: a lecture in history informing one that the Nagas migrated from somewhere in Thailand or Mongolia—where all Mongol peoples came from—to their present location in the hills between Assam and Burma.

Among many politically active Nagas, migration stories form an integral part of their rhetoric for constructing a collective Naga identity and for claiming an independent Naga nation. The same is true of local intellectual discourse, which is mainly lead by Nagas of sociological, anthropological, or theological background, and mostly—and not surprisingly—in favour of the nationalistic cause. The aim of this paper¹ is to discuss the use of origin tales and migration myths in this local discourse on Naga collective identity. Thus, the following discussion is not intended as a political statement but as a critical analysis of local recourses in the debate in question.

THE QUEST FOR A COLLECTIVE NAGA IDENTITY

The hill peoples commonly referred to as ‘the Nagas’ dwell in the northern hill ranges between the Brahmaputra and Chindwin Rivers on both sides of the present India-Myanmar (Burma) international border. Their number on the Indian side is estimated at approximately two million (Census of India 2001, projection 2008). Since colonial times, and

¹ Data for this study was gained within the project Material Culture, Oral Traditions and Identity among the Naga in Northeast India, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, and lead by Prof. Michael Oppitz, former Director of the Ethnographic Museum of Zürich University.
especially since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Nagas were known to Western observers for their outstanding cultural features of headhunting, feasts of merit and a spectacular material culture. To this day, illustrated published accounts tend to emphasise these aspects of Naga culture (Stirn and van Ham 2000 and 2003, Arya and Joshi 2004). The popularity of these topics has its roots in British colonial ethnography and museum collections, primarily those contributed by James Phillip Mills (1922, 1926, 1937), John Henry Hutton (1921a, 1921b), and the Austria-born anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1939). While these features were an important testimony to the ‘traditional’ Naga culture, they have virtually vanished today in the wake of Christian conversion by American Baptist Missionaries, along with other introduced changes and local agency.

It is widely accepted among both Naga intellectuals and the general public that in former times—and even to some extent today—the essential element of identity has been the village. One often hears that the Nagas lived in self-sustained village-republics, which had bilateral relations and contracts with other, at times quite distant, villages. A second important element of identity was and is the clan (Jamir and Lanunungsang 2005:37ff.; Kejong 2008; Kumar 2005:67-72). Before the arrival of the British during the mid-nineteenth century, hill peoples of the Naga region did not identify themselves with specific tribes. Only a few groups, such as the Ao, formed larger entities with a collective name. Usually, if a person was asked who they were, they most probably replied using their village name. In most regions it was British administrators who categorised local populations into tribes, and many of today’s tribal borders date back to colonial times (von Stockhausen 2008). Nowadays, the notion of the tribe is commonly accepted and tribal identification is quite strong among the Nagas.

Furthermore, in the past the Nagas did not use the generic term ‘Naga’ to refer to themselves; this designation derives from agents outside of their region. There are different opinions about the origin and meaning of the word. One of the most widely accepted refers to different forms of Assamese ‘noga’ or Sanskrit/Hindi ‘nanga’ meaning ‘naked’ (van Driem 2008; Kumar 2005:23-24). Most probably the usage dates back to the period of Ahom rule in Assam, beginning around the thirteenth century.

2 Significant collections of Naga artifacts are housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum of Oxford University, the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna, the Ethnographic Museum of Zürich University, the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, the Völkerkundemuseum Berlin-Dahlem, and the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. For object catalogues, see Jacobs 1990 or Kunz and Joshi 2008.
The Ahom were a Tai-speaking people who migrated from Burma into the upper Assam valley and settled on the plains. Their kingdoms always maintained contacts with hill peoples on both sides of the Brahmaputra, as their chronicles record (Barua 1985). When the British conquered the Ahom kingdom, they adopted the term ‘Naga’ for the tribes living in the hills to the east, which came to be named the Naga Hills. As the Nagas had no common term for themselves as a larger entity, they adopted the foreign name for convenience of communication with outsiders (von Stockhausen 2009). However, there are certain regions of the Naga Hills where, according to Kumar (2005:24-25), up until recently local populations still resented being referred to as ‘Nagas’.

Under colonialism, the Nagas did not feel integrated into British India. Experiences of the First World War can be seen as the initial trigger that awakened a collective Naga identity. A group of between one and two thousand Nagas were taken by the British to Europe to be employed as labour corps during the war effort, and while building roads in France they became aware of a greater political context. Some of those who returned founded the Naga Club, the first political organisation claiming to represent the Nagas as a people (Nuh and Wetshokholro 2002:111; West 1999:20), and by the 1920s the first petitions for Naga independence began to appear. A second important juncture for Naga identity appears to be the period of British withdrawal from South Asia and subsequent modern state formation in the region. The awareness that only as a united people would the Nagas have a chance to withstand the newly forming Indian and Burman nation states was most probably the initial motivation for attempting to bring the very diverse and often mutually hostile villages and tribes together under a single umbrella. Since then, incorporation within a collective Naga identity remains an incomplete process, and in many respects identification with one’s village and tribe remains stronger than identification with the Naga collective. Moreover, the question of exactly who is a ‘Naga’ and who is not continues to generate quite heated debate at times.

Shortly before Indian independence in 1947, the Naga National Council (NNC) was founded and formerly demanded independence from the British in the name of the Naga people. The Governor of Assam for the British administration, Sir Akbar Hyder Ali, negotiated a nine-point-agreement with the NNC which foresaw that the Nagas should decide their political future by themselves. Nevertheless, the Naga Hills were then annexed by independent India. Based upon the previous British ‘inner line regulation,’ the region was declared a ‘restricted area’ and
foreign visitors were not permitted to enter until the year 2000. A plebiscite among the Nagas during 1951 revealed that 90% wanted to have their own state.\(^3\) Since India failed to accept any Naga independence, the NNC went underground and formed a rebel army to drive Indian troops from the region. Many bloody battles later, one faction of the NNC signed the so-called Shillong Accord accepting Naga territorial integration within India, and the Indian union state of Nagaland was created in 1963. Another faction of Naga fighters founded the National Socialist Council of Nagaland/Nagalim (NSCN) and continued to wage campaigns against the Indian Army well into the 1980s. According to Naga sources, an estimated 100,000-200,000 Nagas lost their lives in this war, which remained largely unnoticed outside of South Asia (Oppitz 2008:26). During the late 1980s, the NSCN itself split into two factions, each of which continues to field its own underground armies. While both groups have a ceasefire agreement with India since 1996, and now rather fight against each other, their common demand remains for an independent Naga Nation. While support for the underground among the general public is not as enthusiastic as it used to be, the number of sympathisers remains high, with many political activists, political journalist and intellectuals supporting the agenda of the underground.

During the course of talks between the Indian Government and the underground leaders, a central point of the Naga rhetoric has been that the Nagas are one people, distinct from the Indians. This same point has been picked up by the general public. Formation of such a collective identity is considered crucial for the ‘we-feeling’ of the new Nation. The rhetoric in the local discourse is mainly concerned with justifying the demand for a ‘Naga Homeland’. In my opinion, four quite dominant statements can be isolated at the core of this Naga rhetoric. They may be simply stated as follows: (1) the Nagas are not Indians; (2) the Nagas are one people; (3) the Nagas demand nothing other than the land upon which they have lived since time immemorial; (4) the Nagas were always independent and were never conquered by anybody (at least until the British came, and then only partially). These four statements appear to be the basis for the notion of the ‘uniqueness of the Nagas’, an expression which is often referred to—directly or indirectly—in today’s newspapers, in speeches by politicians and as a standard expression in general discourse (e.g., Vero 2005, in the local daily *Morung Express*).

A close look at the arguments supporting these four statements will

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reveal that origin and migration myths play a crucial part in the rhetoric. We also find two types of arguments used: one is vague in its narrative evidence, but is accepted by a large majority of the Nagas and therefore intensely instrumentalised; the other is precise and detailed in narration although not representative for all Naga groups, and when sometimes put forward can create considerable controversy at times.

**Vaguely Coming from Mongolia**

The notion that the Nagas are not Indians is a dominant perception among Nagas, at least when talking in terms of culture. ‘Indianness’ is generally associated with an entirely different set of religiosity, language, material culture and physical features. Naga experiences when in ‘mainland’ India—if we may call most areas to the west of Nagaland such for convenience—certainly confirm this. Having more Burman or Tibetan features, Nagas are often perceived as foreigners by Indians: they may be charged tourist prices because they are taken for Japanese, or they may be accused of lying when insisting that they are not Tibetan immigrants. Thus, one can say the notion that ‘Nagas are not Indians’ is actually generally shared, and this point is certainly confirmed for Nagas through experience. However, for many Nagas this does not automatically mean that politically they would not wish to be Indian. The younger generation in particular enjoy the benefits of being Indian citizens. Many have absolved their education in one of the big Indian cities and rely upon comforts the Indian welfare state and the Indian economy provides for them. So they would rather prefer a better form of integration than a complete separation. However, other Nagas would argue that this is exactly how the Indian state ‘buys’ the Nagas, and subjects them not by war but by their own accommodating nature. Thus, in pro-independence thinking the Nagas should not be Indian in any political sense.

One of the main arguments for the Nagas not being Indians is based upon oral traditions that place Naga origins either somewhere to the southeast of their current homeland, or in the South Seas, Mongolia or China. From the narrative point of view, such myths are not very precise and not necessarily what one may encounter in an evening session of singing or poetic recitation around the hearth fire—the usual form in which Naga oral tradition is preserved. The stories may be summarised in a discussion or a speech and they may be recounted quite vaguely. They may, but rather seldom do, mention village names, most of which are nonexistent today and nobody knows exactly where they
were once situated. Such village names are often associated or even equated with similar sounding village names somewhere in Mongolia, like Mongkhuma/Mongkonyu, to which I will return below. In order to provide the claims with a scientific backing, argumentation by local intellectuals is enriched with speculations originally taken from the monographs of Mills and Hutton or from other authors of the early twentieth century. Evolutionist or diffusionist ideas often come into play. These are, in my opinion, to a large extent reinterpreted from, and based upon a misunderstanding of, the ‘Introduction’ in Jacobs’ work *The Nagas* (1990:10-14), albeit that he explicitly warns readers “[i]t is easy, but probably unhelpful, to imply that social or linguistic influences are a matter of the physical intrusive migration”.

A remarkable example for this type of rationale can be seen in the works of Reverend V.K. Nuh, former secretary of the Council of the Baptist Churches in Nagaland and mediator in the peace process between the underground fighters and the Indian Government. In these functions he has been a most influential writer and an intellectual authority in Nagaland. He is not, however, what one would call a political activist and therefore his argumentation may be a suitable example for the general public to explain who the Nagas are. Apart from a collection of historical and political documents called *The Naga Chronicle* (Nuh and Wetshokholo 2002), his more than a dozen locally edited books centre on theological questions: on the morality of the Nagas; on the Christian history of the Nagas; or on an indigenous theology (e.g., Nuh 1986, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2006). In some of his works he publishes a preface or first chapter explaining about the Nagas in general, including their origins. For example,

…there is a general consensus that has been agreed upon by all scholars that the Nagas are Mongoloid by race. [...] It is believed that the earliest home of the Mongoloid people was on the upper reaches of the Hwang-Ho River in China and further moving down to South-East Asia through the mountains. The Nagas belong to the great Mongolian race, which spread all over the world as far as China and South America. [...] History unveils that the Nagas are from a higher civilization which flourished somewhere in South East Asia from time immemorial. (Nuh 2002:2-3)

He even goes as far as to suggest that

The Nagas were probably the original megalith builders and many of the megaliths that were erected over the world from Europe to America to South-East Asia and Middle East, were in all likelihood erected by them. The reason for this conclusion is not that the raising of megaliths
is immune to independent origin, but that these megaliths are connected with a definite and united culture, called the Naga culture. (Nuh 2002:1-2)

In another of his introductions employing virtually the same wording, Nuh emphasises that the Nagas he is discussing are not the present Nagas, but an ancient race—which he likes to write as Naga in italics—that is to say, a primary culture dispersing through the whole world of which the current Nagas are descendants. Its origins “could be anywhere from Sumeria and India to Southeast Asia and Oceania” (Nuh and Wetshokhrolo 2002:9), and they were a seafaring people—with a reference to Thor Heyerdahl—who spread to all coasts of America, Africa, Europe and Asia (Nuh and Wetshokhrolo 2002:11-12). Finally Nuh comes to the conclusion that

It would not be unreasonable if Naga people are tempted to think they had Hebrew ancestors. For according to the Apocryphical II Andross, the Ten Tribes of Israel made miraculous crossing of the Euphrates after the exile imposed by the Assyrian empire. They ventured for a year and a half beyond the river to a far off country known as Arshaut. There is a great likelihood that they retreated [sic.] Malay Archipelago. (Nuh and Wetshokhrolo 2002:13)

When talking of the current Naga groups, Nuh admits that

...there are many theories propounded so far about, and on the origin and progress of the Nagas as a people. Along with these theories of origin are definitively views of how they came to be in the land they presently dwell. Both Nagas and non-Nagas have put these theories forward after serious consideration and researches. They are mostly based on superstitions, though. (Nuh 2006:14)

Here ‘superstitions’ does not mean oral tradition, which Nuh defends as being a most valuable source. He asserts that the tracing back of the origins of the Nagas has to be done using folktales and oral tradition, and to the defence of this method he insists repeatedly that these oral traditions can be trusted as sources and are invaluable for the reconstruction of Naga history (Nuh and Wetshokhrolo 2002:14). However, Nuh gives no example of such a folktale in the form of a citation or a song text. It seems that ‘superstitions’ does not refer to the British colonial monographs either, which do refer to oral traditions or to linguistic and technological comparison hinting at an origin in China or Southeast Asia, which Nuh agrees with. As in many local publications, no references are given for many statements. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the basis for his argumentation is taken from Hutton’s and Mills’
monographs. In *The Angami Nagas*, for example, the second migration wave from northwest China originating between the upper Yangtze and the Ho-ang-ho river is mentioned for the Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples of the region (Hutton 1921a:6-9), while Mills’ Introduction to *The Lotha Nagas* (1922:xvi-xxi) suggests at length four directions of migration into the greater region of what is today called northeast India: a first from the north, that is Tibet and Nepal, for the neighbouring Singpho, Aka, Mishmi and Bodo groups; a second from south China via the Irrawaddy River for the neighbouring Shan, Ahom and Taman groups; a third from the south for the neighbouring Lushai and Kuki groups; and a fourth—and probably very early one—from the Kol-Mon-Annan region by people occupying the territory before the other groups arrived. While Mills insists that today’s Nagas are probably a mix of all these migration waves, the Tibetan or Nepalese origins are overlooked for the most part in local Naga accounts. And, while Mills points to strong affinities with immediate neighbours, Nuh prefers to emphasise affinities with the more distant Papua or Philippine groups.

Thus, V.K. Nuh never specifies what he actually means by ‘superstition’. In summary, he leaves us with the impression that the early origins and migrations of the Nagas—from somewhere in the East, in China, Mongolia, or in the South Sea—are mainly reconstructed from oral traditions. And it is this provenance that proves that the Nagas are not Indians. But confirmations of such oral traditions in precise myths, songs or poems are neither given by the author himself nor derivable from his most probable sources, the British monographs.

A slightly more precise picture is given by Jamir and Lanunungsang (2005:11-12). Jamir is a freelance author writing about his own tribe, the Ao, after a career serving in the state administration. Lanunungsang is a professor of sociology at the University of Nagaland. In their work the pair trace the origin of the Nagas back to a Mongolian village named Mongkhuma and, according to Burmese oral tradition, give a migration route passing through Yunnan into today’s Kachin area and the foundation of a village named Khankha. From there the migratory group is said to have moved over the hill regions of Melikha and Khamung to the upper Chindwin River and into Hwakong valley to reach a place called Sukai. Up until this point the entire migratory group stayed together, but then split into two: one group moved southwards over the Patkai Hill ranges until they reached the plains of Manipur. From there they dispersed towards the north into today’s Naga Hills; the other group crossed the Chindwin River in the north and spread over the same hills.
This account might sound like a reasonably funded oral tradition, even supplying village names and giving their geographical locations. The extent to which Jamir and Lanunungsang’s narrative has been influenced by accounts from earlier British literature is difficult to determine. The authors do not cite any songs in support of their information, but they give two primary sources in a footnote. The interesting background meaning of these references might easily be overlooked: the first source refers to ‘Burmese elders’, namely S.S. Khaplang; the second is a booklet by Isaac Chichi Swu. To understand the meaning that resonates for Naga readers in these references, it is necessary to take a short look into the recent political situation once more. The sources each refer to the name of a leader of the two main opposing armed underground factions, the NSCN-K led by Shangwang Shangyung Khaplang, and the NSCN-IM led by Thuingaleng Muivah and Isaac Chichi Swu. The narrative is thus directly linked to the most prominent representatives of the claim for an independent Naga Nation. Since the splitting of the NSCN, conflicts between these two factions during the past few decades have resulted in thousands of Naga civilian deaths. Local authors cannot cite one faction and omit reference to the other without getting into severe trouble, but in my opinion there is more to these references than merely maintaining an equilibrium of factional representation. Leaving aside the strong political bias of the sources as such, in my view Jamir and Lanunungsang created an interesting possibility for political criticism by citing both factions in the same footnote for the same migration story: One of the main mutual accusations exchanged between the two fighting factions is that each denies the other as being Naga. A feature of this accusation is that one of the leaders (Muivah) is a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur, while the other (Khaplang) is a Heimi Naga from the Burmese side. One can often hear the objection aimed in both directions that the other is not even ‘from Nagaland’. On the other hand, we could say that the Tangkhul and the Sumi (Isaac Chichi Swu’s tribal affiliation) according to the above recounted story would belong to the group who migrated first south and then north, while the Heimi Nagas settled along the northern route without entering today’s Nagaland. This would mean that the two factions, via their leaders, represent the two migration groups in Jamir and Lanunungsang’s narrative. Seen from this perspective, the migration story suggests not only that both factions are originally of the same blood, but also that they both even tell the same story and thus suggest themselves that they are brothers. By means of

from the northern and eastern sides.
a migration story the authors not only succeed in indicating that the Nagas are one people coming from Mongolia, but also make a political statement about the oneness of all Nagas that goes beyond the defence against India by hinting at the inner disruption of today’s Naga society without criticising either of the armed factions directly.

**Precise but not Commonly Accepted**

The opinion that the Nagas are one people has recently been stressed by one of the most important and locally renowned Naga anthropologists, Abraham Lotha. In his 2008 article, he sets out his opinions about which features constitute Naga unity, for example, clan organisation, the system of *morung* or men’s dormitories, headhunting, feasts of merit, and recent Naga history which generated a ‘we-feeling’. But when Lotha mentions migration, he formulates with great caution, observing how certain migration myths have become the focus of a popular topos which states that the Nagas are one people, regardless of the fact that there is no place to which *all* Nagas tribes can trace back their origin.

In contrast to the vague ‘Mongolian-origins’ or ‘eastern-origins’ myths reviewed above, there are many migration myths of a precise and detailed narration, and which mention origin places situated within Naga territory itself. One such place of importance is Chungliyimti village, which is held to be the origin of the Ao Naga. Official Ao migration myths do not recognise any migration prior to Chungliyimti, stating that the Ao arose out of six stones—three male and three female—near the village and which represent each of the three clans of Pongen, Longkum and Jamir. These clans married mutually and this was the beginning of the Ao tribe. So the argument that the Nagas are one single people because they have one common origin with other tribes would not find favour in official Ao eyes. Several years ago, an Ao scholar, Purtongzuk Longchar (2002), suggested a successive migration history from the south to the north, and which preceded the time of Chungliyimti. His interpretation cost him fines imposed by many Ao village councils. Since then, Ao authors have become somewhat cautious in disputing the Chungliyimti myth. The myth in its recited form is expressed in a number of songs which differ from village to village but which commonly focus upon the six stones and the first village, where all cultural and social features of Ao society were founded. Ao songs are highly poetical and composed in an archaic language, thus their meaning is often not transparent at first sight. Today’s young generation of Ao require the interpretation of
elder singers in order to understand lyrics. Additionally, grasping the connotations of a song usually requires a large amount of ethnographic background information. Here is an example of one such song referring to the six stones *(longterok)* in Chungliyimti (figure 10.1).

Oh formed from six stones  
In the land of Chungliyimti a head-dance was performed  
A great warrior Shiluti was born  
During the time of Konem and Arangba  
The Mongsen enemies were attacked and lost.  

Chungliyimti is not only reckoned as the origin place of the Ao Naga, but is also an important site featuring in the migration of other tribes. The village is presently situated in Sangtam area, and the current head *gaonbura* (a village elder with administrative function) explained that five tribes, the Ao, Sangtam, Konyak, Phom and Chang claim it as important for their migration. He gives an account of a migration starting in Thailand at a place named Chamai or Chaiem (a name he is sure the British misspelled as Shemshen) following a war with the Burmese. The migratory group crossed over several rivers until they reached a place named Mükur (‘skull’) near the mountain of Saramati. His account continues,

From there we stayed in Khozama and left the Chakhesang people and then we came to Yimphir, there we left the Yimchung and also the Sangtam part of Tukumi district. We sent the Khiamnungan from Yimphir on and some of the Yimchung. People from the Kephire district of Tukumi were also sent from there. From there we went to Mao and from there the Tangkhul, Kuki and Zeliang left. After that we came to Philimirutomi and from there the Lotha were sent. We left Phek area and when the Angami and Sema followed us, we told them to go back again. The people who came to Chungliyimti from Phek area were the Rutu, Luma, Pangrong, Jimilomi and Liten. But the Ao, Sangtam, Konyak and Phom came directly from Yimphir.

While the narrator of the story admitted that, from the perspective of the tribes mentioned in it, the story might look different for each, as far as the Sangtam are concerned he had learned from his father that there

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4 See Kaiser 2004:

> O longterok ko oker  
> Chungliyimti lima saku semer yartina,  
> Shiluti nokzenketer soka  
> Konem, Arangba soyimla  
> Mongsen sariertsü nenoksem ko mezüjar.

5 These are not names of present-day tribes, but most probably of single clans.

6 Hotingse Sangtam, head gaonbura of Chungliyimti, interviewed on 16 November 2008 at Chungliyimti/Longterok by Alban von Stockhausen of the *Material Culture, Oral Traditions and Identity among the Naga in Northeast India* Project.
were three periods in the development of the place later to be known as Chungliyimti. The first was called Metidem in Ao language, a name which means ‘animals and humans living together’. The narrator clearly dated the arrival of humans in the area to between 550 and 400 BCE. Where this dating comes from is unclear; he just heard it, according to tradition. The second period was called Semetem meaning ‘settled together’, because many more people arrived at the place. And the third period was then called Chungliyimti, which means ‘shield place’, the name explained by the residence there of a man of Longkumer clan who was so excellent at manufacturing shields that people came even from Angami area to buy them. The Sangtam lived there together for 900 years and once numbered about 9000 people, but a part of them decided to leave the place between 81 and 115 CE, a dating which the narrator confidently offered. Further, he explained that the people who would become called the Ao—actually ‘Aor’ (‘those who went’)—crossed the Dikhu River westwards, destroying the bridge behind them, and left the rest of their community behind because they feared overcrowding. Those people who were left behind became the Phom and the Konyak. They took another route ‘sideways’ along the river terrace and were therefore called the ‘merir’. The Ao believe that they came out of the stones and the stones were there in the first place, but the Sangtam gaonbura has another story about this: It was during the early Chungliyimti period that the people brought together the stones to commemorate the big leaders (‘Ong’) of the village. That is why the Sangtam themselves call the stones Ongterok (‘Six Leaders’), and not Longterok (‘Six Stones’) as do the Ao. He also refers to a recently conducted archaeological excavation (compare Jamir and Vasa 2008), which showed signs of holes for house poles under the stones. To him this represented a clear proof that the settlement, and therefore people, existed before the stones. Thus, he concluded: “If somebody says that the Ao don’t come from the six stones, he will be fined. […] I know the story beyond Chungliyimti, but the Ao don’t appreciate it. So what can I do?”

The Chang, who according to the Sangtam gaonbura also lived in Chungliyimti, do not however refer to this place when asked for their origin. They clearly state that their origin place is Mongkonyu. It is also called Changsang Mongko and was the origin of all cultural invention (Kumar 2005:56-57). One of the songs about the village runs:
Figure 10.1. Longterok/Ongterok stones near the village of Chungliyimti, origin of the six clans of the Ao and, in the background to the right of the tree, memorial stones for the first village leaders of the Sangtam. In the foreground, the stone of the Longkumer clan of the Ao. (Photograph by Alban von Stockhausen, 2008).
It is believed that our forefathers originated from Mongkonyu,
man originated from a rubber tree,
Foreigners also originated at Mongkonyu.

For making the first fire there was a contest between tiger and man, but man invented fire, man invented fire.

Writing was invented in Mongkonyu, machetes were first made in Mongkonyu, Earthen pots were made in Mongkonyu, Clothes were woven in Mongkonyu, handicrafts were first done there.

Babies were born in Mongkonyu, dynasties were divide from there, works was divided clanwise, marriages were made there, worships were held, folk-dances originated from Mongkonyu, cultivation was learned from Mongkonyu.

Man, tiger and bison lived together, people adopted worms as their children, enmity and quarrels broke out between man and tiger, a girl was sacrificed during a flood at Mongkonyu, salt-water was found in Mongkonyu.

The dead resurrected from Mongkonyu, Mongkonyu was surrounded by darkness,
The elder singers in Tuensang recount that there are some ‘youngsters’ who think that Mongkonyu is the same village as Mongkhuma, a place in Mongolia. They had even showed them the village-name on a Mongolian map. But in reality, the old men say, Mongkonyu is a patch of forest some kilometres away from Hakchang village; one can go there by foot in three hours and it is situated in the very heart of Chang territory itself. So in their eyes there is no proof in the many songs about Mongkonyu that the Nagas came from Mongolia.

Usually the origin myths of Chungliyimti or Mongkonyu (as situated in Chang territory) are not instrumentalised for nationalistic discourse, but another origin place is referred to every now and then in public, for example in the daily newspapers. In a recent issue of the Nagaland Post, one can read:

This tree is known as the oldest tree in the history of the Nagas. It is said that once all the Nagas lived at Makhel. But when [the] population increase[d], all people gathered at the foot of this tree and departed to different directions for new settlements. This tree still stands as a symbol of unity and oneness of the whole Naga tribes. When a branch of the tree is broken, all the Nagas observe genna7 for one day. (Nagaland Post, Sunday Post, April 15, 2007:1)

The place of Makhel (also written Maikel) mentioned in this passage is one of the locations to which many tribes trace back not their actual origin, but the point in history and geography from where they dispersed over the Naga Hills. From Makhel a whole group migrated to the village of Khezhakenoma. One narrative relates that there was a magic stone which doubled the grain laid onto it. But the stone was broken in a fight and lost its magic power, which caused the split of the tribes. Lotha (2008) avoids naming these tribes, knowing that the perception of the different tribes as to which other groups split from there might differ in their respective accounts. Mills (1922:4) and Hutton (1921a:6-7) suggest

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7 Genna is a form of a ‘taboo’. In earlier times it included the closing off of a village, rituals, and abstinence from certain foods and sexual intercourse. Today in its original form it no longer exists, but the notion of a special day is still attached to it in many regions.
Figure 10.2. One of the trees near Makhel said to be the origin of the southern Naga groups (photograph by Alban von Stockhausen 2004).
that at least the Angami (which in their time included sections of the Chakhesang), Rengma and Lotha are clearly linked to Khezhekenoma and maybe also part of the Sumi (Sema). But many other Naga tribes do not recognise these places as either their point of origin or a station on their migration route. So the statement that ‘once all Nagas lived at Makhel’ is highly controversial.

Among the Nagas there have been many origin stories of the kind recounted above. They are usually very detailed and exact until they reach the starting point of the migration somewhere in an earth hole or cave, in a stone or on a mountain peak, features which can be located inside today’s Naga territory or not far distant from it. Hutton attempted to link as many of these detailed accounts as possible and plotted them on a migration map (figure 10.4) in his monograph about the Angami Naga.

The map shows some continuous movements but also the fact that there is not one single origin place for all the tribes which can be deduced from the oral tradition alone. This fact is also discussed at length by B.B. Kumar (2005:54-66), who acknowledges that there might be some oral traditions reaching fairly far into Burma or even Thailand, but who clearly concludes “that not a single legend tradition of origin and

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8 See, for examples, those recorded in the monographs by Mills 1922, Hutton 1921a, or Kumar 2005:54-66.
Figure 10.4. J.H. Hutton’s Migrations of Naga Tribes map (source: The Angami Nagas 1921:opp. p.7).
migration is acceptable to or has currency among all the Naga tribes. In many cases, a single tribe has more than one legend of origin and tradition of migration” (Kumar 2005:65). B.B. Kumar was the Principal of Science College in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland. His work is highly esteemed locally, and perhaps this is one reason why he can afford to clearly advance a critique concerning topics about which the fear of possible reaction from certain political forces hinders others. With the publication of Kumar’s work, the hope shining through in earlier local writings, such as that by Chasie (2005 [1999]:28), that when thoroughly researched the Naga migration stories will provide the basis for a common origin, slowly fades.

INDEPENDENT SINCE TIME IMMENORIAL

The ‘precise’ type of migration myths discussed above show that a common origin of the Nagas cannot be deduced from oral tradition. However, they would be more than suitable to support the third important statement in the rhetoric of the Naga identity discourse: that the Nagas demand nothing other than the land on which they lived since time immemorial. Nearly every Naga tribe or subgroup would surely be able to produce a migration or origin story showing that as far as their memory goes back they lived roughly on the land where they are settled now. Of course, some stories may include encounters with peoples who lived on the same terrain previously. But these people may have left and found a homeland somewhere else, or they may have been integrated into the approaching ‘tribe’. A narrative example for such a process can be seen in the case of the Ao. A version of it may be read in Mills (1926:8-11), and it is still related today in many variations: When the Ao reached what is today’s Mokokchung district after crossing the Dikhu River, they encountered two groups of people already living there, the Molungr and the Nokrangan. With the Molungr they established peaceful agreements; they bought the land to settle from them and largely integrated them into their clan-system. In some villages of the Asetkong hill-range one can still today find clans originating from them. With the Nokrangan, however, the encounter was rather harsh. A war between the expanding villagers of Longkum and the Nokrangan people drove the latter away in all directions. Mills suggests (1926:11) that a section of Nokrangan merged with the people living in today’s Changki, an Ao village of special position in the tribe because it is one of the few officially claiming not to have originated from Chungliyimti. Another group fled
north and turned east again to merge with the Phom and Konyak. And a third group even crossed the Bramahputra valley to enter the hills on the north side in today’s Arunachal Pradesh and became a part of the so-called Dafla (Mills 1926:9).

All in all, precise origin myths might be able to stress the claim on the territory with all justification. In this respect, they would fit perfectly into the discourse. However, they are not often used and the question is, why? For one, these stories carry a high risk of factionalism. The tendency of tribalism is already quite strong in Naga society and the breach between the two opposed underground armies mostly runs along tribal lines. We might acknowledge that the exponents of the discourse are sensitive enough not to support this tendency any further. On the other hand, some of the stories are indeed used to deduce a (non-existing) common origin of the Nagas, as the Makhel case shows. Thus, we are not dealing with a question of sensitivity towards possible tribalism but with a question of power: the group fostering its own origin as that of all Nagas is symbolically the group in power.

There is a general problem with both types of migration stories, the vague Mongolian provenance and the precise origin tales, within today’s Naga territory: they often apply to many other neighbouring tribal populations as well. Therefore there is no real point in claiming the provenance from the East as being exclusively Naga. How then, for example, to explain to the outside world and the Indian Government why the Kukis do not belong to the ‘Naga’ tribes on that ground? This is an idea, by the way, which the Kukis themselves would also reject at all costs, even if, until the 1990s (i.e., until the Naga-Kuki war), the Kukis were counted as a ‘Naga tribe’ (Lotha 2007:3).

The claim that the Nagas lived in situ ‘since time immemorial’ and were always independent is a recurring argument in Naga identity discourse. As a prominent exponent of this argumentation, we can take as an example Kaka D. Iralu, a local free-lance political journalist who stresses the point at length in his most popular book Nagaland and India: The Blood and the Tears (2000:3 ff.). Rather than offering the precise origin myths, he uses a set of stories which may be situated between historical account (for the sources) and myth (for their interpretation). Like many local authors, Iralu takes for granted that the first ever mention of the Nagas in written sources is found in Ptolemy’s geography of 150 CE, the original reference likely taken from a footnote by Hutton (in Mills 1926:1). Ptolemy mentions the people of the Nangalothe (‘the naked’) at a geographical position quite possibly near the present-day Naga
The origin and migration myths of the Nagas have been a subject of much debate, with local Naga discourse often taking an unquestioned reference for the antiquity of the Nagas living where they are today. However, it is now not possible to know exactly which people Ptolemy meant when using this term. ‘The naked’ might refer to any regional group, even the peoples of Assam, depending upon how one wants to interpret the account. The next written mentions of the Nagas are said to occur in the accounts of a Chinese traveller of the seventh century and thereafter mostly in the chronicles of the Ahom kings, the Ahom Buranji, commencing from the thirteenth century. These are the three dated sources most often cited when the question of the antiquity of the Nagas turns up. And rather than oral tradition it is these accounts which are taken as evidence that the Nagas have lived where they are since ‘time immemorial’. To prove that the Nagas had always been independent and were never under any foreign control up to British times, the chronicles of the kings of Manipur and of the Ahom are referred to by Naga commentators. However, if we take the case of the Ahom Buranji, one soon sees that the relation between the Nagas—more precisely the Ao and Konyak—and the Ahom had not always been as peaceful as Kumar would like us to believe (2005:20). In the Ahom Buranji, one can read of wars, of slavery and of the slaughter of whole Naga villages conducted by the Ahom. The Ahom had no interest in the hills in terms of conquering them. But from the Ahom perspective, Nagas border villages were subject to them, and there were times when they had to pay tribute (Barua 1985). From the point of view of the Nagas, the Ahom were invaders coming long after the Nagas lived in the territory. There are indeed oral accounts among the Ao and Konyak to describe the first meetings with the Ahom and the relations they had together. In these accounts, one can even hear of marriage relations between an Ahom Kings and a Naga princess. Here the Nagas would have a point in claiming equality with the Ahom their longterm presence in the region accounting to written and oral sources alike. The nationalistic discourse, however, preferably focuses much further back in time, on Ptolemy, even though it cannot be taken for granted that Ptolemy’s Nangas referred in any way to today’s Nagas (cf. Stockhausen 2009).

**An Alternative Myth-Model**

As a conclusion, one can state that the discourse of independence and collective identity among the Nagas does indeed strategically employ myths of origin and migration. The precise and detailed myths of oral
tradition, which are sung around the hearth fire and are considered the mythological heritage of the Nagas, would be a brilliant argument for the claim that the Nagas demand nothing other than the land they have inhabited since time immemorial. But they are not so suitable as an argument for the unity of Nagas because they tell of very diverse origins. Thus, they carry a high risk of tribalism and factionalism, which is most unwelcome in a process of unification. It seems that among the Nagas, the notion of a collective identity is still in the making and the assertion that the Nagas are one people has priority at this point in time. For this process another type of migration mythology is much more suitable: vague tales of an origin in Mongolia, or somewhere to the east. The advantage of these tales is precisely their vagueness, as they offer a possibility for everybody to identify with little or no contradiction, such as in the case of the Ao we examined.

The notion that the Nagas are one people seems to be a crucial argument for the claim of independence and statehood, and thus Naga unity must be accomplished by all means. Of course, the factional fighting between the armed underground groups works to the very contrary of this endeavour. But if we consider for a moment the nation-building myths of other countries, such as the United States of America or Switzerland, we will find that the notion of being one people is not mandatory for the claim of being a nation. In the case of Switzerland, the story runs that three men from three villages came together on a meadow called ‘the Rütli’ and made a vow that they would stand together against enemies and would not attack each other under any circumstances. By and by, other regional groups—including those with different languages—joined them and thus ‘Switzerland’ was created. The story of the original Rüti-vow is as unproven and moot as a Naga migration route from Mongolia, and even its veracity is contested by historians (Sablonier 2008). But this does not change the fact that the Swiss nation-building myth is ‘federalistic’ and not a myth of ‘oneness’. Why do the Nagas insist on the idea of oneness based upon migration myths rather than the idea of federalism? If we consider once more that in earlier times the Nagas lived in self-sustained village-republics with bilateral relations and contracts amongst each other, we can speculate that in theory the emphasis on a federalistic model for the Naga myths of nation-building would have been a possible alternative. I think, however, in praxis we are dealing with an aspect of the colonial legacy. The Nagas, perhaps like many other groups aspiring to their own state following the end of colonial rule, were directed towards a myth-model of oneness. Most indigenous peoples in the colonies were
origin and migration myths
generally grouped and termed as ‘tribes’ by their colonisers, and this was also true for the Nagas—in spite of the warnings of some colonial commentators, such as Thomas Callan Hodson (1911:81). The classical colonial notion of a tribe includes a common origin, kinship and territory, sometimes also a common language (Gingrich 2001). The concept of ‘tribe’ was institutionalised especially in postcolonial Indian administration in order to develop so called ‘backward’ peoples. According to Panda (2006:35), the definition of ‘tribe’ accepted most widely in Indian context is offered by Majumdar and Madar (1980[1956]:241), who, based on colonial concepts of the term, emphasise that ‘[a] tribe is (...) above all, conscious of a homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration’. With such notion of oneness in the back of one’s mind, an alternative, federalistic model for nation-building myths among the Naga ‘tribes’ became unlikely. Thus, we can observe that, among local peoples like the Nagas, their traditional myths of origin and migration, and especially their use in the rhetoric of independence and a collective identity, are heavily influenced by colonial history.


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