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## Chapter 23

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### ETHNIC ATTACHMENTS AND ALTERATIONS AMONG NAGAS IN THE INDO-MYANMAR BORDERLAND

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# ETHNIC ATTACHMENTS AND ALTERATIONS AMONG NAGAS IN THE INDO- MYANMAR BORDERLAND

*G. Kanato Chophy*

## **Introduction**

The Nagas are a congeries of ethnic communities inhabiting the parallel mountain folds between two rivers, namely the Chindwin and Brahmaputra. This wide swathe of territory straddles the contemporary Indo-Myanmar border and is contiguous with the highlands, mostly 3,000 feet above sea level, occupied by the ethnic Kachins and Chins in the north and south, respectively. On the Indian side, Naga communities reside dispersed in the northeastern states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Nagaland. Besides Nagaland state, which is predominantly inhabited by the Nagas, the Naga groups inhabit Changlang, Longding, and Tirap districts of Arunachal Pradesh; Senapati, Tamenglong, Noney, Ukhrul, Kamjong, Chandel, and Tengenoupal districts of Manipur; and are found in Cachar, Charaideo, Dibrugarh, Dima Hasao, Golaghat, Hailakandi, Hojai, Jorhat, Karbi Anglong, Karim Ganj, Sivasagar and Tinsukia districts of Assam.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, on the Myanmar side, the Nagas primarily inhabit the Naga Hills of the Sagaing region, located in Northwestern Myanmar.

The nomenclature ‘Naga’ is complex since it refers to several ethnic groups (see, Jacobs et al. 1990: 20) that have cultural similarities as well as differences, and the latter now and then become politicised and descend into violent conflict, also referred to as tribalism.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary Naga communities encompass a remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity; for example, the crossborder Konyak Naga group alone are estimated to speak over 30 mutually unintelligible tongues (Konyak 2008: 148). Notwithstanding, Naga communities tend to reveal discernible cultural traits, even among those Naga communities that share no immediately territorial or social proximity.

The post-independence condition of India and Myanmar (after 1947 and 1948) contributed to the complexity of Naga identity, so much so that an ethnic group living on an imaginary nation-state boundary of India and Myanmar began to be identified as two different ethnic communities as is demonstrable in the case of the Langayu- and Mukuryu-speaking groups of the Yimchunger Naga.<sup>3</sup> Even the demarcation of interstate boundaries influences identity formation; for instance, a Naga village in Phek District that could, for historical and cultural traditions, be called the Poumai Naga in Senapati District, Manipur, is identified as the Chakhesang

Naga in the neighbouring state, Nagaland. A similar phenomenon is witnessed even within the districts of a state like Nagaland. For example, the erstwhile 'Eastern Rengmas' (Mills 1937: 2) from the present Tseminyu District who had migrated to the Meluri subdivision in Phek District are now identified as the Pochury Naga along with the communities who traditionally spoke the Sangtam Naga language and Khezha language division of the Chakhesang Naga.<sup>4</sup>

The Nagas were evangelised by the American Baptist missionaries by the last quarter of the 19th century, while Europeans had made their first contact with the Nagas as early as 1832, which ushered in tremendous change. There are several factors influencing the ethnic identity formation process, but arguably the Baptist mission's translation work remains exceptional, as it has engendered some kind of structure amid a prodigious diversity (see Atsongchanger 1995; Kiremwati 2001; Kuolie 2005).

In the present day, the influence of dominant neighbouring communities on the Naga groups is noteworthy. Take, for example, the Sumi Naga village in Tinsukia District in Upper Assam bordering Arunachal Pradesh. The Sumi Naga migrated there during the latter part of British rule, but within less than 100 years, adopted new livelihood patterns such as coal mining and tea cultivation, completely giving up traditional slash-and-burn agriculture and integrated into Assamese society, with the new generation speaking Assamese and Hindi.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the Naga groups, especially in Imphal Valley, Manipur, speak the language of the dominant Meitei community for socio-economic exchange; the Rengma and Zeme Naga in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts of Assam speak Assamese as a necessity for daily social and economic transactions; the Naga groups, the Nocte, Tangsa, and Wancho, natives of Arunachal Pradesh speak pidgin Hindi (lampooned as Arunachali Hindi), which is the unofficial lingua franca of the state; the Naga tribes in Nagaland speak Nagamese, a pidgin Assamese, between them as a lingua franca. The ingenuity for language among these traditionally Tibeto-Burman speakers is noteworthy: in a road towards multilingualism, the Naga groups have imbibed the Indo-Aryan language family of their neighbours for purposes of social and economic exchange.

The impact of Christianity, especially the Protestant brand of Baptist faith, on an indigenous group like the Nagas is striking, although there are other denominations like Catholicism, Christian Revival Church, and Seventh-Day Adventists found in the region. Around 75–80 per cent of Nagas identify as Christians, with some following Theravada Buddhism and traditional religions – often clubbed as Animism. Over the last three decades or so, Hinduism has been making inroads into the Naga areas (see, for instance, Khimhun 2006; Zeliang 2012; 2015; Longkumer 2010; 2017; 2021). Hindu influences are present amongst the Zeme and Konyak Naga in the Dima Hasao and Sivasagar districts of Assam; the Zeme and Liangmai Naga in Peren District, Nagaland, following the reformed Heraka religion; and to some extent with the Rongmei Naga followers of Tingkao Ragwang in Imphal Valley (although these indigenous practitioners strongly deny the instances of syncretism, since according to them reformed traditional faith has nothing to do with world religions). Among the ethnic Tangsa group in Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh, the rise of Rangfraism, a syncretic traditional reformed religion, has facilitated the assimilation of Tangsa Naga into the mainstream Hindu fold (to counteract Christian missions). Also, among the Konyak Naga of Nagaland, the rise of Yahoï 'cult' has breached the stronghold of Baptist Christianity. This new religious sect founded by a charismatic Konyak woman at the start of the new millennium in the Chen area in Mon District has come to the notice of the Hindu right-wing groups on the mainland that are interested in the Naga 'tribes' for political reasons.<sup>6</sup>

Of the ethnic communities living in the Indo-Myanmar uplands, the Nagas arguably stand out with regard to the impact of nation-states in the postcolonial period. The ethnic Nagas are broadly hemmed in by China, India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Thus, the demographic changes and socio-

economic and political realities of China, India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh have exerted considerable influence on the region and its inhabitants. With the change of regime in Myanmar in 2012, the Naga groups in the Sagaing region are increasingly coming under Naypyidaw's welfare state programme, influencing even the once far-flung villages on the Indo-Myanmar border. The coming of infrastructure projects like roads, healthcare centres, and state-run schools (giving Baptist mission schools a run for their money) promoting the Burmese language in the remote Naga villages are changing the political and cultural landscape of the region. Academics, researchers, and policymakers are on the cusp of studying the new emerging realities dawning in the region.

### **The Naga ethnographic tradition in the post-independence period**

Starting from the second half of the 19th century, the British colonial agents began documenting Naga communities. Around the same time, the American Baptist mission entered the fray and, over the decades following, contributed to describing Naga society and culture. In the post-independence period, specialised disciplines like history, political science, economics, and English literature, besides anthropology and sociology, have studied various aspects of Naga society and culture. Coming to the present, ethnographic works on the Nagas in the 21st century is marked by an interdisciplinary approach where practitioners are transcending the discipline barriers to understand sociocultural life.

Arguably, contemporary Naga ethnography has maintained its methodological and theoretical distinctiveness despite the interdisciplinary approach adopted. Here, more than a century of colonial writings on the Nagas has proved helpful. Nagas now writing about themselves in the postcolonial period have not only enriched and diversified a long ethnographic tradition but have also aggravated the dilemma of representation. Debates on anthropological research and writings in the West (see, for instance, Marcus and Clifford 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986) have influenced contemporary Naga scholarship; by the last quarter of the 20th century, Naga ethnography has taken a new direction (Channa 1992). The discourse on institutional practices, motives of knowledge production, power and gender relations, etc., are some epistemological developments that have enriched the analysis of Naga ethnographic tradition.

The widely accepted framework of dividing the Naga ethnographic tradition into three phases (see Lotha 2007) namely, the military phase (1832–1866), political control phase (1866–1877), and administrative phase (1878–1947) is Naga-Hills-centric (an administrative district in Assam in British India). This is due to the exigencies of colonial rule and the availability of ethnographic works on the Naga communities from the administered so-called Naga Hills District, which constituted only a relatively small part of wider Naga ancestral lands. Arguably, contemporary Naga ethnography remains strongly Nagaland-state-centric (the 16th state of the Indian Union), primarily due to political exigencies and research interests in the post-independence period (the rise of Naga ethnonationalism being a case in point). A comprehensive and interconnected Naga ethnography needs to transcend the limitations by formulating new crossborder (both domestic and international) theoretical and methodological frameworks to locate the ethnographic enterprise in the 21st century, as the Naga-inhabited areas across the state and international boundaries are becoming more accessible. Amongst others, the contestation of 'constructed' overlapping traditional homelands between ethnic communities like the Kukis and Nagas; the rise of a fervent and assertive evangelical Christianity in the Indo-Myanmar uplands; and the new emerging geopolitics of South and Southeast Asia affecting the region may be considered.

Here, keeping in perspective the inexorable rise of nation-states in the post-independence period, an overview of Naga ethnographic works shaped by an 'imaginary' but also real and inevitable interstate and international boundaries is attempted.

Arunachal Pradesh is the 24th state of India. Its 26 major tribes inhabit 25 administrative districts of the state and may be divided into 4 groups for ethnographic convenience: the Tibetan-Buddhist group, the Central or Tani group, the Burmese-Buddhist group, and the Naga-related group. The Naga group, namely the Tangsa, Tutsa, Nocte, and Wancho are found on the border of Myanmar and Nagaland.<sup>7</sup> According to Verrier Elwin's classification of the ethnic groups of Arunachal Pradesh, the Naga-related group was known for their headhunting, war dances, and affinity with the Burmese tribes (Elwin 1959). This Naga tribal area was at first administered by the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, but in 1952 it became a new division named Tuensang under the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). In 1954, the Tirap and Tuensang Frontier Divisions were further created, and Tuensang was united with the Naga Hills in 1957, forming the state of Nagaland in 1963. These new administrative units divided the Naga tribes in the erstwhile Tuensang Division in NEFA.

In the post-independence period, Elwin, in his *A Philosophy of NEFA*, wherein he advocated a middle path between 'isolation' and 'detrribalization' of tribal communities, gave a cursory ethnographic description of the Tangsa, Nocte, and Wancho (Elwin 1957). Also, in *Democracy in NEFA* (1965), Elwin gave information on the customary law and political institution of the Nagas along with other tribal communities of NEFA. Elwin's ethnographic data on the Nagas was based on the research work of Parul Chandra Dutta of the Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh (Dutta 1959; 1978). The late P.C. Dutta, who retired as the director of the Directorate of Research under the Department of Cultural Affairs, had published works on the Tangsa in 1959 and the Noctes in 1978. In a first of its kind, a trained ethnographer, L.R.N. Srivastava, wrote a fieldwork account on the Wancho Naga from 38 villages in the south and southwest of Tirap District (Srivastava 1973). Again in 1990, Dutta published a comprehensive account of the Wancho society and culture (Dutta 1990). These ethnographic works on the Naga-related group were mainly a general description of society and culture. But in recent years, researchers have been studying the continuity and change among the Nocte, Tangsa, and Wancho of Arunachal Pradesh. Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh's ethnographic work on the interface between identity, conversion, and cultural change among the Tangsa is notable. Barkataki-Ruscheweyh's detailed study on Rangfraism among the Tangsa settled in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh highlights the new ethnic identity conundrum arising out of cultural contact (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2017). This dimension of changing ethnicity and culture is a new frontier for ethnographers studying the Naga groups from other areas as well.

In comparison, there is a paucity of ethnographic work among the Naga tribes of Assam. For one thing, the Naga groups settled in the state of Assam are widely dispersed in 12 districts (or pockets) of Assam: the Ao, Zeme, Rengma, Rongmei, Konyak, Wancho and the Sumi Naga settled in Assam do not maintain cultural contact due to distance. The Ao, Sumi and Rengma Naga of Assam overwhelmingly follow the Baptist faith, while Dima Hasao inhabited by the Zeme Naga, is a bastion of the traditional reformed religion, Heraka. Arkotong Longkumer's ethnographic study on the Zeme Naga remains a notable work from this region (Longkumer 2010). In studying the revitalisation movement, ethnic identity, and cultural assimilation, Longkumer links the cultural history of the Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei Naga (Zeliangrong Naga) scattered in Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland, but his ethnographic study is primarily based in Dima Hasao. Besides, there are works on the Zeliangrong Naga that have highlighted the Zeme-Naga-inhabited region of Assam, although without the same ethnographic rigour (Pamei 1996; 2001).

The Naga tribes settled in the hill districts of the state of Manipur self-identify themselves as the Southern Nagas. The Naga tribes of Manipur present an interesting case because the idea of an 'ancestral' Naga homeland and pan-Naga identity is particularly strong in the hill districts

(Horam 2000; Shimray 2005). This idea is perceptible in some well-known works on Naga identity, culture, and politics from the region (Horam 1977; 1988; 1995; Shimray 1989; Vashum 2000). In focusing our ethnographic lens on the Imphal Valley, we find a growing body of work on the Zeliangrong Naga, marked by a revisionist study of history and culture, written by the proponents of the reformed religion, Tingkao Ragwang (Kamei 2000); mostly self-published, these writings include folktale, folksong, epic poem, hymns, ceremonial and pastoral handbooks, religious texts, and migration stories. This new literary tradition is also found among the Heraka followers in Assam and Nagaland, but Tingkao Ragwang followers, who put a great emphasis on modernising and formalising the religion, have found a great ally in documentation and writing. Gangumumei Kamei's (a champion of the Tingkao Ragwang faith and a noted Rongmei Naga historian) historical work on the Zeliangrong Naga remains notable (Kamei 2004). With regard to ethnographic-based works, native scholars have produced works on the social and cultural life of particular Naga communities like the Tangkhul Naga (Ruivah 1993), Mao Naga (Daniel 2008), and Maram Naga (Athickal 1996).

In administrative terminology, the Naga-inhabited area along the borderline with India is known as the Naga Self-Administered Zone (SAZ). The Naga SAZ comprises three townships, Lahe, Leshi, and Nanyun, with the administrative headquarters in Lahe town. Many remote villages located far from the towns are beyond the pale of the welfare state, also receiving the least external aid and attention from global nongovernmental organisations. Hitherto, there has been less ethnographic attention on the Naga communities in the Sagaing region. Most notably, the Naga-inhabited areas in Myanmar have been the preserve of adventurers, photojournalists, and documentary filmmakers (Aglaja and Stirn 2003; Saul and Viallard 2005; Azevedo and Drouyer 2016). Here Jamie Saul's work (2005) gives a sociocultural description of the Naga groups in Northwestern Myanmar. Interestingly, the works on the Naga groups from Myanmar are still wrapped in the aura of anthropological strangeness with a dash of exoticism. In work reminiscent of a fieldwork account, the Swedish journalist Bertil Lintner, a noted Burma expert, has written on his journey through the Naga guerrillas' camp in the Naga Hills of 'northern Sagaing Division'. Lintner focuses primarily on insurgency and ethnonationalism, but he recounts the cultural change and new political consciousness among the local Nagas (Lintner 1990). There are some writings in vernacular languages (mostly unpublished) on the Burmese Nagas by former Naga underground personnel highlighting stray cultural practices like headhunting, mortuary rites, and taboos; these data are not amenable to ethnographic scrutiny, but can certainly throw light on the politics of writing Naga culture on the other side of the border.

Generally speaking, the state of Nagaland, erstwhile the Naga Hills, may be considered the nucleus of ethnographic tradition on the Naga tribes (the popular monographs on the Naga tribes is a befitting example). In a short but succinct overview, Wouters and Heneise (2017) have traced the trajectory of Naga ethnographic tradition in the post-independence period. The ethnographic works they highlight are noticeably among the Naga tribes of Nagaland. Wouters and Heneise trace the disciplinary leaning, fieldwork tradition, the nature of texts, and theoretical developments at the backdrop of sociopolitical realities influencing ethnographic studies over more than half a century. Underscoring the chronology of Naga ethnographic tradition in the post-independence period, some of the prominent works listed by them include Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1976), Milada Ganguli (1984), and N.K. Das (1993), amongst others.

There are several contemporary works pivoting on the Naga tribes of Nagaland, which can be classified under genres like photo-essays (Arya and Joshi 2004; Bailey 2017; Konyak and Bos 2018), travelogues (Glancey 2011), and mission-leaning works (Hattaway 2006). Besides, there is an increasing body of work on the Naga tribes of Nagaland from other university-based disciplines (Hibo 2014; Thong 2016; Kire 2019). Recent years have witnessed some in-

depth ethnographic works in Nagaland state where trained anthropologists have had a sustained engagement with the Naga groups; some of the notable mentions are Vibha Joshi (2012), Avitoli Zhimo (2013), Iliyana Angelova (2015), Abraham Lotha (2016), Michael Heneise (2018), Jelle Wouters (2018), Anungla Aier (2018), Dolly Kikon (2019), and Kanato Choppy (2019). The ethnographic works of Angelova, Choppy, Joshi, Heneise, and Zhimo are discernible for focusing on particular Naga communities for description and theorising on various aspects of Naga society and culture, such as belief system, religious change, gender relations, and customary law, etc., while others like Kikon, Lotha, and Wouters have located the region and its tribes within theoretical frameworks of state, ethnicity, and political movements.

### **Christian mission, ethnonationalism, and Naga identity**

At the Indo-Myanmar border in the state of Nagaland, the Saramati Mountain Range, running for several kilometres, act as an international boundary. On the Indian side, the Yimchunger Naga inhabit this borderland; however, the Saramati watershed, as local inhabitants call it, runs through the territory of another Naga tribe, the Khiamniungan, (north of the Yimchunger), whose domain extends far into the Sagaing region in Northwestern Myanmar. Up to the second quarter of the 20th century, the Saramati Range was considered a proverbially remote and perilous uncharted territory. As late as the 1930s, Fürer-Haimendorf wrote about this eastern frontier that, 'The area further to the east was still unmapped, and the country of these Kalyo Kengyus [Khiamniungan] had never been entered by any European' (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976: 105). Fürer-Haimendorf was attempting an ethnographic description of this large eastern Naga tribe that would inadvertently become divided into two nationalities.

On the Indian side of the border, villages like Thanamir, Pangsha, Monyakshu, and Longwa have become wholly Christian in religious outlook. Akin to Naga villages near the Indo-Myanmar border, the American Baptist brand of faith rules the roost. It is noteworthy that the missionaries established a thriving Baptist subculture in what was once considered a remote outpost of the Christian missions. The bumpy and landslide-prone road leading to 'Indian' Naga villages near the border like Thanamir, Pangsha, and Longwa, is also a missionary trail for Naga evangelists to take the gospel to the 'Burmese' Nagas. The Naga insurgents, who for decades have fought the Indian military with their backs behind the thick jungles of Burma Naga Hills, know the region well, and they did not shy away from mixing evangelism with ethnonationalism, adding to the religious and ethnic conundrum in the region. Some English-medium-educated Naga nationalists from the Indian side worked as teachers and preachers in the remote villages monitoring the movement of enemies (government troops) at the same time. All was fair in war and evangelism. The Naga insurgents preached a form of Christianity that was inordinately rooted in mysticism (see Lintner 1990), much to the consternation of the mainstream Baptist churches, but the so-called Naga national workers played a notable role in spreading the new faith in the Sagaing region of Myanmar.

Until some decades ago, there was a stark difference between the Naga tribes that first came into contact with British colonialism and American Baptist missions as compared to those beyond the pale of so-called 'civilisation'. For example, when the Ao Naga in Mokokchung District were gearing up to celebrate 100 years of Christianity in 1972, a case of headhunting was still being reported among the Khiamniungan Naga in the Tuensang frontier in the mid-1960s, which had recently come under the purview of the state administration (Ganguli 1984: 256). In 1938, Fürer-Haimendorf described the victims of a 'dreaded' frontier village Pangsha that he 'have never seen more miserable creatures than these five "slaves": a young woman, a youth of about twenty, two small boys, and a small girl' (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976: 122). Pangsha

today is a Baptist enclave with 100 per cent Christianity, but the differential access to modern education and development has engendered a perceptible divide between the Naga groups.

The Naga tribes that had first witnessed modernisation inherited from the Westerners a thinly veiled sense of superiority. Mutual ethnic prejudice and caricatured ethnic jibing have continued well into the 21st century. The devout Konyak Naga Baptists to this day regret that the American Baptist mission to the Namsangia Nagas in 1839 in the present Tirap District (Downs 1971), Arunachal Pradesh, ended abruptly, and they missed out on education and other development indexes and consequently had to play second fiddle to the 'advanced' Naga tribes. Namsang, the Naga village in which the American missionary Miles Bronson first set foot, has become a byword of 'what if and only if' in the Naga Baptist world.

Inadvertently, the British and their American counterparts had created a new class divide. The natives would colloquially name themselves as 'advanced' and 'backward' tribes towards the latter part of the 20th century; the Nagaland government, with its welfare state policies, had also contributed to this development (Thong 2016). Leading the ranks of so-called advanced Nagas are strikingly communities that had first come into contact with the American Baptist mission; for instance, the Baptist missionaries had started a mission station among the Ao Nagas in 1876, the Angami Naga in 1878, the Lotha Naga in 1885, the Tangkhul Naga in 1897, and the Sumi Naga in 1938. These 'firstborn' Nagas would lead the native missionary efforts, changing the traditional society and culture of their 'less fortunate' brethren within a few decades. No American missionaries were as successful as the native missionaries in bringing hundreds and thousands of converts to the Baptist fold within a short span of time. When missionaries from the so-called advanced Naga communities evangelised their Naga brethren in the eastern frontier, the condition of these so-called 'backward' tribes did not differ much from the time when British officers and American missionaries first encountered the 'primitive' Nagas. For instance, Lieutenant Colonel Woodthorpe called the Angami Naga 'Bloodthirsty, treacherous, and revengeful of all Nagas' (See Elwin 1969: 55); and the sociologist missionary, W.C. Smith, wrote that 'the Ao Naga in his native state, cleanliness is quite foreign' (Smith 2002 [1995]: 14), and so on. Later in the post-independence period, the native missionaries used similar unflattering terms to describe their 'heathen' Naga brethren. For instance, eastern Nagas like the Konyak, Khiamniungan, and Yimchunger were typecast as boorish, warmongers, and 'naked people'.

To the Nagas, the colonial and mission encounters were both serendipitous as well as a historical necessity. The British government opened an outpost in 1866 in Samaguting (Chumukedima), about 25 kilometres away from the old Kachari ruins in Dimapur, to mainly rein in the recalcitrant Nagas. The Angami Naga were no less 'notorious' than other powerful Naga tribes that exacted tributes from weaker villages and tribes, but they were at the forefront of British expansionism and economic interests. The Angami Naga's recalcitrance ended in a final showdown between the Nagas and British-led forces in 1879, with the British gaining the upper hand. This event marked a new phase in British rule, as Kohima became not only the administrative centre but also a hub of American Baptist mission activity, most notably producing a class of educated Nagas that came to spearhead Naga nationalism (see Thomas 2016).

In the post-independence period, ethnonationalism had a considerable influence on the notion of a pan-Naga identity. Its proponents held a strident primordialist view of ethnic identity so much so that they began to poach the neighbouring ethnic communities (ironically, based on constructed oral narratives) who otherwise, in the colonial period, could have been put under the Kuki-Chin group due to shared cultural and linguistic similarities. This phenomenon is commonly observed in Manipur state, where the Kukis and Nagas have lived side by side for generations (see Hodson 1911). These 'liminal' ethnic communities are marked by smaller populations (sometimes numbering just a few thousand) with distinct languages that are now classified as



endangered, as are these communities themselves, and at times have changed their ethnic affiliation depending on which opposing group, Naga or Kuki, had the precedence of political power.

Researchers writing on these sensitive issues are treading on perilous ground, bound to ruffle the feathers of many, but such is the reality of ethnic relations in the Naga-inhabited uplands. This fluidity of ethnic identity is unique to the region since, for instance, J.H. Hutton had observed that the Sumi Naga, who are geographically removed from the Kuki, share cultural similarities like the autocratic chieftainship system and the 'orphan system' with the latter (see Hutton 1921a: appendix IV). Such ethnographic data adds to the complexity of Naga identity and culture since the Sumi Naga are geographically closest to the Angami Naga (who have a loose democratic political system) linguistically and according to the timeless legend of the magical stone at Khezakenoma (a Chakhesang Naga village), both are said to be brothers and had migrated from the same (Hutton 1921b: 19).

For the Naga groups in the Sagaing region, Northwestern Myanmar, it was the educated Nagas from the Indian side who had introduced the new faith and ethnonationalism. Political observers say that the idea of self-determination has come at the cost of dignity, loss of livelihood, and human rights violations (see Nibeddon 1978; Iralu 2000; Linter 2012). Most of these reports are disembodied and dislocated from daily social life, and therefore ethnographic studies unravelling the underlying processes are much anticipated. Having said that, the Naga 'national' workers have tremendously impacted the social and political contours of the Burma Naga Hills. This jungle-matted upland was an unmapped and uncharted territory, with cases of headhunting continuing as late as the 1970s.

The impressive Naga Baptist Convention in Khamti town in Myanmar comprises Baptist faithful from Naga groups like the Khiamniungan, Konyak, Makury, Lainong, Heimi, and Somra (a subtribe of Tangkhul Naga); these ethnic communities speak different languages and possess different cultural traits but are united by a faith tradition. Before the coming of the Naga Baptist mission, the Naga insurgents were the first 'outsiders' to breach the village-centric social set-up introducing the idea of a common Naga identity. Notwithstanding, the nation-states are substantially changing Naga sociopolitical life, thereby affecting the national and ethnic identity formation processes.

To cite an example from my ethnographic study of the well-known Konyak Naga village, Longwa, famously straddling the Indo-Myanmar border, the effects of the welfare state are visible even from a distance overlooking the village (Chophy 2021). The houses on the Indian side have electricity and road connections, with most houses having corrugated galvanised metal roofing, while the houses on the Myanmar side of the village have thatch roofs mostly and still do not have basic amenities although the Myanmar government has opened a school in the village. Moving down south to the Konyak Naga neighbour, the Khiamniungan Naga, a similar phenomenon is observed. For instance, the disparity is visible between Dan Village on the Indian side of the border and Ponyu Village on the other side. Nagas on both sides of the border have maintained marriage alliances and social relationships over generations, but as the state surveillance increases, crossborder interactions are being affected, and villagers who own traditional forestlands on both sides of the border are put at a disadvantage. As nation-states assert their sovereignty (and territorial integrity) in these border areas with unique culture, history, and ethnic relations, the new emerging sociocultural and political realities will be of great interest to the researchers.

### **Changing ethnic and religious identity**

The impact of the Baptist mission on the Naga tribes is studied extensively. Broadly, ethnographers have studied the continuity and change of Naga religious life (see, for instance, Joshi 2012;

Chophy 2019; 2021), while Naga seminarians mostly produce works on the ‘positive impact’ of the Christian mission outpacing ethnographic works (see, for instance, Nuh 1986; 1999; Linyü 2004). There is also an increasing body of work known as ‘tribal theology’ where Naga theologians are attempting to indigenise Christianity (see, for instance, Alem 1994; James 2017). A broad sweep of ethnographic works on Naga religious life reveals that researchers have continued the tradition of studying particular communities for theory building and generalisations. Arguably, the former Naga anthropological subjects in the colonial period are still in the limelight of ethnographic studies due to physical accessibility and availability of literature. With this backdrop, the transnational character of Naga tribes on the Indo–Myanmar border has a huge scope for understanding present Naga society. Take, for example, how the Khamniungan Naga Baptist community transcends nationalities and borders; up to 2011, the Khamniungan Baptist churches in the Sagaing region were under the Khamniungan Baptist Churches Association in Noklak District, Nagaland; they had split the association for mission and evangelism convenience, but are still maintaining strong ties. As with other Naga tribes distributed on both sides of the border, the political climate, welfare state, and bureaucracy influence their social and cultural characteristic, but a community like the Khamniungan Naga is able to maintain common ethnic and religious ties through the church and evangelism networking with far-reaching implications. The Naga Baptist missionaries from the Indian side of the border have proved their mettle in creating a subculture in one of the most difficult places. Most importantly, a similar belief and practice, church establishment, and a zeal for mission and evangelism are found among the Baptist faithful in all the Naga-inhabited areas cutting across interstate and international boundaries.

Amid the diversity of the Naga social and cultural life, the homogenisation of the Naga groups is inevitably taking place from both within and without. Hitherto the theme of an ethnographic study on the ethnic Nagas has focused on variables like religion, kinship, economy, ethnoarchaeology, customary law, ethnic identity, knowledge system, folklore, migration, and nationalism, generating a substantial amount of scholarship. Anthropologists with the micro-study of particular Naga groups have kept the notion of the heterogeneity of Naga culture alive, but of late, there is a need for the ethnographic imagination to study the homogenisation process posed by formidable agencies like the nation-state, ethnic mobilisation, religious ideologies, and globalisation.

Ethnographers and researchers can look into the homogenisation process that is creating subcultures that are politically loaded, identity-defining, and are at loggerheads with each other. The rise of electoral politics is changing the political landscape, and newer identity assertions are making an entry. The national identities of Nagas settled in Myanmar and India are getting sharper, influencing social and cultural life. In an attempt to integrate the minorities into mainstream society, the Naga legends, myths, and ‘tribal icons’ are being appropriated. The rise of traditional reformed religions like Heraka, Tingkao Ragwang, and Rangfraism have made cultural assimilation into the mainstream Hindu fold more amenable (for more details, see Yonuo 1982; Chophy 2021; Longkumer 2010; 2021 Barkataki–Ruscheweyh 2017). This assimilation process using tribal icons, legends, and myths is now part of the larger Hinduisation process among the ethnic communities in Northeast India. The response from the ethnic communities varies; while some Naga groups have readily accepted the iconisation of their leaders like Rani Gaidinliu into the mainstream, the ethnic Mizos have flatly rejected the making of their native personality, Khuangchera, who fought against the British in 1889–90, as an Indian freedom fighter, apprehensive of assimilation into the larger Hindu society. Meanwhile, among the Naga communities of Arunachal Pradesh, the ethnic identity appears to be more fluid than thought of earlier; with the Christian and Hindu missions battling for dominance in the region – which is exacerbated

by the entry of Naga ethnonationalism in the region – the ‘Naga-related group’ in the region is grappling with new realities like cultural loss and assimilation.

The Baptist faith is influential in the Naga-inhabited areas and is fighting turf wars on several fronts. In the Naga-inhabited areas of Myanmar, the Baptist mission is subtly but persistently competing with the Burmese state to create a subculture; the push from the nation-state is tenacious, but if the Baptist mission gains the upper hand, it will create an ethnic populace who will speak English, have a zealous evangelical outlook, and share commonality with the Western Christians. As I see it, the anthropological studies have missed the broad interconnectedness while inordinately focusing on cultural particularities like rituals, festivals, esoteric practices (headhunting and lycanthropy), and traditional institutions, as important as they are. Ethnographic studies in the Naga-inhabited region need to locate the ethnic Nagas within larger cultural and ecological zones attuned to the changing dynamics of the neighbouring communities, states, countries, and the world at large.

### **Future prospects**

The noted Indian anthropologist Irawati Karve is said to have pointed out that if we divide India diagonally, the upper half is the wheat-eating zone and the lower half the rice-eating zone.<sup>8</sup> The wheat-eating zone showing cultural relatedness extends further northwest up to the Fertile Crescent, while the rice-eating zone includes most of South India, Eastern India, and the north-east frontier and extends to the countries of Southeast Asia, which are rice-intensive cultures. One study, in particular, had advanced that people of Mongolian stock had introduced rice cultivation into the Indian northeastern frontier around 7,000 years ago (Gadgil et al. 1998: 100–129). To take such historical interconnectedness into consideration, the Nagas are not only political beings but are also ecological, biological, and cultural beings; thus, the possibility of studying an ethnic group like the Nagas in connection with the cultural zones of Mainland China and Myanmar (with age-old civilisations) is not a far-fetched idea, if one takes into consideration the other parameters of human and cultural developments. The variables of statelessness, disenfranchisement, and isolation from civilisation (Scott 2011) are one among many theoretical frameworks or geographic-cultural zones within which the Nagas can be located and studied holistically.

The Baptist faith of the Nagas has been discussed at length here. The Nagas are part of a larger geographic-cultural zone, which I call ‘the Baptist highland’ (see, Choppy 2021: chapter 2). The Baptist highland is an Indo-Myanmar frontier development that includes ethnic groups like the Kachins, Nagas, and Kuki-Chins, whose traditional religion was overrun by the American Baptist brand of faith starting from the second half of the 19th century. The ethnic composition, cultural traits, political climate, and religious fabric of these ethnic communities show many similarities, which can be made amenable to theory building and generalisations. As early as the second half of the 19th century, Ola Hanson, the Swedish-American Baptist missionary to the Kachins, had remarked that: ‘The temptation has been strong to compare the Kachin custom and religion with the practices of related tribes such as the Karens, Chins, Nagas, Garos, Mishmis and Abors’ (Hanson 1913). The bottom line being that an integrated ethnographic study of these ethnic groups in the Indo-Myanmar upland is yet to be explored, which can bring new perspectives on Naga society and culture. As the old Sumi Naga adage goes: ‘Our neighbours know us better than we know ourselves’.

### **Notes**

- 1 There are a total of 10 Naga tribes with nearly two lakh population settled in more than 400 villages which are widely dispersed in 12 districts of Assam.

- 2 Since the beginning, the number of Naga tribes has been a debate; Hutton in 1921 listed 14; Elwin listed 14 in 1961; and in the 1970s, Horam listed 30, and Yonuo gave 38 (See Jacobs et al. 1990: 20). Interestingly, the Naga National Council has listed more than 80 Naga tribes in the Naga inhabited areas (Naga National Council 1993: 4).
- 3 The Yimchunger Nagas are divided into six language divisions namely Chirryu, Langayu, Longpuryu, Mukuryu, Phunungyu and Thikiryu. The Mukuryu speakers across the border in Myanmar are known as Makhori/Makury Nagas.
- 4 Pochury Nagas are divided into five regions, which also behave as linguistic zones, namely Apoksa, Kanali, Poisha, Pokhungri, and Meluri. There are Khezha speakers dispersed in at least three regions.
- 5 There are total of six Sumi Naga villages namely Balijan, Lalpahar, Lontong, Paharpur, Tsaliki and Tingukupathar
- 6 In December 2017, the governor of Nagaland, a devout Hindu Brahmin, inaugurated a new settlement of Yahooi believers in Chen area, much to the consternation of the Konyak Baptists, as they believed that the Indian state has become involved in the Naga religious matters.
- 7 The Tutsa Naga inhabiting Changlang and Tirap districts are ethnically related to the Tangsa Naga. Until the census of 1981, the Tutsa Naga were enumerated as members of the Tangsa Naga.
- 8 My teacher of prehistoric archaeology, the late D.K. Bhattacharya, first introduced me to this concept during my postgraduate studies at the University of Delhi. His hypothesis, building on Irawati Karve's concept was that worship of the feminine deity is common among the people of the rice belt, while male deity worship is more prevalent in the wheat-eating zone.

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