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## “Culture, The Identity Of The Naga Tribe And Its Challenges.”

Professor Ng. Ngalengnam,

Professor & HoD

Department of Political Science & Human Rights,

Indira Gandhi National Tribal University-Regional Campus, Manipur,

Makhan -795136 Kangpokpi District Manipur.

**Abstract:** Naga is a conglomeration of many tribes inhabiting North East India and Myanmar. They are the Indigenous tribal who have lived in their ancestral land since prehistory. They have a unique culture, customs and traditions which can be understood as the tribe's identity. Traditionally, Nagas lived in villages that were regarded as small republics and independent village-states. Chieftainship has been a characteristic feature of the Naga Polity. The practice of headhunting was one of the most striking features of the Naga tribe. Though, they did not have education in the present system they had their way of education known as the Morung. They learn and hand down their history, culture, customs and traditions through folk-song, folk dance, folk tales etc. as their unique identity. However, today, they are facing several challenges in their culture and identity with the coming of modern education, religion and the wave of globalization.

**Key Words:** Tribe, Tangkhul, Culture, custom, chieftainship, Headhunting, Morung, identity, challenges.

**Introduction:** The term Naga refers to a conglomeration of many tribes inhabiting North Eastern part of India in the area between the Brahmaputra River and the Chindwin River at the longitude of 93 degrees - 96 degrees and 24 degree- 27 Degree latitude having similar cultures and traditions. To mention a few of them Anal, Ao, Angami, Chakhesang, Konyak, Monsang, Lotha, Mao, Maram, Rengma, Rongmei, Somra, Tangkhul, Zeliang etc. there are certainly some special works by which Naga tribes are distinguished from their neighbours, way of life and weapons they use, the practice of headhunting. The Nagas are scattered in the present State of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and a large tract of Somra in Myanmar. The land has two international borders with China in the North and Myanmar in the East. As a result, the land is strategically important for India, China and Myanmar.

Many writers use the name Nagaland with two different connotations, as the present State of Nagaland and the entire Naga inhabitant areas including outside India. The Naga people are traditionally tribally organised and have a strong warrior tradition. Each Naga tribe occupies its distinct territorial rights, one's land, forest and water both at a collective level and individual level. This fact remains that the tribes of no other states enjoy special protective measures and privileges to such an extent. One of the recent examples is that even the Inner Line Permit has been in operation since the colonial period and continues to prohibit unauthorised entry of non-Nagas into Naga areas till today. Nagas of all tribes share a common core of culture, traditions, dress code, eating habits and material traits but customs, laws, dialects and some other social institutions slightly differentiate them from one another in some respects. Nagas speak many varieties that belong to the Tibeto-Burman language group of Sino- Tibetan language family. The Naga people as a tribally organised group chose village sites on hilltops until the later part of the 14th century. It is said that Nagas once settled at a particular place, seldom move to another place. Their love for their village was immeasurable and no sacrifice can be considered as too much for the defence of their village. This is the marked contrast to the Kukis and other hill tribes like Garo, hill Kacharis etc.

**Origin And Migration:** The origin of the word "Naga" is unknown, but it has been supposed by some to have been derived from the Sanskrit word "Naga". It is not clear how the name "Naga" was derived. There have been several attempts made by anthropologists and historians to trace the origin of this word. Yet, as Verrier Elwin points out, "the derivation of the word is still obscure". Even four decades after Elwin made this observation the problem remains unsolved". There are many other different writers who defined its origin in different ways. Yet, the term "Naga" denotes the tribal living in a particular part of Northeast India and an early tribe of Indo- China group. As per the Naga legends, stories and folk songs which were verbally passed on to the succeeding generations, we can also locate somewhere in South East Asia to be the origins of the Naga. They have many similarities in culture and lifestyle with Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar etc. The culture of headhunting, tattooing system, platform, burial, looms, and terraced cultivation were also found in all these groups. The common use of polished stone traces Naga culture to the Neolithic age. Most of the Naga tribe have the common story that they came out from a hole in the earth like the early English people who were living in caves, the Nagas were also living in big holes or caves in the remote past. "As they came to know the existence of another world, they decided to come out from the cave. In the process, they sent out a cock for the first time to know whether there was any danger. The cock did not return to the cave. Then, they sent a buffalo which returned with broken horns, then a pig which also came back with lips broken, and then a bull which also came back without horns. Finally, they saw a huge tiger at the gate of the cave waiting for animals or men to come out from the cave to eat. They shot dead the tiger with arrows. After that, they sent out a black Mithun. The Mithun went throughout the vast land to explore the new world and returned unhurt. As they knew that there was no other tiger, they came out from the cave and were surprised to see the unlimited virgin land. As such, the Nagas came to occupy the present land of the Nagas". When we talk about immigration, there are mainly four immigration waves. The first immigration was from the direction of Tibet and Nepal which probably entered via Arunachal Pradesh with some tribes such as the Noctes and the Akas which belong to the Naga family. The second immigration was the Mon-Khmer or Kotmon Annam; they were tribes of the Indo-China peninsula. (Now inhabited by the Nagas of the south). The third immigration was most probably from the Southern China province of Yunan across the valley of Irrawadi, and in this movement, the Tias, Shans and Ahoms formed a part. "This takes back to the first millennium of the Christian era. Some of the peoples, or the warrior group of Thais were also moving toward the south and established small independent kingdoms in what is now called Laos, Northern Thailand, the Shan state of present Myanmar and the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra (Dihang) valley of Assam (India)". Thus, Naga came to their present land thousand years before as the first settler.

**Culture and Identity:** All over the world, tribal villages possess one common characteristic of exclusiveness from others. They went on to preserve for their identity in every stage. The Naga villages were one such tribal exclusive organisation. If we have a closer look at our culture and its identity, we can broadly classify their lives as follows;

**The Village:** Traditionally, the Nagas lived in villages. "Naga village has been regarded as a small republic as every Naga village has existed as an independent village-state as a small republic". The village is a well-defined entity with distinct land demarcation from neighbouring villages. Each has a dialect of its own and as such there is a strong sense of solidarity within it. The people in the village are held together by social, economic, political and ritual ties. The villages have their own identity but not in isolation as there are independent relationships with neighbouring villages. The village located on the hilltops provided a commanding view over the surrounding areas, which is a strategic one. Thus, a Naga village-state has the elements of population, territory and sovereignty. Every village-state pursued an independent foreign policy and implemented its customary laws on all walks of life. Each village had its defence system and indigenous administration. Nagas have always been a brave people. The defence of the village was given top priority by them. They have both outer and inner defence lines around the village. Village gates were erected at strategic locations to prevent the enemies from being sneaked inside the village.

**Village Administration:** The Chieftainship has been a characteristic feature of the Naga Polity. Every village has a Chief (Monarch) or Headman having dual functions as the religious and the secular head of the village. As religious head, the Chief is the first man to sow seeds, to plant and the first to harvest. The Chief presides over all religious festivals. However, the actual religious worships were performed by the village priest. As a secular Head, his functions were numerous. At the time of headhunting his primary concern was to defend the village. He summoned and presided over the meeting of the village council. In case of arising any dispute, the Chief's house served as the court. In day-to-day administration, the Chief was

assisted by the councillors. Among the Naga Chiefs, Konyak, Sema and Mao Chiefs were the most powerful chiefs. As a tradition, the Chiefs of Naga are hereditary. The village Chief was the nominal head of the village. However, the land of the village belongs to the people. Each family had the right to possess the land in their village. This is one distinct point at which the Naga.

**The Family:** The family is the basic unit of the Naga Society. The institution of marriage has been usually monogamous. Marriage within the same clan is not permitted as they believe that it amounts to incest. Incestuous couples used to be ostracised from their village. There used to be a deep respect for parents and elders. Material inheritance was passed on to the male offspring with the eldest son receiving the largest share.

**Head Hunting:** One of the most striking features of the Naga tribe was the practice of headhunting. The Nagas were known to the outside world for their headhunting. "Ursula Graham Bower described the Naga hills as the 'paradise of head hunters'". Most villages had a skull house and each man in the village was expected to contribute to the collection. The taking of a head is a symbol of courage and a man who could not be dubbed a woman. There is nothing more glorious for a Naga than victory in battle by bringing home several heads of enemies. The Nagas could be identified through their practise of head hunting which was found in other tribes in no history of the world. There is, however, no indication of cannibalism among the Naga tribes. (This practice is now entirely eradicated with the spread of Christianity and modern education)

The Nagas war too had its logic as other Nations in the past fought for many wars. Their logic is not that they wanted more land, nor a colony nor an empire but they did value human heads, that the Nagas fought many wars and chopped off human heads for their laws and culture were quite different from those of other people in the world. They also believed that the heads of enemies would add to the fertility of the soil. Another important factor for waging war was the Naga tradition that a man could not climb the ladder of social recognition till he brought the enemy's heads, particularly the long hair of women to enrich the soil. Killed but no head? Who would believe it? Did not the head brought home by the warriors inspire the young people? What a shame for a warrior to come back empty-handed! Would the priest bestow a blessing upon the warrior unless he brought home the head and hair so necessary for the rites? Another important factor for headhunting was the fact that the warrior who scored several heads over his rival had a better chance to win the favour and love of the fairest girl in the village for marriage. In the Naga society, there were two most important steps for gaining social recognition. They are the number of heads one could get and the feast of merit one could arrange. These ushered a man to the social ladder of honour and dignity. In one sense, headhunting was a savage Naga cultural trend though it has now completely vanished. However, it does not simply mean that their culture was bad because of their practice of head-hunting. Naga culture is not bad at all. The Naga was a warrior tribe, the headhunting was treated as their manly game. The practice of headhunting in their society continued to exist as part of their culture as late as the 1950s. Thus, the Nagas had a unique culture, customs and identity in the past.

**The Morung System:** The Morung as the bachelor dormitory system was found only in the Naga society. This system used to be an essential part of Naga life. Apart from the family, it was the most important educational set-up of the people. The Morung was constructed at the village entrance or a spot from where the village can be guarded most effectively. On attaining the age of puberty young boys and girls were admitted to their respective dormitories. The culture, customs and traditions of Naga have been transmitted from generation to generation through folk, music, dance, folk tales and oral traditions. Wood carving and weaving were conveyed to the young in the Morung. Any important announcements regarding war, death and meetings were made from the Morung.

**Status of Women:** In the classless and casteless Naga society, women traditionally enjoyed a high social status, with a pivotal role in both family and community affairs, unlike the Hindu women in the past. Being a patriarchal society with a strong warrior tradition the Naga women are humble by nature as expected by males. However, women play role of wife, mother, child bearer, food producer and household manager. Women were highly respected and given great freedom in many aspects. As a tradition, they were not included in the decision-making process of the clan or the village.



**Religion:** The Nagas followed their traditional practices until they converted to Christianity. The traditional Nagas believed in various malevolent and benevolent spirits. They are polytheist or animist. By offering gifts and sacrifices they believed and worshipped in certain type of spirit. They had both social and individual character in religion.

**Culture:** The Nagas are expert craftsmen from different points of view. Their dwellings are made of wood and straw and these are ornately carved and arranged. Each sub-tribe has a unique way of constructing their huts. A common thing about all the tribes is that they decorate the entrances of their dwelling's house with heads of buffaloes. The Naga people love colour and this is evident in their colourfully designed shawls and headgear. Here again, the designs on the costumes are unique to each tribe. They use beads with variety, profusion and complexity in their jewellery along with a gamut of materials like glass, shell, stone, teeth or tusks, claws/ horns, metal, bone, wood, seeds, hair, fibre etc. According to Dr. Verrier Elwin, the art and crafts of this group of tribes reflect their self-sufficient lifestyle, "they have made their cloth, their hats and raincoats; they have prepared their medicines, their cooking vessels, their substitute for crockery." The various crafts work done by the people include basketry, weaving, wood carving, pottery, metalwork, jewellery and beadwork. The weaving of colourful woollen and cotton shawls is a central activity for women of all Naga tribes. One of the common features of Naga shawls is that three pieces are woven separately and stitched together.

**Folk Song and Dance:** Folk songs and dances are essential ingredients of the traditional Naga culture. The oral tradition is kept alive through media of folk tales and songs. Naga folk songs are both romantic and historical, with songs narrating entire stories of famous ancestors and incidents. There are also seasonal songs which describe various activities done in a particular agricultural season. Folk dances of the tribal are mostly synchronized fashion by both men and women depending on the type of dance. Dances are usually performed in festivals and religious accessions. War dances are performed mostly by men in the manner of the actual war. All dances are accompanied by songs and war cries by the dancers themselves. The various indigenous musical instruments used by the people are bamboo, mouth organ, cup violins, bamboo flutes, trumpets, drums made of cattle skin and log drums.

Nagas can also be identified by their traditional festivals which are related to their religion, economic vocations, and social and cultural ethos. They celebrate festivals at different stages of agricultural activity. Luira is a seed-sowing festival of the Tangkhul Naga Tribe, and Gaan Ngai is a post-harvest festival of Kabui Naga. Luira festival is celebrated in the months of February and March by the majority of villages of the Tangkhul Tribe. Since prayer was offered to their gods before sowing of any seed for the new year. In the Gaan Ngai festival, a farewell feast is celebrated for the spirit of those people who died in the previous year. Ginkimei is a religious festival which is celebrated to please the goddess of wealth. Thus, Nagas are known for their rich traditions and culture. The Naga have been able to preserve their culture, language, identity, traditions and customs through festivals.

**The Major Challenges to the Identity of the Naga Tribe:** The culture and folklore of the indigenous Naga tribe are vanishing gradually due to various factors. If the present trend continues to take place without taking measures for its preservation, the precious culture and folklore of the community may vanish within a few decades. Among the vanishing cultural identities listed in the Millennium issue of the National Geographic Magazine, Naga is prominently mentioned on the map.

When I talk about the vanishing culture of the Naga society, I mean the vanishing of some the important items of the Naga culture. They are;

Naga folk dance,  
Naga folklore: mainly legends and folk tales,  
Naga's names,  
Naga tribal dialect,  
Naga festival etc.

Many modern Naga youths, mostly those who are residing in towns do not know their respective dialect and language.

**Globalisation:** The impact of globalisation, both theoretically and practically can be observed in every field, including economic, social, political, cultural, financial and technological dimensions of the world. Asia, the land of religions, cultures, traditions and languages is now confronting a massive deterioration and disappearance of their culture. Globalisation destroys identities in many ways. Before the era of globalisation, there exist local autonomy. Globalisation attacks the foundation of the existence and livelihoods of the indigenous people, there are some 350 million indigenous people in more than 70 countries around the globe, speaking autochthonous languages and who are marginalised and frequently denied basic human rights including their cultural rights. Globalisation has led to democratisation and identity politics in third-world countries. On the other hand, it causes fears about loss of cultural identity in many ways. Simultaneously, literature, film theatre, art, dance etc create a sense of belonging to a specific national, regional or ethnic zone. Under globalisation, there has been a great expansion of Western culture. India is a land with many cultures, faiths, and ways of life, dress, food habits, traditions and rituals. Thus globalization has posed a big challenge in the identity of the Tangkhul Naga Tribe.

**The Advent of Christianity:** The most important landmark in the history of the Naga people with considerable social, cultural and political ramifications is the arrival of missionaries and the spread of Christianity among the Naga tribe. The acceptance of Christianity marks a departure from their many tribal customs and traditions, and along with the spread of English education, heralds the arrival of modernity in the Naga hills. The first missionary to arrive in the Tangkhul Naga hills is believed to be Rev. William Pettigrew, a Scottish Missionary who arrived in Ukhrul in 1895 and got permission to open a mission school from Raihao, the Chief of Hunphun. Pettigrew's effort included translating the Bible and Christian Hymnal into the Tangkhul dialect. Likewise, the missionaries served as agents in forging a greater Naga identity which is a radical departure from the old age set-up of a warring village republic. The dreaded custom of headhunting slowly declined and disappeared as more and more Nagas embraced Christianity in the early 20th century.

The Christian Missionaries interfered in the social and cultural practices to a far greater extent than the government. The new educational and religious system of the British administration and Christian Missionaries brought about drastic changes in the Indigenous patterns of life among the Naga tribes, thereby, affecting the tribes to discard the age-old social patterns, cultural practices and traditional political set-up which stood as their identity. Also, many Naga Christians want their newborn babies with biblical names like Peter, John, Paul, Mary, Esther etc. instead of giving Naga indigenous names and thereby threatening their identity.

**Modernisation and Westernisation:** The impact of modernisation is slowly but steadily eroding the centrality of villages as a social unit as large commercial towns are rapidly coming up in every region of the Naga hills. This is bringing about drastic changes in the values lifestyles and social set-up of the people. With the onset of modernity, the Morung system is no longer practised among the Naga tribes. It is believed that a loss of religion is a loss of culture and also a loss of culture is a loss of identity. The genuine identity of any society is comprised of indigenous religion, native culture, mother tongue or language, history of forefathers, arts and crafts, rites and rituals, traditional village institutions and customary laws. Though we or the Naga society talk of their identity it has become more like a fashion. Therefore, if we wish to save Naga society from doom and downfall we have to return to our forefather's roots.

**Conclusion:** We have discussed the Naga tribe and their culture and identity from different perspectives. Therefore, it is clear that they are the first settlers of the present land in which they live today. They seldom leave or shift their village for their compassionate love, trust, affection and kindness to the village. Therefore, they have no fear and idleness of sacrifice their soul for the protection of their village. They are culturally rich people. They had their traditional form of education known as Morung since their existence. They have the culture of headhunting, which was the most important, respectable and bravest act of men in the society. They have different types of festivals based on various aspects of life. For example, they celebrated the Seed Sowing Festival, locally known as Luir or Lui-Ngai- Ni Festival, Harvest Festival, Thisam Festival etc. All these festivals are closely connected to the identity of the Naga society because these festivals are cultural as well as significant activities based festival in their life. Thus, for the Nagas tribes, their culture has been playing a significant role which could identify them as the Nagas. Despite of this fact, several changes also come into their way posing a serious challenge to liberalize the rich cultural heritage of the Naga tribe. Further, the coming of modern civilization such as, globalization, westernization, convert of people into many new religions, modern economy, present way of life and various other forms of cultural

invasions from more influencer countries not only lead to a big threat to the existing old aged unique culture and identity of Naga society but also a threat for event extinction of their culture.

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