The Ethnic Fashion Scene in Nagaland

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“All contestants should arrange for a modern ethnic wear denoting any Naga traditional outfit and an evening dress for the formal round. The designer wear and tees for photo session will be provided by the organisers. Besides the three winners, all subtitiles holders that includes Miss Perfect 10, Miss Talented, Most Photogenic 2011, Miss Beautiful Skin, Miss Congeniality and Best Ethnic Wear 2011 will receive prizes along with modeling contracts maintained by the club. Further, three contestants will be selected by NEZCC officials to represent the centre for any state or national level festival programme and two photogenic faces by the Tourism department to model for Nagaland Tourism advertisements” (from the announcement of the “Miss Dimapur beauty pageant” 2011 in the Morung Express, Nagaland)3.

The contemporary fashion scene in Nagaland, one of the easternmost union states of India, has been exploding in the last decade. Beauty pageants, designers’ contests, model hunts, and fashion weeks are scheduled one after the other in the calendar. During such events, an ethnic fashion show is hardly ever missing. Not surprisingly, today’s ethnic fashion in Nagaland is based on traditional clothing. One hundred years ago, this traditional clothing was considered everyday wear with a precise and detailed system of codes and social meanings attached to it. The aim of this paper is to examine the transitions undergone by ethnic dress in Nagaland: from social status to ethnic identity (see also Wettstein 2011).4 Applying a rather classical approach in fashion theory (cf. e.g. Davis 1994), I focus on the messages and meanings of dress. Starting with the colonial context, my initial questions are: What messages and meanings were communicated by Naga dress in historical times, by the single components which

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1 “The Ethnic Group of Nagaland” (EGoN), a society organising such events as model contests and talent shows.
2 North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur, Nagaland (an institution by the Government of India).
3 Spelling as original.
4 My data is based on field and museum research conducted over the last ten years largely financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) project “Material Culture, Oral Traditions, and Identity among the Naga of Northeast India” (2006–2010) directed by Michael Oppitz. The paper is based on a presentation that was held at the ASA12 conference in Delhi in 2012. I would like to thank the organiser of the conference panel, Tereza Kuldova, Oslo, for her valuable input and Malcolm Green, Berlin, for the copy editing.
made up the dresses, and by the contexts in which they were used? I will then take a leap in time to the Nagaland of the last fifteen or so years and look at the recent emergence of the present ethnic fashion movement there. Some of the main questions will be: In what context did the ethnic fashion scene emerge in Nagaland, and what messages and meanings do these contexts attempt to communicate? Which are the ethnic dress components that are used in this type of fashion, and what messages and meanings are they perceived to be communicating today; and how do they relate to the “old times”? And lastly, with what other dress components are they combined and what messages and meanings are communicated by these other components?

Naga Dress Transforming in History

The Naga are a group of local cultures inhabiting the hills along today’s boarder between northeast India and northwest Myanmar. When in the early twentieth century the first British administrators and anthropologists wrote their monographs on the Naga (e.g. Hutton 1921a,b, Mills 1922, 1926, 1937, von Fürer-Haimendorf 1939) and assembled huge collections of Naga dress and ornament for their museums⁵, most of these items had a precise meaning encoded in them: They told of the wearer’s social status, which was gained through bravery in war or expenditure in feasts of merit; inherited by birth into a clan; or linked to stages in the life cycle. The readability of such codes was geographically circumscribed – at times even restricted to a single village – and only in some cases had greater regional validity. Soon the Nagas became famous in Europe, not only for their practice of head-hunting, but also for their splendid and distinctive material culture, especially their jewellery and dress.

After the Indian independence, the Naga region became a closed-off territory that was very difficult for outsiders to access. In the second half of the twentieth century, an underground army was organised among the Nagas that fought for Naga independence, and many a bloody battle with the Indian army resulted in an estimated 100,000 dead⁶ (cf. c.g. West 1999, Nuh and Wetshokholo 2002). During the same period of insurgency Baptist Christian missions exerted a firm grasp (e.g. Ao 2000), and today the vast majority of the Nagas are Christians while the old worldviews and religious concepts have largely vanished (also Oppitz et. al. 2008). Only a few features still persist of the former Naga culture, above all in the field of material culture. Many of the traditional dress items are still produced and used in Nagaland today – with transformed designs and new meanings attached to them.

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⁵ For instance the large collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford University, England, the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, England, the Weltmuseum Wien, Austria, the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, Switzerland, and the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, Germany, as well as the smaller collections of The British Museum, London, England, the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich, Germany, the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich, Switzerland, and the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France. Cf. also Jacobs 1990, Kunz and Joshi 2008.

⁶ The number of victims has never been verified by independent sources. Some Naga activists speak of up to 200,000 victims which would mean roughly 10% of the population.
When the armed conflict began to cool down in the 1990s and cease-fire agreements were being made, the Nagas could once again start to look to the future with fresh creative thoughts. Recently, a vibrant ethnic fashion scene has emerged in Nagaland, making strong use of traditional ornaments and textiles. But rather than presenting a precise and detailed code of individual social status, as in former times, nowadays these dresses express a general ethnic and Naga national pride. The contemporary ethnic fashion scene in Nagaland is, however, not rooted in the local clothing habits and does not follow the rules of the fashion industry. It mainly lives on the catwalk and through the sponsorship of and active promotion by the government of Nagaland. In the following paragraphs I will track these developments in more detail by starting with Naga dress as it was perceived by the colonial observers at the turn of the last century.

Naga Dress in (Pre-)Colonial Times

As we can gather from the colonial monographs previously mentioned in this article about the Nagas, the European museum collections and the historical photographic archives (von Stockhausen 2011, SOAS special collections\(^7\)), dress in Naga society – especially festive attire – always made a statement about social status. This statement was sometimes so detailed and precise that during the spring festivals, head-receiving ceremonies, or feasts of merit, when everybody dressed up in his and her best, one could read the social position of an individual simply by their dress. In my earlier work on Naga textiles (Wettstein 2011) I tried to unravel this coded system in detail for one Naga group, the Ao Naga. At this point, I will give just a brief impression of how the dress-code of status worked among them:

Among the Ao women, one could distinguish from the colour of the hairband that held a woman’s bun together which language group she belonged to: the Chungli-speaking Ao wore black, the Mongsen and Changki-speaking Ao white. The hornbill feather in a woman’s hair conveyed that her brother, father or grandfather had performed at least one mithun sacrifice. If she wore large, square crystal earrings and strings of carnelian beads around her neck, she was financially well off. If she wore spiral brass rings fixed to her head and trumpet-shaped brass bracelets on her upper arm, she was assuredly from the Pongen clan, or in a few cases perhaps the Longkum clan, but certainly not of the Jami clan. And only the very rich Pongen clan ladies wore a long string with bells across their chests. Women whose fathers had performed the full cycle of a feast of merit with all the animal sacrifices entailed, including the sacrifice of the precious mithuns, were allowed to wear a specific number of specially ornamented stripes on their skirts and bells along its lower seam, and in some villages they wore full body cloths covered with long red tassels. In other villages the ornamented stripes on the

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\(^7\) For the more recent history of Nagaland see for example von Stockhausen and Wettstein (2012).  
\(^8\) For a visual impression see the photographs of Alban von Stockhausen in Jamir 2008.  
\(^9\) More than 500 Naga photographs by Christoph von Führer-Haimendorf are publicly accessiable in the online archive of the special collections of the School of Oriental and African Studies London. (http://www.soas.ac.uk/furer-haimendorf/archive/)
skirts gave exact information as to how many *mithuns* had been sacrificed by the wearer's family.

Likewise, the feasts of merit and the *mithun* sacrifices were recorded minutely among Ao men, but another message that had to be included in their dress was their status as a warrior or head-hunter. The best piece of cloth for that purpose was a shawl called a *tsunkotepsù*. Drawn along its middle-band were a number of small figures referred directly to the number of *mithun* sacrifices, whether or not the wearer was a real head-hunter, and also what his general character was like: Was he strong like an elephant, had he the foresight of a cock, could he creep stealthily like a tiger? As with the women, hornbill feathers on the man's hat indicated *mithun* sacrifices, three feathers for the first sacrifice, five feathers for the second, and seven for the third, which represents the full cycle of a feast of merit. Records also show (Mills 1926: 49–52) that among Ao men, constant disputes were held over the right to wear elephant tusk armlets on the upper arm. Which clan may wear one of the armlets on one arm or on both, and under which circumstances, was the constant subject of negotiations in the village courts. This shows that even in historic times, the dress code was not fixed for all eternity.

Just as classical fashion theory suggests (Veblen 1899, Simmel 1904, König 1958), people constantly tried to "dress their way up" in the hierarchy and challenge the status quo.

With a few exceptions, most of the colourful Naga dress elements that can be found in European museum collections or that are depicted in historical photographs were worn only in a festive context, during the large spring ritual dances, the head-receiving ceremonies, or the feasts of merit. These were the moments when people really dressed up, while in everyday life they mostly wore old, simple-coloured cloths around their waists and shoulders.

The examples given above are only valid for a specific group of people, the Ao Naga: among other Naga groups we may for example have found that stages in the life cycle were encoded into their dress, even such features as extramarital affairs; but only for a certain period of time, at the beginning of the 20th century. For a long time now, head-hunting and *mithun* sacrifices have no longer been performed by the Nagas. Other festivals have likewise changed in character. One feature, however, that does not seem to have changed up till now in its general structure of meaning – notably among the Ao Naga – is the clan system. And to this day the rights as to which clan may wear which textile pattern or accessory are strictly controlled. But of course, along with the general cultural changes – influenced by British colonialism and its administration, American Baptist missions, global political awareness, a bloody fight for independence, and an ever-changing economic situation – the style of dressing and its messages and meanings have also changed. The dress system as it was still practiced at the beginning of the 20th century has long since vanished. Everyday wear in Nagaland looks quite different today. What once was simply Naga dress, has, with new materials, combinations and meanings, now become “traditional” costume. Every Naga group still celebrates annual festivals at which these “traditional” costumes are worn and a centralised state festival, the Hornbill Festival, fosters such traditional attire by inviting dance groups from all over Nagaland. But these festivals have very little to
do with the rituals, belief systems, and world views of the Nagas of the early 20th century.

Some fifteen or twenty years ago, Nagaland witnessed the awakening of a local ethnic fashion movement which has grown in the meantime into one of the most visible vehicles for expressing Naga national pride. Probably the events that have led furthest to the emergence of this movement have been the aforementioned Nagaland Hornbill Festival and the Miss Nagaland Beauty Pageant with its fashion shows, both held every year in the month of December. In the following, I shall briefly outline these events and the use of traditional dress or components thereof.

The Hornbill Festival and the Naga Ethnic Fashion Scene

In its beginnings, the Hornbill Festival was held on the local grounds in Kohima, on the football and event square at the centre of the capital of the Indian Union State of Nagaland. The festival mainly attracted nearby town dwellers and occasional visitors from the villages, and the groups dancing in their ethnic costumes were mostly brought in from the vicinity. Over the years, the Hornbill Festival has
grown into the biggest festival in Nagaland; held for a whole week on a purpose-built festival ground near Kisama village, some ten minutes outside of Kohima. Dolly Kikon (2005) has shown how the Hornbill Festival has turned into a spectacular aimed at promoting Northeast India as a tourist destination and as an interesting investment market within the frame of major political campaigns. As I have described elsewhere (von Stockhausen and Wettstein 2008: 180–181),

"the regional government of Nagaland, which hosts the event, is making use of the various local tribal festivals as a resource to furnish the recently created [Hornbill] festival with traditionally-dressed, colourful 'cultural groups'. The logistical feat behind the event – transport, catering, and accommodation for the many hundred festival participants – is immense. (...) The festival is preceded by large-scale marketing campaigns in newspapers and pamphlets, self-confidently advertising 'cultural extravagance' and inviting the public to visit various seasonal events such as fashion shows, beauty pageants, music festivals and textile exhibitions. (...) These efforts are suggestive of an attempt to give expression to a common, trans-tribal 'Naga' identity. This also becomes apparent when one considers the gross disproportion between festival visitors and participants. The great majority of visitors is made up of inhabitants of the capital, the local villages and the actual participants. Tourists make up only a very small minority."  

Cultural groups from all the tribes in Nagaland are invited to the festival and, dressed in their "traditional costumes", present dances in the large arena and offer local food in houses built in "traditional" styles. In short: They perform "tradition" for a week. When evening comes, they take off their costumes and return to one of the nearby villages that host the participants, only to come back to the arena the next morning. Mere visitors are usually dressed in everyday clothes, mostly in "Western" style (albeit largely of Korean origin), perhaps with the addition of an ethnic accessory such as a shoulder shawl or a locally woven skirt 10.

Even though the types of dresses that are displayed at the Hornbill Festival are considered "traditional costume" – and not "fashion" –, they are often created specifically for this event. Not so with regard to the textiles, but often with regard to accessories, jewellery, and assemblages of all the pieces. Dance groups make sure that their members will present a coherent and impressive visual whole 11. Therefore, a lot of consideration goes into what to wear and how to combine it. The fact that traditional jewellery is consciously designed can be shown by the case of an interesting "designer" who lives in Ungma village, well known among the Nagas for its strong traditions. Ungma is the seat of the Naga Watir, the (men's) association of the Ao Naga. These men discuss cultural, political and economic matters and are often responsible for cultural programmes. One of its members is the well-respected and well-off Tia Longkumer. His son studied fashion design at the NIFT 12 in Guwahati and specialised in textile prints, while his daughter-in-law, Akala Pongen, studied dress-making at the same institute and has locally become one of the best renowned Naga ethnic fashion designers. Inspired by the young generation, Tia – who is in his sixties – started to design tra-

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10 For an impression of everyday wear and fashion in Nagaland see Merelli 2011.
11 For a visual impression see von Stockhausen and Wettstein 2012.
12 National Institute of Fashion Technology (India).
ditional accessories for men: necklaces, headgear, and armlets. His influence in the village is so large that a lot of men will wear his creations during “traditional” dance programmes. And this does not contradict local notions of tradition. Many Nagas, young and old, told me that they do not see any problem in “inventing tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) or, as they prefer to say, the “dynamics of tradition”. “Tradition that doesn’t move is dead”, says Theja Meru, who is one of the leading young cultural activists and social workers in Kohima. As long as the change takes place within the framework of certain rules, it is seen as and understood characteristic of tradition.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Wettstein 2011), such rules may be set for example by certain organisations, as for instance the women’s association in the case of the Ao Naga, who keep an eye on how traditional textile patterns are used in the upcoming ethnic fashion scene. They may at times issue a ban on using certain patterns for such fashions. Whether this ban is followed, circumvented, or even openly disobeyed in specific instances depends on a large variety of factors, such as the association’s geographical reach, the power relations between its members, and the economic and social status of the designers. To once again draw on the example of the Ao Nagas, there was a major discussion in the women’s association as to whether or not local fashion designers should be allowed to use the most respected men’s shawl, the tsunkotepsü mentioned above, to make men’s waistcoats. The fashion of sewing waistcoats from traditional men’s textiles has been the rage in Nagaland for about five to ten years, and the pieces are widely used, especially by the middle-aged generation. In the case of the tsunkotepsü, the women’s association deemed it as lacking in re-
spect to cut or transform the most cherished traditional shawl and the symbols
drawn on it. The association issued a ban on using the shawl, but finally lifted
it again, because, as one of their former presidents put it: "It makes no sense to
forbid something that has already been created and punish fashion designers in
retrospect. Times change, and who knows what will be ten years from now." Nev-
evertheless, the association had a large impact on ethnic fashion
design among the Ao. The notion that traditional textiles and accessories have to
be treated with great respect is especially strong among them and prevents many
from trying their hand at ethnic fashion design.

For the Hornbill Festival – and for many local festivals of similar nature but with
smaller catchment areas – the components of traditional costumes can be re-
arranged to dress ensembles, and this also gives room to play with them for eth-
nic fashion creations. Most probably the first opportunity for a public showing of
these creations in Nagaland was provided by the Beauty and Aesthetic Society of
Nagaland which, for some fifteen years now, has organised the annual Miss Na-
galand Beauty Pageant. Meanwhile, Naga ethnic fashion is shown at dozens of
fashion shows, beauty pageants, model hunts and designer contests right across
the state.

Naga Fusion Fashion and the Markers of Ethnic Distinction

One of the first indigenous fashion designers to use traditional dress elements
in combination with “Western” style fashion was probably Kos Zhasa, an Angami
Naga, who is considered to be the first Naga graduate from NIFT in India.

Even though many years have passed since their first appearance, pieces
from one of her earliest collections were still being shown at a fashion show dur-
ing the Miss Nagaland Beauty Pageant in 2005, and for many years she exerted
a great influence on how Naga ethnic fashion, which was predominately made for
women, was initially made: taking existing traditional textiles or handloom skirts
and shawls, cutting and sewing them together with other fabrics bought from the
market, she produced a very formfitting dress. In this way, she created some of
the first modern Naga ethnic mini-skirts and the prototypes of the Naga interpre-
tations of so-called “gipsy” or “flamenco” dresses in shapes that are most untyp-
ical for the Nagas. Traditionally, women’s skirts consist of rectangular pieces of
cloth that are wrapped around the waist and bound quite tightly. Long wide and
floating skirts of many layers like the one shown by Zhasa were not common.

Apart from the fashion shows, which were staged as an entertainment be-
tween the rounds of contestants, one section of the beauty contest is always dedi-
cated to ethnic dress. In some contests these “modern ethnic dresses,” as they
were called for example in the 2005 show, were designed by each contestant her-
self.

At other events, a single designer was responsible for all the ethnic fashions –
especially in regional contests, where most participants are from the same Naga
group. Until now, many dresses in some Naga groups rely heavily on “traditional”

13 For a detailed description of the shawl and its symbols see Wettstein 2008 and 2011.
models. As I related elsewhere (Wettstein 2011: 261), the general message these dresses on stage communicated was ethnic glamour. “Ethnic” in this context has to be understood on two levels: on the “national” level the Nagas perceive themselves as one nation, and on the “tribal” level the contestants were asked to choose textiles typical for their respective Naga group. The intended message was one of “diversity in unity” and one of the effects these dresses had was to cement the notion that certain patterns and designs are typically Ao, or typically Angami and so forth.

What is remarkable in most of the locally produced Naga ethnic fashion creations I have seen so far is that the dresses strictly respect tribal boundaries. Apart from the fact that some pattern similarities can also be found in very traditional textile designs, and with the exception of the designs by Bambi Kevichusa described below, new Naga ethnic fashion creations always seem to be geared to making the tribal affiliation – Angami, Ao, Chakesang, Konyak etc. – quite blatant and unmistakably. It seems to be an unwritten rule that tribal elements of two or more tribes are never mixed in one dress, unless the elements are in any case traditionally used by several tribes. It just seems inappropriate to touch or violate rights to certain patterns and ornaments on a tribal level, just as it was forbidden in former times to wear a dress or dress element to which one was not entitled on the basis of one’s personal status or clan affiliation.\textsuperscript{14} In this way, in the case of the Nagas, ethnic fashion cements ethnic boundaries on the local level.

Over the years these dresses became more “fusioned”: Instead of using

\textsuperscript{14} Many thanks to Janaki Turaga, IIT Delhi.
ready-made traditional textiles as before, the designers started to have new cloth woven with pattern fields calculated perfectly to fit the cut of the finished dress. What was considered fusion fashion showed a stronger integration and intermix of local and Western dress elements. The dresses designed in this way were no longer perceived as “ethnic dress” but rather as “formal wear” with an ethnic touch. Some of the dresses that were worn during the “Miss Eastern Nagaland Beauty Pageant” in Tuensang in 2007 demonstrated this quality. A most obvious example of this kind was shown by Chakhesang designer Rosou Rhi in a collection with which he won the “Magical Thread of the Northeast” designers contest in 2010. It features a mixture of lines and stripes that is very characteristic of Angami and Chakhesang textiles, arranged as a border on a woman’s short tunic dress.

In 2010, several fashion shows were launched during the Hornbill Festival. One featured “traditional fashion” from the whole of Northeast India, a second was called the “Hornbill Fashion Night” and showcased “modern” and fusion fash-

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15 During this show, also another type of fashion which at first sight has nothing to do with ethnic dress was presented. One of the models appeared in a long, hand-knitted woollen shawl with rainbow colours and matching stockings and cap. The large applause that greeted her appearance might have surprised an outsider, because what could be so special about a rainbow-coloured shawl and a cap? But for the Naga audience, these accessories have a very specific, ethnic connotation. The colours have nothing to do with traditional dress, but they symbolise the rainbow which emblazons the flag of the Naga Underground Government, a flag that is banned in India.

16 The spelling of the name differs in different media; I applied the spelling as it is mostly used in Morung Express, one of the leading newspapers in Nagaland.
ion from local Naga designers; and of course the annual “Miss Nagaland Beauty Pageant” included an ethnic modern section along with shows by local designers. Even though some of the designers still relied heavily on traditional textiles and jewellery, as for example Akala Pongen from Ungma mentioned above, who won one of the awards at the “Hornbill Designers Contest”, a new trend became apparent for using traditional textiles and symbolism in such a transformed way as to blend in perfectly with contemporary “Western” design. In some cases such a subtle fusion or merging of Naga ethnic components and other styles was achieved that the Naga ethnical markers can only be detected on second view and with specific background knowledge. Only an observer who knows the distinct style of the use of beads in traditional Naga jewellery as compared to, for instance, African jewellery could now attribute a specific dress to a Naga fashion designer without context information. One local designer of this kind of fashion is Bambi Kevichusa, and some of the dresses shown during the 2010 “Fashion Night” clearly illustrate this new idea of “Naga elegance.” The “ethnic” element in her show was reduced to a few cowries or a single string of beads. In another creation at the Fashion Night by Takjemkala Jamir, nothing hints at “Naganess” or an “ethnic” element to an outside observer. The blue fabric for the jacket and the hat, however, is that of a traditional Ao itsungšü shawl.
The Government-Sponsored Fashion Bubble and the Market Reality

When talking of the ethnic fashion scene in Nagaland, it is important to emphasise that the dresses described are only worn (until now) for the show. Especially the ethnic dresses that appear at fashion shows or beauty pageants are worn exclusively on the catwalk. Very unlike ethnic fusion fashion in other parts of India, which has become part of the regular middle and upper class wardrobe, people “on the street” of Nagaland do not wear such fashions. Even more so, it is also extremely difficult to buy the dresses at all. Most of them are privately owned by the models or the fashion designers, and not intended for sale. One of the exceptionally few institutions that recently succeeded to acquire some examples of such catwalk pieces for an exhibition about Nagaland is the Weltmuseum Wien.

The ethnic fashion designers in Nagaland are not dependent on selling their creations and they do not have to promote their labels among the general audience, because most of the shows and contests are totally subsidised by the Government of Nagaland. This means that the fashion scene in Nagaland functions largely independent from the rest of the fashion scene in India or elsewhere. Shefalee Vasudev, fashion columnist of The Indian Express, concludes that the fashion scene in Nagaland is like an island in the sea, which does not care about seasonal collections or wearability.\textsuperscript{17} Ethnic fashion in Nagaland is linked much more closely to the governmental programme of identity-building than to economics. This programme can for example easily be recognised when browsing

\textsuperscript{17} Personal communication and The Indian Express 19.12.2010.
through the official website of the Government of Nagaland. In the section “about Nagaland” we can read the following:18

"Each of the 16 odd tribes and sub-tribes that dwell in this exotic hill State can easily be distinguished by the colourful and intricately designed costumes, jewellery and beads that they adorn. The present generation of Nagas have ventured into fashion designing in a big way, reproducing fabrics that represent the ancestral motifs blended with modern appeal. Indeed, it is a beautiful mix of the past with the present. . . . a paradise for those who are into fashion designing. This is an affluent fashion station of the East.”

That fashion is exploited by political agents for identity-building processes is not uncommon. As I have related elsewhere (Wettstein 2011: 232–233), there is a whole branch of fashion theory dedicated to the question of appearance and ethnic identity which points out in many examples from all over the world in what way the construction of ethnicity is closely linked to appearance management (Eicher 1995, Lynch 1999, Edwards 2001, Maynard 2004: 69–86, Steele 2005).

In these studies it is made very obvious that notions of “ethnic” or “tribal” identity often only became relevant after an encounter with a colonising power. The naming of ethnic identities by the colonisers went hand in hand with the introduction of labour migration and a capitalistic market, which had a huge impact on ethnic self-perception (Eriksen 2002: 86ff.). Contemporary strong emphasis on

18 http://nagaland.nic.in/profile/history/about.htm (last accessed 05.12.2012).
ethnic appearance and dress often originates in such a situation and is today reinforced by a tourist environment, the need to display identity in the diasporas, or in a surrounding in which ethnic membership is questioned by political pressure. In this way the link between "ethnic" or "tribal" identity and dress is as new as the concepts of ethnicity and tribality themselves. Also in the case of the Nagas, we can find that the code of tribal identity in appearance is related to a colonial construct of ethnic identity. Once installed, it developed a great dynamism in the current project of preparing Nagaland for large-scale tourism.

Since both tradition and fashion are mainly "performed" in a context of Government-sponsored shows in which the messages and meanings of the ethnic design elements have changed from expressing individual social status to ethnic identity, one is tempted to argue that the meaning of "traditional" fashion in general has changed entirely among the Nagas. But apart from the fact that the ethnic design elements can still be clearly recognised today as transformations of older ornaments and dress elements, there are also other aspects of Naga fashion which are comparable to the "old times." Also in colonial times, the most outstanding dress combinations were only worn during festivals and rituals. Also in the past they were "only for show." These "shows" mostly consisted of dances and games and the dance groups were composed according to socially coherent entities, by people of the same clan or of the same village, for example. Thus, the groups, while performing in their most splendid dresses, expressed a proud feeling and competed with one another. Their "show" was organised by the village community. The shows and festivals organised by the Government of Nagaland
can thus be seen in a peculiar way as a transformation of the festivals and rituals of a long vanished Naga culture.

Of course, the protective bubble that the Government of Nagaland has created for the fashion designers bursts as soon as they try to stand on their own feet, especially outside Nagaland. Which is why we must also take a brief look at some of the Naga fashion designers who work outside of Nagaland, who are not integrated in the governmentally protected fashion space, and who have managed to receive national and international recognition on the catwalk.

One of the best-known Naga fashion designers is undoubtedly Atsu Sekhose, who has been working for the Spanish fashion label Zara and, after having launched his own label "Atsu," was recently the object of much discussion after designing Miss India's dress for the Miss World 2011 competition. The fact a Naga designed her dress contributed immensely to the ethnic pride among many Nagas.

Until recently, Atsu's fashion did not contain any ethnic Naga design elements whatsoever; nevertheless, he had a big influence on the fashion scene in Nagaland, including the ethnic one. As a role model for Naga fashion designers, his style has also inspired the ethnic fashion scene, notably with regard to the new elegance in ethnic Naga fashion, the fusion fashion as described above. In 2012, Atsu Sekhose was approached by the Indian Ministry of Textiles and asked to represent the Northeast of India at the prestigious "Willis Lifestyle India Fashion Week" with a collection for the spring season 2013. The Willis Fashion Week is one of the most widely recognised fashion events in India and for this presen-
tation Sekhose integrated some Naga symbolism into his creations. What is remarkable is that he did not choose to take the traditional textiles as the basis for his fashions. He rather depicted generally accepted pan-Naga symbols such as the stylised mithun horns to strikingly decorate the chests of otherwise white T-shirts and blouses.  

Another Naga designer who has “made it” outside Nagaland is Imcha Imchen, whose creations include very recognisably Naga design elements. For some years now, he has presented his own fashion label “Imcha” at the Lakmé Fashion Week, and in 2010 also made an appearance at the London Fashion Week. As yet, he is the only internationally recognised Naga fashion designer to make extensive use of traditional textile patterns in his creations. By way of example we can take a woman’s dress from his collection “Do you know when the river has run dry” (Spring/Summer 2010): The seams on the arms and legs are ornamented with adaptations of those shapes that are drawn on the white panels of one of the best-known Rengma Naga men’s shawls. Also, Imcha Imchen scarcely takes ready-made traditional textiles for his creations. He re-designs the textiles and thus transforms the patterns, often by abstracting the shapes considerably. That his creations are not mainly based on Naga traditional dress, but on a general understanding of Naga tradition, is most apparent in a shirt fabric he designed using one of the most common Naga symbols for wealth, the mithun horns. The visual basis here is not taken from any traditional dress element, but from a traditional symbol of Naga wood carving. But his designs also recognisably contain elements of “Indian” fashion (as for instance in collar shapes) and his declared aim is to build bridges between Naga and Indian design as a contribution to cultural understanding.

In a conversation we had in winter 2011, Imcha Imchen confirmed that his long-term objective is to shift his fashion label from Mumbai to Nagaland itself. But he felt that Nagaland was not ready yet for a consumer-oriented everyday-wear ethnic fashion scene. Meanwhile, he is approaching his home territory with a project for textile heritage awareness by reviving traditional dyeing techniques and developing a general “Heritage Foundation Project”, thus paving the ground for his future vision of a grassroots-based ethnic fashion label within Nagaland.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the ethnic fashion scene in Nagaland has been exploding in the last decade featuring creations in dozens of fashion shows, beauty pageants, model hunts, and designer contests in the annual calendar. The meaning of Naga ethnic dress or of single entities of textile ornaments underwent a transition from denoting a detailed code of local social status to a general statement of ethnic identity and belonging. The contemporary categories of clothing that incorporate ethnic markers range from “traditional costumes” worn for cultural festivals, to

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19 For a visual impression of Atsu Sekhose’s designs visit his website: http://atsu.in (last accessed 01.07.2012).

20 For a visual impression of Imcha Imchen’s designs visit his website and online journal: http://www.imchaimchen.com / http://www.imchaimchen.in (last accessed 01.07.2012).
so-called “ethnic dress” presented as specials at events and shows, and “fusion fashion” considered a modern form of Naga elegance. Currently, this ethnic glamour conveys the message of “diversity in unity”, while simultaneously cementing the ethnic boundaries between the Naga tribes and aiming at a universal Naga style. Overall sponsorship granted by the government of Nagaland frees the local designers from the need to produce for the market. In this way it can at the same time make sure to communicate its message of ethnic identity. The case of Naga ethnic fashion shows how closely fashion and its intended meaning and message are interwoven with the agenda of the governmental sponsors. Fashion seems to have a great potential of carrying messages of identity and belonging, especially in cases where it is not subject to consumer taste and budget.

Only few Naga designers operating outside Nagaland have made it to the national and international catwalks. A very recent and celebrated “Gen Next” discovery at the Lakhmé Fashion Week is Asa Kazingmei, a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur, showing his first collection in 2012. As a result, mainland Indian media (for example Wal 2012 in Tehelka Magazine, Dundoo 2012 in The Hindu) slowly start to recognise the potential of fashion design to reschedule the Nagas in the Indian national consciousness as a creative fashion people rather than a bunch of dangerous insurgents.

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