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Continuity and change in Hao Naga festivals

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Festivals can be approached as sites for examining the relationship between indigeneity and assimilationist modernity, and this chapter explores the ways in which Hao (Tangkhul) Naga festivals index cultural continuity and change in Manipur. Since the new millennium, festivals have become a focal point for state-sponsored tourism, as well as for resurgent, and increasingly self-conscious, indigenous identity performance (Longkumer 2013). Globalising indigeneity, spurred by the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as the growing economic influence of nostalgic indigenous diaspora, have also contributed to shaping and re-shaping local festivals. This chapter looks specifically at the Hao *Luirā* - seed-sewing festival - the largest and most important annual festival for 200,000 Hao Nagas living in Manipur and across the border in Myanmar, and identifies some of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways local communities creatively accept and refuse change.

In Manipur, festivals have become focal sites for performing identity and fostering unity among ethnic Nagas. State planners have found ways to capitalise on such events as they have sought to recast Manipur's typically fraught reputation as one more appealing for tourists. The *Lui-Ngai-Ni* festival, for example, is observed annually on February 15 under the aegis of the United Naga Council (UNC), an apex body representing about twenty Naga communities in Manipur¹. Among the many aims of *Lui-Ngai-Ni*, celebrations articulate sometimes very distinct traditions, but these are understood as expressions of a common Naga heritage. The events, however, invariably hold broader political overtones as the Naga hill areas in Manipur remain underdeveloped, and many see this as the result of irreconcilable differences with the Imphal valley Meitei communities that dominate

¹ These include the Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Kharam, Koireng, Lamkang, Liangmai, Mao, Maram, Maring, Moyon, Monsang, Poumai, Rongmei, Tangkhul, Tarao, Thangal, and Zeme Naga communities among others.

state politics. The first ever *Lui-Ngai-Ni* was celebrated in 1987, and the government of Manipur soon moved in and recognised the festival, declaring 15 February a state holiday. A decade later, India's Ministry of Tourism listed *Lui-Ngai-Ni* as one of the great tourist festivals of India. No longer an indigenous 'micro-event' (Longkumer 2013: 95-96), the *Lui-Ngai-Ni* links up 'to larger economic, cultural, religious and political processes that have wider consequences for the future of the Nagas' of Manipur.

However, the origins of this festival lie largely in the *Luirā* festival of the Hao (Tangkhum) Nagas², and this article is concerned with describing the continuities of this traditional Hao festival, what changes may be observed, and the reasons underpinning those changes. Importantly, the word 'Lui' in the *Lui-Ngai-Ni*, derives from the Hao *Luirā* (trans. 'to sow'). The assimilation of Hao cultural traditions into the larger cultural and political space in the state is not insignificant, and this article is a preliminary examination of these themes, while focused on how the *Luirā* is remembered, how it is variously celebrated, and how the 200,000 Hao Nagas that mostly self-identify as Christians negotiate traditions in light of modernity.

Hao Festivals

Hao festivals broadly fall into three categories: religious, agricultural, and those more-or-less of a non-religious social nature. In all, there are fourteen festivals celebrated by the Hao Naga, and these include:

Luirā - seed sowing festival

Zingkāng Phanit - rain invoking festival

Manei Phanit - lit. 'a festival signifying that busy season is in the offing',

Yarrā - youth festival

Mangkhap - post-paddy transplantation festival

Kashong Kahao Phanit - festival of 'warding off dangers to the standing crops'

Yampāt - a Peh village festival

Dharshāt or *Dharreo* - pre-harvest festival

Chumphā - festival related to granary (also known as 'post-harvest festival')

Nāsut Phanit - 'ear piercing festival'

² The term *Hao* is the traditional nomenclature of the Tangkhum Nagas (see Mawon 2014). With a population of more than 200,000, the Hao are among the largest of all the Naga tribes in India and Myanmar, and are settled in the borderlands of Manipur and Northwest Myanmar, with a significant diaspora also living in Delhi. Today, there are 261 Hao villages, with 232 in India and 29 in Myanmar. The lingua franca *Tangkhum Tui*, a Tibeto-Burman language derived from some Hao dialects, was largely developed and encouraged by early Christian missionary William Pettigrew, along with his earliest converts. Prior to carrying out his missionary work among the Hao in 1896 (with British government permission), he surveyed the Hao villages of Hunphun, Hungpung, Shirui, Khangkhui and Peh in October 1895 (Luikham 2002: 83).

Longra Kashak - festival related to youth dormitory

Thishām - festival related to death

Zaiham Makhum - festival related to weaving

Hamrui Phanit - a clan festival related to pottery

While most Hao festivals last little more than a day, with no great feasts, music, folk games or sporting activities, and thus are not costly to the community, major festivals such as the *Luirā*, *Yarra*, *Mangkhap*, *Chumphā* and *Thishām* can be very expensive, and participation of the whole community is more or less obligatory. Generally, festivals follow the agricultural cycle, and thus both signal and prepare the community for the year's various seasons of work.

Luirā (also pronounced *Luitā*), in particular, provides a rich set of practices and performances, including different forms of Hao music³ accompanied by traditional Hao musical instruments, and folk dance (*Pheichak*), that in many ways stand out above the other festivals. The word *Luirā* is derived from two Hao words namely, *Lui* (field) and *Rā* (to till or to dig), and thus means 'to till or to dig the paddy field'. *Luirā* is celebrated for anywhere between 9 and 13 days, depending on the climatic condition of the Hao villages. The colder the village climatic condition, the earlier the observance is scheduled, and thus the fixation, duration, date and month, of *Luirā*, varies from village to village. Hao villages such as Longpi, Lunghar and Kuirei, for instance, observe this festival during the last week of *Tharao* (January). Some other Hao villages like Hunphun celebrate *Luirā* generally in the month of *Marun* (February). Whereas, the Hao villages like Hungpung, T. Chanhong, Tashar, Ramva, Ringui and Shokvao observe the annual seed sowing festival in the month of *Mayo* (March). In the pre-Christian period, *Luirā* marked the beginning of a year, which is why some considered this festival the New Year festival of the Hao people. The festive order of events greatly depends on the village concerned, and the number of days scheduled for the celebration varies from one village to another. However, most of the customary practices related to *Luirā* among the Hao villages remain more or less consistent.

On the eve of the *Luirā* festival, rituals such as the *Kapā Khayang* ('a ritual performed through the process of bamboo splitting') and *Harkho Khayang* ('a ritual performed by throttling a fowl') are performed by the *Shimkhur Sharva*, a family priest. These are done in order to portend the future of the family. The performances of these rituals help them foresee the living conditions of a family including the agricultural activities in that year. On notification of any bad omen during the ritual performances, the family priest will

³ Hao Music can be broadly categorised into *Hao Laa* (Hao folk songs) and *Hohoing* (a form of Naga vocal music). *Hao Laa* are of various types based on themes. *Hohoing* can be broadly categorised into three viz. *Khamahon* (a melodious vocal sound with overlapping musical tones), *Hokharai* (a combination of recitation and the production of vocal sound in musical tunes) and *Kakahang* (howling).

seek the assistance of the village shaman rid himself and the family of such a bad omen. *Khānong* - a family priest or village shaman - communicate with *Ameowo* (god of Hao religion) through the sacrificial ritual performance of *Harnaō Vāreikathā*, namely divination through the sacrificing a fowl at the village gate to ward off evil. This is to say that through propitiation *Ameowo* has the power to take away bad omens that may affect the community. Thus, before *Kumdhār* (the Hao new year), the community appeals to *Ameowo* to keep disturbances throughout that year at bay. *Khā Sit* is also performed on the eve of the *Luirā* festival. A form of collective work in the village, and usually undertaken before or on the eve of *Luirā*, *Khā Sit* entails washing utensils, cleaning agricultural implements and weapons, as well as footpaths, houses, and public areas. It is also a day to ward off 'evil elements viz. ill luck, diseases, evil spirits etc. from the village'. The visitors neither are allowed to enter the village nor are the villagers allowed to leave the village during these days for fear of disrupting the 'prosperity of the village' (Shimray 2000: 136). One customary practice performed on the day of *Khā Sit* is *Kapā eina Mei Khalap*. It is a traditional way of making fire with a dry bamboo, firewood and some pieces of thatches or straw. Since the Hao New Year starts with this festival, they remove ashes, charcoal from the hearth, and prepare a new (fresh) fire. In other words, it is a tradition to make a fresh fire during the seed sowing festival among the Hao people.

The *Luirā* is considered the 'festival of festivals' of the Hao Naga 'during which continuous festivities, traditional and cultural swing and sway take place adorning themselves with colourful costumes and ornaments. It is a time of mirth and gaiety, altogether forgetting the impending hard work at hand' (Luikham 2009: 89). The festival involves feasting, folk games, and sports activities on days where the performance of religious rituals are not already scheduled. Further, it cannot be celebrated without *Hohoing* - a form of Naga vocal music, and *Hao Laa* folk songs. Musical instruments like *Tallā*, a type of trumpet, and *Tingteilā*, a fiddle-like instrument, are also used. The order of events⁴ during the *Luirā* depends on the village, though as previously mentioned most of the customary practices related to the seed sowing festival among the Hao villages are more or less the same.

Some important practices and events that take place during the seed sowing festival include the already mentioned *Khā Sit*, the *Sāthithang* (lit. 'animal slaughtering day'), *Shangrei Rukthang* (lit. 'a day of ritual performance by the village Chief'), *Luikathui* (lit. 'seed sowing ritual'), *Yarui Rukthang* (lit. 'a day of ritual performance by the villagers'), *Laa Khanganui* (maiden dance), *Thingeirā Khangakhun* (tug-of-war), singing *Hao Laa* (Hao folk song) and *Hohoing* (a form of Naga vocal music), *Pheichak Kachak* (folk dance performance), *Khā Sho* (lit. 'opening of the village gate'), *Khā Ung* (lit. 'leaving the

⁴ See Luikham (1961: 46-47), Shimray (2000: 135-143), Luikham (2009: 88-94), Pheirei (2010: 63-67), and the order of events narrated by Mw. Ramyaola and Mw. Yangyirla (cited in Mawon 2015: 85-86).

village') and *Khā Leinganong* (lit. 'village market day'). Of all the events, *Laa Khanganui* is considered as the most important festive event of the seed sowing festival. We present a brief discussion on some important customary practices and events of this festival.

Shangrei Kharuk is another ritual involving invocation of *Ameowo* by the *Awunga* or village chief, and *Awungva*, the wife of village chief. It is also known as *Wungrei Rukthang* or *Shangrei Rukthang*. On this day, the village chief and his wife perform the seed sowing ritual *Luikathui*. After the invocation, they sprinkle the blood of fowl on the seeds, and then sow the seeds on the ground. During the ritual performance, the village chief and his wife also use *Kapaiwon* (flower of wild berry tree), *Sahārwon* (flower of cherry tree) and *Nāpawon* or *Mayāngwon* (flower of peach). It is believed that when these flowers bloom exuberantly it signifies prosperity, and their beauty is symbolic of divine promise. Before the performance of this ritual, it is a taboo for any villager to sow seeds in the ground (Luikham 1961: 47). It is also taboo to touch or cut down any plants on this day. Decoration of the above-mentioned flowers at the house of the village Chief marks the end of *Shangrei Kharuk*. The two main reasons for the performance of this religious ritual are (i) to seek *Ameowo's* blessing over the cultivation; and (ii) to give the privilege to the village Chief and his wife of sowing the first seed in the ground that year as a sign of respect and honour by the village community.

Yarui Kharuk - *yarui* meaning 'public', and *kharuk* meaning 'the process of propitiation or invocation' - refers to the process of ritual performance and propitiation to the *Ameowo* by the village community as a whole. It is also known as *Yarui Rukthang*. As with *Shangrei Kharuk*, the blood of a fowl or chicken is sprinkled on the seeds and then sown on the ground on the day of *Yarui Kharuk*. For the propitiation in the paddy field, flowers like *Kapaiwon*, *Sahārwon* and *Nāpawon* are used. Here, the ritual performers are the villagers. On this day, every household in the village decorated their houses with the above-mentioned flowers. Unlike in *Shangrei Kharuk*, there is no taboo to touch or to cut down plants on the *Yarui Rukthang*. One of the main reasons for the observance of this religious ritual is to seek protection and blessing for their agricultural farming from the *Ameowo* so that the villagers would harvest in abundance in that year.

Khā Sho - *khā* meaning village, and *sho* meaning 'to open' - means to open the village gate. The *Khā Sho* is signaled by burning of the dried twigs and leaves, purposely leftover, of the jhum cultivation (Shimray 2000: 143). Before the *Khā Sho* is signaled, the villagers are not allowed to leave the village, nor are guests allowed to enter the village. On this day the *Yorlā* (married women), relatives, visitors and travellers flock in to the village in order to participate in the *Luirā* festival. According to their tradition, the most important guests of the seed sowing festival are the *Yorlā*⁵. One of the traditional values

⁵ The custom of meat gifting to *Yorlā* (a married woman) is not only performed during the festivals of the Hao Nagas, it is also done on some solemn occasions like marriage ceremonies, feasts of merit, and

pertaining to the seed sowing festival is the observance of *Yorlā li Rayar Kahei* or *Yorlā Sā Khami*, which is a gifting of a large portion of meat to a married woman by her maternal parents, brothers and her maternal uncles. Apart from the practices and events, feasting is one important feature of the *Luirā* festival. Luikham (2009: 91) wrote, 'by tradition, all who happen to come into the home (in any house of the hosting village) are offered meat and drinks (rice beer) known as '*Rāshā Khangaphang*' as per established custom of hospitality. Nobody is allowed to go away without certain amount of refreshment.' On a similar line, Longvah (2001: 54) also points out that the best rice beer, rice wine and meat are served to the relatives, visitors, travellers and neighbours during this festival. In short, everyone is welcomed to enjoy the food and drinks during this festival. Lunghar (1987: 39) wrote: 'it is during this festival that they would find out the most generous man of the village through his offering of rice beer, rice wine and meat to the visitors, relatives and other guests of the festival.'

Khā Ung - ung meaning 'to leave' or 'to part' - means the departure of the relatives, visitors and travellers from the host village. The pronouncement of *Khā Ung* is usually made towards the end of the *Luirā* festival. It is taboo for any guest to remain back in the host village. In another sense, it is necessary for any guest to leave the village on this day. However, such a strict code of conduct or taboo is not applicable to the *Yorlā*. The observance of *Khā Ung* marks the end of the seed sowing festival for many Hao villages.

Laa Khanganui is known as the maiden dance which is considered the most important festive event of the *Luirā* festival. The performers, wearing a uniform dress code⁶, are the *Laa Khanganui bing*, or unmarried girls of the village, and some consider this performance a 'virgin dance'. These performers, however, are chaperoned by married women to help them in singing the Hao folk songs related to the *Laa Khanganui* performance. Apart from the married women, the performers are also accompanied by the men of the village. The men sing *Hohoing* at the beginning and at the end of the *Laa Khanganui*. This performance is usually organised in the village chief's courtyard or in the open space of the village playground.

While performing the maiden dance, the performers move in a circular motion, singing and dancing the Hao folk songs, which praise the brave and the rich men of the village, as well as the feasts of merit. During the performance, the performers use no

Christian celebrations such as Jubilee and new church building dedications. The culture of 'meat gifting' to *Yorlā* symbolises the relation and bond maintained by the Hao men and women.

⁶ Shimray (2000: 142) describes the dress code of the performers: 'The dancers wear a uniform of PHANGYAI KASHAN (a sort of wraparound) down to the knee, a pair of brass bangles called ZAOKUI, one on each hand; two sets of bead necklace of missed colours called KONGSANG, one worn around the neck and the other dangling down from the head, both covering the breast; a set of a sort of ornamental belt around the waist on top of the skirt covering the buttock called KHOM MASHIM. It is against the social etiquette to clip or tie the hair as such all the maidens hair are let loose nicely hanging down at the back... These practices are very much vogue in the past and the same though not common is still prevalent today.'

musical instruments, but the rhythmic striking of the *Kazao* or *Zaokui* (brass bangles) produces a melodious sound. The movement of the legs and hands of the performers are simple, but uniform. The 'dance is soft and slow in uniform movement of hands and legs rocking the body gracefully according to the tune of their songs' (Shimray 2001: 138). It is pointed out that if any girl 'joins the dance after defiling her body for fear of public reprobation, some prodigy happen viz. either her *Kongsāng* (necklace) broke or become loose amid the dance or domestic animals like dog, fowl etc. enter the dancing semi circle and went out by her side' (Shimray 2000: 142). Chastity of the unmarried girls is strictly observed among this group of people. Thus, the Hao people allow only the unmarried virgin girls to take part in the *Laa Khanganiu* performance. Apart from this most exciting and fascinating event, *Thingneira Khangakhun* (tug-of-war), *Khamahon* (a melodious vocal sound with overlapping musical tones) and *Pheichak-Pheishon Kasā* (folk dance performance) occupy an integral part in the *Luirā* festival of the Hao Nagas.

Thingneira Khangakhun - *Thingneira* meaning 'a creeper rope', and *Khangakhun* meaning 'to pull', is a tug-o-war contest in which two teams or groups pull opposite ends of the rope. The team or group dragged across the central line loses. During the *Luirā* festival, it is a must to play *Thingneira Khangakhun* (Longvah 2001: 55). The collection of a creeper rope from the forest is done by the men especially the village youth. Those who collect creeper ropes usually sing *Hohoing* on their way home, and before the beginning of the game, two elderly men of the village perform the *Thingneira Makhuntā Khami* (a sort of inaugurating the game). During this performance, the elderly men sing *Hao Laa* related to the *Luirā* festival and pull the creeper rope from opposite ends.⁷ All the villagers, young and old take part in the game, asking for *Masi-Lāngyai* or *Mawon*⁸ ('to seek wealth and prosperity') from *Ameowo* (Luikham 1961: 46). It is generally held that if the creeper rope is torn into two after the hard struggle between the two equally matched groups, it will lead to an abundant harvest. Apart from this game, they also play other games such as the *Khangatuk* (wrestling), *Rai Kathat* (mock war), *Zeipā Khangatam* (javelin throw) and *Sigui Kaphung* (a game of 'carrying wooden pestle').

The interrelation between festival and agriculture activities may be observed, as a due consideration to their seasonal agricultural activities is given while fixing the schedule of any Hao festivals. The fixation of date and duration of the festivals is the prerogative of the *Awunga* (village Chief) and *Hangva* (village councilors). Another observation is that it seems clear that there exist a variation of duration and date, ritual performances and the sequences of events from one village to another, and more so from

⁷ In the words of Shimray (2000: 140): 'every villager young and old touched the rope at the village ground... This touching of Thingneira is called SEICHANG KHAMEI KHAMAYOK, meaning invoking prosperity or good luck.'

⁸ Hao word *Mawon* is derived from two words viz. Ma (rice) and Won (flower). Literally, the word *Mawon* means the flowers of the paddy rice in the field. Symbolically, the word *Mawon* refers to wealth and prosperity.

one region⁹ to another. However, the meanings of the festivals and the purpose for the observance of the festivals remain the same in all the Hao villages. They perform rituals during the festivals for two main reasons: (i) to seek blessings and (ii) to ward off bad luck and evil spirits. The generosity and hospitality of the Hao people during the festive seasons is observable.

Changing aspects

Recently, in the Hao hills, the Hungpung Awungshi Organisation (HAO) of Hungpung village erected a wooden monument which is called *Tarung Kashun* in 2004, Shokvao in 2012, Tashar in 2013, Lamlai Hanjamphung in 2014, Shangshak in 2015 to revive their culture of *Marān Kasā* (Mawon 2016: 193) and in Nungshang in 2017. Today, the once individual affair called *Marān Kasā* or 'feast of merit'¹⁰ has become a community affair because of many reasons. The three main reasons are (i) economic constraint as the culture of *Marān Kasā* is an expensive affair; (ii) unavailability of a wooden post of a desirable size for the feast largely because of deforestation; and (iii) many Hao people may no longer find 'honour and merit' as much as they did in the pre-Christian days.

Generally, the *Awunga* (village Chief) and *Hangva* (village councillors) continue to fix the date and duration of the festivals. Further, it is observed that there is a continual usage of Hao music and musical instruments in some of the performances. Despite the changes in the festivals, there are elements that cannot be done away with. These include the role of *Awunga* in conducting the festivals, practice of meat gifting to *Yorlā* (a married woman), singing *Hao Laa* (Hao folk songs) and *Hohoing* (a form of Naga vocal music), performing *Pheichak* (folk dance) and *Laa Khangnui* (maiden dance), and playing tug-of-war among others during the festivals. In short, in many aspects of the festivals, there are no major changes at least in principle.

Hao music still continues to occupy an integral part in the Hao festivals as well as during the agricultural activities and on other occasions. In the absence of teaching-learning process between the older generation and the younger generation, the Hao folk song has experienced a reduced popularity in the present day. Many Hao people hold that they are witnessing the loss of their music and musical instruments in the face of western songs and the electronic musical instruments of the western world. Hao artistes like Rewben Mashangva have modified and have refined some of their musical instruments such as *Tingteilā* (Hao fiddle), *Yangkahui* (bamboo flute) and *Seikongthei*

⁹ Traditionally, the Hao villages can broadly be divided into 9 (nine) regions viz. Raphei (North), Somra (Northeast), Rem (East), Veikhang (Southeast), Kamo (South), Kharao (West), Khaorui (Southwest), Kharao-Raora (Northwest) and Kathur (Centre) [Ruivah 1993: 18].

¹⁰ According to Jelle J P Wouters (2014: 8-9): the feast of merit 'was not just a wealthy ambitious villager's gesture to host a feast, or indeed feasts, but it was morally and socially expected of him to do so, as intrinsic to a wider moral economy and order of social stratification in which the less prosperous could count on the village rich to now and then showcase their largesse.'

(cowbell) which has enabled them to play these instruments along with other electrical musical instruments. One prevailing trend in the Hao society is the 'remixing' of Hao folk songs with western songs. For instance, a song entitled 'Ngashan' (2015) composed by one Hao artiste by the name of Ngathingpam Tangvah is a mixing of different genres such as folk song, *Hohoing* and rock song. It is a song about *Luirā* festival, in which the artiste sought for the revival of the Hao culture associated with this festival.

In the recent past, *Luirā* is also used as a platform to 'bridge' the hill-valley divide in Manipur. For many years, Manipur has witnessed ethnic conflict particularly between the Nagas and the Meiteis, and the role of state government in such divisions has been clear. One myth asserts that the Hao Naga and Meitei shared the 'same progenitor' in a distant past; stating that the village Chief of Hungpung (one of the Hao villages) was the older brother of Meitei Maharaja. This, however, myth of origin has been 'contested' in many writings. In the writings of T.C. Hodson (1975), A.S.W. Shimray (2001), and Sothing W.A. Shimray (2000) among others explained the 'loose relationship' that was maintained in the past between the Hao Naga and the Meitei. But the question of domination or suzerainty over the other did not arise as far as their past history has recorded in the oral tradition. On March 6, 2010, Okram Ibobi Singh (the then Chief Minister), though he had never visited the Hao hills throughout his political life on important occasions, unveiled the monument erected at the residence of Hungpung village Chief on the occasion of Hungpung *Luirā* (Mawon 2014: 39). This was viewed as one political move wherein the government of Manipur attempted to 'relive' the myth of 'brotherhood' of Hao Naga and Meitei. But to replace the 'trust deficit' with 'oneness' between the hill and valley is unlikely to realize in the near future, as the present relation between them seem to be on the basis of 'verification' and not on the principle of 'trust'.

With the turn of the century, sections of Hao villages began to observe some other festivals viz. Kachai Lemon festival, *Hāthei Phanit* ('chili festival') and *Shuri Kaso Phanat* ('garlic festival'). Since the Hao people began to observe these festivals during the last few years, whether they can be termed as festival is a pertinent question to be asked. Further, will there be a festival even when there is no product or plantation associated with the festivals is also a relevant one. Since festival is a themed celebration which is concentrated in time and delivered with a clear purpose, the new festivals of the Hao people can be termed as festival. All the three new festivals have its clear purpose, theme and celebrate on a specific time. They are homegrown festivals and are evolving gradually, and are also celebrating with the support of some of the governmental institutions and the NGOs. These new Hao festivals have the objectives of creating awareness on the importance of lemon, chili and garlic cultivations among the Hao people, and on the potential economic outcome that would profit the cultivators who mostly belong to the poorer section of the society.

The advent of Christianity¹¹ and the introduction of formal education to the Naga Hills by the Christian missionaries played a significant role in moulding the attitudes and outlook of the Nagas towards the outside world. Many Naga writers argue that Christian missionaries took a poor view on the Naga culture. Horam (1977: 73-74) remarks, 'the missionaries sought to plant a replica of the western concept of norms and standards of life, and these were conveniently introduced as part of Christianity.' Sema (2013: 60) remarks that the American Baptist missionaries were the first who considered 'all the Naga culture and heritage as evil and anti-Christian like feast of merit, singing folk songs and folk dance, etc.' He continues, 'the introduction of formal education by the missionaries was also responsible for western culture and way of life to creep in' (ibid). For some, Christianity in the Naga Hills is an 'imported one' (Lotha 2013: 77). Lotha suggests that Christianity was 'transplanted from America and Europe. If the Protestants are too American, the Catholics are too Greco-Roman...The whole implications seem to be that if the Nagas cannot be white in skin, they should be white in their way of worship' (ibid). To this day, many Church leaders continue to subscribe the ideas of implanting western norms and standards into the life of the Nagas.

The question of continuities in Hao festivals with the now longstanding influence of Christianity is one that preoccupies community leaders and scholars alike. No doubt, culture is never static, and by simply observing the changing durations, costumes, levels of participation, the order of events, as well as the kinds of music and musical instruments give one a sense of significant change. Christianisation since 1896 and the introduction of modern education, association with other communities, economic constraints, and a whole host of factors have contributed to change. Most Hao people hold that Christianisation by the foreign missionaries and Christian conversion, such as that of Ruichumhao Rungsung,¹² is the single most important factor in bringing cultural change in Hao communities. For example, the process of prohibition among Christian converts against their participation in the Hao festivals and ritual performances continued even after the foreign missionaries have left from their hills,¹³ is one major reason why the Christian festival particularly Christmas is given 'more important' place in the Hao areas today.¹⁴ Christianity is deeply embedded and implanted, and has revolutionised and

¹¹ Solo (2006: 4) and Zeliang (2005: 28) wrote that for the first time 12 (twelve) students¹¹ were converted to Christianity (Baptist denomination) on September 29, 1901. In the same year, the first Baptist Church in Manipur was built at Hunphun village (Sangma 1987: 275). In this hill, the Roman Catholic began their missionary works in 1946 and the Adventist Church in 1951 (Shimray 2000: 181).

¹² Ruichumhao Rungsung of Songran (Somdal) village was one early Hao Christian convert who played an integral role in the Christianisation of the Hao people.

¹³ Personal interview with Benjamin Rungsung (85 years of age in 2012) of Sinakeithei village, Tuimayang Chahongnao (84 years of age in 2012) of T. Chanhong village, and Sw. Kayangnam (91 years of age in 2012) of Tashar village.

¹⁴ Personal interview with A.S. Haora Zimik (76 years of age in 2011) and A.S. Kazaching Zimik (79 years of age in 2011) of Ramva village.

transformed the Hao people. Christianisation and assimilation with the western culture are major factors that are held responsible for the discontinuation of the observation of many festivals and also for the many changes in the festivals of Hao Naga.

Many Hao festivals are no longer observed, some are dying, while some others are reviving or are being revived in modified forms. Hao festivals that are no longer observed include *Zingkāng Phanit*, *Manei Phanit*, *Kashong Kahao Phanit*, *Yampāt*, *Nāsut Phanit*, *Chumphā*, *Longrā Kashak*, *Thishām*, *Zaihum Makhum Phanit* and *Hamrui Phanit*. *Yarra* festival is dying, *Mangkhap* is reviving and *Luirā* is revived in modified form. Today, a section of the Hao villages like T. Chanhong (since 1993) observe *Chumkhot*, which is a modified and Christianized form of *Chumphā* festival. *Khamui Phanit*, a modified form of the rain invoking festival, is observed by a section of the northern Hao villages like Chingjaroi. All the surviving Hao festivals are observed for shorter duration as compared to their pre-Christian period. In some cases, however, customary practices in modified forms are still being observed, while addressing and invoking the Christian God and not *Ameowo*. For instance, while performing *Hokharai* (a combination of recitation and the production of vocal sound in musical tunes) during the seed sowing festival, the Hao people are now addressing and invoking the Christian God for blessing. Here, the Hao communities celebrate their festivals to seek blessing for protection over their agricultural farming, and give thanks to the Christian God instead, whose power can help them yield more production from their agricultural activities.

Today, the seed sowing festival is observed for 3 to 5 days, and the oldest sequences of festive events are no longer maintained. In principle, the customs of *Khā Sit* (lit. 'village social work'), *Khā Sho* (lit. 'opening of the village gate'), *Khā Ung* (lit. 'leaving the village'), *Shangrei Kharuk* (lit. 'ritual performed by village Chief'), *Luikathui* (lit. 'seed sowing ritual'), and *Yarui Kharuk* (lit. 'ritual performed by villagers') continue to exist. In practice, the above-mentioned customs are not observed as strict as they were prior to Christianity. This is not to say that the *Luirā* festival, and *Laa Khangnui* (maiden dance) do not continue to occupy an important place in community life today. Further, the singing of *Hohoing* (a form of Naga vocal music) associated with the maiden dance continues to be performed by village men. Some Hao villages like Hungpung and Hunphun continue to give special importance to this event. One informant, reflecting common sentiment, said 'we have to value our cultural heritage, without which we are no less than people with no cultural identity of our own.'¹⁵

¹⁵ Personal interview with A.S. Barnabas Hungshi (62 years of age in 2012) and Y.R. Phamila (93 years of age in 2012) of Hungpung village, Tuingapam Seipainao (87 years of age in 2011) of Tashar village, Haopa Layam (94 years of age in 2012) of Longpi Kajui village, Khashung Mawonao (92 years of age in 2011) of T. Chanhong village, and Zingthan Zingkhai (91 years of age in 2012) and Ruichumshai Rumthao (70 years of age in 2010) of Hunphun village.

Ritual performances during the *Shangrei Kharuk* and *Yarui Kharuk* are no longer performed as the rituals are seen to violate the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, in this case 'You shall have no other gods before Me' (NKJV 1988: 65). In other words, the ritual performances and the invocation to any gods including *Ameowo* violates the new faith. The seed sowing ritual called *Luikathui* is performed in some pockets like Hungpung village before the observation of the festival. However, such performance is not made known to the villagers, and is no longer addressed to *Ameowo*. Further, it is now commonplace to invoke the Christian God where it was once customary to invoke *Ameowo*, such as in times of sickness. In the pre-Christian period, it was a taboo for any villager to sow seeds before the performance of the *Luikathui*. However, such taboos are no longer observed today. Further, the performance of *Luikathui* is now one of the cultural items competed among the groups or localities of the village like Hungpung during the seed sowing festival.

Rice beer and rice wine have been in use among the Hao people for centuries, yet the advent of Christianity primarily the Baptist denomination¹⁶ discontinued such consumption in most Hao villages as its uses were considered 'un-Christian'¹⁷. Contrary to the teachings of Baptist missionaries, the Catholic priests and evangelists welcome the use of rice beer and rice wine, and are not considered 'unchristian' if they consume moderately. Till today, the use of rice beer and rice wine during the *Luirā* festival is found in some sections of the Hao Catholic populations like Hungpung and Longpi Kajui. They continue to sip rice beer in the public gatherings, while singing *Hao Laa* and during the leisure hours of the *Luirā* festival.

They continue to use the flowers like *Kapaiwon*, *Sahārwon* and *Nāpawon* or *Mayāngwon* especially for decoration during the seed sowing festival. For the Hao Nagas, the beauty of these flowers symbolises the promising days ahead in their lives. The use of these flowers in the *Luirā* festival is itself a traditional aspect which they continue to find relevant in the present context.

Not much change in the costumes and attires worn by the performers during the festival is observed. The two changes in the costumes and attires worn by the performers during *Luirā* are (i) the performers wear bodice called *Sihup* usually black or white in colour to cover their body, and (ii) the performers' attires are seen more artistic and also wear other cosmetics during the performance. They continue to use no musical instruments while performing the maiden dance. The rhythmic striking of the performers'

¹⁶ Today, more than 90% of the Hao populations are Christians, of which more than 80% are Baptist denomination.

¹⁷ Personal interview with Mw. Ramyaola (87 years of age in 2010) and Mw. Yangyirla (84 years of age in 2010) of T. Chanhong village.

brass bangles produces a melodious sound, which is used as the rhythm of the maiden dance performance.

Folk games like *Thingneira Khangakhun*¹⁸ (tug-of-war) during the *Luirā* festival are still played, and the *Hohoing* songs during the collection of a creeper rope are still being sung, though these have been in decline. Further, the beliefs associated with the festival, such as the connection between touching of the *Thingneira* (a creeper rope) and a plentiful harvest, is now a belief of the past. Of late, some Hao villages have started to use ropes sold in the market, citing difficulties locating creeper ropes in the forest.

Unlike in the pre-Christian period, today non-participation of the villagers in the seed sowing festival is not punishable. The absence of such rules, however, does not necessarily cause of non-participation. The practices associated with honouring *Yorlā* (married woman), for instance, continue to occupy an important place in the festivals. In comparison to the pre-Christian period, today the *Yorlā* admittedly receives a smaller portion of meat, and this may be due to economic constraints and substantial population growth in the villages. But such customs, similar perhaps to the modern *mother's day*, are cherished by the community, as they offer an annual occasion, especially for the men, to publically honour the women in the family. As such customs are embedded within the *Luirā*, they also contribute to the renewed relevance and continuance of practices that contribute to community cohesion.

Conclusion

The revival of some Hao festivals can be seen not only in the Hao villages, but also in the Hao diaspora. For instance, Hao people living in the Indian metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Guwahati, Bangalore, and Shillong among others began celebrating their own *Luirā* in modified forms. The revival of festivals and other cultural practices among the Hao people seems to have initiated in their quest for protecting identity and preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

Reviving old festivals is certainly replete with challenges, especially when evaluating rituals to old Hao gods. This is exacerbated by the fact that Hao communities are now more invested in Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter, which they hold in common with broader Naga society, including in neighbouring Nagaland. The old ways, when they are reaffirmed, are 'Christianized', in the sense of reorienting rituals toward the Christian God, employing Christian prayers and singing hymns during the festivals.

¹⁸ With the passing of time, Hao people began to play *Thingneira Khangakhun* (tug-of-war) on many other occasions organised by the student bodies and the civil organisations of Hao Naga like Tangkhul Katamnao Saklong, Zingtun Longphang, Raphei Katamnao Long, Kathur Long, Aze Katamnao Long, etc. during their conferences and sports meet. Occasionally, some Hao villages like T Chanhong play this game in the Christmas festival. In Hao Naga diaspora, the student organisations organise cultural meet in towns and cities like Imphal, Dimapur, Shillong and Delhi, wherein *Thingneira-Khangakhun* is played occasionally.

The scale, as noted, of feasting and joyous merrymaking of the festival has gone down considerably, posing challenges in the survival of the old festivals. Moreover, these are still seen as 'traditional', though in practice there are considerable changes seen in their performances, costumes, participation, duration of the festivals, order of events and in the use of Hao music. Bringing in the concept of 'tradition' in the Hao culture, the surviving festivals are more inclined towards 'custom' or to 'invented tradition', than to his concept of 'tradition' that is 'invariant' (Hobsbawm's 2000).

Finally, this article suggests that, though Christianity is now all-pervasive, bringing significant change in the lives and customs of the Hao people, this is not to suggest there is a major incompatibility with the old ways. Shimray (2000: 183) suggests, for instance, that 'one can be a true Christian at the same time a good Tangkhul.' For instance, in Hao villages, churches provide invaluable public spaces to the villagers to come together. Christian principles are also seen as a positive influence in village affairs, such as governance. In many ways, Christian institutions are positioned to be the agents to resuscitate 'degraded' Hao culture. This is especially true, as I have illustrated in this paper, as many aspects of the old community-strengthening customs hold values that remain deeply embedded in Hao culture, and these are not incompatible with the values of the new faith. 🙏

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