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The Unfolding of Myth of the ‘Tribal’: A Case of the Nagas

การแผ่ขยายของมายาคติว่าด้วยความเป็น ‘ชนเผ่า’:
กรณีชาวนาคา

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A b s t r a c t

Tribe is a social construct which has no constant meaning. While the word ‘tribe’ is used to describe a group of people, the understanding of this narration is very often delusional, leading people to believe that the concept associated with it is fixed and rigid. The label of *tribal* is repeatedly understood to mean primitive and backward and is attached enduringly to numerous communities who were unable to control their mode of production, particularly during post-colonial phase. In this paper, I contend that ‘tribal’ cannot be generalized as a homogenous social category. If we regard a tribe as a social group that has certain territory, simple political organization, common religious beliefs and single spoken language, with respect to the Nagas, this is not the case. Likewise, this paper will take into consideration the political history and ethnohistory of the Nagas so as to identify the construction and changing patterns of Naga culture and identity politics. In this review, the rising phenomenon of identity politics of the Nagas will be closely scrutinized through the circulation of visual culture specifically tied in with features of ethnic interest as well as the feminine body. Conclusively, the paper suggests that the Nagas are forced into a situation where they have had to preserve the distinctiveness of their culture, despite or because of manipulation and threats imposed by primitive stigmas and labels.

Keywords: Identity politics, India’s North East, myth, visual imagery, The Nagas and Nagaland

บทคัดย่อ

กลุ่มชนเผ่า นั้นเป็นประติมากรรมทางสังคมอย่างหนึ่งที่มีความหมายไม่คงตัว คำว่า ‘กลุ่มชนเผ่า’ ถูกใช้เพื่ออธิบายกลุ่มคนประเภทหนึ่ง และมีความหมายเกี่ยวเนื่องที่มักเป็นที่เข้าใจผิดอยู่บ่อยครั้ง ส่งผลให้ความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับวามโนทัศน์ต่างๆ ที่ผูกติดกับความเป็นชนเผ่า นั้นตายตัวและไม่ยืดหยุ่น โดยทั่วไปการตีความทางสังคมเกี่ยวกับชนเผ่าจะอ้างอิงถึงลักษณะที่บรรพกาลและล้าหลัง ซึ่งผูกมัดอย่างยาวนานอยู่กับชุมชนจำนวนมากที่ไม่สามารถควบคุมวิธีการผลิตได้ โดยเฉพาะตั้งแต่หลังการคลี่คลายของลัทธิอาณานิคมเป็นต้นมา บทความนี้เสนอว่า ความเป็นชนเผ่าไม่ใช่เรื่องที่จะเหมารวมในแง่การจัดประเภททางสังคมเชิงเอกพันธ์ได้ ในกรณีศึกษาเกี่ยวกับกระบวนการก่อรูปของความหมายดังกล่าว ในบทความนี้เป็นการยกตัวอย่าง กลุ่มชาติพันธุ์นาคา ที่มีได้มีภาวะความเป็นจริงทางสังคมอยู่บนพื้นฐานของการมีเขตแดนตายตัว การจัดองค์การทางสังคมอย่างง่าย ศาสนาดั้งเดิมและภาษาร่วมกัน ดังนั้น ในบทความนี้จะเป็นการวิเคราะห์การเมืองเรื่องอัตลักษณ์ของชาวนาคาผ่านตัวบทประเภทภาพถ่ายที่หมุนเวียนอยู่ในวัฒนธรรมทางสายตาของชาวนาคา โดยเน้นที่ลักษณะโดดเด่นทางชาติพันธุ์และเรือนร่างผู้หญิง โดยทำความเข้าใจผ่านประวัติศาสตร์เชิงการเมืองและเชิงชาติพันธุ์ เพื่ออธิบายการประกอบสร้างและรูปแบบที่เปลี่ยนแปลงของวัฒนธรรมและการเมืองเรื่องอัตลักษณ์นาคา โดยสรุป บทความนี้ได้แย้งว่า ชาวนาคานั้นจำเป็นต้องพาตัวเองเข้าสู่สถานการณ์การเมืองในชีวิตประจำวันที่ต้องอ้างความโดดเด่นของวัฒนธรรมร่วมบางประการ แม้ว่าจะถูกยึดเยียดตราประทับและมลทินทางสังคมที่บรรพกาลและล้าหลังก็ตาม

คำสำคัญ: การเมืองเรื่องอัตลักษณ์, ตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของอินเดีย, มายาคติ, จินตภาพผ่านสื่อสายตา, ชาวนาคาและรัฐนาคาแลนด์

Introduction

“Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is.”

— Clifford Geertz (1973)

The term ‘tribe’ reflects a discursive phenomenon; it can have a wide range of views depending on one’s standpoint. Even within the practice of anthropologists and ethnographers the word ‘tribe’ can have different connotations. One of the common views on the term is that a tribe is historically or developmentally outside the domination of the nation-state system which is dependent on natural resources which are assumed to be sufficient for their social maintenance. Let us place this view up against the following view of a British anthropologist and indigenous rights activist Stephen Corry who delineates tribes as:

[T]hose which have followed ways of life for many generations that are largely self-sufficient, and are clearly different from the mainstream and dominant society. (Corry 2011)

It is indeed clear that the term is a contested one in the eye of the public. It is imperative to consider the process through which the various meanings of the term have been naturalized and the substantial debate that it has generated. A point of focus in this paper will be to explore the closest meaning of the word ‘tribe’ to that which we can estimate the possibility of ascribing a common connotation or broad definition of the term which could be employed in different spheres. Furthermore, it is essential to explain how the circulating knowledge correlated to the word is being understood in different contexts particularly in the case of North East India. The narratives on the people who are referred to as ‘tribal’ through various processes of appropriation of meaning-making will be investigated. I will next attempt to explicate the process through which myths and stereotypes of tribal pertaining to the Nagas are fabricated, as well as to concisely deliberate the issue of discursive construction of Naga ethnonationalism and identity.

The Politics of Meaning

Tribe is a social construct which has no constant meaning. While the word ‘tribe’ is used to describe a group of people, the understanding of this process is very often delusional, leading people to believe that the concept associated with it is fixed and rigid. The seeming timelessness of the notions of tribe and the tribal has shaped our understanding of reality; we therefore tend to believe that the fact that a particular community is ‘primitive’ is an unchanging truth. The community that is identified as *tribal* has to carry the baggage of *primitivity* with it.

The primordialist approach to ethnicity identifies the term ‘tribe’ as referring to the descendants of a group of people who share certain social and cultural traits. Primordialism contends that *race* which takes partially biological elements into consideration has provided a way to the enlargement of collective identities of a simpler group of people. This notion has been taken for granted such that the differentiation and categorization amongst the kinfolks frequently operate by taking the biological and geopolitical facets into account. In other words, the practices of a people in relation to ethnicity are, thus, inevitably and naturally ‘given’ from and by the kinfolks having had a communal history of racial segregation. One large kinfolk is literally called a *tribe* and it is being seen as a non-complex social group as a result of negligible evolution. None the less, the primordialist approach often is employed to illustrate ethnic divisions. As Elliott Green argues that

“...[The primordialist] paradigm can best be described as that which is so prevalent in journalism and non-academic discourse today, namely the view that ethnic groups are ancient and immemorial and thus given facets of social life. This paradigm was first expressed by German romantic philosophers like Herder and Fichte and has continued to be held to one degree or another by such writers as Pierre van den Berghe, Basil Davidson, Clifford Geertz and Steven Van Evera.” (see Green 2005)

Yet it fails to articulate the understanding of solidarity amongst members of communities which extends beyond the geopolitical boundaries of a nation state, or the ones that manage to survive in favour of transnationalism.

The etymology of the term *tribe* connects it to Middle English from the Old French *tribu* (or Latin *tribus*). Besides, it is assumed to have something to do with the origin of the term *tri* which means three, here being used to refer to some *unknown* communities in the Roman Empire. However, the etymological significance of *tribe* cannot account for the complexity of meaning that it brings to life today. But the meaning of the word indicates a group of people whose way of life is different from that of the political and social ‘mainstream’. Historically, the word *tribe* has been used by politically more powerful outsiders to refer to an ‘inferior’ group of people. If we regard a tribe as a social group that has certain territory, simple political organization, common religious belief and single spoken language, then amongst the Nagas, this is not the case. The Nagas are constituted by a

variety of ethnic communities residing in the eastern side of the Northeast of India and several others in the adjacent country of Myanmar. Most of them reside in hills with a small population living in the plains of Assam. The ‘tribal’ Nagas shared little in terms of politics, economics, religion or culture with the plains kingdoms of Burma or India (Jacobs et al. 1998: 11). Yet there has always been some form of relationship between them, [...] in terms of political alliance and trade relations (Jacobs et al. 1998: 11). Despite the fact that each of Naga groups shares comparable cultures, they were never united on the basis of ethno-linguistic categorization. Each village’s language happened to be divergent, incomprehensible and unintelligible in the matter of verbal communication; even villages presumed under the same *tribe* or *hill range* have a distinctive variety of language and thus cultural traits. The act of identifying a group of people as tribal, likewise, reflects the site of privilege of the addresser. In many cases, indigenous communities have not chosen to initially assign themselves as tribal—for instance, the traditional name of the Angamis is supposed to be Tengima or Tenyimia for the case of the village system in the Naga Hills, but the term Angami was assigned by the outsider to indicate the majority communities who mostly live in Kohima Hill. The word Tengima or Tenyimia used to refer to themselves possibly has a close meaning to what we mean by human, which obviously does not carry any negative connotation. Therefore, the term does not subsidize and reflect an accurate understanding of the lived reality of the Nagas. Instead, the acquired negative connotation of *tribal*

is thus considered to reflect the authoritative discourse of the powerful for whom the *tribe* constitutes *the Other*.

In addition, the notion of a primitive form of society is involved with the Western academic discourse of social evolutionary and social Darwinism theory. In the early nineteenth century, social scientists believed that societies evolve in a linear direction, corresponding to a ‘progress’ from savagery to barbarianism to civilization. In this sense, the stage of civilization has its derivation based on the development of agricultural society where people settled down and were able to hoard their surplus produce. For this, it is imperative to note the socioeconomic context that signaled the point when some groups of people chanced upon and learnt to control the modes of production more effectively than others. Thus, the cornerstone of the concept of *tribal* was determined by historical contingencies where *the Other* was unable to develop control over modes of production. The theory of social Darwinism that was widespread in the late nineteenth century, not only constructed the cultural, but also the underlying belief in racial superiority over the ‘unfit’ classes. This endorsed a political doctrine of conservatism for vindicating the class stratification and taking control over the inferior’s resources. In excess of this interpretation, many have widely institutionalized it as a perilous tool of its governance and domination.

Locations of the Tribal: A Case Study of India

In the postcolonial phase India adopted the framework of a modern nation-state and democracy. After the decline of the British Empire, the new sovereign state was faced with the compulsion to unify its people. Generally, the political structure of the British administration was adopted by India. The Indian state followed in the footsteps of the colonial rulers, particularly in terms of its policy towards the minorities and rural populations:

The Constitution of India sought both to promote national unity and to facilitate progressive social change. There was a fundamental right to propagate religion, but the state reserved to itself the right to impose legislation oriented towards social reform (such as a uniform civil code). The centre had the powers, through national planning, to redistribute resources away from richer provinces to poorer ones. The right of due process was not allowed in property legislation, another instance in which the social good as defined by the state took precedence over individual rights. Land-reform laws were on the anvil in many provinces, and the government wanted to close the door to litigation by disaffected moneylenders and landlords. (Guha 2008: 91)

The philosophy behind the constitutional safeguards* provided to the minorities (such as the tribals) makes it authoritative that independent India takes care to ensure that the resources of the tribals of India's Northeast remain with them. It is understandable that the Northeast of India is strategically very important for the nation's security as it shares more than a few international frontiers. At this juncture the tribal was said to be different from the non-tribal, though the tribals in India cannot be generalized as a homogenous social category. They are distinctive from each other for the most part. Additionally, the notion of difference between the tribe and the non-tribe was, however, based on the binary of the non-Hindus and the caste Hindus.

India has successfully constructed the category of the tribal based on the clues left behind by the colonial masters. The idea of tribe in India has been involved with political administration and governance associated with the problematic issue of geopolitical territories in India. The term 'tribe' has been used since the British rulers introduced it in 1872 to describe a

*To possess an advantage of welfares with regard to constitutional provisions to minorities in India, the citizens are classified into several main categories, such as the Schedule Tribes (ST) and Schedule Castes (SC), The Other Backward Caste/ or Classes (OBC), and The Forward Castes/General Caste. These categories had inverse movements in the context of Indian politics; thus the communities who fall under the same category will enjoy material benefits provided by the central government differently. However, this has continually given rise to social welfare movement against social policy since the Independence. This is evident by the fact that numerous communities in the Northeast have been demanding indigenous status and autonomous council/state in order to access better benefits from constitutional safeguards.

few select communities in India (Abbi 2008: 153). A year earlier in 1871 they had identified supposedly ‘criminal’ tribes by an act (Abbi 2008: 153). The credential of those communities was hypothetically understood as *criminal tribes* up until other official terms were introduced a few years after Independence. Some were criminalized because of their inability to register themselves into the system and they were assumed to have *immoral* tendencies which, at times, disturbed the British Empire. To cite an instance, in the case of the *Thuggie*, they were preparing for a revolt against the British rules. The Criminal Tribe Act was cancelled in 1952 when the Government meant to de-notify them by introducing the new categories, for example: the Scheduled Tribe, the Nomadic Tribe and the Denotified Tribe. At this point, I argue that the word *tribal* began to be considered as a constructed category apparently in the domain of official discourse of the postcolonial India. However, the technical removal of these terms has failed to abrogate the act of labeling and attaching social stigma to these groups of people.

While India has continued to use the terminology of tribe and the tribal, in other Asian countries, other terms have been used to assign to communities with a distinct way of life. For instance, the term *Bumiputera* is used to describe the native Bornean and indigenous population in Malaysia while the term *nationalities* is officially applied in Nepal for indicating indigenous groups. None the less, these terms are demarcated by the political appropriation of the policy makers mainly in order to control and exploit the unfit population. Constantly

In Assam, the ‘Tea Tribe’ category has emerged in relation to different ethnic and political constraints. The Tea Tribes of Assam, who had previously migrated and been brought to this region by the British, have been demanding the political status of Scheduled Tribe (ST)* in the same way as other *Adivasi*** communities in many parts of India. But in Assam they are not considered the same since generally the grant of ST status in the state is limited to communities who have a different ethnohistory; thus, the Tea tribe community finds itself alienated from both other ethnic groups in India’s North East wherein many claimed to be indigenous and their clusters of relatives in central and eastern India. The granting of ST status to North East India’s *Adivasi* is a highly complex political issue as it evokes the question of indigeneity of the ‘natives’. At the same time, the Tea tribe community has become the permanent resident ‘outsiders’ of the region leading to their tragic persecution in India’s North East. Instances*** of such persecution would be the

*Under India’s reservation policy, a certain percentage of government jobs and vacancies in educational institutes are set aside for members of castes and tribes that are judged to be historically marginalized, comparatively backward and, on the whole, underrepresented in government position (Wouters & Subba 2013: 12). This reservation comes in the form of a quota-based affirmative action policy (Wouters & Subba 2013: 12). Also, this system is commonly accepted and implemented in the education scheme. The tribals and other backward categories receive relaxation and exemption, for instance, aggregate of mark in competitive examination etc.

**The *Adivasi(s)* are probably 50 to 60% or 30-40 lakhs of the “tea tribes” i.e. present and past plantation labourers who are estimated to be about 60 lakhs in Assam (Fernandes 2003). The clusters of them are considered as aboriginal inhabitants of inland South Asia, mostly originated from central and eastern India.

***The indigenous northeasterners and non-indigenous settlers (especially in case of Bangladeshi immigrants and Indian *Adivasi*s) conflict has been violently uncontrolled since mid-1990s when India were preparing for her Independence.

Beltola incident in November 2007 and the massacre in three districts of Kokrajhar, Sonitpur and Chirang in December 2014.

In most cases in India, collective groups are deemed to be more important than the individual. The groups rely on the idea of communalism which would never resolve the issues like those of the Tea tribe community and the Bodo's demand to carve out half of Assam. The question of belonging and indigeneity at this time does not count on how the natives perceive their indigenous features as a consequence of a simpler social category, that is, a tribe or a band. Instead, the conflictual form of a tribe depends largely on the influence of national states and sociopolitical competitiveness.

Above all, the tribal may be seen as an altered form of backwardness and primitiveness which has arrived to contest the unchallenging project and propaganda of the nation states and the discrimination amongst its citizens. On the other hand, they are, accordingly, not just being understood as the primitive form of social group in India, but as instances of those who are yet to be appropriated within the dominant structures. Ironically, in the case of India's North East, the people celebrate the fact of being a tribal in the location. But it is to be kept in mind that not all arrangements of tribal communities in the region have been equally conquered. The situation amongst the tribal states and the non-tribal states are dissimilar for the tribal who reside within. It can be surmised that the closest meaning of the word 'tribe' to that which we can determine the possibility of ascribing a broad definition of the term is not conceivable.

‘Tribe’ is socially constructed category which its process of meaning-making needs to be contextualized.

Prior to the installation of the sixteenth Indian state of “Nagaland” which comes into being in December, 1963 as a result of culmination of the fifty-four-year unconventional Indo-Naga warfare, some regions of the Naga-related minor communities were unadministrated by British India or any princely states. When the president of Naga National Council (NCC), A. Z. Phizo, saw future of having Greater Nagaland, he declared Naga liberation on August 14, 1947—only the day before India’s Independence. Till a few years after this event, there were a series of memorandums and dialogues submitted to both the UN headquarter and New Delhi that informed on the creation and the existence of Nagaland whose was shaped by more than fourteen tribes. None the less, at present, the recognition of official Naga tribes in state’s territory of Nagaland comprises seventeen ethnic communities. In addition to this, it is imperative to note that the Nagas are also found in other neighboring states as indigenous population such as in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. Historically, even if not all the Naga communities had a part in the idealism asserted by underground agencies of Naga freedom struggle against the central government; none the less, the state’s name that deliberately refers to the *Land of the Nagas* has, at the same time, literally disengages the imagination of erstwhile Naga communities.

If we look at a case of the Rongmeis in this context, the

indigenous Naga tribe constitutes a minority in Nagaland. But most of their populations are residing in the state of Manipur. The Nagas of Nagaland have been protesting against the addition of the Rongmeis on the list of the official Nagaland's tribes. Although they have been living in Nagaland as long as the other Naga tribes only the major Naga Rongmeis enjoy ST status—that is approved by the government of Manipur. Allocation of communities can become controversial under certain circumstances. For example, in the 2013 assembly election of Nagaland,

“...communities as a whole may promise their collective support, like the Rongmei Naga community in particular area of Dimapur [the capital city of Nagaland]: ‘the Rongmei... extends unconditional support to the NPF*’ or as the youth of the Kuki community did in another constituency, ‘We, the undermentioned Kuki Community Youth** have resolved to extend our full support to the Independence Candidate.’”

(Wouters 2014: 65)

In this sense, the idea of Nagaland as the land/state of the Nagas is not viable, and it has collapsed due to state impediments. Therefore, it is seen that the constructed notion of the tribal cannot be generalized. To a great extent, the notion of the tribal varies from place to place as it needs to

* NPF or Naga People's Front is a regional political party active in the state of Manipur and Nagaland associated with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

** Once the erstwhile Naga national leaders had sought for self-autonomy, the Kukis were included in the memorandums as a Naga tribe but no longer after internal conflicts estranged them.

take into account the ethno and political history of the location. The umbrella instrument, namely, the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India seems to have been expanded beyond its purpose. As a result, it has given rise to political turmoil and unrest in the region.

Myths and Stereotypes about the Tribal: A Brief Reading of Photographic Text on the Nagas

Assuming that such topological stereotypes cost us more in terms of the richness of our understanding of places, how are we to contest their dominance (Appadurai, 1988: 46)? It is noteworthy that the images of the native are constructed, more or less, in relation to the early intellectual contribution of colonial ethnography. The term *native* is closely connected to the term *tribal*, specifically in the nature of anthropological discourse. In response to the query: *Who is the “native”?* we shall consider what Appadurai (1988) points out:

The quick answer to this question is that the native is a person who is born in (and thus belongs to) the place the anthropologist is observing or writing about. This sense of the word *native* is fairly narrow, tied to its Latin etymology. But do we use the term *native* uniformly refer to people who are born in certain places and, thus belong to them? We do not. We have tended to use the word *native* for persons and group who belong to those parts of the world that were, and are, distant from the metropolitan West. [...]. Proper natives are somehow assumed to represent their selves and their history, without distortion or residue.

The statement mentioned above suggests that the representation of the native is confined by the ones who primarily studied about people outside their own society, and the captive knowledge produced by them came to become the dominant representations of the community with the help of repetition. Besides, the natives were also keen to showcase their *selves* through these representations. It is undeniable that certain stereotypes have been reproduced out of academic texts. Thus, it is significant to accentuate the alternative works (for instance, feminist ethnographic work) about the people of the location to bridge the gap between knowledge and the practitioners and the people, as well as to bust the myths and stereotypes held by societies. Under this circumstance, in order to locate the elusive construction of these phenomena, the example of the myths and stereotypes about the Nagas and Nagaland are taken into consideration along with a critical reading of photographic texts on the Nagas in brief.

By a means of textual analysis, the argument here will lay emphasis on the supposition that the photographic images have set up the possible ways of articulating the understanding of the Nagas. Interestingly, when one observes the photographs about or on Nagaland there is a pattern that emerges. I would like to make the claim here that irrespective of the sources of origin of these photographs, they are dispersed with great gusto, aided by the tools of information technology. It would be fair to state at this stage that this last point is not taken for granted by relying solely on photographic images, but with the intention of

scrutinizing issues of the Nagas and the politics of representation through the cultural artifact of photography.

The Nagas as a tribe of India are besmirched as a result of their historical social practices, in particular the practice of headhunting or head-taking. One may raise the question [as to] whether the ancient Naga people were [truly] barbarous and the headhunting wars...committed due to...barbarianism (Singh, 2004: 6). The head-taking practice amongst the Nagas in the past has generated a stigma associating them with violence, a myth that was fostered by their prolonged struggle against the central government.

When the North East of India became a part of British India following the First Anglo-Burmese 1824-1826 war and subsequent the Yandaboo Treaty, the British were able to gain entry to a geopolitical space from which the rest of India was practically disinherited. Following this the outstanding anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1909-1995) had an opportunity to pursue his fieldwork in the region. Pursuing a visual approach to cultural research, von Fürer-Haimendorf is recognized for delivering a “photographic collection consist[ing] of approximately 24,000 images” (SOAS 2014) which was mainly taken in the Naga Hills of Assam (presently Nagaland) and the North-East Frontier Agency (presently Arunachal Pradesh). His collection of visual documents on the region includes one of his filmographies entitled *The Man Who Hunted Heads-The Nagas of Assam* produced for the BBC in 1970. To consider one of his archives in context, figure 1 shows the returning

“...from a punitive expedition conducted by the British against the Kalyo-Kengyo (Khamniungan) village of Pangsha. From this tour he brought back head-trophies, some of which he had collected from the head trees in the villages he visited on the way. A large group of Nagas from different Konyak villages had accompanied him onto the expedition as porters (kulis). Coming back to their villages, both Furer-Haimendorf and the returning villagers were greeted as head-hunters....” (SOAS 2015)

This was his expense to be accepted and equipped to work in the community. However, the ritual performance was at that time definitely different from what we are used to today, namely, in the mass cultural performance during the state’s worldly-known annual Hornbill festival. The head-receiving dance, accordingly, was associated more closely with what I shall call a ‘head-taking’ kind of practice, than a barbaric ‘head-hunting’. There was no evidence of such practices in the pre-photography era so von Furer-Haimendorf’s collections have provided a primary source of historical studies on the Nagas as well as built up the strength of their historical past which was different from that of the rest of India. Therefore, this photograph (Figure 1) is one of the cultural and historical artifacts of the Naga’s past and, if nothing else, governs the way current generations regard their own collective past. It is because of the social convention of indigenous religious practices in the Naga Hills that we have gotten to know about the ancient beliefs associated with head-hunting; this kind of practice can also be seen in other ethnic

groups, such as, the Apatanis of the NEFA (presently Arunachal Pradesh), the Ilongots of the Philippines, and the Taiwanese aborigines, etc. Despite various accounts of head-hunting/head-taking practices in Asia, the most renowned seem to be those of the Nagas of India.

The head-taking practices and rituals of the Nagas was a part of their epistemological worldview in addition to the Naga's social life and organization. Similarly, other kinds of rituals and festivals were practiced in a different way in the past which had an intimate connection with their lived experience. But the exotic imagery of the Naga's past cannot exclusively account what they are today*. The content of head-taking practices does not function like days of yore. Besides, the indigenous religious practices, rituals and festivals of the ancient Nagas we see presently are reinvented, which aim at other social affairs, such as, cultural tourism, political and ethnic interest and so on**. In this sense, the Nagas genuinely internalize not only the role of racial ideology in detaching themselves from the rest of India,

*For instance, the Hornbill is a state-organized annual festival held in the first week of December for ten days. It has become a site of cultural performance that brings together various communities in the state to construct the idea of cultural distinctiveness of Nagaland. Surrounded by this, of course, the most recognizable *state-sponsored* cultural performance in the festival commonly found amongst the major tribes is that of *head-hunting*.

**As a result of this transformation, the indigenous religious practices had been intercepted the proscription by the predominant religion in Nagaland, that is Christianity, which has had a role in constructing of formation of Naga political identity in the first place. The introduction of Christianity to the Nagas was successfully done in the area of Ao Naga (mostly residing in present Dimapur district) by American Baptist missionaries. The very first Baptist church—the Molungkimong—was established in 1872. Since then, together with the proposition of British Rules, the churches have enormous engrossment in modern Naga's way of life in terms of formal education, economic benefits, nationalistic sentimentality, etc.

but also concede to the marketization of their culture—the interests in the past for contemporary usage.

In relation to the debatable issues that I have earlier attempted to provide a close analysis, next I will contend the issue of consternation of identity politics that visually dealt with the feminine tribal body of Naga women. It is arguable that this matter is politically anticipated in searching for the feminine body as to become a site of visual representation. The argument will draw from the basic assumption that, of late, women and their feminine body is sought to be a cultural bearer and an apparatus of a society in maintaining what is collectively accredited as, tribalness, tradition, nationhood, and so on.

Seeking to clarify why the term ‘feminine’ is applied here, I believe that is a sociocultural construct that is obligated by social normativity of its contemporary contexts; the feminine body has been defined out of essential traits of masculinity in certain milieus. Thus, the feminine is not biologically inherited and many times is different from the term ‘female’. This is to say that the discarded elements of the masculine are usually allotted to the ‘female’, being presumably seen as a binary opposition. It is how we commonly reject the feminine-esque traits that might be fundamental to the male as well. Otherwise it can be seen as the subject of desire that the male denies to interfere on his masculine body.

In addition to the above-mentioned, the typical stereotype of Naga youths is merely generalized under the term *Northeasterners*, especially for the case of Northeast migrants

in metro cities. The stereotypes that are attached to them, along with the descriptions *backward* and *head-hunter* which often refers to the men, include representations of the women who are repeatedly referred as *chinky* and *sexy*. Importantly, ‘chinky’ is not used by Northeasterners to refer to themselves or each other (McDuie-Ra 2012: 90). In other words, they have not claimed ownership of the epithet (McDuie-Ra 2012: 90). Most respondents found the term to be deeply racist and reflective of ignorance and hostility (McDuie-Ra 2012: 90). Moreover, the image of sexiness emotionally associated with Northeast women has led to many incidents involving not only Naga women, but also the others who have immigrated to metropolitan cities:

This case was also remembered because in the aftermath, blame for the incident was directed at the murdered woman for allegedly inviting the attack. In a case from October 2007, two women from Nagaland were subject to sexual advances by their boss. When the women resisted, they were suspended from work without pay. In January 2008, a gang of more than 20 men attacked and sexually assaulted two sisters from Manipur in the internet café the two sisters ran. In October 2008, a female Naga student was murdered by another student (a non-Northeasterner) when she resisted his sexual advances. (McDuie-Ra 2012: 106)

Apart from numerous academic works and reports such as the study of urban ethnographic work, the media serve as instruments for circulating both misleading as well as superficial knowledge about the Nagas which are regularly consumed

by large numbers of the public audience. The regional media of India's North-east is also responsible for fostering certain discourses about the people of the region. The increasingly repetitive use of media products creates a divisive version of social traits within and outside the region. Likewise, media professionals working on the Nagas and Nagaland (irrespective of whether they are locals or not) have used the issue of Naga identity politics to add to the region's sense of difference from the rest of the country. What's more, women and their bodies are not immune to this projection of identity politics.

The expressive culture of the Nagas is specifically tied to elements of ethnic interest in order to set them apart from other parts of India, including other northeastern states of India. The so-called Mongoloid look—which is also a discursive construction of human classification—is not enough to accompany the Naga's visual values, and such values are embodied on the living feminine bodies. We can take for example the case of Nagaland's first fashion magazine the *Ramp*. The magazine typically contains topics relating to women's beauty, modeling, and the up-to-date lifestyle of Naga youths. Also, some content pertains to the subject of masculinity. In Figure 2, if we forego the label of a Nagaland-based fashion magazine and the photogenic models clothed in modern 'tribal costumes' and their traditional tribal 'colours' and 'textiles', it is difficult to identify what is distinctive or unique about them; probably the observer notices that it is created through the already well recognized stereotypical characteristics of northeasterners. The repeated visual imagery,

which is widely distributed especially in both India's North-east and Nagaland thanks to the regional media, emphasizes the normative model of the represented. On the other hand, other kinds of Indian women, say, who have lesser conventional tastes—tastes that are defined by *social class*—to tribal or primitive patterns may negotiate, or take a stand in opposition to the dominant codes represented in that image.

One can possibly develop a cognitive dissonance and preconception about the visual elements in the image, here the feminine body of the northeastern tribal women. Subsequently, the image allows the member of the public audience to internalize the reciprocal notion of *the Other* in defining different social groups. The standardization of aesthetic interpretation and perception has changed the idea of 'tribal beauty' from earlier days when the beauty rested on a *natural exoticism* as appeared in numerous ethnographic archives (see Gait 1906; Hutton 1921; Elwin 1959; etc). Today, the normativity of tribal feminine beauty is in conformity with the racialization of the *traditional Indian* and the *young Northeast Indian* women*. That is to say,

*One frequently comes across current ideas regarding 'tribal' northeasterners as antithetical to the traditional (literally civilizational) Indian society as being more close to 'Western' lifestyle. It might be considered that this paradox has its root when India was preparing for her Independence. There were various movements for Independent India. Many of these had at one point of time or the other conceded to the pressure of politically accepted wisdom of *Hindu*, *Hindi* and *Hindustan*. For example, the *Bharat Mata* (Mother India movement) of the late nineteenth century kept afloat by the Gandhian leaders was one of the national personifications of freedom fighters. Though there was the entry of Muslim in the movement, the idealizing concept had set the roles of Indian women with the help of Hindu ideology to electorally participate in a wider nation scale, contrasting to the women

Women in [and from] the region [North East India,] when compared with their counterparts in other parts of the country, are often portrayed as enjoying greater freedom with respect to their mobility and the absence of certain practices such as dowry, obligatory wearing of burqas (Buongpui 2013).

However, the problems that the tribals in and from the region struggle with are not homogenous, especially in the case of upper-class tribals who are capable of adjusting to socioeconomic changes. There is no conclusive justification that cases of stereotype and racial violence are being imposed alone on the Naga. In absence of location-specific markers they are simply assumed to be one of the ‘backward’ Hill tribes of North East India.

Likewise, the attempt to briefly emphasize the issue of ‘tribal women’ here is that, in Naga communities, women have always been a wing of society both in the private as well as the public sphere. Thus, Naga women and their materialized body are assumed to convey both culture and process of social transition in their societies, in this sense, with the help of media repetition. Interestingly, the image implies the license to visual power that the spectators enjoy. We are being led by the mode of visual element and message to conceive only certain

in other sessions, say, the ‘tribal women’ who already had, in reality, corresponding roles in the *public* of their folk life in the community, and solely then they are likely measured as the ‘Other’ women who had less contribution in the making of sovereign India. This was also resulted in case of the Nagas for the fact that they were more politically associated with the British; on top of that, some minor hills had never been in vision of either the British or the powers that be in New Delhi.

information, and then reproduce the rest on the basis of our shared knowledge—values which have already been circulated since the introduction of romanticisms throughout the colonial phrase in the region as well as the application of innovative materials such as frame, camera and film.

Conclusion

The circulating knowledge about the ‘tribal’ as a constructed category is being understood in different contexts especially in the case of the Nagas. The prevailing impression of a so-called backward community is the result of an extensive process of myth fabrication and stereotyping which has been entrenched with the help of media representation. The transformation from the ‘savage’ to ‘civic-minded’ Nagas obviously reveals the distinction and discontinuity of Naga society as they take into an account of welfare state and modern Christianity. Nevertheless, in this way, the visual machinery has helped in connecting this disjunction of Naga cultural practices through representation in various reformed spheres. These ideas have been internalized and negotiated by both the cultural outsider and the cultural insider--the Naga themselves. The awareness of losing the ‘savage’ past of the Nagas correspondingly encourages them to recollect and reconcile again with the past, but in a different formation. The historical account of the Nagas, on the other hand, exhibits a transformation towards consumer phase when they see the need to partake in the process of development. This implies that the Nagas are forced into a situation where they have

had to take care of the distinctiveness of their culture despite or because of manipulation and threats imposed by primitive stigmas and labels. Thus, the Nagas, faced with the perceived threat of cultural homogenization arrogated by India as a nation state, have felt the need to conserve the characteristically distinctive essence of being ‘Nagas’, culturally and politically, so as to establish a firm foundation for their unique sense of Naga ethnicity.



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Figure 1 Head Receiving Dance at Wakching (SOAS 2015)



Figure 2 From the back cover (Ramp Magazine 2014-2015)

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