

Dynamics of Hornbill Festival of Nagaland: Exploring Identity Assertion and Cultural Negotiation

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Abstract: The Hornbill Festival, showcasing the customs and heritage of over 17 Naga tribes, is the largest cultural event in the State of Nagaland. This event, which takes place every year in December for ten days, generates an enormous spike in both domestic and foreign culture-conscious visitors to the State. When discussing the Nagas, one of the most commonly mentioned aspects of their history is that their ancestors practiced headhunting. This practice earned them the title of the "headhunters' tribe," and it continues to hold cultural significance, often reflected in their traditional performances. Each year, the festival organizers select a cultural troupe from each tribe to represent as custodians of the unique Naga heritage. The performances encompass various artistic expressions, including folk songs, traditional dances, imitation games depicting hunting or warfare, and more. This research will delve into the intricacies of a variety of performances showcased during the festival, elucidating their cultural significance and meanings held by the people. Furthermore, it explores to what extent the festival can unite diverse Naga communities and evoke a spirit of sharing a common identity among them.

Keywords: Hornbill festival; folk heritage; socio-cultural anthropology; Naga identity.

INTRODUCTION

Etymologically, the word 'festival' is derived from the Latin *festum* and it has been defined from the classical cultural-anthropological perspective as "a sacred or profane time of celebration, marked by special observances" (Falassi, 1987:2). Duvignaud (1976:13) argues that the classic analysis of festivals goes back to Emile Durkheim, who made a distinction between the sacred and profane and wrote about the "collective effervescence" as the supreme moment of the solidarity of collective consciousness. Cultural festivals celebrate community values, ideologies, identity and its continuity, and the festival as such can be viewed as a public celebration involving all sections of the community, sharing meanings in common as revealed through the performance of rituals and festivities. Although such meanings vary at the individual level, they ultimately take the form of a larger collective expression based on a common history marked by common struggles and cultural communication of a dimension which changes its courses or evolves over time.

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The study of festivals in anthropology has now been directed to a critical assessment of the broader social and political context of the event in question. Such an effort requires the adoption of methods that can take full account of the multi-faceted nature of the issues involved. As Frost (2015:17) observes, “It seeks to stimulate wider discussion about the significance of festivals in the contemporary world as cultural practice, as economic intervention, as political platform, and more – and to inform the policy-making that influences their futures.” Zehol (2016), illustrates the role of festivals amongst the Naga suggesting a mode of interpretation based on the celebration of important festivals during one agricultural cycle by the people of Khezhakeno, highlighting the importance of festivals in nurturing community values, ideologies, identity and continuity of tradition. In her view, most of the festivals and celebrations revolve around an agrarian calendar. Nagaland is a land where agriculture is the primary occupation of the majority of the people and, according to the State Economic Survey 2022-2023, almost 60 per cent of the population still depend on agriculture and farming for livelihood. Some of the major agricultural festivals observed by the different tribes of Nagaland such as Sekrenyi among the Angami Naga and Tokhü Emong among the Lotha Naga are genuine efforts to preserve their culture against growing external influence and to maintain a distinct ethnic identity amidst all types of pressures exerted from various sources under the pretext of modernization.

Festivals have always occupied a special place in society. Early festivals were predominantly religious affairs, predominantly ritualistic having a divine or supernatural component. Their celebratory roles, and underlying cultural and social implications of ritual and festivity have long attracted the attention of sociologists and anthropologists. In anthropological and historical literature, festivals are traditionally conceived in ritualistic terms or are understood as recurrent short-term events in which members of a community participate to affirm and celebrate various social, religious, ethnic, national, linguistic or historical bonds (Bennett *et al.*,2014). Festivals are powerful vehicles forging new identities, one of the earliest references of which could be traced to Jean-Jacques Rousseau suggesting the use of festivals as a type of “social dramaturgy”. As a theory, it was introduced by Goffman in 1959, who examines the interaction between performance and social experience. A proposition has been made that social experience is created and shaped by performances of rituals, and individuals in turn take on particular roles, generating scripts on them in order to construct a view of their social world. To Guss (2000), the festive practice as a cultural performance in the context of a larger sociopolitical reality could be an important strategy in which communities can react from the

position of their own realities, and can even change the world they live in. Here festivals are examined in the context of the roles they perform in promoting local culture and a distinct identity, in the process determining how they have been transformed by global factors, as they have been experienced and, collectively expressed through creativity-linked exercise or innovative designs.

Objective

The main objective of the study is to assess the role of festivals in Naga life with special reference to the Hornbill Festival, and in the process to understand the socio-cultural significance of such a festival.

METHODOLOGY

The Hornbill Festival, the largest cultural event in Nagaland, has garnered international attention, contributing to its successful performance, which involves various intricately organized components. This study aims to unveil some of these components, thereby enriching the current knowledge base developed around cultural festivals. The data are based on fieldwork conducted during the Hornbill Festival 2021 at Kisama Heritage village. The heritage village has been constructed and maintained by the Government of Nagaland to host the festival and other cultural programs throughout the year. The name 'Kisama' is derived from two Angami villages, 'Kigwema' and 'Phesama', and it is located 12km away from the capital town of Kohima. The heritage village resembles an ancient Naga village where 18 Naga '*morung*' are strategically arranged to represent their respective geographical locations across the State. The Hornbill Festival serves as a unified platform where, as many as 17 tribes, come together to celebrate and display their unique cultural heritage. The selection committee, which is usually composed of civil bodies, selects a group or a particular village to perform, and this group will be responsible for managing the respective '*morung*' at the festival site. In addition, the '*morung*' also offers tourists traditional delicacies and rice beer. Listed below are the names of the cultural troupes representing each tribe in the Hornbill Festival of 2021.

1. Angami: Kohima Village Cultural Troupe
2. Ao:Wadir Cultural Troupe, Ungma
3. Chakhesang: Phek Village Cultural Troupe
4. Chang: Hakchang Village Cultural Troupe, Tuensang
5. Khamnuiuingan: Thang Cultural Troupe, Noklak
6. Konyak: Longchang Cultural Troupe, Mon

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7. Lotha: Phiro Village Cultural Troupe, Wokha
8. Phom: Nangland Cultural Troupe Society, Longleng
9. Pochury: Apoksha Range Public Organization Cultural Troupe, Phek
10. Rengma: Pharashan Cultural Troupe, New Sedenyu
11. Sangtam: Singrep Yangdong Tsungdi Mulong, Kiphire
12. Sumi: Lhuishi Village Cultural Troupe, Zunheboto
13. Yimkhiuing: Jipurur Yiakliyiakko Cultural Troupe, Chessore Village
14. Zeliang: Ntu Village Cultural Troupe, Peren
15. Garo: Garo Cultural Troupe, Eralibill
16. Kachari: Burkhong Cultural Society, H.Q Padum Pukhuri
17. Kuki: Kuki Cultural Troupe, Lilen

Non-Naga tribes such as the Garo, Kachari, and Kuki, who reside in Nagaland, have been included in the list of performing troupes or cultural organizations (Sl. nos. 15, 16, 17). This inclusion is significant, as it aims to promote and highlight the cultural diversity within the State by giving these communities a platform for greater representation. As a methodological exercise, a semi-structured interview schedule was utilized by the researcher to conduct interviews with a total of 32 participants. These participants, represent the local community, perform tribal folk dances, folk songs, and indigenous games during the festival. Among the respondents, there were 6 females and 26 males, within the age range 18 to 58 years. Among the 32 participants, 3 each from Pochury, Chang and Yimkhiung, 2 each from Konyak, Kuki, Chakhesang, Rengma and Sumi, 5 from Lotha, 4 each from Ao and Zeliang groups. Data were also sourced from festival brochures and magazines issued by the Department of Art and Culture, Government of Nagaland. Additionally, secondary data in the form of Culture Connect, census data, and official documents of the preceding three years were accessed.

NAGA HORNBILL FESTIVAL

'Naga' actually serves as an umbrella for many ethnic groups living in the hills of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and in the neighboring country of Myanmar. When congregated, they form a larger political entity rooted in shared cultural and territorial characteristics. The festival is one such attribute, which when performed on such a magnitude can bring all the ethnic groups to come together at one place to show unity in diversity. This festival recreates or recollects the era of the forefathers, which might otherwise be forgotten. On such occasions, elements of both tangible and intangible heritage are showcased, offering non-

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Naga visitors an opportunity to gain firsthand insight while encouraging the tribes themselves to reflect and rediscover their cultural identity. By vividly showcasing their internal diversity, the festival fosters greater appreciation among participants while inspiring in the performers a deeper sense of collective identity.

The Hornbill Festival, often referred to as the 'festival of festivals,' began in 2000 and is held annually during the first ten days of December. The opening day also marks Nagaland's Statehood Day, commemorating its establishment as the 16th State of India. Every year a tribal guest is selected to pronounce traditional blessings on the inaugural program. Tribal guest offers a prayer for a successful festival and pronounces God's guidance and blessings upon the State and the people. In 2021, the chief guest of the Hornbill Festival was Professor Jagdish Mukhi, the Governor of Nagaland and Assam. He was welcomed by cultural troupes in vibrant traditional attire, who lined the path from the gate to the main stage. Upon his arrival, the troupes enthusiastically yelled, yodeled, danced, and beat traditional log drums in their respective 'morungs'. After the ceremonial welcome, official speeches were delivered by the guests and other dignitaries. Each troupe then performed according to their allotted time slot. The program had a morning session from 10 AM to 12 PM and an afternoon session from 1 PM to 3 PM, followed by evening musical concerts. Different guests and dignitaries attended the festival each day, and the program continued in successive days. In addition to the cultural performances, the Hornbill Festival features a variety of other activities, many of which were held in different districts and across the whole region. Undoubtedly, all such activities could promote nature-based tourism, offering experiences like trekking to Dzukou Valley, ToupHEMA Village, Pfutsero, and Khonoma. Other highlights included the Naga Wrestling Championship, the Naga Chef competition, the Hornbill Canoe Sprint and Boat Race at Doyang in Wokha District, and various art exhibitions. A favorite among locals was the night carnival held in the main town, where local entrepreneurs set up stalls to sell their goods. One of the most significant benefits of the Hornbill Festival is the valuable platform it provides for local entrepreneurs. The festival creates a unique opportunity for them to showcase and promote their products to a diverse and large audience, including both domestic and international visitors. From traditional crafts and handmade goods to food and beverages, local businesses can generate substantial income during the event. This exposure not only boosts their immediate sales but also helps them build connections, attract future customers, and enhance their brand visibility, contributing to long-term economic growth in the region.

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The Hornbill Festival 2021 took place after a one-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic and related travel restrictions resulted in fewer tourists that year. The festival was further shortened to just four days following the Oting incident, where 13 civilians were tragically killed by the Indian Army in Oting village in Mon District. This incident led to widespread protests across the State, stopping the festival prematurely, which also signifies displaying tribal solidarity at another level. Before its abrupt closure, during those four days, diverse cultural troupes captivated the audience with folk songs, traditional dances, indigenous games, and demonstrations of practices such as headhunting and game hunting. While these performances could showcase the rich and varied culture of the Naga people, these were not enough to capture every aspect of their heritage. In any case, it is believed that the festival can play a crucial role in preserving and educating both the younger generation and visitors, acting as a living repository of Naga traditions and cultural practices.

Listed below are some of the performances of the cultural troupes at the festival. These performances reflect the lifestyles, beliefs, and customs of their ancestors, each telling a story that helps today's Nagas reconnect with their heritage.

Folksongs

The folksongs performed by each tribe conveyed messages, each focusing on the strength of the song to express happiness, sorrow, good luck, love and hatred, and various other emotional expressions. The songs were used to communicate with one another, motivating them to maintain a harmonious relationship during the performance of activities connected with agriculture and farming. Most of the Naga folksongs, folktales, ritual contents and practices associated with the belief system revolve around the agricultural cycle. The folksongs related to farming and agricultural activities performed at the festival were '*Tsate Li*' of the Chakhesang and '*Moyü*' of the Ao, sung during jhum cultivation when the villagers come together as they work from one end of the field ending up at the top. '*Nyokro kevi*' of the Angami is generally sung when the farmers use 'Kedzü' (spade) to soften the dry land for sowing the crops. The song is sung to ease physical hardships, encouraging one another to work tirelessly and an attempt to uplift their spirit. '*Asiio Kesii*' is a traditional song sung by the Rengma women during husking of paddy. They line up along a large traditional pounding table and pound the rice in order while singing the song in unison. Along with the above-mentioned songs, folksongs of love have also found a place, of which mention may be made of '*Mezo Khwe*' of the Rengma, sung by the lovers

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to convey to their admirers that they would go back home together in the evening in spite of hills and mountains separating them throughout the day. Similarly, '*Tya-boi*' is a song of enchantment sung by the Lotha, telling how a young girl was attracted to a boy from another village and was determined to betroth him. She communicated her feelings through the song. '*Yaloro Kwbi*' is another love song popular among the Pochury, when they express their love and affection to one another.

Folkdances

Folkdances were performed celebrating war victories, imitating different animals. The Naga ancestors took immense pride in victories by acquiring the maximum heads of enemies as war trophies. The victorious warriors used to display the heads on top of tree branches or nails on the top of '*morungs*', which is followed by a big feast in the village. The performances are generally done as war dances accompanied by ululation by the warriors before the start of the battle and movements depicting the war preparations. In the '*Ekyo sharii*' (Victory dance) of the Lotha, men go around in circles and crisscross forming complex patterns, diverging in different directions in order to confuse the enemy and ensure that they are not followed to their village. They also exhibit a crisscross movement of the footprints so that they can escape and the enemy cannot trace their route. The war heroes used to receive great honor for their bravery and courage and would receive marriage proposals as it was considered a great privilege to be associated with a warrior. This dance is known as '*Teri Nga*' among the Rengma, '*Nokenketer yar*' among the Ao and '*Thupühusazo*' among the Chakhesang.

The Naga ancestors also had a close relationship with the environment and the animals inhabiting it, as is evident from their folk culture. In this connection, the Zeliang perform dances such as '*Herie Lim*' (Hornbill dance), '*Awaina Lim*' (Amur Falcon dance), '*Hecha Lim*' (python dance), and '*Temangna Lim*' (Swift bird dance). The dances are performed after closely observing the movements of the animals and picking up their majestic beauty as revealed through their movements. '*Lataya malii tsüingsang*' (moonlit dance) of the Ao is performed in the open on a moonlit night where young boys and girls gather to compare themselves with the beautiful celestial objects and flowers; the dance is performed in celebration of their beauty.

'*Melo phita*' is a folkdance performed by the Angami during Sekrenyi festival. The festival is celebrated in February, which signifies the purification and sanctification of the body. The dance is performed by men and women dressed in traditional attires, with menfolk carrying spades and the womenfolk carrying baskets. The festival could accommodate all these dance

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forms ensuring the recognition and visibility it deserves. Proper curation and display can provide a vibrant showcase of the unique styles, costumes, rhythms, and cultural narratives that these dances embody.

Indigenous art and games

Few art forms and traditional games were on display during the festival. '*Rekü Lükhüm*' of the Yimkhiuing Naga is the demonstration of the beheading of the enemy head. During the performance the participants enact the event of defending the village and the people from the enemy, capturing and killing the enemy, collecting the head as a trophy, and finally returning to the village as a hero and organizing a grand feast in the village. During the ceremony the men folk perform the warriors' dance, praising the bravery and courage of the war heroes and proudly displaying the head of the enemy hung on the papal tree. '*Terbü do*' performed by the Angami Naga is a demonstration of the battle tactics when an elderly ululates in a long and continuous loud wail and the warriors respond in a loud voice '*lü*', if they are ready for the attack. '*Rücebele*' is a demonstration by the Chakhesang of paddy harvesting by girls and boys. On completion of the harvest and winnowing, the grains are measured by basket and given to each worker by the owner of the land. War and agriculture, though diametrically opposite from the functional point of view, were essential components of the Naga society giving it a distinctive character.

The Naga forefathers regarded the log drum as one of the integral parts of the bachelor's dormitory, '*morung*'. The young warriors beat the log drum for different purposes, one of which was to relay information or to warn against an incoming attack from an enemy. However, it has multiple uses like sounding victory during war, alerting to the danger of natural calamities and even announcing the death of a person in the village. The tree for the log drum is carefully selected by an elder and purified through rituals and prayers. For making a drum, a log of tree is cut and is pulled using ropes made of natural fibers. Demonstration of the act of log drum pulling is known as '*Tongtn Senbü*' among the Chang, '*Phen Loi*' among the Khiamniungan, '*Sangkongthunek*' among the Yimkhiuing.

Performing traditional games and sports is one way of remembering the Naga ancestors. '*Angü kupüsü*' of the Sumi Naga is a spear-kicking game played by the men-folk displaying their skills and agility. The main purpose of this game is to prepare and equip the men to act swiftly in the event of a future attack by the enemy or wild animals. The game determines which player can jump at the highest point. '*Fübo*' is a popular traditional game played between two to four players by the Lotha Naga, where stakes can be money, properties, and even wives.

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Each player tosses cowries to determine who takes the first turn. Six cowries are tossed and the result is determined by the number of cowries overturned. The pattern is continued till the resources of the players are exhausted and only one player is left standing as the winner of all the stakes. '*Kene*' or Naga wrestling is one of the most popular games played by the Angami. The individuals wear colored clothes around the waist and try to topple their opponent on the ground by holding onto their waistband.

As we explore further into the interactions among individuals, particularly the participants, we come to realize that they transcend mere theatricality and reveal deeper dynamics at play. In the face of acculturation and the erosion of tradition, today's societies are primarily concerned with safeguarding and upholding their heritage. The Naga society exemplifies this pursuit, sharing a common agenda of preservation of the cultural legacy. While the festival might have originated as a governmental agenda, its enduring success and longevity for over two decades point at factors beyond a mere official endorsement. Certainly, when a festival receives popular attention, the economic advantages it carries for the people often take precedence over the other considerations. However, in the context of the Hornbill Festival, economic benefits are just one reason behind the continuity and preservation of the Naga culture in its unified form.

Preparation for the troupes begins at least a month before the festival, during which each group diligently collects their ornaments and attire to ensure authenticity. During the festival, many participants hailing from remote areas of the State give their time and energy to travel to the festival site, where they perform tirelessly throughout the 10-day event with utmost effort. Emotions and sentiments expressed during the performances are unparalleled, underscored by a profound sense of unity. The audience, with diverse cultural backgrounds, gather to witness the vibrant dances, intricate hand-woven attire, elaborate rituals, and lively music. In the process, they are introduced to the depth and diversity of Naga culture. The atmosphere is one of unity through self-belief, with people from different walks of life engaging, learning from one another, and celebrating the Naga heritage. As the festival serves to connect and unite people, there are also instances where non-Nagas respond differently to certain performances. Naturally, not every member of the audience will connect with or appreciate the performances in the same way. For example, a couple from Maharashtra reacted differently after observing an Angami cultural troupe demonstrating a live rooster sacrificing ritual to sanctify a newly built sacred kitchen for the Sekrenyi festival. This ritual involves prediction from the rooster's leg position, intestine, and movements to foresee the future. The

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rooster is then prepared as a sacred dish, which is traditionally consumed only by the male members of the family. While the couple found the ritual insensitive to the bird, this ritual carried deep meaning for the Angami, touching their ancestral roots. They have been performing it for generations as part of their culture. In the course of the discussion, the couple shared that they had never seen an animal sacrificed live on stage and found it cruel. Although they had respect for the Naga culture, they were surprised and somewhat shocked to witness such a ritual before their eyes, as it was an unexpected experience for them.

While some may find such demonstrations unsettling, others view them as genuine expressions of cultural behaviour. Though these diverse responses are natural and inevitable, they do not take away from the fact that these performances play a vital role in uniting the Nagas through celebrations aimed at sharing a common cultural history. In spite of reservations, outsiders on the whole are quick to admit that, the festival stands as an example of Naga unity and integrity on display, fostering a unique identity of their own. One visitor from Kerala was enchanted by the attires and performances and remarked, “It is incredible to witness the display of such a rich culture, all in one place.” Another visitor commented, “Now I understand why the Nagas are truly unique, distinct from the rest of the country.”

Delving into the production, reception, and interpretation of various art forms such as music, dance, theatre, and visual arts within the purview of cultural events necessitates a comprehensive examination of how these elements were created, received by the audience, and understood or interpreted in different contexts. This exploration entails analyzing the intricate processes of bringing these artistic expressions to life, the way they are perceived and appreciated by the attendees, as also interpreting the cultural and symbolic meanings they might carry. Additionally, it involves recognizing the contributions from diverse sources to the art forms displayed or enacted live, enhancing the festival's overall significance and centrality. Music, for instance, sets the mood and rhythm of the event, while dance and theatrical performances narrate stories or depict the cultural traditions of the Naga in totality. Visual arts, on the other hand, adorn the festival grounds with a colorful display that offers insights into local craftsmanship and aesthetics. Together, all these artistic elements play a significant role in determining the festival's importance, imbibing a sense of community living, and creating a lasting impression on the participants and spectators alike.

FUNCTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FESTIVAL

Turner (1982) was of the opinion, that culture fully expresses itself when performers become

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conscious of their own 'self' during rituals and 'theatrical performances'. In other words, cultural practices and traditions are most effectively showcased when people actively engage themselves with them, driven by a desire to consciously understand their significance and meaning. During rituals and theatrical performances, individuals often embody their cultural norms, values, and traditions, either through symbolic gestures and display of, traditional attire, or scripted performances. Naga males make a war cry or a howling sound during specific types of performance, which holds deep symbolic meanings and serves multiple purposes. This vocal expression, often performed by a leader, marks the beginning of performances at the Hornbill Festival, signaling to both performers and the audience that the event is about to commence. In this context, the war cry functions as a signal to get organized, establish rapport, and forge unity. Historically, this shout, known as *Meku* among the Angami tribe, served various purposes. It was an expression of joy and happiness, as well as a means to encourage and boost morale during times of pain and sorrow. *Meku* was also used to announce before others one's presence, reinforcing a sense of community spirit and support. Originally, it was taken to be a sound of triumph and victory made by the warriors returning from successful battles, when victorious hunters would dance and march towards their village, proudly displaying the hunted enemy heads as prized trophies. Among the Chakhesang tribe, a similar war cry, called *Unbe*, is prevalent. To master the technique of the exulting yell of *Unbe*, boys are specially trained as they learn all the intricacies of warfare. This cry not only prepares them for combat but also serves as a rite of passage, instilling a sense of bravery and camaraderie. Folkdances also symbolize friendship, reconciliation, and acceptance. For example, the *Sharise* dance among the Lotha tribe was performed by the young women and men to thank the village priest for a bountiful harvest. During this dance, the priest would pronounce the season of marriage and engagements within the village, making it a significant event that reinforces social bonds and projects it as an occasion to celebrate communal prosperity. The villagers communicate with one another through songs and also use other natural signs as a means of communication. One such example is the Pochury folk song called 'Awura Kwahi.' This song tells the story of leaving a sign, typically a freshly cut branch with leaves, at the crossroads of field paths. The sign serves as a message to relatives or friends coming behind, letting them know that the person has safely returned home from the field ahead of them. These cultural practices illustrate the richness of Naga traditions, deeply ingrained in nature, which through vocal expressions and dances, help in maintaining the Naga social cohesive structure, celebrating victories, and recreating important communal events. These were not merely romanticized enactments, but were sincere attempts to authentically

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represent the social-cultural life of the Naga people, reflecting on their interactions and encounters with the nature they were placed in, or which was their creation in the sense that it could reveal itself deep in their understanding and interpretation of their lived experiences. The intangible aspects of Naga culture would be incomplete without the tangible elements, which are essential to the preservation and expression of the Naga identity and the tradition it signifies. Aitchison and Pritchard (2007) describe festival setting as a space for the articulation, performance and rediscovery of identity. By engaging in these rituals and performances, the Naga people not only honor their heritage but also make an attempt to create a living connection to their history, normative value systems, and identity.

The Hornbill festival also acts as a platform for political and social activism in a situation when Naga cultural identities have been facing increasing contestations from diverse sources of power and control. Longkumer (2013), explores how festival offers a peaceful alternative to the region's more than 50 years of military warfare between the Indian State and several Naga nationalist groups seeking independence. Interactions with local participants revealed that a significant number of them put emphasis on the importance of identity formation through the festival as a reflection of social living together. Feintuch (1988) demonstrates that cultural appreciation and celebration through a festival format can also serve to validate traditional values amongst the marginalized members of society, suffering from uncertainties and lack of support for their cause. A participant from one of the Pochury Nagas stated that his motive for participating in the festival was "to promote Naga unity." Other such comments like "*moi naga manu ase*" (I am a Naga), "*etu festival bara moikhan laga nyium dikhai*" (this festival showcases who we are), "*sob naga eki loko dey bhal para bobibole*" (for the cause of unity among all the Naga tribes) were recorded. These comments illustrate how the concept of identity and solidarity carries significant emotional weightage among participants of the festival. Through the comment, "for the cause of Naga unity," the respondent only expresses his deep-seated sense of belongingness and commitment to the cultural heritage, he holds so dear. The underlying sentiment suggests that individuals participating in the festival are there not merely for entertainment or personal gains, but are driven by a shared commitment to preserve their collective identity and fostering unity among the Nagas. It underscores the profound emotional attachment that participants feel towards their cultural heritage and the importance they place on coming together to celebrate and uphold it. Overall, it demonstrates how the festival serves as a platform for individuals to reaffirm their sense of identity and solidarity with their fellow participants and with the members of the larger Naga community. It may also be indicative of a

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step in the direction of achieving greater integrity among the different sections of the Naga, assuming the dimensions of a political community serving the interests of all the Naga communities and even going beyond that, as exemplified the participation of members from other tribes living in Nagaland. From the larger Indian perspective, the notion of identity emerges as a central theme in the estimation of majority of policymakers' and cultural observers in the face of the ongoing endeavor of the minority and tribal group to construct a national identity based on their unique way of bringing diverse forms of cultural representation to a common platform.

Drawing parallels with the concept of Goffman "social dramaturgy", the Hornbill festival utilizes performances as a means to convey values and foster social bondages. In a country as diverse as India, where various ethnicities, languages, and cultures coexist, there are often struggles initiated by tribal communities to maintain distinct cultural identities in the face of mounting pressures of homogenization and assimilation by the nationalists to promote greater political integration. For the Naga, who have a unique cultural heritage and a history of political struggle for autonomy, preserving their cultural identity is paramount. The festival is a form of cultural assertion and resistance against any attempts to erode or dilute the Naga identity.

Naga identity reflects a hybridization of ethnicity, nationalism, religion, and global cultural forms through this Hornbill festival (Keditsu, 2019). The festival features fashion shows that highlight Naga attire alongside contemporary designs. Local designers incorporate traditional patterns and textiles, creating outfits that respect cultural heritage while appealing to modern sensibilities. The evening music concerts showcases both national and local band and artists. There is a noticeable increase in the participation of young Nagas in contemporary musical events, which help foster a sense of belonging and connectivity among the youth. A number of food stalls often presents a mix of traditional Naga dishes and global cuisines. The chefs even incorporate local ingredients like bamboo shoots into popular international recipes, creating a culinary experience that is both familiar and innovative. These illustrate how the festival serves as a platform for engaging with modern trends and resonates with broader audience. Therefore, the Hornbill festival is more than just a celebration; it plays an essential role in shaping and evolving Naga identity in a changing world. As with any culture, Naga traditions are not static but have been continuously evolving, trying to come to terms with and adapt to new sources of influence, emerging ideas, and aspiration of new generations. The festival

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provides a space where customs, cultural practices, and art forms are showcased and sometimes replayed, allowing them to stay relevant and meaningful in today's world, while preserving their authentic core. It encourages intertribal interactions and exchange, adding a new dimension to the collective representation of the Naga identity, and at the same time ensuring, the presence of a global audience drawing appreciation and acknowledgement of the Naga culture beyond its regional borders. The exchange helps Naga communities reflect on their heritage in a new perspective, as they present a reflection of their deep-seated customs to people coming from different background. This blending of local and global elements also reflects a dynamic and adaptable cultural identity. However, if not properly balanced, this evolution may produce negative result in the long run, potentially defeating the very purpose preservation of authentic traditions. It is crucial for the younger generation to be made aware of this, as the festival alone may not be sufficient to foster this awareness. Cultural studies should be integrated into educational curricula, life skills should emphasize the importance of tradition, and cultural integrity should be actively maintained in everyday life.

The Hornbill festival according to a local author, Yanger (2019) is a firsthand experience of the Naga milieu, the rich and vibrant Naga heritage and the Naga disposition in cultural pride juxtaposed in the contemporary space. Wettstein (2015) also argues for the role of performance in public spaces as a means for making ethnic identity in a demilitarized environment as in the case of the Naga Hornbill festival. According to him, the enactment of identity roles through performance in public makes the concept of ethnic identity become real for the concerned people. In addition, Guss's framework of 'cultural performance,' which encompasses performances intended for both spectators and participants, contributes to the creation of new social constructs that unify communities and establish a shared symbol for a nation. Within this socio-political context, the Hornbill Festival exemplifies the practical application of such principles. The festival brings all the Naga communities together in one place, creating a unified space for what can be described as "performing Naga." The term "performing Naga" is used to illustrate how, during festive times, there is a portrayal of unity and display of cohesion among the Naga people. However, this outward display of unity can often be misleading in the sense that it could be a mask hiding deeper internal conflicts and divisions that are not readily visible during the celebrations. Despite the festive atmosphere, significant internal conflicts exist within the Naga communities. The Oting incident highlights the ongoing uncertainty and tension in the relationship between the Naga people and the Indian military. It also underscores the complexities of intra-tribal conflicts among the various Naga tribes themselves. These internal

disputes are part of broader challenges faced by the Naga community, affecting their unity and complicating their interactions with external forces. The situation reveals how historical grievances, differing interests and priorities, and competition for resources can strain relationships both within and outside the community, impacting efforts to attain greater cohesion and peace. Another notable example is the ongoing demand from the seven eastern Naga tribes, represented by the Eastern Naga People Organization (ENPO), for a separate state. This demand stems from long-standing grievances over unequal development of their home regions. The eastern Naga tribes have felt marginalized and neglected, leading to their call for greater autonomy and equitable development. The depth of these internal conflicts became particularly evident in recent years when they chose to boycott the festival entirely, refusing to participate in the celebrations in 2022. This boycott was a powerful statement highlighting their dissatisfaction and the urgency of their demand for a separate state to protect their interests. The absence of these tribes from the festival pointed to the significant differences within the Naga communities. While the festival site may bring everyone together and create an image of unity, the reality is that the underlying tensions and conflicts persist at another level. The boycott by the ENPO and its member tribes could serve as a reminder that despite the celebratory facade, there are serious issues that need to be addressed to achieve real unity and cohesion among the Naga people. In conclusion it may be said that, while the festival site plays a crucial role in bringing the Naga communities together and showcasing their cultural heritage, it also serves as a reminder of the complexities and challenges they face at the political level, relating particularly to developmental gains and distribution of resources. The act of "performing Naga" during the festival may temporarily blur the lines of internal conflicts, but these underlying issues remain and require meaningful attention and resolution to foster genuine unity and progress.

So far as the Hornbill Festival is concerned, it aims to uphold and sustain the distinct identities, dialects, customs and traditions of the ethnic groups or tribes of Nagaland, and at the same time fosters inter-tribal communication and goodwill as envisaged through the coming together of the tribes under the aegis of the Nagaland Hornbill Festival (Yanger, 2019:28). But it does not just fulfill a crucial role in archiving and preserving the intangible Naga traditions; it also actively perpetuates these traditions in a spirit of continuity that might fade away with societal progress taking the direction of the political economic developments gaining momentum, which are otherwise engulfed with much fluidity. The younger generations, often the most susceptible and amenable to change within the society, have been moving away from their traditional roots, and with a different orientation of mind they do not always find much

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significance behind their cultural heritage plagued with rituals, beliefs, customary practices, and the group identity they perpetuate. Significantly, there has now been a resurgence of interests among them about the Hornbill Festival. To them, it now serves as a means to reestablish a connection with and uphold the traditions of their ancestors, infusing greater strength to the Naga identity. So, the festival serves as a conduit for the continuation of living traditions, providing visitors with opportunities to engage with and gain insights into Naga culture for developing a more authentic perspective. It actively contributes to the regeneration and promotion of the cultural traditions that have been dormant for some time. In the modern context, the concept of cultural tradition has evolved, taking on a broader and more dynamic meaning. Rather than being confined to static practices or historical customs, cultural traditions now encompass adaptive elements that merge historical roots with contemporary influences. This evolution reflects the changing needs and aspirations of society, ensuring that these traditions remain relevant and vibrant while retaining their essence.

CONCLUSION

Festivals as cultural celebrations have always occupied a special place in societies. There is scope for examining them in the context of their role to promote local culture and identity as it is affected and transformed by global effects, human experience, changing expression and creativity. Through this study, we may gain a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental concepts and significance of festivals in anthropology, as well as their evolving meanings over time. It explores how festivals serve as platforms for various cultures to converge, negotiate shared interpretations, and construct cultural identities. This research offers insights into the multicultural public sphere, demonstrating how festivals can serve as conduits for performance in festivals; it reveals how these events cultivate a sense of community and shared identity among both the audience and participants. The research implicates the notion of identity as a central theme while asserting their national spirit through the performance of the festival, and at the same time highlights the traditional values as they cultivate the spirit of social bonding among themselves, extending the message to the outside world through the visiting observers. The study sheds light on the intricate dynamics at play in cultural festivals as they serve as arenas for cultural negotiation and expression.

Taking a cue from Falassi (1987), this study showed that festivals have retained their primary importance in all cultures. It may be said that the human social animal could not have developed a more significant way to be in tune with the world of his making than to partake in

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the intricacies of festivals displaying a reality of its own. This may apply to the Naga Hornbill Festival as well which the people experience and relive the rich cultural history of their forefathers. The festival is not only a leisure activity for the cultural tourists, but at the same time it has an educative value for the local tribals. The Hornbill festival recreates the historical setting to stimulate a living past providing visitors with an experiential demonstration of Naga cultural history.

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End notesⁱThe morung in early Naga society was an important social centre and acted as an institutional hut for the younger generations to learn various skills and socialise. It was strategically built in the village to facilitate a guardhouse to protect the village from possible attacks from the enemy.

ⁱⁱCulture Connect is a cultural magazine compiled by the Department of Art and Culture during the Hornbill festival.

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