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Research Article

Globalisation and New Identities: The Cultural Evolution of the Naga Community

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Abstract

Over the past century, the Nagas, a collective of traditionally indigenous communities living in the North East of India, a region that borders Myanmar, continue to experience cultural transformations in their shared culture and identity. The emergence of new cultures and identities that came in with the arrival of Christianity contributed to the fading of their own age-old traditions, oral histories and customs that gave them a unique identity in the subcontinent. In present times, globalisation, modernisation and digitalisation has further transformed their culture and identity as witnessed in the urban centres of Kohima, Dimapur and Mokokchung Town. These hubs of modern life are further evolving the Naga identity as they adapt themselves to new cultural transformations. However, despite the pull towards the creation of drawing out a modern identity, one that has been shaped by global influences, concrete efforts are being made to blend the past with the present. This in turn is enabling the Nagas navigate between their indigenous way of life and at the same time adapting to contemporary ways of expression. The paper examines the ways in which the Nagas are redefining themselves and creating a unique identity for themselves which is a fusion of their traditional practices, their new found faith and the demands of modernity.

Keywords: Nagas, Cultural transformation, New Identity, Modernity, Globalisation

The formation of a New Identity:

The Nagas, a diverse community of people belonging to various ethnic groups from the North East of India, for the longest time lived in isolation from each other. Every ethnic group had their own language, social and political institutions that differed from each other and yet

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

there were commonalities amongst their cultural practices that have been observed and established. Although the 1991 census of India enlisted 35 Naga ethnic groups as Scheduled Tribes, of which 17 are in Nagaland, 15 in Manipur and 3 in Arunachal Pradesh (Shimray, 2007), some scholars list 67 Naga ethnic groups in total (Jamir, 2016). What constitutes as Naga identity today can be traced back in time through their oral histories, traditional practices and vibrant customs, although some of these are fading away. Their intricate oral histories encompassed folktales and fairy tales, legends, myths, epics, ballads, rituals, fables, ghost stories, superstitions, jokes, chants, proverbs, and mythologies, a method of disseminating history helped in understanding the everyday life of everyday people in societies that preferred seclusion and sustained contact. Although, they are a diverse group of ethnicities, it is these shared cultural characteristics that ushered in a strong sense of community and a deep connection to their land.

The social structure of the Nagas was based on a system of clans and villages with each village functioning as an independent political entity composed of a village council with a body of elders and a village chief as the head of it. This system helped them in maintaining their autonomy and resistance to external forces for centuries. The council played a crucial role in decision making and conflict resolution.

Traditionally, the Nagas followed Animism and followed rituals that believed in the appeasement of the spirit world and the worship of their ancestors. The Nagas have also been long known for their warrior ethos with head hunting, a symbol of bravery, being deeply rooted in their warrior culture and belief system. Although this practice had been abandoned and has ceased to exist, it continues to remain as an integral part of their oral history and cultural memory.

With the advent of Christianity, new influences gradually emerged and took its shape and form through the forces of globalisation, modernisation and digitalisation. This in turn contributed to the formation of a new distinct identity - one that began to integrate their past with the present and create a hybrid identity that acknowledges their vibrant history and also embraces contemporary transformations in order to adapt to the the present. However, these come with its own set of challenges. The task of preserving indigenous heritage and navigating the pressures of globalisation and modernisation has become increasingly complex. As younger generations are drawn to global trends and digital platforms, there is a risk of traditional practices, languages, and oral histories being overshadowed, abandoned or completely forgotten. Most importantly, some of the old customs and practices are looked upon quite disdainfully. The need to disassociate from stories that glorified inhuman practices like headhunting is seen to create a sense of cultural dislocation, where the older and younger generations struggle to find common ground in their understanding of Naga identity. Despite these challenges, the Nagas are making conscious efforts to reviving traditional festivals, documenting oral histories, and integrating cultural elements into modern everyday expressions. The process of adaptation and preservation reflects the struggle of the Naga people in forging a unique identity that honours their past while embracing the future.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

New Faith, Colonialism and Naga Identity

Christianity had a profound impact on Naga culture. The religion gave the Nagas a new sense of identity, a window to the modern world and an affiliation to the larger Christian world religion (Sinha, 1994). The Baptist church missions played a key role in transforming the Naga community. Despite the primary objective being to 'win souls for Christ,' the church also ensured that concepts related to health, hygiene and education were also imparted. Christian teachings on truth and objectivity also helped in doing away with superstitions and belief systems that induced fear and other restrictions that once forbade the Nagas from interacting with the world outside their own. Although the Americans were the ones who brought Christianity to Nagaland, the British administration extended financial aid to the setting up of mission schools. This aid, however, was restricted only to those who had embraced the faith. It would have been impossible for both the British administration and the American missionaries to plant churches without first educating the Nagas. According to Murkot Ramunny, although the primary objective of the Christian missionaries was to spread the teachings of Christ, they also initiated them into the elements of education.

The new found belief system also helped in bridging differences between the various Naga tribes which in turn brought a sense of identity and unity. As much as the Nagas were proud of their cultural identity, with the acceptance of their newfound faith, they wanted to distance themselves from their past to the point of obliterating much of it. While traditional animist practices and rituals began to fade, the warrior culture that the Nagas were identified with including the practice of headhunting was abandoned as the church played a prominent role in community affairs in order to ensure peace, the main doctrine of the religion.

To the outsiders, who were much too keen on refining them, the Nagas were labeled as an uncivilized society who were aloof, illiterate and untamed. While the Baptist missionaries not only viewed the Nagas as primitive and backward, they disregarded their practices of animism, head-hunting and mythogenesis, which up until then were central to Naga culture. Animism, as practised by the Nagas, was placing belief in spiritual beings who had to be appeased by way of sacrifice to ensure fertility in land and progeny. For the Naga, head-hunting was the means to ascertain the prosperity of their crops, their clans and their animals, as it was believed that the human skull contained powers of the life-giving force (Dhar, 2021). Head-hunting was seen as an antithesis to the Christian message of peace and brotherhood. Myth, on the other hand, was seen as the fundamental structure of the Naga society, modelled by values where culture could not have evolved without its intervention (The Policy Chronicle, 2021). However, to Christianity, myths and stories had also incurred fear and superstition and therefore had to be replaced by embracing the message of freedom. The Christian worldview perceives all people outside the faith as being under the shackles of 'evil'; hence the Gospel, the 'embodiment of Truth', was to offer freedom from the constraints of fear and trepidation. However, in turn, it replaced the traditional practices of the Naga society that they had once fought tooth and nail to preserve.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

The Baptist church missions also put an end to one of the oldest traditional institutions that were upheld by the Nagas; the Morung. Despite the Nagas claiming to be equal by birth, they have always been a patriarchal society where roles of administration and domesticity were assigned according to a person's gender. Consequently, the Morung, a dormitory for young unmarried men, was seen as a social institution where the elders of an ethnic group would orally impart knowledge. The Morung is where young Naga men, apart from being acquainted with religious practices, folk songs and stories, would also learn techniques of head-hunting, seen as pertinent to protect themselves, their village and their tribe from intruders. This was also the place where social, religious and political decisions were taken, whether it be the meeting place for the village elders or conducting important rituals pertaining to sacrifices to please the gods or the fulcrum of maintaining political relations with other villages. The Morung was referred to differently by name and represented differently in style and form depending on the tribe a Naga hailed from, and yet it was considered the core of Naga society.

With the onset of Christianity, the Morung was seen as a place where 'heathen rituals' were practised, and therefore, the Nagas were asked to strictly stay away from these spaces that contradicted Christian values. According to Hokishe Sema, former Chief Minister of Nagaland, Christianity affected the cultural identity of the Nagas as the control Christian missionaries imposed, such as not participating in any rites and rituals connected with traditional religion, created divisions within the community. When the whole village has to observe community rites, non-Christians expect everyone to participate, but the missionaries prohibited the Christians from participating in such religious rites (Sema, 1986).

While Christianity as a religion came with its own set of doctrines that brought about lasting and transformative changes on Naga culture and society, British colonialism reshaped its socio-political, and economic structures. Colonial rule introduced a new set of administrative laws, taxation and government systems that were totally alien to Naga society that once functioned as independent political entities governed by a council of elders (Ao, 2002 and Yonuo, 1974). The Angami Naga rebellion of 1879 which took place in Kohima district was a part of a series of tribal uprisings which challenged the colonial structures of domination in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (The Angami Rebellion of 1879, n.d.).

Both Christianity and colonialism brought modernising influences such as education and infrastructure and along with created lasting challenges especially cultural dislocation. This legacy continues to shape Naga society influencing their ongoing struggles for self-determination, autonomy and cultural preservation.

Globalisation, Modernisation and Cultural Hybridity:

In recent years, Naga society has witnessed further transformations with the onset of globalisation and modernisation. The blending of traditional and modern elements exemplifies the concept of Cultural Hybridity, as proposed by scholars like Homi K. Bhabha and Nestor García Canclini. Cultural Hybridity provides a framework for understanding how the Nagas are navigating the forces of globalisation and modernisation by creating a "Third Space" where their indigenous traditions, Christian faith, and contemporary influences intersect. While at its

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

core, Cultural Hybridity refers to the blending of different cultural elements to create something new and unique, for the Nagas, the process of Cultural Hybridity is not just about adopting external influences but about actively reinterpreting and integrating them into their own cultural framework. The Nagas' journey of Cultural Hybridity began with the arrival of Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This marked a significant shift from their traditional animist beliefs and practices, such as headhunting and communal rituals. While Christianity brought new values and systems of education, it also created a space for the Nagas to reinterpret their identity. Over time, they began to blend their indigenous traditions with Christian teachings, creating a unique cultural synthesis.

Glimpses of these transformations are particularly seen in the everyday as witnessed in the urban centres of Kohima, Dimapur and Mokokchung Town. These centres have become hubs of modernity where traditional practices coexist with contemporary influences. For instance traditional Naga attires are often paired with a Western style of clothing, not only creating a unique fusion in fashion that reflects both their cultural heritage and their modern outlook. And while it is seen that the Nagas cherish their tradition of gathering with extended families and sharing home-cooked meals on weekends, thanks to globalisation, there is a growing interest in Western fast food chains and international brands becoming increasingly popular in these urban centres.

Cultural hybridity is also apparent in Naga music and entertainment . The Nagas have always been inclined to music since time immemorial. Once known for their folk music, a lot of their songs have been adapted into contemporary music genres. In recent years, it has been observed that the popularity of Korean pop culture has also taken over the younger generation living in urban areas.

Another significant domain where cultural hybridity is evident is in language and communication. While native Naga languages continue to be spoken, English has become the dominant medium of communication, especially in urban areas. This linguistic shift is largely due to globalisation, modern education, and digital interactions. However, rather than replacing indigenous languages, a hybrid form of communication has emerged, where English words and phrases are mixed with local dialects. In fact since most of the Naga languages do not have a script of their own, they follow the Roman script to preserve some of their folk songs and oral traditions (Pou, 2015).

However, this Cultural Hybridity comes with its own set of challenges. The dominance of Western culture through globalisation often threatens to overshadow indigenous practices. The Nagas in order to preserve their cultural heritage have remarkably navigated these challenges. For instance, the Hornbill Festival which was primarily to attract tourism in Nagaland has become a platform to not only to showcase traditional Naga culture but also to engage with global audiences, creating a dialogue between the local and the global.

At the heart of this whole process of Cultural Hybridity is the creation of what Homi Bhabha calls the "Third Space"—a liminal space where cultural meanings are negotiated and new identities are formed. For the Nagas, this Third Space exists in the fusion of their

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

traditional practices, Christian faith, and modern influences. It allows them to transcend binary oppositions like traditional vs. modern or local vs. global, creating a dynamic and evolving identity that is uniquely their own.

In conclusion, Cultural Hybridity in the context of the Nagas reflects their ability to adapt to change while staying rooted in their heritage. By blending the old with the new, the Nagas are crafting a cultural identity that honours their past, embraces the present, and looks confidently toward the future. This process not only enriches their own community but also offers a powerful example of how cultures can evolve and thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

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