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'Cultural Extravagance' and the Search for Identity in Present-day Nagaland

A Naga warrior is standing upright in front of the *morung*. His ornate hat made of hornbill feathers and bearskin is well visible from a distance; in front of his chest he holds an old-fashioned muzzle-loader with which he is about to fire a shot into the air. His bearskin gaiters are covered in dust after having performed the head-hunting dance to the throbbing sound of a log-drum. Proudly he assumes the right pose for the cameras of the waiting tourists. [Fig. 343]



→ Fig. 343, p. 186

'The richness of Naga heritage and tradition is revealed through majestic dances, songs and games in the festival. It transmits vibrant message to the world on the uniqueness of the Naga people and their culture and the need to revive and protect the same as to gain due recognition in the world.'¹

In these words one of the local newspapers praises the Nagaland Hornbill Festival in 2005. The quote is typical for the media coverage of this week-long event at the beginning of December. Large-scale colour photographs with hyped-up titles depict colourful, exotic dance groups. Each day the programme brochure announces which of the Naga tribes is presenting its traditional songs and dances, its storytellers, traditional games, sports, theatre-plays or pre-Christian rituals. Short articles highlight the 'exquisite Naga cuisine' or praise the traditional handicrafts that are sold at more than 90 stands on the festival ground. The visitors also receive recommendations to visit the various *morung*, the traditional men's sleeping houses that have been constructed as an open-air museum across the festival ground, following the distribution pattern of the different tribes within Nagaland. [Fig. 344]

1 Chizokho Vero, *Morning Express*, Saturday 3 December 2005.



→ Fig. 344, p. 186

According to the indigenous Naga anthropologist Dolly Kikon (2005a), the Hornbill Festival is part of a major political campaign that aims at promoting Northeastern India as an attractive tourist destination and an interesting investment market. 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 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 and relies on the support of many of the nearby villages.

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. As the above quote seems to be implying, 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 since entry to Nagaland is handled very restrictively and even visitors from other Indian states need a special permit. For the local press the festival's jamboree atmosphere is more a 'form of carnival' than the continuation of a living cultural tradition.² Seen from a superficial point of view, the Hornbill

2 S. Daiho Mao, *Nagaland Post*, Friday 9 December 2005.

Festival has the character of a slightly oversized tourist attraction, not unlike many

other folk festivals around the world whose financial and logistical costs never pay off; but the grandiloquent eulogies in the local media suggest that there is more to the event and that it possibly also serves other, more important functions (see also PICARD & ROBINSON 2006).

— The 'Uniqueness of the Naga' as an Argument in the Struggle for Independence —

One important function that the event has with respect to Naga identity is reflected in the quote at the beginning of this contribution where the 'uniqueness of the Naga people' is addressed. For the local population this has a very patriotic and historical touch and stands as a metaphor for the struggle for independence that has been going on for more than half a century. It was on this idea of 'uniqueness' that the first Naga movements for political unification founded their claim for national independence. At the peak of British colonial rule in the Naga territories – in the 1920s and 1930s – a core group consisting of tribal leaders and intellectuals from the otherwise very locally focussed and operating Naga groups got together, calling themselves the Naga-Club. They understood that the Naga could only prevail against the great powers – both colonial and post-colonial – if they united and came to see themselves as one people. The experience of the First World War essentially contributed to this insight, when Naga men from various tribes had been recruited by the Crown and sent to France where they served in a regiment responsible for road maintenance. Triggered by the experience of global political and power relations, the returnees began to develop their first conceptions of independence (IWGIA 1986: 17 et seq.). In view of territorial and tribal fragmentation the Naga-Club saw it as its duty to take on a leading role in this struggle and began initiating the first steps towards a desired independence. In 1946 the Naga-Club became the Naga National Council (NNC), which then put forward the motion to the British colonial power, demanding that the Nagas be left to decide on the independence issue for themselves. Following this the Nagas declared independence on 14 August 1947 – one day before India (NUH 2002: 111–115). However, India was not prepared to accept the Naga declaration since it was stipulated in the Act of Independence with Britain that 'parts of the province of Assam', the boundaries of which had not yet been definitely laid down and which, depending on interpretation, included the Naga territories, should fall to the new nation (Indian Independence Act 1947).

Thus the seeds of conflict were sown, and in the 1950s a bitter guerrilla war raged in the Naga territories between the Indian military and armed Naga insurgent groups; a war that nobody outside India really noticed. But there is probably not a village in present-day Nagaland that has not suffered the brunt of this war; just about every family has suffered losses. The whole region was declared a military no-go zone, and both foreigners and Indian citizens were forbidden entry. When finally an agreement was reached between the Indian government and the NNC, which foresaw the establishment of a more or less autonomous Naga federal state under the Indian constitution, the NNC leaders signed a peace treaty. However, not all groups agreed to this settlement, especially not the representatives of those Naga groups

whose territories lay outside the new federal state (i.e. those in Manipur and in Burma). This led to a split between the different Naga groups and the formation of a new underground movement, the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland), which kept on fighting against the Indian troops until, in 1988, the NSCN itself broke into two warring factions (CHASIE 1999: 49). In the mid-1990s the two enemy factions signed a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government, which meant that from 2001 onwards the entry ban for foreign tourists to Nagaland was partially lifted. However, the internal conflict between the two warring underground factions continues to this day.

Still today the Naga independence claim is underpinned by the argument that the Naga constitute 'one people', or at least a grouping of related peoples, on the basis of their 'uniqueness' (see e.g. KIKON 2005b; SATYANARAYANAN 2004 and NUH 2002: 14–16). But what actually constitutes this 'uniqueness'? Since linguistic criteria do not provide sufficient basis for shared identity – the Naga speak more than 40 different languages that do not all belong to the same language group and which are not necessarily congruent with 'tribal boundaries' (VAN DRIEM 2008) – the sense of belonging together is based on ideas of territorial unity, common material culture (with respect to clothing and adornment), social structure (with reference to the *morung* institution and the special type of political leadership in the villages) and ideological culture (e.g. the feasts of merit and the seasonal feasts) (LOTHA 2008). In spite of the ongoing conflict between the two rival underground factions and sustained tribalism the demand for independence meets with broad support among the Nagas. Moreover, the fact that Hindu-nationalist movements in India look upon 'non-Indian' looking Indians – and these certainly include the Naga people with their more Burmese physiognomy and their distinctly different material culture – as second-class citizens³ fuels the longing for independence and underpins 'the undeniable fact that the Naga are not Indians' (Plebiscitary speech by the legendary NCC-leader A. Z. Phizo on 16 May 1951, in NUH 2002: 118).

Thus, the Hornbill Festival in all its colourful variety and richness expresses the wish of 'all Naga tribes' to be looked upon as 'one people', just as their distinct material otherness shows them to be different from India; and this although the State Government of Nagaland, whose ministry of tourism and Department of Art and Culture is responsible for the organisation of the festival, officially recognises allegiance to the Indian Constitution. The festival is looked upon as a powerful tool to spread the message of 'uniqueness' to the world via the channel of tourism and thus attain 'due recognition' as stated in the quote at the outset of the article. The feeling that outside recognition will eventually put pressure on India is not merely a silently hedged hope but the official view as stated in UNPO⁴ where the Nagas have been represented by the NSCN since 1993.

3 A project initiated by Prof. Subba of the Anthropology Department at the North Eastern Hill University in Shillong deals with this issue under the title 'The Indian Face'.

4 Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, an international non-government organisation with consultant status in the UN Economic and Social Council (www.unpo.org).

— 'Revitalisation and Protection' as a Reaction to the Destruction of Culture in the Context of Baptist Proselytization —

According to the quote at the beginning however, the Hornbill Festival is not only to be seen as propaganda for the unity and uniqueness of the Naga people, it also stands for the necessity to 'revive and protect' Naga culture. The journalist seems to be echoing what many Nagas cautiously suggest when speaking to foreign visitors: the culture of their forefathers was destroyed at its core in the course of the colonial era, especially through conversion to

the Baptist faith, and is gradually fading into oblivion. In order to retain at least some of the culture it has to be actively nourished, which is something that the young jeans-, sneakers- and T-shirt-generation is not doing enough.

Anyone who visits Nagaland today immediately realises that in everyday life there is little left in terms of 'traditional culture' in its original context. The best places to look for 'traditional culture' are the monographs by the old colonial anthropologists such as J. P. Mills, J. H. Hutton and C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, or museum archives in Europe. Splendidly dressed, proud warriors and weavers adorned with heavy carnelian necklaces, or farmers working with stone-age hoes emanate pure exoticism, lest one has the chance to travel through Nagaland under the guidance of the Ministry of Tourism or is lucky enough to witness one of the local cultural festivals. These survivals are actually meant to commemorate traditional Naga culture and – if possible – even to revive it. Each of the 16 tribes in Nagaland⁵ stages at least one annual festival. They are recommended by the government as a tourist attraction and celebrated by the local village population; often they are incorporated in a Christian context. The great Hornbill Festival in Kohima, for example, is not a completely modern invention, it goes back to a tradition of feasting that lives on in many villages today. But as the example of the Ao shows, the long years of seclusion have changed the face of these feasts. While J. P. Mills (1926: 107–132, 219–220, 252 et seq.) still lists numerous smaller annual feasts and rituals

5 Due to the ongoing amalgamation and division of tribal units the official number of tribes in Nagaland is disputed. In the spring of 2007 the situation was made even more complex through the introduction of a new minority politics by the Indian government and the introduction of the new category 'backward tribes' for which even a new government ministry is planned.

as well as important feasts of merit and life-cycle rituals, most of the villages today actually only celebrate *Moatsü* which could be described as a harvest feast. Events associated with traditional animistic beliefs have been practically abandoned.

Baptist missionaries took up their work in the Ao region at a very early stage. The Clarks, an American missionary couple, were among the first to settle in the Naga Hills in the 1870s where they built a mission station (AO, BENDANGYABANG 1998). Like many other observers, Mills was extremely sceptical about these new developments, frequently mentioning the inner turmoil that the mission caused among the people (1926: 407–408, 410 et seq.). In spite of early resistance Christian belief soon gained a foothold in the Naga territories, and during the 50 years of seclusion it wasn't even necessary to import new missionary forces since the Nagas themselves soon began spreading the word of God among their own people, carrying the new faith even as far as Burma (JACOBS 1990: 177). Today more than 90 percent of the Nagas are Christians (Census of India 2001). The evangelical Baptism was, and still is, of a fundamental and radical kind, to the effect that key aspects of traditional culture were simply forbidden. Many rituals and their concomitant feasts were prohibited, alcohol was banned,⁶ mission schools soon replaced the traditional *morung* that soon fell into ruin, pre-marital permissiveness was censured and in some areas the people were even forbidden to sing their own traditional songs. And since the missionaries absolutely condemned the practice of head-hunting they demanded that all the paraphernalia associated with the practice, especially the skull-trophies, be destroyed. Thus it happened that, from an early time on, the Nagas themselves began to feel ashamed of their head-hunting tradition, their feasts of merit and their rituals. This sense of shame persists to this day: when visitors to the local museums are shown pieces that reflect animistic beliefs they are described as 'satanic' objects; large rocks that are believed to be inhabited by 'spirits' were smashed to pieces and the stones were used for

6 Officially Nagaland is still under prohibition rule but this does not stop anyone from drinking and it has made some smugglers very rich men.

building new churches. In order for the Nagas to hand down traditional adornments or elements from rituals, songs and

dances under the watchful eyes of the mission they had to be detached from their earlier cultural meaning context and practiced as 'harmless' tradition or meaningless folklore. Therefore it is not surprising that most members of modern dance groups actually don't know the meaning of the dance steps they perform, cannot interpret the patterns shown on their costumes and don't understand the words of the songs they sing.

However, in recent years many people in Nagaland, especially among the Ao, have become aware of the destructive impact that the mission has had on their culture (JAMIR & LANUNGSANG 2005: 323–346), and attempts are being made to recompense the felt loss of identity by reviving traditional culture. At the same time, however, the Baptist dogmas have become so ingrained that Christian belief itself is looked upon as a form of 'new tradition'. This means that the people are challenged to perform a balancing act between 'traditional culture' and modern Christendom, which, admittedly, destroyed much of their old culture, but at the same time is responsible for the blessings of education⁷ and health care. Here it becomes evident that certain elements of traditional culture are more suited for revival than others. Nobody regrets the passing of head-hunting but the adornments associated with the practice are kept as nostalgic memorabilia. Especially the art of hand-weaving and the feasting tradition are being promoted, as shown for example by the *Cultural and Fashion Overture Sobalia Asensashi* (cultural renaissance), a feast event staged by the Ao Naga in Kohima in 2002. Next to the Hornbill Festival and various tribal feasts, church festivities such as Christmas or parish jubilees are especially suited for this type of 'renaissance'; this also holds true for the large-scale wedding ceremonies that have been introduced in recent years since the majority of tribes did not celebrate marriage elaborately in earlier days, apart from the sealing of the marriage contract that was conducted in several consecutive steps. Today these events are especially popular because they provide the chance to display traditional cloths, even if these often do include war- and head-hunting symbols. What is striking here is that on the occasion of these church and cultural feasts it is mainly the inoffensive symbols of the old culture that are emphasised, that is, those costumes, dances, songs and architecture that have already successfully been detached from their original meaning context. The Hornbill Festival, for example, preferably features aspects of local tradition that are compatible with the doctrine of the church, while loan elements from the old tradition of head-hunting are usually staged as mere burlesques.⁸

Since recently, however, leading local theologians, of all people, are attempting to reinstate the old religious meaning context by way of argument that traditional Naga

culture always had been inherently Christian (in the sense of *praeparationa evangelica*) and that the two ideational systems therefore did not exclude each other. Most indigenous schools of thought implicitly draw the conclusion from this that there is nothing wrong in following Christian teachings (e.g. Ao, ALEM 1994: 95 et seq.; KEITZAR 2003). The inversion of the argument, namely that traditional animism has equal or even more validity is sometimes cautiously insinuated but, in the end, usually rejected again (e.g. BEDANGANGSHI 1993: 38–39). Among the local population as well as among outside observers opinion is divided as to how strong the animistic mindset of Naga culture has survived to this day, or, put differently, how much of it the Baptist Mission has destroyed over the years. [Fig. 345]

While the generation of fathers and mothers together with local ministers and village councillors attempt to revitalise traditional Naga culture, their sons and daughters, at least those living in urban environments, have found a form of Naga identity of their own, which links up with the musical and feasting traditions of the old days, not only in a figurative but

7 The majority and the most renowned colleges in Nagaland are theological institutions.

8 Generalisations made in the above paragraphs are based on our own personal observation and field interviews.



→ Fig. 345, p.186

in a very real sense: each evening, when the cultural groups have cleared the stage of the amphitheatre on the Hornbill Festival ground in Kisama, it is time for a large-scale musical contest. [Fig. 346] The performing bands mostly play cover versions of American songs with Christian contents, with no references to traditional music or dress. Here the message of American media- and music-culture merges with the Baptist doctrine of a missionary mandate that has become reality far beyond the boundary of the festival. Many musicians as well as many visitors to these youth events are members of either one or the other of the numerous Christian youth organisations that often go by the name of 'crossaiders', an intended pun on the words 'cross aid' and 'crusade'.

Caught between explicitly formulated claims for political independence from India and, at the same time, economic dependence on their powerful neighbour, the Nagas find themselves in a restless search for a new identity, an identity that leaves room for 'ancient tradition' but also declares Christian faith as its leading maxim. The Hornbill Festival is one of the beacons in this search. [Fig. 347]



→ Fig. 346, p. 186



→ Fig. 347, p. 187



Figure 343

A Naga 'warrior' being photographed by, and together with, tourists. Hornbill Festival, Naga Heritage Village, Kisama, Kohima District, 2005.



Figure 344

In imitation of the famous 'Hollywood' sign, 'Naga Heritage Village' is written in large letters above the Hornbill Festival ground. Naga Heritage Village, Kisama, Kohima District, 2005.



Figure 345

Billboard in Kohima. The idea that the missions are actually invigorating a subliminally pre-existing religion belongs to the rhetoric of most Christian organisations in Nagaland. Kohima town, Kohima District, 2005.



Figure 346

In the context of the Hornbill Festival the 'Hornbill Rock Contest' is staged in the evening. It is here that the youngest Naga generation expresses its ideas about identity and modernity. Hornbill Festival, Naga Heritage Village, Kisama, Kohima District, 2005.



Figure 347

Where the hills drop off towards the Assam plains lies the boundary of Naga country. In the village of Yachang A, a young man sits under a Christmas star that was erected by the local Baptist church. Mokokchung District, 2005.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Ethnological Museum SMB**—Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Ethnologisches Museum (State Museums of Berlin, Prussian Cultural Property, Ethnological Museum)
- MKB**—Museum der Kulturen Basel (Museum of Cultures Basel)
- SMVM**—Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München (Munich State Museum of Ethnology)
- SPNH**—Society for the Preservation and Promotion of Naga Heritage, Frankfurt/Main

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