

Modernity, Nationalism and Culture: Cultural Transition /Tension and 'Naga' Cultural Reality

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Nationalism is a modern western phenomenon, originating in the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth century throughout Europe. Its modernity stems from its strategy to circumscribe communities, cultures and ethnicities, within homogeneous categories, by obliterating historical identifications, and replacing them with a new nationally 'constructed identity. While such a project/politics of assimilation into homogeneous formations was less fortuitous in the western context, its journey to the east, through a history of nationalist expansion through colonialism meant the imposition of homogeneity over large geographical spaces that constituted of ethnicities and cultures which were heterogeneous and plural. The expansionist politics of colonial nationalism was further complicated by the competing western nationalist interests in the east, especially, India, which reached its traumatic zenith during the two World Wars. The World Wars, largely a conflict between western nationalistic interests, transformed the very plural nature of colonized spaces. In the context of India, the assertion of a sense of Indian nationalism against a British nationalism necessitated the invention of nationalist geographical boundaries and the marginalization of distinct plural ethnic and cultural identities, in the interest of a composite, homogeneous nationalist identity to challenge British nationalism. As Eric Hobsbawm asserts, in his The Nation as Invented Tradition, ideas like 'nation', 'nationalism', the nation-state, national symbol and history, "rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative". (Hobsbawm, 76)

In this sense, Indian nationalism was not simply imitative of the western notions of nationalism, but, more importantly, this homogeneity was achieved, by a violent and traumatic process of transition where ethnic communities and local cultures, through the overriding influence of modernity, were made to erase customs and tradition so as to 'modernize'. Colonialism, through its project of promotion of western scientific understanding of the world, and the projection of the 'superior' west as against the 'barbaric' other, had through its history, largely eroded local

cultures of its customs and traditions. This situation and the transition to a nationalist culture, was further aggravated by the Wars, especially the Second World War.

In the Indian context, the North East, has been, since the Second World War and the subsequent formation of the Indian Nation-State, an ideological battleground for this conflict between nationalism, the emergent modernity and the local ethnic cultures, which found themselves at a crossroad between the traditional perception of the world based on local customs and the sweep of nationalism and modernity. The Indian experience of the World War II was largely felt in the 'Naga' society, which since then, have struggled with an understanding of the idea of Indian nationalism and its own identity within such a formation. In this regard, Abraham Lotha's *The Hornbill Spirit: Nagas Living Their Nationalism*, is an important intervention from within the culture, in terms of an understanding of the 'Naga' society. The mission of the book, as stated by the author, poignantly highlights the tension that the conflict between nationalism and ethnicity orders the 'Naga' reality. He states that the work is,

about Nagas' involvement in an ongoing struggle to affirm their lives as a free nation,It is about peoples' attempt to understand one another, and, at times, about resistance to understanding, misunderstanding and refusal to understand.
(Lotha, 3-4)

The term 'Naga', in dominant nationalistic discourse, has indeed been, misunderstood, 'normalized' and homogenized to represent a collection of heterogeneous tribes, which though similar in appearance, differ in terms of language and customs. The 'Nagas' are an ethnic group of tribes, who, "migrated from Mongolia, and then through southwestern China and Myanmar" to the geographical region which now constitutes India and Myanmar. As a group and its sub-groups, it is constitutive, according to Lotha, of sixty eight different tribes, in both India and Myanmar. On the Indian side, there are, according to him, fourteen major Naga tribes. The major Naga groups on the Indian side are the Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Konyak, Khamniungan,

Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sumi, Sangtam, Yimchungru and Zeliang (Lotha, 7-11). The significant point to note in the data provided by him, however, is the politics of amalgamation and exclusion in the process of classification of the Naga identity. As he points out, “the exact number of Naga groups has not been ascertained. For one reason, historical forces such as colonization have affected the naming and classifying of the different groups.” (Lotha, 6) Furthermore, the tension in the transition, through coercion, Lotha hints, to an Indian nationalism is palpable when he states that, “Naga nationalists have argued that the difference among the Nagas and Indians and other ethnic groups in the country are from time immemorial”, (Lotha, 228), implying that British colonialism, and the subsequent Indian nationalism, has been instrumental in erasing a unique Naga culture.

If Lotha grapples with the politics of representation, Temsula Ao, a very distinguished voice from within Naga society, meditates on what it means to be a Naga in the midst of the transition to modernity. In her work, *On Being a Naga*, Ao states that, in the present age, “it is a complex fate being a Naga...it is a double-edged sword” because the complexity lies “not only in the way outsiders view us but also in the way we see ourselves”. (Ao, 1) This is an important articulation of both how, perceptions of the culture from the exterior has been circulated in order to marginalize it, and how, in turn, this has affected the manner in which Naga society has modified itself, by erasing aspects of its unique culture, in order to wrestle with the ‘Other’. Temsula Ao articulates this sense of marginalization, as a child growing up in another cultural space, through a comment on the practise of ‘dog-eating’ amongst Nagas,

I often recollect an ultimate insult hurled at us..., ‘You dog-eating Nagas’. (*kukur Khunwa noga*). After this onslaught on our very being, which was thus typified as savage and therefore inferior, we would cringe at the insult and withdraw. (Ao, 1)

While such comments caused her pain in her childhood, she implies, it was only later in life that she came around to acknowledging that the practise of eating dog meat, was not, according to her

culture, savage, but because of the belief “that it has great healing and rejuvenating properties”. (Ao, 1) Similar was the case with the practise of ‘head-hunting’, a practise that has always been employed by the dominant ideological formations, colonial or nationalistic, to represent the Nagas as barbaric. Head-hunting, according to Ao, was reflective, in ancient Naga society, of the sovereignty over territory, amongst the tribes in their intermittent conflicts and were governed by “well-articulated code that governed this practise in the contexts where they were living at that stage of Naga history” (Ao, 3-4) But as a child, “growing up in an alien environment”, she was always perceived as inferior because of her culture and customs, and the symbols of her customs were employed to show her as barbaric. “Such attitudes persisted against us as a people and we were always viewed with suspicion and often even antagonism by the outsiders because our way of life was indeed different.” (Ao, 1-2) That sense of “Othering” persists, according to her even to the present day:

In our own times too, we have experienced ostracism because of our food preferences in cities like Delhi....Also our reputation as ‘naked’ people followed us everywhere and the relative poverty of our village existence and ignorance about the outside world only confirmed their view about us. (Ao, 2)

Such a perception about Naga culture, according to her, was “based on merely the apparent and the perceived. What the biased eyes failed to recognize was the fact that these so-perceived primitive, barbaric and backward people have had a long tradition of well-governed lives”. (Ao, 2)

The anguish and frustration that echoes through Temsula Ao’s narrative expresses the tension that the decolonization of India and the subsequent national ideology entailed for marginalized communities, as they were coerced into surrendering the certain reality to a way of life that sought to exert its hegemony over them. Before colonization and the subsequent amalgamation into the Indian nation, The Nagas, were, according to her, ‘self-reliant’ people, dependant largely on natural resources, and had its own traditions of tribal art which largely reflected itself in the weaving of

colourful clothes, in its “fashioning of utility and other household items like utensils” and other items of daily use that reflected and blended with their way of life and the identity of the various Naga tribes. Before the advent of Christianity, The Naga tribes had a belief-system which was largely blended with nature and the different seasons of the year. Nature was worshipped as benevolent and life sustaining. The advent of Christianity and colonial modernity transformed the very nature of Naga existence -- “Being a Naga then in the way we thought of ourselves, was held out to be negative” -- and from this juncture itself, the transformation of Naga society commenced through a new religion and modern western knowledge -- “At this stage of our history, being a Naga became an apologetic acknowledgement of a seemingly inferior individual”. (Ao, 2-4)

The marginalization of Naga society, its stereotyping as barbaric, inferior and savage began, according to Ao, with the advent of British colonialism and Christianity into the Naga cultural and geographical space. While the British policy of isolating and restricting access to the rest of its Indian colonial territory to the hills fostered the perception that the Nagas were primitive, Christianity “sowed the seeds of doubt in our minds about our own intrinsic worth”. (Ao,4) The mental and spiritual violence that sought to transform the enclosed reality of Naga existence, was further complicated with the advent of the Indian nationalism. If British colonialism and Christianity, in its engagement to Naga culture, narrativized them as barbaric and inferior, Indian nationalism, by not recognising the unique nature of its culture, and by fostering the colonial perceptions about the society, further marginalized these tribes. Modernity and scientific knowledge aggravated and destroyed Naga identity and culture, but not without violence. Interrogating the nature of Naga identity in contemporary times, Temsula Ao asks,

What does it mean to be a Naga? Is the word Naga merely a political blanket term to designate the countless tribes living in a more or less contiguous territory of the country? What is the ‘commonness’ shared by these tribes that they have been bunched under this umbrella term? Is it a common language? NO, because there

is no common Naga language. There are as many Naga languages as there are tribes and the countless numbers of dialects within a tribe. Then is it a common culture? If so, what is it? Can we specify it? Can we retrieve it and is it desirable to do so?

(Ao, 6-7)

The questions that Ao poses are significant and reflective of the how the nature of Naga cultural reality has been moderated and articulated by the dominant historical ideologies, and how the politics of nationalism has not recognized its uniqueness. Both colonialism and the subsequent nationalism employed the term 'Naga' as a political term to homogenize what was essentially a diverse cultural space, with different languages and different customs. Temsula Ao asserts the need for Naga society to "look inwards -- into our past, in the villages among the folk" where some remnants of the culture still survives, yet unadulterated by modernity, as the urban spaces have become. In conclusion, it is imperative to understand not only history, not only as it is articulated, but also discover the absences and gaps which such articulations enclose. An understanding of Naga culture and customs, through these two texts, which are important articulations, from within the cultural space, is reflective of the desire to comprehend the unique nature of Naga reality.

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