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Reading continuities and change in vernacular architecture among the Hao Naga

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The Hao (Tangkul) people are among the largest of the Naga tribes, and are settled on either side of the India and Myanmar border. Prior to the arrival of the British, Hao villages were largely peripheral to the modernising forces that brought about significant change in political centres such as Imphal, the capital of Manipur. The increasing presence of the British administrative apparatus along with the advent of Christianity introduced significant changes most notably western forms of education and governance. The establishment of institutions at variance with indigenous forms created hybridisations in both religious and social arenas, significantly altering local Hao world views. Forms of visual and material culture absorb new influences, and this paper presents types, meanings, and motifs associated with social status among the Hao as indexed in vernacular architecture.

Material culture is a concrete and visible marker of human ingenuity, intelligence, and reason. We might also say that the relationship between objects and human social institutions is visible across time and space. For the Hao communities in Northeast India and Myanmar, cultural knowledge is located mainly in performative idioms such as music, lore, in narrated myths and songs, and these are preserved and transmitted inter-generationally through performance and oral narration. This process of learning and indeed recording oral tradition is continually changing, with modernising processes and Christianity contributing the most to their regrettable disruption. However, in addition to

orally and performatively transmitted knowledge, the Hao are also losing their material culture, and this brief paper touches specifically on fading Hao vernacular architecture.

The roughly 200,000 Hao Nagas living in both India and Myanmar are concentrated mostly in Manipur state. There are 261 Hao villages, out of which 29 villages are in Myanmar and 232 villages are in India. In Myanmar, they are found in Sagaing Division (earlier known as Naga Hills) under four Townships – Somra, Leishi, Homalin and Tamu. On the Indian side, the Hao people are found in Ukhrul, Senapati and Imphal East districts in the state of Manipur. A small section of the Hao populations is found in neighbouring Nagaland. They self-identify as Naga, and speak a Tibeto-Burmese derived language (Ruivah 1993: 15).

When we speak of exploring a material culture, we might broadly state that it is the 'study through artefacts of the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions – of a particular community or society at a given time' (Prown 1982: 1). According to Dorson (1971: 2-3) 'material culture responds to techniques, skills, recipes and formulas transmitted across generations and subject to the same forces of conservative tradition and individual variation as verbal art'. Well known Indian folklorist, Jawaharlal Handoo (2000: 14) termed material culture as 'physical folklore'. Handoo (2000: 16) continues saying that folk arts and crafts are objects of material culture that simultaneously give pleasure and serve some political, social and economic end.

In defining modern material culture, Rathje (1979: 29) stresses on the temporality of understanding the past and anticipating the future. Similarly, Safiruddin (2005: 8) in his study of Sindh folk housing, describes that the 'house is not simply a shelter. It is a physical form given to culture, desires and dreams of a people. It embodies one's religious beliefs and social needs. It represents the cultural heritage of group that inhabits it. Thus folk house is the material expression of the culture and the physical conditions of the area'. *Hao Shimor*, or 'Hao folk housing', is an expression of the culture of the Hao people and their social status.

In a traditional Hao Naga village the structure of the house follows local methods and the architecture reflects on pertinent aspects of the culture. Hao Naga houses are partitioned into three rooms - the front, middle and the innermost rooms. There tends to be one main door, one small window in the rear, and no chimney. The front room is used for a variety of storage purposes such as stocking agricultural supplies, weaving materials as well as accommodating domestic animals like *Hao Hok* (Hao pig), *Hao Har* (Hao chicken) etc. The middle room measures to be the largest in size, 'serving multifarious purposes' (Thong 2011: 70) for the family occupying the house. In this room, "furnitures" like *Samkok* (family wooden bed), *Thing Pamkhong* (wooden seat), *Meithalung* (hearth), *Phungshar* (implement made of plaited bamboo which is square in shape for drying paddy above the hearth), and *Chāngpong* (space above *Phungshar* for keeping baskets and other implements and goods) are found. Families kept their household materials like utensils including *Khongphei* (wooden plates), *Ngalei Ham* (gourd bottle and earthen pots), and

Shimphut (broom) etc. Their traditional utensils and furniture are made of different types of wood and bamboo. Weapons and implements like *Kazei* (spear), *Malā* and *Kachāk* (two different types of bow), *Khaipāk* (dao) among others are also kept in this room. The innermost room was the smallest in size where residents safely stored valuables such as jewellery. It is a taboo for any guest to enter this innermost room without the permission of the house owner. Wooden hooks on doors and windows prevent domesticated animals and birds from entering the building during the absence of the family members.

Though fallen out of use today, Hao villages have at least two youth dormitories or *Longshim*, for young boys and girls, namely called *Mayar Long* for boys and *Ngālā Long* for girls. Here, the young people from various clans learn what is generally understood as ‘skills and knowledge of life’ from village elders. Traditionally, any boy or girl who has reached the stage of puberty becomes a member of this educational system. *Longshim* is regarded as the storehouse of cultural knowledge.

Hao Shim (lit. ‘Hao House’) are found into two types – *Lengcheng* (wooden) *Shim* and *Ngashi* (thatched) *Shim*. *Lengcheng Shim* is also known as the house of *Khalāknao* (rich men or men of status in the village), and *Ngashi Shim* is known as the house of *Vāhongnao* (common people or poor men) which is constructed using bamboo mats and/or wood for wall and thatch or a kind of palm for roofing. The economically poor strata of society continue to live in *Ngashi Shim* especially in remote pockets of the region.



Figure 1: *Tarung* of Hungpung Village Chief, Ukhrul District, Manipur

While *Lengcheng Shim* is generally made of wooden posts, planks or timbers for the walls and roof, there two types, namely those with *Lengcheng Kui* (lit. ‘crossed wooden horns’) at the front of the house and the other without *Lengcheng Kui*. In all, the front pillars of *Lengcheng Shim* feature carved spears, human skulls, buffalo or mithun heads,

hornbill heads, leopard footprints, and other figures. Historically, architects mostly used daos (machetes), and axes as tools for carving. All these folk arts reflect the social status of the family concerned, including awards or trophies earned and achieved during their lifetime. These designs vary slightly from one village to another. However, the strict designs or the culture associated with the construction of *Lengcheng Shim* remain more or less the same amongst the Hao villages, both in India and in Myanmar.



Figure 2: *Tarung* erected at Tashar Village, Ukhrul District, Manipur



Figure 3: *Lengcheng Shim* of Hungpung Village Chief, Ukhrul District, Manipur



Figure 4: *Lengcheng Shim* at Longpi Kajui Village, Ukhrul District, Manipur

As can be seen from Figures 3 and 4, the houses are decorated with 'crossed wooden horns' which are constructed only by the village chief and the clan heads of the village. However, prior to building this crossed roof, the builders must erect a wooden monument or post called *Tarung* (See Figures 1 & 2) during *Marān Kasā* or the 'feast of merit'. In Figure 6, the buildings can also be seen as constructed on a resting platform called *Onrā*. Figure 6 also shows the *Samkok*, a wooden bed made of a single log with a length of more than ten feet, and a breadth of three to four feet, outside the house. The placement of *Tarung* in front of the house *Onrā*, in public places, and *Marān Kasā* hosted for the whole village, is the cultural combination of Hao Naga culture.

Despite the high cost, the Hao Naga people held this feast with honour primarily to attain social status. There were few other private affairs that required such a significant expenditure of resources apart from feasts and festivals. The type of architecture may differ in relationship to wealth. For example, *Lengcheng Shim* or rich men's houses without the instillation of *Lengcheng Kui* ('crossed wooden horns') is simple and can be easily made as long as one has the means to fund its construction. To construct the simpler house, one does not require a *Tarung*, *Onrā*, *Marān Kasā* and *Samkok*. Even though not compulsory, they do have *Samkok* which is usually shorter and smaller in size. Pillars and the front side of the house are decorated and carved with various objects of folk art, which gears towards the building of social status.

The arts carved or painted (refer to Figures 2 and 3) at *Lengcheng Kui* ('crossed wooden horns') of the house symbolise the human activities and responsibilities of the Hao people, especially the village chief and clan heads. Circles within the circle represents the decision-making process in the village administration under the headship of the village

chief. According to some elders of Hungpung village (Ukhrul District, Manipur), numbers of semicircles at the 'crossed wooden horns' symbolise the life spans of human beings. In between the semicircles, one straight red line called *Wungvathān* drawn on the body of 'crossed wooden horns' holds significant value. The village chief is entitled to have this *Wungvathān on his door* as a sign of acknowledgement and reverence to his position. The *Hao Lengcheng Shim* has either five or seven pillars at the front side of the house. The central or main pillar is known by a name *Pākrā Akhoka*, meaning 'the main or strongest pillar'. Some *Hao* villages such as Hungpung, Longpi and T. Chanhong, among others, have five pillars at the front side of the house, whereas, villages like Hunphun have seven pillars at the front side of the house.

Each village has its own typical way of carving art on the pillars, and the sequence of the art carved varies from one village to another. However, the meanings or motifs remain more or less the same. Like other Naga tribes, the *Hao Nagas* practiced 'head-hunting' before the British administration abolished the practice. They regarded human heads of the enemies as the highest award of honour. A house decorated with many human heads symbolised the bravery and success of the individual, which in fact earned respect from others. Apart from the decorated human skulls, they also carved human heads on the pillars of the house. This reiterated the importance of the exposition of head-hunting culture in everyday life.

Hangkhok Khalāng (hornbill) heads and feathers are either carved or decorated on the pillar which signifies the boldness and bravery of village men. Hornbill feathers decorate the *Mayong Pāshi* (headgear) as well as their folk housing. As with most other Naga groups, the Great Hornbill is the most significant bird for the *Hao*, and found only in thick forests such as Angkoching Hill in the eastern part of their hills. One local saying is that many wear headgear, but the feather instillation is not necessarily collected by themselves. Only a few people collect hornbills from remote areas in the country, which have to be mulled against the threat of the enemy, wild animals and disturbances of evil. Thus, to bring home a hornbill was a challenging task representing an entire reverential ordeal.

An angular shape characterised by sharp turns in alternating directions in two rows at the pillars is called *Chāsei* in Tangkhul (See Figure 1). It means the wealth or family assets especially jewels and other cultural attires. It is said that one can find out the possession of assets by a family through *Chāsei*. In all *Lengcheng Shim*, buffaloes and/or mithun heads are carved and decorate the front part of the house. Customarily speaking, no *Lengcheng Shim* can be constructed, or 'feast of merits' hosted, without slaughtering numbers of buffalos and/or mithuns. The *Hao Nagas* regard buffalo and mithun as the most valuable animals of the lot.



Figure 5: Footprints of tiger or leopard carved at the central pillar



Figure 6: *Onrāh* constructed at T. Chanhong Village, Ukhrul District, Manipur

In some *Lengcheng Shim*, the *Khā Chuk* (footprints of a leopard) are carved on *Pākra Akhoka* (central or main pillar) and at the bottom part of a wooden monument or post

called *Tarung* (See Photo 5). Even though *Lengcheng Shim* represents the house of a rich man, not all could carve leopard footprints on the pillar. Village elders suggest that, in the not too distant past, the Hao struggled for survival from the attack of wild animals such as leopards, tigers, and other large mammals with strong claws. If any villager was found missing, they often suspected that either a missing person was eaten by wild animals like a leopard, or was killed by enemies. Symbolically, the footprints carved on the pillar or wooden monuments symbolise that wild animals are no longer a threat to the Hao people. In the remote past, headmen who performed *Mi Khamasei* (an act of secretly capturing human beings from other villages for sacrificial purposes) during their 'feast of merits' were entitled to carve leopard footprints on the pillars of their homes.

The advent of Christianity in 1896 among the Hao, came largely at the hands of British missionary William Pettigrew. The spread of Christianity is one major factor that has brought change in Hao cultural life. The Christianisation of the Hao people resulted in a significant loss in material culture, largely associated with the requirements of conversion, and leaving behind the past. Horam (1977: 73-74) rightly points out that 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'. The changes are reflected in the housing structures of the Hao Naga people today.

Currently, more than 90% of the Hao population live in houses constructed with plank or timbers, and increasingly in cemented houses. The Hao folk housing especially the *Lengcheng Shim*, however, continues to find its place in some villages like Hungpung, Longpi and Chingjaroi, but with much modification in its structure, size and carvings. The symbols as carved at *Lengcheng Shim* may not have changed or been replaced with new symbols or signs. However, unlike in the past when architects and artists used many traditional tools and implements for carving, more and more what one finds is the use paints to paint the same symbols.

Today, partition of the *Hao Shim* is not necessarily into three rooms or parts as it was in the past. One could find no chickens or fowls and domesticated animals like pigs inside the *Hao Shim*. One might ask, 'why do some Hao people continue to live in *Hao Shim* when they have access to other materials and products for the construction of houses that are more comfortable and convenient?' We could speculate here, and suggest that (a) they cherish their age-old traditions, or perhaps (b) it is one means tying themselves to older traditions, which follow a certain sensible logic. In either case, the *Hao Shim* connects the Hao person more closely to their traditions.

For many centuries, the construction of *Lengcheng Shim* for the Hao people was for the wealthy. As mentioned briefly above, they adhered to some strict rules during the process of construction of *Lengcheng Shim* with *Lengcheng Kui*. Despite the great resources required for the construction, the village chief and clan heads of the Hao hills honoured and practiced this costly culture for centuries. Village chiefs and clan heads

earned honour and pride from the villagers and neighbouring villages through the construction of this folk housing. We might say that in these pre-colonial times, how much they had spent for feasting really mattered. Economically speaking, these groups of people in Hao villages controlled a great deal of village resources including land and property. Their control over resources is largely due to patrilineal inheritance patterns. Apart from the special privilege enjoyed by the village chief and clan heads in the village administration, their customs of inheritance ensured they inherited the largest and best part of any natural resources. This custom is still in practice in some Hao villages, and has helped them to continue practicing the costly affair of construction of *Lengcheng Shim* with *Lengcheng Kui*.

With the introduction of modern education, democratic institutions and the commodification of resources in the Hao hills, the village chief and clan heads are no longer the wealthiest and richest men in their villages. On the contrary, today, it is the politicians, bureaucrats and businesspersons among others who control most of the village resources as well as public goods and governance. As mentioned earlier, the village chief and clan heads are entitled to construct *Lengcheng Shim* with *Lengcheng Kui*; but many village chiefs and clan heads in the Hao hills belong to a poorer section of the society. Though politicians, bureaucrats, and businesspersons are the richest among the Hao people, based on the culture, they have no entitlements to construct this folk housing. Thus, the revival of the culture for construction of *Lengcheng Shim* is a challenging task.

Apart from the changes in the distribution of resources and control over resources in their hills, we see challenges on the relevance of traditional institutions under the headship of the village chief and his councillors (constituted by clan heads) in some Hao villages. Traditional governance was generally the responsibility of the village chief and clan heads. However, the introduction of democratic institutions like village Panchayats and other constitutional bodies, has weakened the role of village chief and clan heads in the village administration. Governance in some Hao villages like Sinakeithei and Teinem among others is now on the line of democratic principles. In these villages, the villagers elected their 'village chairman' and other village authorities for a specific tenure to govern the village administration. In other words, in these villages, the village chief acts as a nominal or titular head. Further, some delegated bodies including the 'Village Development Authority' or the 'Village Council' further undermine the relevance of the old office of the village chief, and the clan heads in the village administration. In essence, the office of 'headmanship' which is hereditary is slowly being replaced by the office of 'chairmanship' in the Hao hills. In significant ways, this seems to further distance the community from the old vernacular architecture as the roles of village chief and clan heads in the village are gradually waning and losing the social status that they enjoyed for many centuries.

For practical reasons, much of the culture as seen through the artistry and symbols carved on the *Lengcheng Shim* is losing its relevance in the Hao hills. In fact, some of these traditions have not been in practice for more than a century. For instance, through British

legislation, head-hunting culture is now a culture of the past. Erection of wooden monuments called *Tarung* by an individual is another challenging task especially for economic constraint. For centuries, they cherished socialistic values and principles.



Figure 7: Office of T. Chanhong Baptist Church in Ukhrul District, Manipur

Like in other Naga tribes today, the *Lengcheng Kui* ('crossed wooden horns') of *Lengcheng Shim* has become a symbol of Hao cultural identity. *Lengcheng Kui* is today in use for other purposes. We see *Lengcheng Kui* at the Naga Gate of Ukhrul district headquarters, Manipur (See Photo 8). Even in regards to religious institution, some Hao villages like T. Chanhong constructed their church office with *Lengcheng Kui* (See Photo 7). Many Hao villages have constructed their community halls with *Lengcheng Kui*. We often find podiums or rostrums with *Lengcheng Kui* constructed by the various Hao civil organisations during regularly organised conferences or sports meets. Some of these civil organisations include the *Tangkhul Naga Long* (Tangkhul Hoho), *Tangkhul Katamnao Saklong* (Tangkhul Student Union), *Kathur Long* (Central Tangkhul Hoho), *Raphei Katamnao Long* (Northern Tangkhul Student Union), *Zingtun Longphang* (Western Branch Hoho), and *Aze Katamnao Long* (Southern Student Union) among others. In essence, the symbol of *Lengcheng Kui* is found today in many events and places organised by the Hao people.

There is a question of unavailability or scarcity of materials required for the construction of *Lengcheng Shim* with *Lengcheng Kui*, especially pillars, *Samkok* (family bed), and *Tarung* (wooden monument). In other words, deforestation of most of the Hao



Figure 8: Naga Gate of Ukhrul District Headquarters, Ukhrul, Manipur

hills is one major concern for the revival of erection of wooden monument, construction of *Lengcheng Shim* with *Lengcheng Kui* or for the construction of *Samkok*. Of late, the culture of erection of wooden monument called *Marān Kasā* has been reviving but in different ways. Today, the erection of wooden monuments is organised and hosted at clan localities or at the village level. In other words, there is a shift from individual to community in organising the erection of wooden monuments. This erection is usually organised during the *Luirā Phanit* (seed sowing festival). Some of the villages that have recently erected wooden monuments at the community level are Hungpung in 2004, Shokvao in 2012, Ramrei Aze in 2014, and Shangshak village in 2015.

The rich heritage associated with the vernacular architecture of the Hao people seems to be continuing, but also radically changing. The growing awareness of the relevance, and calls for revival of the culture, as seen in new forms of house arts, raises perhaps more questions than it answers. The concepts of *Lengcheng Shim*, *Lengcheng Kui*, *Tarung*, and *Marān Kasā* among others, are traditions that may simply belong to the past. Despite the changes, such arts as seen in the *Lengcheng Shim* are helping younger generations to understand their past and their cultural heritage. The continuance of the practice of construction of *Lengcheng Shim* with often significant modifications in certain areas, and the erection of *Tarung* in some Hao villages, nevertheless are examples of the linkages that Hao people want to make to their traditional values in the age of uncertainty. 🙏

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