

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Orchestrated Celebration: Performing Reconstructed Identity in the Hornbill Festival of Nagaland

Tatongkala

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Tetso College, Sovima, Dimapur, Nagaland, India

Abstract:

Nagaland is the homeland of several traditionally distinctive communities who have been collectively identified as the Nagas – a colonial exonym labelled for them since the British Rule. The colonial administration and the Christian missionaries played crucial roles in shaping the present political and cultural fate of the people of this region. Since the year 2000, a spectacular cultural festival under the name of Hornbill festival began to be organized by the State Government of Nagaland in the month of December every year, with an aim to foster cultural unity among the various constituent groups at home and to showcase their rich cultural resources to the rest of the world.

This paper aims to dwell on the political, cultural as well as economic aspects of this increasingly popular cultural extravaganza in Nagaland. It is argued here that Hornbill festival can be seen as the equilibrium of the diverse interests of its various stakeholders – the local ethnic groups, the Government and the sponsoring private agencies. While on the economic front it makes the biggest tourism event in Nagaland, on the political front it provides the much-needed space to demonstrate the unified Naga identity.

Keywords: *Hornbill festival, Naga Identity, Cultural Commodification, Identity Reconstruction*

1. Introduction

In its tourism literature, Nagaland has branded itself as the “land of festivals”. No matter what the season is there is always a festival around the corner, thanks to the co-existence of several Naga groups, each having their own distinctive cultural repertoire, in this hilly state of North-east India. Hornbill festival is a cultural extravaganza, a celebration of all tribes in one venue and it has been coined as “festival of festivals”. Each tribe has its own way of maintaining its distinctive cultural traditions and customs, through various forms of performing arts, material culture and food which is an integral part of the festival. The Government of Nagaland, along with the Directorate of Tourism and the Department of Art and Culture took the initiative of starting the Hornbill festival in 2000 with the aim to identify and conserve the Naga heritage and also to promote tourism and highlight the socio-cultural panorama of Nagaland.

However, behind this valorized ethnic spectacle of present times, there is a peculiar history of cultural loss and colonial framing of the Nagas that the state went through during the British rule. The wave of the Christian mission has left a scene of devastation among the traditional local cultures of the Nagas who have been moulded by them. The Nagas who once had their own strong animistic form of religion were converted to evangelical Baptism. With the Missionaries working eagerly to educate the Nagas and to bring them up to the academic civilization, many old cultures were almost abandoned or changed drastically. In the process, old habits and cultures which were considered as impediment to the progress of men were discouraged and given up. ‘The entry of the Nagas into the written history of the world can be dated to 24th February 1826 when the Treaty of Yandabo was signed’ (Oppitz *et al*, 2008, 11). The Nagas were an autonomous group of people with their own internal sense of belonging to a group. Every group had their own system of doing things. Little is known about the pre-colonial history of the Naga groups. But, When the British administration entered the Naga territory, the Nagas had been banded together as tribes. They classified the groups and labelled them with different tribe names. Though this began over 150 years ago their effects have remained unabated to this day, affecting all the Nagas. Regardless of their local origins and their specific and collective qualities, it ultimately demands a total redefinition on every dimension: as individuals, as descent groups, as village communities, as tribes, as a prospective unity of all Nagas (Oppitz *et al*, 2008, 9).

The Hornbill festival is named after the bird Hornbill. The majestic bird is admired by the Nagas and the admiration for the bird is symbolically displayed in headgears and ornaments used by the Nagas and worn especially during the festivals. Over the years the festival has become a unique platform for tourist to witness the cultural diversity of Nagaland. For an outsider Hornbill festival is a closer understanding of the people, land and culture of Nagaland. It is also an opportunity to experience the food, drinks and the tradition of Nagaland. Hornbill festival was created to re-assert the Naga identity; which is having a feeling of cultural displacement, brought about by rapid structural change, social mobility and globalization process. There are 17 tribes and 1400 villages in Nagaland. Tribal troupes from every tribe are given opportunity to perform. A tribal troupe who has already performed once, its turn to perform again in the Hornbill festival will come only after a period of more or less than 100 years.

Till 2012 Hornbill festival was being organised from 1st – 7th December. But from 2013, the Government extended the number of days for the celebration of Hornbill Festival from 1st – 10th December. It is held in the Naga Heritage Village at Kisama which is about 12 kilometres from Kohima town. The word Kisama is derived from two villages namely, Kigwema (KI) and Phesama (SA) and MA which means Village. The Naga Heritage Village is established and commissioned by the State Government of Nagaland. Within the Naga Heritage Village complex there is a main arena, a Bamboo heritage hall, Bamboo Pavilion, Horti-scape, an Amphitheatre, Bamboo craft centre, Food court and stalls etc. It also consists of 17 houses of each tribe created with typical architectural designs. These tribal houses are called Morung. The heritage complex also houses World War II Museum. The observance and participation in festivals is a significant experience for a contemporary tourist experience. Hornbill festival may be extremely popular for contemporary tourists but it is traditionally popular with the locals. As cited in the official guide book of Hornbill festival the aim of the festival is to ‘experience first-hand both sides of the coin- the rich cultural and vibrant heritage of the Nagas and their disposition in cultural pride arrangement in the face of modernity at the other end of the spectrum. All in all, the Hornbill festival: Festival of Festivals is the coming together of synergistic elements that make up Nagaland’ (Hornbill Festival Guide Book, 2012).

Hornbill festival is said to be a means to renew connections among the communities and also create networks beyond Nagaland. It is noteworthy to study this festival as a kind of balance or equilibrium amongst the different interests of its various stakeholders: the state and distinctive local groups. Certain goals were kept in mind before the formation of Hornbill festival. It seems like a politically correct move by the government as an aspect of negotiation between the Indian nationalism and Naga identity. A final stage that Peacock and Rizzo discuss in *The Heritage Game (2008)* is that the collective interest in the conservation of the past is associated with the growth in nationalism and the preservation of national identity. ‘Heritage was once the preserve of the few, now it has become the interest of the many with the growth in domestic and international tourism, and the willingness of the tourist to pay for access to such heritage place festivals and the like’ (Peacock and Ilde 2008, 8). ‘Heritage often serves as an anchor that provides stability and secures identity in times of great social unease and confusion.’ (Green and Philip 2007, 70). Hornbill festival serves as a platform to show why peace is needed for development besides from an economic perspective and tourism sustainability. As Green has argued that, forms of nostalgia and the representations of the past that they engender are influenced by current political and economic agendas. People in positions of cultural authority, such as those who work for the government or the tourism industry, wish to articulate a past that can both instil a sense of national pride and serve as the basis of a viable cultural tourism industry (*ibid*, 64).

2. Highlights of the Festival

In this week-long celebration there is a medley of events like cultural performances, indigenous games, craft bazaar, musical events, fashion shows, cycling rally and motor sporting events, kids’ carnival, competition and exhibition-cum-sale of flowers, fruits, vegetables, handlooms and handicrafts, North East Cultural Day, Hornbill half marathon, North East Riders Meet (NERM), Hornbill Glocal film festival, Hornbill Art festival, Hornbill International Photo Contest, Rock and Jazz Concert, Guitar Playing Contest, fashion night, national rock contest, beauty contest, food festival and a series of competitions in various activities. Since, all these events cannot be performed and carried out in Naga Heritage Village alone many other venues are selected to hold the activities of Hornbill festival. Such other venues are; IG Stadium Kohima, Hotel VivorKohima, The Heritage Kohima, State Academy Hall Kohima, Dream cafe Kohima, Lifepro cafe Kohima, NER Agri Expo Complex Dimapur.

Another highlight of the festival is the Night Bazaar which is also called as ‘Kohima Night Carnival’ organized by the Kohima Chambers of Commerce & Industries (KCCI). While in normal days the shops are closed by 6:00p.m and the streets of the market bear a deserted look, at the time of Hornbill festival the streets of Kohima town come alive. People throng to Night Bazaar for shopping and merrymaking which opens from 4:00pm till 8:00p.m. The whole stretch of street from Phool Bari (Y-Junction) to Razhü Point are turned into a “Pedestrian only” street with road side food stalls selling ethnic and global food items, street entertainments etc. for both locals and tourist alike.

3. Hornbill festival and the Reconstructed Naga Identity

Hornbill festival provides an opportunity to promote and encourage inter-participation of all the tribes and it brings together the festival of all the tribes of Nagaland under one umbrella. It can create new partnerships and it opens the way for the Nagas to put together its unique heritage. Hornbill festival must have started as a political strategy or as a way to cope with or respond to change. Hornbill festival is a mode through which the Nagas can define their identity through their culture. The State Government is also taking up various initiatives to work on the issue of Identity through this annual festival. In December 2012, while hosting the Hornbill festival, the Government of Nagaland jointly with the Ministry of External Affairs organized an Indo-Myanmar workshop with an objective to bridge ties between Nagaland and Myanmar in the backdrop of India’s Look East Policy (LEP). Delegates from Myanmar attended the discussions on business relations and cultural exchange. ‘In the context of rapid political change and national identity crisis, festival becomes a platform to test new formulations and symbolic expressions of the nation’ (Picard and Mike Robinson 2006, 24). What kind of identity is displayed of the Nagas by hosting an annual festival like the Hornbill festival? While the Hornbill festival is constructing a national culture and identity for the Nagas by showcasing their traditions, it is also displaying the modernized Nagas through rock and jazz music, fashion show, beauty contest and so on. Cultural heritage and contemporary cultural diversity like non-indigenous cultures of Nagaland such as rock contest, selling of foreign goods, fashion night, beauty contest etc. as displayed in Hornbill festival are gaining more popularity and they represent as an important image and appear to contribute to a sense of Naga identity.

‘The identity that the Hornbill festival presents is a fusion of culture but only those elements that complement with Christian view of morality and religion, and the youth culture of the new generation. Everything that does not correspond to the current-politically

correct-idea of cultural identity is left out. Non-Christian rituals are reduced to a farce; and if a ritual actually is performed, then only after a loud speaker announcement has stated that it is a practice from the past.' (Oppitz *et al* 2008, 71). And yet, the festival makes the Nagas to view themselves in the perspective of their own history and draw on both the new and the old for their own identity (*ibid*, 74). An elderly man present at the festival said, "We will go to heaven but we must also carry on with our tradition because it is our identity." Longkumer in his article 'Who sings for the Hornbill? The performance of politics of culture in Nagaland, Northeast India-Part II' opines that the constructed and dynamic nature of Naga identity is played out interestingly in the Hornbill festival. For some it allows a visual glimpse of other tribes, while for others it's an opportunity to be included into the Naga fold. Having a *Morung* in the Hornbill is helpful and legitimizes their claim to be 'indigenous' inhabitants of Nagaland – for them territorial indigeneity is the sole marker of Naga identity, not blood, language or customary practices. Hornbill festival is playing a significant role in the notion of identity as the Government of Nagaland tries to derive political advantage from the event and strengthen its own position. According to Stockhausen,

..... The Nagas have a joint history, one they have all gone through in the same way since the colonial era at latest and more recently since Indian independence. Ultimately this joint search for identity is above all the necessary demand to be heard within the global field of indigenous strivings to achieve recognition and political self-determination (Oppitz *et al* 2008, 76)

Today, social media and advertisements have both redefined the way we connect and reshape our identity. Hornbill festival is a way to bring awareness about preserving the heritage of the region while displaying the Naga identity to the outsiders. "Festivals, whether as 'traditional' moments of social celebration or as constructed and highly orchestrated events, have been absorbed into the expansive stock of 'products' that tourist desire" (Picard and Mike Robinson 2006, 2). What has emerged from a local heritage event has turned into a national and international festival, attracting both the domestic and foreign tourists. Hornbill festival form arena for cultural creativity. It is, packaging of unique cultural diversity in a creative way. Though the festival is very much a local endeavour with government, public and village participation, it seems like the larger part of the festival's concern is to draw attention from beyond the national boundaries. Using the colourful medium of culture attracts the outside audiences or tourists. Talking about tourist, it is important to identify what are the expectations of a tourist? The tourists seek authenticity and so the Hornbill festival exposes the Naga tradition alongside the modern face as an ethnic Naga in the global world system. Authenticity is what drives tourists to the Hornbill festival. When some tourists were asked why and what made them to come and attend the Hornbill festival, their reply was that it is because they wanted to witness the authenticity of the Naga culture which they thought was "still" authentic. However, what is intended to be argued here is that this 'authenticity' is more a performed and enacted kind of phenomenon; with a definite set of interconnections amongst the factors like present/past, modernity/tradition, urban/rural, mainstream/tribal and familiar/exotic. But isn't presenting a multifaceted and diverse Naga culture of both tradition and modernity supposed to lose its authenticity? But again Longkumer argues that the idea of 'tradition' and 'modernity' are part and parcel of the surroundings and there is no denying that the two often go hand in hand when discussing the politics of 'culture'. This particular dimension has become significant in the past few years and the future of the Hornbill signals the happy co-mingling of both the local and the global. "Nevertheless, the argument of 'inauthenticity' and commodification, although very intriguing, does not take into account the potential that the revival, re-construction or even the invention of festivals holds in terms of replenishing traditions, re-negotiating communal identity and strengthening group solidarity" (cited in Picard and Mike Robinson 2006, 41).

4. Hornbill Festival and the Commodification of culture

The increasing influence of the Tourism industry has made immense impact on authenticity of cultures. According to Cohen (1988), tourism as an economic activity has been blamed for the commodification of cultures. Objects and performances that were once created for local consumption become geared towards the tourism market and consequently are said to be exploited, debased and trivialized (cited in Smith and Mike Robinson 2006, 177). Culture and Heritage is not only a marker of identity but it is also open and projected for global consumption in ways that it has been packaged and commodified. In a non-industrialized place like Nagaland, culture plays a vital role. It is packaged in the form of heritage and the tourists are aggressively lured for consuming such commodity. Hornbill festival has developed into such cultural industry. Having said that Hornbill festival is a politically correct move by the government, it seems like the government is hoping to make the festival market on a global scale by drawing in sponsors, promoters and various stakeholders who are all involve with multiple interests.

'The core of the tourism industry is the commodification of escapism, the commercial answer to the longing of mankind for another reality beyond the dull and grey of the everyday life' (Smith and Mike Robinson 2006, 191). Nothing comes for free and so is culture. Hornbill festival seems like a corporate packaging of traditional culture. However, the process of commodifying the past for touristic consumption can be (dis)inventing tradition. Giving a brand name to any commodity for the market is essential and for that reason the government gives brand names such as "Nagaland Land of Festivals" or to Hornbill festival as "Festival of Festivals". These slogans could be one of the reasons that attract the tourists and it facilitates the Hornbill festival to grow in a global scale and it becomes an identity of the Hornbill festival in the cultural industry. However, while commodifying and commercializing the festival, is the Government of Nagaland making the Hornbill festival into a commercial 'state' festival and selling Nagaland to the outside world? Keeping in mind the expectations of the tourists the festival is packed accordingly since the success of the festival is because of the tourists who come as 'cultural tourists.' Though, there are chances that excessive commercialization can also create a more materialistic populace. Perhaps ethnic precincts and ethnic heritage tourism need to be grounded within the local ethnic community so that the resulting tourist experience is authentic and credible to both locals and visitors. Hornbill festival also commodifies culture through souvenirs. 'Souvenirs are the most easily available commodity of culture and heritage. Souvenirs as well as experiences are conceived as being authentic when they reflect the perceived core values of the visited destination' (Smith and Mike Robinson 2006,

191). After a visit to the Hornbill festival one will not leave without buying a souvenir. There are varieties of souvenirs ranging from low price to high price such as, Nagaland Land of Festivals stickers, Hornbill Festival of Festivals badges, local arts and crafts, textiles et cetera. Whilst commodifying the past for the future developments the perceptions of authenticity may change which will have an effect on the local community themselves.

Every year a new theme, game or contest is added to give the festival a new flavour. Themes are made in order to classify the different activities and since there are many activities happening at different places, it helps the tourists in shaping their itineraries. Using a theme can also provide several interpretations of the same space at the same time attracting the tourists. For instance, the Department of Art and Culture presents the cultural extravaganza under the theme "Unity" where altogether 17 troupes from Nagaland shall present a glimpse into the rich cultural songs, dances and traditions of the tribes of Nagaland. Apart from the cultural shows there are other programmes like presenting collection of Naga traditional motifs and designs on contemporary wear under the theme of "Celebrating Naga Textile Art & Design" or Glocal Film Fest with the theme of "Global Local Meet", Photo contest under the theme "Colours of Nagaland" etc. Besides all these the tourist can also participate in indigenous games and sports like Greased Bamboo Pole Climbing, Naga Wrestling, and Naga King Chili Eating Contest and so on.

5. Conclusion

Hornbill Festival no doubt is an event created by the Government to showcase the Naga cultural heritage. While the festival has a good feel for traditions, it has also come to hang on with the dynamics and apparent of the contemporary activities. It is orchestrated and enacts factors like past with present, modern and tradition etc. Hornbill festival seems more organised and less spontaneous, highly choreographed and managed which gives the visitors the impression that it is more of a show. Authenticity is staged though the tourists as well as the locals don't seem to mind it. However, the question remains are, for whom the Hornbill Festival is really for? Is it staged and performed for the few elites with reserved seats who may or may not have an upper hand in organizing this orchestrated celebration? When the main aim of the festival is to bring all the tribes of Nagaland under one umbrella, why create a new umbrella. Perhaps the festival needs to reflect more on the theme of the festival "unity", which provides the much-needed space to demonstrate the unified Naga and re-enactment of shared Naga identity.

The government of Nagaland is planning to turn the Hornbill Festival into a commercial hub with the aim of recreating a 'Mini Nagaland'. A permanent shopping arcade to sell and promote indigenous produce with an adjacent food court, complete with all traditional delicacies. The association of various media partners, sponsors, event partners' etc. makes the festival a commercial event along with their own advertisement while associating with the festival. Economic forces may be one of the reasons that push such contemporary festivals for commercialization. It seems the Government have turned to advertisers as a revenue source. The authenticity of festivals is regarded not only as a cultural value, but also as an economic generating opportunity. Thus, Hornbill festival is a festival of coming together of all the elements that make up Nagaland, displaying its unique identity [which is contested and constructed]. The festival also gives a glimpse into the cultural diversity of the entire Northeast as the participants from the neighbouring states like Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal performs and showcase their culture. In the recent years the festival has also gone truly global with dance troupes from Korea, Myanmar and Thailand showcasing their cultures and this provides a platform for the Nagas in promoting cultural exchange, whilst at the same time it is a great boost for the tourism industry.

Hornbill festival is a negotiated balance between the local and the national/global, between imagined past and enforced modernity. For the state, this carries the message that peace is essential for development; and for the Naga groups, this provides the platform to stage their revived identities. At a critical level, it also demonstrates the duality of heritage – that heritage is simultaneously political as well as economic in terms of the functions it renders. If Hornbill festival is a sacred stage for enacting identities for the Nagas, it is also a market of cultural commodities for the others.

6. References

- i. Green, Garth L. & Scher, Philip W. Eds (2007). *Trinidad Carnival: The Cultural Politics of a Transnational Festival*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- ii. Longkumer, Arkotong. (2013). "Who sings for the Hornbill? The performance and politics of culture in Nagaland, Northeast India- Part II." *The South Asianist Blog*, viewed 20 May 2013, <http://thesouthasianistblog.co.uk/2013/02/19/>
- iii. Oppitz, et al. Eds. (2008). *Naga Identities: Changing Local Cultures in the Northeast of India*. Snoeck Publishers, Gent.
- iv. Peacock, Alan & Rizzo, Ilde. (2008). *The Heritage Game: Economics, Policy and Practice*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- v. Picard, David & Robinson, Mike. Eds. (2006). *Festival, Tourism and Social Change: Remaking Worlds*. Channel View Publications, U.K.
- vi. Smith, Melanie K. & Robinson, Mike. Eds. (2006). *Cultural Tourism in a Changing World: Politics, Participation and (Re) presentation*. Channel View Publications, U.K.
- vii. Strinati, Dominic. (2004). *An Introduction to the Theories of Popular Culture*. Routledge, London.
- viii. The Directorate of Tourism. Govt. Of Nagaland. (2012). *Hornbill Festival Guide Book*. The Directorate of Tourism, Kohima.
- ix. Weaver, John A. (2005). *Popular Culture Primer*. Peter Lang Publishing, New York.