

Prohibition and Naga Cultural Identity: Cultural Politics of Hornbill Festival, Nagaland

Theyiesinuo Kreditsu

Abstract

This paper explores the conflict between two important markers of Naga cultural identity namely ethnic identity and Christian identity, brought about by the observance of the Hornbill Festival in Kohima, Nagaland. In particular, it examines the ways in which the hegemony of the church via the long-standing prohibition of alcohol is contested in the space of Kisama, the venue for the Hornbill festival and during week to ten day long celebration of the festival. It proposes that by making these contestations possible, the Hornbill festival has given rise to new possibilities for the articulation of Naga cultural identity.

Keywords: Naga cultural identity, Ethnic identity, Christian identity, Prohibition, Hornbill Festival

The Hornbill Festival was created and implemented by the Government of Nagaland in 2000. The first staging of the Hornbill Festival occurred in the Kohima Local Ground, which is situated in the heart of Kohima Town. In 2003, it was moved to its now permanent location, at Kisama, a heritage village constructed as the venue for this festival. It is held on the first week of December of every year.

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out between 2008 to 2011 in Kohima, Nagaland, particularly during the first week of December when the Hornbill festival is held. Data was collected through qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and participant observation. It is also partly a product of my own negotiations of my ethnic identity as an Angami Naga and as a practising Baptist and therefore member of the Baptist Church of Nagaland.

What Kathleen M. Adams (1997) observes about ethnic tourism in Toraja, “a mountainous interior region of South Sulawesi, Indonesia” (ibid: 311) may be said to hold true in the case of the Hornbill Festival as well:

Both the growing tourist and anthropological literature have helped make Torajans international celebrities, their culture an entity to be studied, dissected, photographed, and packaged for export. Today's Torajans are increasingly exposed to outsider images of their culture...In short, contemporary Torajans are not only ethnically self-conscious, but are also avid consumers, manipulators, and critics of the ethnographic and touristic images of their culture. (ibid: 312)

By attributing agency to the tourist ‘object/subject’, Adams moves beyond the notion of museumisation, which conceptualises the space and peoples of ethnic tourism as trapped in a touristic definition of themselves, deploying this in representations rather than their culture as it really is. Agency on the part of the Nagas is evident both in the way the Nagas articulate various aspects of their cultural identity and in the way they negotiate between these aspects.

With regards to the festivals/festivities reenacted in Kisama Heritage Village, the conflict between ethnic and Christian identity becomes evident. Traditionally, the identity of the Naga as a tribal—naked, animalist and head hunter has been constructed as the binary opposite to the identity of the Naga as Christian, educated and therefore reformed (Kikon 2009). Ethnic identity was unstable, potentially disruptive and could only be ‘tamed’ if it was expressed or lived through, mediated and monitored by Christianity. What began as a ‘controlled’ exhibition of Naga ethnic culture has evolved into a chimeric display of both ethnic as well as modern Naga culture that has challenged the hegemony of the Church. The carnivalesque nature of the festival (this is the only time in this dry state that *Thutse* or local rice beer is openly sold and liberally consumed with the consent of the government) has resulted in a strong reaction from, in particular, the Baptist Church (the largest and predominant in the state). This festival has thus provoked the revival of a discourse on Naga ethnic identity vis-a-vis Christian identity.

Particularly in the months leading to December (October onwards) till February, the editorial pages of local newspapers are replete with attempts to arbitrate this conflict between the ethnic and Christian components that constitute part of Naga cultural identity.

Where once, the ‘new life’ in Christianity meant a rejection of traditional cultural practices ranging from cultivation, rituals and/or festivals, feasts of merit to attire and bodily adornments like tattoos and jewellery (Hutton 2003; 2003; Mills 2003; Jacobs 1990; Eaton 1984), the Hornbill Festival has ‘glamourised’ these very practices. Firstly it has done this by proving traditional Naga cultural heritage to have a greater commercial viability than Christianity and its way of life. Granted that the Church (Baptist as well as other denominations) in Nagaland has always enjoyed the patronage of the international Christian community, both in the form of goodwill as well as donations. However, one of the marks of an established and thriving Church is to ‘give back’ and to engage in mission work. Hence, while it asks and accepts funding, the Church also contributes to international evangelist missions by sending and supporting missionaries within the country and without. In terms of actual visits as well, the influx of foreign missionaries or representatives from churches abroad, into Nagaland have been viewed with suspicion and rigorously controlled. And when they do arrive, they do so upon invitation, as guests who enjoy ‘free’ hospitality and usually ostentatious shower of ‘gifts’. There is little money to be made in this arrangement.

On the other hand, the form and manner in which Hornbill Festival represents traditional cultural heritage has been a commercial success, both with the local public as well as the increasing number of tourists that come to attend. Tourists Arrivals recorded by the department of Tourism have increased from 13268 domestic visitors in the year 2000 to 20953 in 2009 and 451 foreign visitors in 2000 to 8423 in 2009.¹ Tourist Arrivals have since decreased, or “leveled out” to use the words of an official in the Tourism Department, to 15881 domestic and 1457 foreign visitors in 2013 and 17044 domestic and 1360 foreign visitors in 2014. There is awareness, both on the part of the organizers and the locals that the Hornbill Festival draws in tourists and thus, generates revenue. According to a craftsman I interviewed in the Bamboo pavilion,

Before I used to make my things but I wasn't sure when and if I would be able to sell them. There were things that I made two or five years ago which were unsold. But now I know that once a year, I can come

¹ Data obtained from the records of the Department of Tourism, Nagaland

here and there will be people to buy my things...No, not only foreigners but also our own people buy also...so during the year, as I work I know that at this time I can earn for my work, it makes me want to do this.

But to explain the articulation of a more ethnically centred cultural identity simply in terms of the political economy of the event would be to overlook more intricate maneuvering that takes place in trying to negotiate between ethnic identity and Christian identity.

Prior to the Hornbill Festival, it may safely be said that in this struggle, Christian identity enjoyed hegemony over ethnic identity. Folk songs were re-worded to include the Christian God. Festival programmes, or rather most social programmes followed and do still follow the format of a Church programme with an invocation prayer and a benediction and a prayer to bless the meal, all to the Christian God. Those held without alcohol were and are still regarded as more acceptable than those that are. While western clothing introduced by the Baptist missionaries came to signify not just a new life in Christ but also a more 'civilized' identity (cf Kikon 2009), the fad also changed the way traditional costumes were worn, over underwear, shorts, or in some cases the design of entirely new garments to cover the breasts or private parts. The legacy of this can be seen in the way Nagas themselves view those tribes whose current traditional attire expose more skin as less 'advanced' than those who have learnt to cover up. Nowhere is this more evident in the 'traditional' costumes worn by women in cultural troupes across the tribes. Where once an upper garment covering the breasts was a rarity, all the 'costumes' now include some such garment. Christianity has ensured that shame and modesty, with regards to the naked body, and that of the female in particular is now inextricably linked with the representation of an ethnic identity. Hence while reviving and highlighting an ethnic identity may be seen and has been perceived as more profitable, the deep-rootedness of Christianity in Naga cultural identity has led to a reconfiguration of the ethnic identity which is represented. The concern has thus been to showcase a Naga cultural identity that is both authentically ethnic enough to draw in tourists but one that also pacifies anxieties rooted in our Christian heritage, about not betraying Christian principles and beliefs by appearing too 'savage' and uncivilised.

This tension was made visible in a now infamous incident when members of the Chakhesang cultural troupe tore a live dog apart as part of their 'cultural display' in the 2005 Hornbill Festival. Foreign tourists were horrified and made this known both at the venue and to the organisers. The locals were concerned about how outsiders would perceive the Nagas. The modern rhetoric of 'animal rights/cruelty' was deployed by Nagas to accuse the perpetrators of

‘uncivilised and savage behaviour’. The Church condemned this act as ‘unChristian’. The act as well as the people involved was disowned in various papers as being ‘Un-Naga’. A few voices that defended it as part of customary practices were drowned out by the cacophony of protests. Explained by Prohibitionists who sought to highlight the evils of intoxication, as a drunken act, this incident was used to lobby for the banning of local alcoholic brews that were being served and sold at the festival.

The presence of alcohol, in its modern as well as its indigenous variations, in and during the Hornbill Festival has been the most contentious issue discussed by the Naga public with regards to this event. In place since 1989, the Prohibition in Nagaland was a culmination of many cultural influences, the foremost being the conversion of Nagas to the Baptist Denomination (Eaton 1984; Jacobs 1990; Mills 2003). The Baptists “prohibited the drinking of rice beer, ... Catholic missionaries, arriving later, tended to take on a more relaxed attitude to rice-beer and traditional songs” (Jacobs 1990: 153). Writing about the effects of Baptist conversion on the Ao Nagas in the early 1920s, J.P.Mills (2003) observed the relationship between the (non)consumption of ‘madhu’, a term used loosely to refer to alcohol, and Christian identity:

From the time when Mr.Perrine and Mr.Haggard joined the Mission in about 1892 all converts have been strictly forbidden to touch alcohol in any form. Anyone who transgresses this law is expelled from the community. Nothing in Christianity looms as large in the Ao mind as this prohibition. Teetotalism is to the ordinary convert the outstanding sign of Christianity, and an Ao Christian, when asked his religion, often defines himself, through what he considers to be the essential, simply as a ‘non-drinker of ‘madhu’’. Even in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper unfermented American grape-juice is used, and the average Ao does not realize that Our Lord at the Institution used fermented wine...the word used for the grape juice partaken of ... is tsükmenatsü tzü, a term which carries no implication of fermentation...There is therefore more than a tendency for the Ao to think that the tsükmenatsü tzü of Our Lord’s day was the same as the unfermented grape-juice with which he is familiar. I have often talked to the Missionaries about this rule, and they have always based their Manichean attitude towards alcohol not on Scripture, but on a conviction that social benefits accrue from it. No “madhu” means more rice to eat, and no drunkenness means fewer quarrels and less sexual immorality. This may be true but there remains the danger of secret drinking (entailing hypocrisy), and the adoption of evil substitutes for the comparatively harmless rice-beer. (Mills 2003: 416-417)

Mills’ apprehensions were not unfounded as this has been one area where the pervasive power of the Church over the Nagas has been at once demonstrated and challenged, not in the least

because of the way the Church has positioned alcohol as symbolizing the antithesis of a Christian life.

A man will become a (nominal) Christian and be baptized. Then his soul yearns for “madbu” and, since anyone who touches alcohol is expelled from the Baptist community, he often goes the whole hog and joins the non-Christians again. Later he may change his mind, give up his “madbu” and heathen practices and be readmitted into the Baptist Church. (Mills 2003: 414)

The consumption of alcohol has thus become fixed in the popular imaginary as a sign of a ‘sinful’ character. As Christianity brought modern western education to the Naga Hills, a Christian identity also came to imply a ‘civilised’ identity. Thus, the ‘sinful’ drunkard was not only morally debauched but was assumed to be uneducated and uncivilised, placing him/her at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The consumption of alcohol has thus been constructed as indicative of a nefarious character, if it was a deliberate lifestyle choice, or an ignorant one, if it was perceived not to be. Either explanation justified intervention and thus the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) along with various women’s organisations, in particular the Naga Mothers’ Association, lobbied successfully for Prohibition in the state. The power inherent in Christian identity is evident in the way the Government then, and subsequent ones thereafter have upheld this Prohibition despite damaging evidence that it costs the state huge revenue losses. Thus far, neither political parties, nor individual leaders are ultimately willing to risk being labeled ‘unchristian’ by revoking the Prohibition.

While it has not demolished this relation of power, the Hornbill Festival managed to temporarily destabilise the stronghold the Church sustained in this debate. The debate on Prohibition was thus a battlefield on which a war of sorts, over the definition of Naga cultural identity was waged. The then Secretary of Tourism, L.Thangi Mannen narrates the initial response to the Hornbill Festival:

In the early years, the Hornbill Festival was not very well taken by the public. Churches were against the sale of local brew and let’s not even get started on other alcohols. Hornbill [Festival] was viewed as encouraging anti-social activities and sexual immorality...there was very strong opposition.

As stringent as the Baptist proscription on alcohol may be, the consumption of local rice beer has persisted. This was in part because it was an integral part of village life, particularly during traditional feasts of merit and festivities and in part because the arrival of Catholic missions that were more sympathetic to indigenous cultural life and thus, allowed its consumption. Those who

brew rice beer however were and are relegated to the margins of respectability and a visit to a 'madhu ghor' (alcohol house) identified as a mark of either sin or 'backsliding'. It is not that either local rice beer or other alcohol are rarely drunk during the rest of the year. Only that drinking during the rest of the year takes place furtively, as far away as possible from the Church and society's panoptic gaze. Drinkers, drinking and the spaces in which it happens are rendered socially liminal by the very presence of alcohol.

Given this status quo (ante), it is interesting how the Hornbill Festival briefly made behaviour, generally avoided or hidden for fear of being treated as social pariahs, possible in the open. Some explanations may be found by examining the nature of festivals and the ways in which the panoptical repression of the Church facilitated the intensity with which the Hornbill Festival is celebrated. Festivals are by nature jubilant occasions characterized by a break from the daily routines of life and in many cases, marked by revelry and the carnivalesque. Bakhtin (1984) proposed that the carnival, through its merging of the sacred and profane, allowed for a liberating subversion while also dispelling the tension between authority and subject, thus allowing for the perpetuation of "official culture".

It may be acceptable to surmise that a directly proportional relationship between the degree of power exercised by the ideological state apparatus and the intensity of the carnivalesque that manifests exists. However, Althusser's understanding of the ideological state apparatus as exo-state institutions like those of the Church, education, family, law, the media etc., that further the agenda of the State through interpellation needs to be rethought in the Naga context. The introduction to the modern notion of state was engendered by conversion to Christianity. It was through the education provided by Mission Schools that the language with which to understand and articulate a unified 'Naga' identity was acquired. The formation both of the State of Nagaland as well as the functioning of the state has been intimately linked to the emergence of a Christian identity. In fact, Nagaland is a self-declared Christian state, the first state in 'secular' India to do this. Hence, the state's identity is collapsed with a Christian identity. The state has thus had to submit to the authority of the Church as have the other institutions mentioned by Althusser. An extreme but apt illustration of this may be found in the attempt of the Dimapur District Commissioner's office to close shops on Sunday. This dictate was greeted by heated protests from the public as well as the city's chamber of commerce. The bone of contention was the conflict between a biblically substantiated dictate of Sabbath and commercial profit. It was

finally deemed too unprofitable and therefore a threat to Dimapur's reputation as the 'commercial capital' of Nagaland and revoked.

Similar protests of the economic losses caused by Prohibition have however failed to move the Church to change its stance. To understand the power of the Church over Nagas then, one may employ Foucault's concept of panopticism. Foucault (1999) defines panopticism as the internalized and embodied operation of power, one characterized by self-surveillance. In the Naga context, the network of surveillance checks for and interpellates a 'Christian' identity. Modesty, whether in lifestyle, speech, or dress is one widely agreed upon 'sign' of an active Christianity. Other important 'signs' include abstinence from drinking (alcohol), smoking, drugs and sex outside of marriage. These in combination with Nagaland's history of political unrest have led to a certain way of life in Kohima and most other towns: an existence where one is always watching and has a sense of being watched.

Shops, eating places, offices shut early. There are few (now growing because of tourism) eating places. Most are functional eating houses for locals, only a few are recreational. Going to a restaurant is still looked upon as a frivolous activity, one that indicates indulgence, laziness and in the case of women, a lack of domestic skills. Bars or places, which sell alcohol, were officially banned with the onset of the Prohibition; there are many places however, which sell various kinds and qualities of alcohol. The video parlour, a room equipped with a video projector and speakers in which movies were screened for a paying audience has been made obsolete through raids conducted by women's organizations as well as the arrival first of the home TV and VCR set followed by Cable TV and now the Internet. Nightlife was until very recently non-existent. While people do meet for private parties, because of panoptic surveillance, those with a reputation of attending them are held in disrepute by society. By extension, one of the few 'acceptable' forms of social recreation is the Church and its various activities such as Sunday service, prayer meetings, Bible camps etc.

The responses to this prolonged and palpable experience of the power of the Church, via state, education, family and law range from resignation to indignation. And the Hornbill Festival acts as a fissure through which these tensions find release. It is no wonder then that since its inception, a considerable portion of the public, in particular the youth have indulged in week-long revelry.

The organizers of the Hornbill Festival defended their decision to allow the sale and consumption of local rice beer on the grounds that any ‘authentic’ representation of traditional ethnic life, and in particular festivals, required it. While the response to the cultural revival it set off has met with the approval of Naga society, the repercussions of permitting alcohol have led to vehement protests. This is not without cause. The number of drunk driving-related accidents and deaths increase during the time of the festival. Incidences of physical fighting, at the individual and ‘gang’ level have occurred enough times for the public to associate this week with a marked rise in random acts of violence. Finally, this week has come to be infamous for apparently alcohol induced sexual ‘debauchery’.

More than one participant shared that on the nights after the Rock shows, the venue is strewn with used condoms. When prodded, only one admitted to seeing this sight with her own eyes, the others claim they ‘just heard’. What is significant is that by the time of these interviews, the association of the Hornbill Festival, alcohol and “immorality” had graduated to the realm of myth.

Because it occurs within the context of tourism, in which the gaze of the tourist/outsider plays a pivotal role, there is a heightened awareness that the Hornbill Festival represents the Nagas to the world. The apprehension about alcohol thus stems from the desire to affirm and portray a cultural identity rooted in Christianity. Accidents, death, violence and sexual immorality are the antithesis of what is understood to be the true spirit of Christianity. This was the argument put forth by the Church, in particular the Baptist denomination with increasing fervour until the Government relented and enforced the ban of alcohol, local and otherwise, during the Hornbill Festival in 2008. Youth organizations from the neighbouring villages of Kigwema and Phesama, who volunteer at the Heritage Village each year, were given the additional task of enforcing this ban, as was the Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB), already stationed at Kisama for ‘security’ reasons. In Kohima Town, the onus of enforcing the ban went to the Kohima Chamber of Commerce (KCCI). As they sought to pitch the Night Carnival as a ‘family friendly’ event, this ban helped in altering public perception of this event/space. The Night Carnival is now indeed seen as a safe, family friendly event complete with Church groups performing songs and preaching the Gospel.

Despite the ban, the sale of alcohol has persisted, particularly in the Heritage Complex and at the venue(s) of the Hornbill National Rock Contest, albeit more surreptitiously. What I hope to have demonstrated through the above discussion is that the extension of the Prohibition into Hornbill Festival space and time is the culmination of a power struggle between the religious and the

secular in which the former eventually managed to regain control over an articulation of Naga cultural identity. By submitting to this hegemonic equation, the Hornbill Festival was able to legitimize itself in the public sphere. This regaining was thus pivotal to its movement from a liminal transgressive social space to the cultural heart of the Naga social calendar. Yet this control has been transformed by this struggle. A space has subsequently opened for subversion which was previously not available. The clearest evidence of this is the reopening of the debate on Prohibition in the state in general over the last five years in which anti-prohibitionists emerged from a wider spectrum of society, including even members of the Church. Their polemic was noticeably bolder and more vociferous resulting in a formidable lobby to lift the Prohibition. Here again, a power struggle ensued and the Prohibition stayed. What these struggles have managed to do is to the rupture the power of the Church over Naga cultural identity. Many adults and youth encountered and interviewed during data collection freely admitted to drinking recreationally and openly argued for a culture of drinking. For them, this practice was not viewed as contrary to Naga cultural identity but rather as something that could be part of it.

Naga cultural identity may be conceived of as a hybridity. It is at once an amalgam of a range of other cultural identities but also none of these. Homi Bhabha's work may be employed to understand the hybridisation of Naga Cultural Identity and its location in/as the Hornbill Festival. According to Bhabha (1990:210), "culture is a signifying or symbolic activity. The articulation of cultures is possible not because of the familiarity or similarity of *contents* but all cultures are symbol-forming and subject-constituting interpellative practices." Hence the meaning(s) of culture are ascribed through processes of what Bhabha calls "cultural translation...a way of imitating, but in a mischievous, displacing sense—imitating an original in such a way that the priority of the original is not reinforced but by the very fact that it *can* be simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, made into a simulacrum", it is simultaneously representation and reproduction (ibid: 210-211).

The construction/articulation of Naga cultural identity is a process of hybridisation, it "bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it" (Bhabha 1990: 211). The Nagas' ethnic heritage, Christianity, Naga nationalism and the Indian state as well as modernity and globalization all act as "originaries", referents without which a Naga cultural identity would not be possible but which at the same time are altered and re-constituted through translation. This translation/hybridity is both visible and enabled in and through the Hornbill Festival. Naga

Cultural identity and the Hornbill Festival are thus collapsed together, both hybrid. Bhabha further describes this hybridity as a “third space [as that which] displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, ...” (ibid: 211). The conflation of Naga cultural identity and the Hornbill festival operates as one such third space.

By virtue of its incommensurable nature, the third space acts as a heterotopia, which according to Foucault “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986: 8). In the heterotopia of the Hornbill Festival, the actual Heritage Complex, Kohima and other venues, the space of memory and the space of future aspirations exist as superimposed layers. Each as already discussed signifying and interpellating a range of Naga cultural identities. As Nagas navigate amongst and between these spaces, they must negotiate with matrices of power that hold these structures together. However, as the discussion on Prohibition has shown, these negotiations conversely also reconstitute the matrices of power.

Just by its permanent physical presence on the map of Kohima in particular and Nagaland in general, the Hornbill Festival acts as a visual reminder of the identities it made/makes possible. The hotels, restaurants, events borne out of this one festival now survive during the rest of the year, not as relics but as alternative third spaces where the Naga cultural identity can be dis/re-articulated, thus propagating this hybridity until the next December. As these proliferate, one can observe an increasing “boldness” particularly in the youth who no longer conform to the Naga cultural identity boundaries delineated by Christian hegemony. At this point in time however, this observation runs the danger of being presumptive as the Church is also transformed by this increasing resistance, co-opting cultural modes like fashion and music for its own cause.

Even as they negotiate existing events and practices in the Hornbill Festival, each year more Nagas join the Hornbill Festival with new events that they hope will articulate what they feel is also “Naga [cultural] identity”. Nagas, particularly those living in the capital and the city of Dimapur, two hours away, view the Hornbill Festival as a site through which to articulate Naga cultural identity. The fact that this space exists for a week and is therefore transient also serves to embolden people to ‘come out’ as well as explains one of the reasons why the state apparatus and more importantly the Church, tolerates it. This heterotopic third space thus, allows for the proliferation of multiple articulations of identity, creating new encounters and challenging hegemonies that were once held to be firmly established and in the case of the Church, sacred.

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