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Who sings for the Hornbill?: the performance and politics of culture in Nagaland, Northeast India*

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This photo essay reflects on the annual Hornbill Festival celebrated by the Nagas of Nagaland in Northeast India. It provides an ethnographic account of the various activities and the different actors involved in the Festival, and examines what makes this a compelling tourist destination. The state of Nagaland capitalises on the colourful image of the Festival as an ‘exotic’ location, which plays on the warrior and tribal identity often associated with the Nagas; ideas of ‘traditional’ culture; and the mountainous and pristine landscape. While the region has witnessed over fifty years of armed conflict between the Indian state and different Naga nationalists demanding independence, the Festival provides a creative public space where all sections of society – urban/rural; students/politicians/administrators; Indian army/Naga nationalists – can freely mingle, a temporary lull from the otherwise pervasive militarised landscape.



*This article was originally written for and appeared in February 2013 in two parts on the South Asianist Blog [<http://thesouthasianistblog.co.uk>]. Cover image: Sangtam Naga women performing outside of their morung. Photo by M.T. Heneise

From the vantage point of the tribal Naga Kachari morung (traditional youth dormitory), I am mesmerised by the vivid colours of the different tribal attire. I hear myriad voices as throngs of people huddle around crackling bonfires with their bamboo jugs of hot tea and rice-beer, as dusk brings the unwelcome December winter chill in Kisama. It's the end of the first day of Hornbill Festival 2012.



Figure 1: The words 'Naga Heritage village' on the hillside in Kisama village, Nagaland

Just above me, amidst the orange glow of the evening sun, the white letters 'Naga Heritage Village', a copy of the iconic 'Hollywood' sign, are faintly visible in contrast to the faded green of the hillside. On the hilltop a familiar Christian cross was foisted, I was told, to remind people that this is Nagaland, and like in most Naga villages, it is a central symbol: of Christ as redeemer.

Each tribal morung is arranged according to the geographic map of their location within Nagaland. During the course of the Festival



Figure 2: Entrance to Kisama, Naga Heritage Village

they entertain various visitors in their morung by performing their songs and dances, and exhibiting the different material culture.

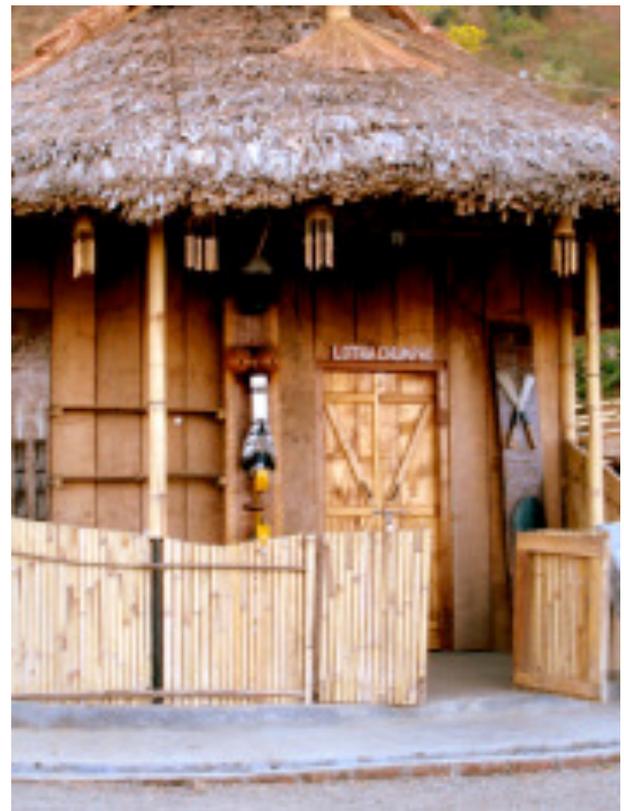


Figure 3: A Lotha Naga morung

The Festival over the years has mushroomed into a mega state event that includes stalls that sell food, clothes and

artifacts encouraging local, regional and national entrepreneurs to participate; it also hosts a number of indigenous games like Naga acrobatics, pig-chasing, and Naga chilli (the hottest in the world!) eating competition. It has introduced Rock, Fashion and Art shows and a bizarre World War II car rally that is an attempt to cater to a variety of audiences both within and outside Nagaland.



Figure 4: Stalls inside the Bamboo Pavilion in Kisama

Access to Nagaland has been difficult primarily due to the fifty-year-old independence struggle with the Indian state that has seen the rise of several Naga movements: the Naga National Council (NNC), the two National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah; and Khaplang), and other variants of these factions. The peace process between these groups and the Indian state in 1997 ushered in relative calm, making travel and tourism easier. However, ‘official’ access to this region is still enforced in the

form of the Restricted Area Permits (RAP) for foreigners and the Inner Line Permits (ILP) for Indian citizens outwith Nagaland and Northeast India. In 2011 the RAP was lifted while the ILP remains. Some Indian citizens I met from the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra were irked by this duplicity that denies them access to regions within their own country. As a sign of protest they have ‘infiltrated’ Nagaland without ILPs.



Figure 5: The panoply of tourists, mixed with local participants, represents the sea of humanity

Speaking and interacting with various people gives me a sense of the truly global dimension to the Festival that has grown in leaps and bounds from its earlier conception. Its origins coincided with the International year of the World’s Indigenous People in 1993. It was called ‘Naga week’ and held between 1st-5th of December in the local Kohima ground, organised by the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPHMR) and the Naga



Figure 6: 'Nagaland: Land of Festivals' billboard

Students Federation (NSF). 'It was a difficult time for us', reflected Neingulo of NPHMR because factional clashes between the two NSCNs, along with Indian Army operations made the situation very tense 'on the ground'. Using the slogan and rhetoric of the 'world's indigenous peoples' year', the NPHMR and the NPF appealed to the two NSCNs to cease fighting. Calm pervaded throughout the week when around twenty-seven Naga tribes from the Indian states of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and even Burma came and constructed their morungs and celebrated their 'indigenous' cultures, creating a momentary safe space where they could come as 'one' Naga nation. For Neingulo, this was a 'real' celebration of indigenous Naga culture because there was a spirit of solidarity, amidst the chaos and violence, that encouraged cooperation between different Nagas from all over. He laments that the Hornbill Festival in its current avatar is a poor imitation of the 1993 event. He

says that the Government of Nagaland has made it into a commercial 'state' Festival that involves only its official seventeen Naga tribes. Many people I spoke to seem to agree with this sentiment. In fact, two officers from the tourism industry tell me separately that the Festival is about 'selling' Nagaland to the outside world.



Figure 7: Tourists with their cameras

They say that the success of the Festival is down to the presence of international tourists who come with cameras and are busy interacting with the various Naga troupes of performers. In fact, I do notice the active (and sometimes aggressive!) camera flashes are from their lenses. Most international tourists come to the Festival as 'cultural tourists' who frequent festivals in many indigenous hotspots. One couple from Germany tell me they recently attended a similar Festival in Papua New Guinea and heard about the Hornbill on their way to Bhutan. Such cosmopolitan

tourists makeup the majority of those who come to Nagaland. I interact with four of them from England. Johnny and Sabina weren't sure if the 'Nagas' were 'Indians' – they said that Nagaland feels more like Southeast Asia. For Johnny, the Hornbill Festival represents the expression of an 'authentic Naga national identity'. He is particularly impressed by the parade of bagpipes and drums with its accompanying material accoutrements. Perhaps this is a nostalgic reminder of Britain's colonial rule? Indeed, the odd conflation of tartans kilts amidst the sea of Naga traditional clothes makes the event slightly bizarre if not mildly entertaining.

Sabina is more critical. Having lived in Northern Thailand, where similar festivals were common, she observes that whereas in Thailand it was less organised and more spontaneous, the Hornbill was highly choreographed and managed. It gives one the impression that it is more of a 'show', than a 'genuine' Naga festival. Haley agrees. She contrasts the Hornbill Festival with those of neighbouring Garo and Khasi tribal festivals that were more 'genuine'. Mike is more academic in his approach and says that he really enjoyed the Hornbill and this is the 'real deal'. He is wary of comments of 'authenticity' – which authority decides its criteria? He is unequivocal in his stance that if the Nagas say that they are attempting to

preserve and display 'authentic' Naga culture than who are we to say otherwise?

Authenticity is what drives many tourists to the Hornbill. I meet a group of tourists from Bangalore who are part of a photography course. Priya, Sandesh and Ashwin came across Peter van Ham's coffee table book on the Nagas and were fascinated by the vivid picture of 'traditional-authentic' Nagaland. I ask them if such representations are highly 'exotic' and problematic? They react positively and say that the 'exotic' element is one of the reasons why they came in the first place. Of course, coming here, they realise that things are different between 'image' and 'context', but nevertheless it is the motivating factor. Our conversation drifts to ideas of indigenous peoples' rights, the Hornbill Festival and the Naga national movement for sovereignty. Hema, an eco-tourist, says that through this Festival she can see the unique 'indigenous' and strong national culture of the Nagas. Before she was wary of such intellectual tropes, but now she can see why the Nagas want to be left alone: 'self-determination' is a right. Malini disagrees and says that Nagaland is an integral part of India – even if they gain independence, how would they sustain themselves? These questions are at the back of the minds of many national tourists from outside Nagaland, due to its long history of violent insurgency in the region.



Figure 8: A day out in the sun, with a group of Indian tourists

The visible presence of the security forces, both the Naga police force who provide security at Kisama to VIPs and delegates, and the throngs of Indian Army *jawans*, officers and their families, are a constant reminder that issues surrounding ‘Naga independence’ are hotly contested. One Kashmiri stall owner says that it is striking to compare Kashmir and Nagaland due to the overt and visible military might on show. The Indian Army even has a separate, cordoned off plush seating area for their officers and families.

The co-mingling of the forces of exclusion and inclusion is what makes the paradox of nationhood striking: the uneasy relationship between the Nagas and the Indian state, even though it is funding from New Delhi that enables such a festival. On the other hand, questions of indigeneity provide international legitimation that allow the Nagas to perform and represent a ‘distinct’ Naga culture and link

with United Nations ideas of indigenous people’s rights of cultural uniqueness, self-determination, and sovereignty. These debates circle each Naga *morung* in the Hornbill though couched in a different, and sometimes ambivalent, language.



Figure 9: Army personnel and tourists co-mingle at Naga Heritage Village, Kisama

‘Nagas are not Indians’ is a common sentiment one often hears in the Hornbill (and elsewhere in Nagaland). Some Nagas say that this idea becomes even more coherent when international tourists (mainly) recognise such disjuncture of the territorial imprint of the Indian state and the national imaginary of the Nagas. The jarring of these two ideas is evident during the opening session of the Hornbill Festival. The event starts off with the Indian national anthem that is greeted with indifference by the largely Naga audience (a number of tourists also told me that it felt rather forced). This message of national integration of the Indian Republic is further

extolled in speeches made by the Governor and Chief Minister of Nagaland. Yet, some of the Naga public are uneasy with such rhetoric because for them Naga sovereignty is non-negotiable and the intrusion of the Indian state (read Indian Army) in such national festivals is flexing muscle – to ‘show who is boss’. Other Nagas favour being in the Republic because it brings economic development – Naga independence anyway is a far off dream! Some are not fully aware of what it even means to be ‘Naga’ let alone Naga sovereignty.

Khiamniungan Nagas from places like Noklak in Eastern Nagaland (near the Burma border) told me that the Festival is a chance for them to see other Nagas. They have only ‘imagined’ and heard of the Angami and Chakhesang Nagas, now they can actually see them. The constructed and dynamic nature of Naga identity is played out interestingly in the Hornbill Festival. For some it allows a visual glimpse of other tribes, while for others it’s an opportunity to be included into the Naga fold. Many Kachari, Garo, and Kuki people told me that even though they are recognised ‘officially’ by the Government of Nagaland as ‘Naga’, the other Naga tribes don’t. Having a *morung* in the Hornbill is helpful and legitimises their claim to be ‘indigenous’ inhabitants of Nagaland – for them territorial indigeneity is the sole marker of Naga identity, not blood, language or customary practices. Although they have kin relations elsewhere:

the Garo (in Meghalaya); the Kachari (in Assam); and the Kuki (in Assam/Manipur/Mizoram), they say they are Nagas and have nothing to do with their kin (although cultural ties are strongly maintained through marriage). When one Kuki lady said that they are not ‘Naga’, she was quickly reprimanded for her foolishness. The politics of the moment necessitates their inclusion into the Naga fold.



Figure 10: Khiamniungan gentlemen relaxing, capturing an image of a visitor (M.T.Heneise)

While the political dimension of the Festival clearly resonates with the larger project of national identity, especially when one digs deeper, the cultural aspects of the Festival are also significant. What is ‘culture’ is often asked when interacting with the many performing artists and tribal delegates in the *morungs*. For some, they haven’t changed one single song or dance routine, it’s ‘original’ they say. Others confess the painful tattooing

process and vow never to do it again, and point to cohorts' tattoos that have been painted using ink (some even wear plastic Hornbill feathers due to its rarity). Amongst the Nagas, they comment that the 'wilder' you are, the more tourists you attract. So the Konyak, Yimchungru, Chang, and the Khiamniungan *morungs* are busier than most. Some, like the Phom *morung*, are largely empty while the Lotha *morung* serve mainly food. The Ao *morung* involves a lot of joking and jesting around one Ao comedian who is being recorded on mobile phones to show to their villagers upon returning home. The idea of 'tradition' and 'modernity' are part and parcel of the surroundings and there is no denying that the two often go hand in hand when discussing the politics of 'culture'. This particular dimension has become significant in the past few years and the future of the Hornbill signals the happy co-mingling of both the local and the global.

Speaking to Abu Metha and Himato Zhimomi, both distinguished officers in the Government of Nagaland and organisers of the Festival this year, one gets the sense that the Festival is expanding its reach in terms of the scale of organisation, variety of programmes; making this truly a mecca of Festivals both nationally and internationally. 'Why can't we make the Hornbill Festival like the Edinburgh Fringe?' Abu told me as we stood inside the venue of the Naga Art Exhibition. He said that

along with the Chief Minister of Nagaland, Neiphiu Rio, they came to Edinburgh during the Fringe and were in awe of the scale, infrastructure, organisation, the events on display, and its reputation. He wants to make the two festivals more alike and even showed me the Hornbill catalogue of events that resembled the Edinburgh Fringe one. Such is the vision, but not shared by all. Some see the Hornbill as a waste of time, money and exercise, which needs to be reduced to three days – it takes immense human labour, inconvenience (traffic during the Festival is a nightmare), and expenses that don't justify its scale. One tourism officer told me that the investment far outweighs the return, and it is unsustainable for the long run. Church leaders are equally sceptical. They see the Hornbill as encouraging drinking (Nagaland is a Christian dry state!), sexual freedom and partying (most of the local youths emerge only during the night entertainment of music, fashion and drink). One young Ao pastor told me that the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) held a day walk around Kisama praying against the evil and licentiousness the Hornbill was encouraging amongst the youth. The church holds that reviving traditional Naga culture mustn't clash with Christianity – the famous 'Christ and culture' debate is being rehearsed in many church corners.

Instead of viewing the Hornbill Festival as a micro-event, it is more useful to think of its

links to the larger economic, cultural, religious and political processes that have wider consequences for the future of the Nagas. A sort of ethnographic ‘thick description’ has been attempted through the Festival that tells multiple stories with many actors and audiences. Its success has truly put Nagaland on the map in terms of its global outreach and tourist destination, but difficult questions are also being asked that involve many sections of the society with ideological positions in the global arena of fluid connections on the one hand and the increasing crystallisation of its

boundaries and identities on the other. A balance between the two is most prudent but also the most difficult.

Sitting around a warm fire outside the Kachari *morung*, Joseph, a Kachari elder, and I are in deep conversation when one of the Kachari youth come up to him and ask if he could change into his ‘proper clothes’. Joseph laughs and asks why, and the youth says because it’s cold in my Kachari traditional clothes! I left the Hornbill thinking that there are many ways this puzzle can be completed, it’s just that I still haven’t found all the pieces. 🧐
