

Personhood in Naga Culture

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This paper looks at the cultural practices of the Nagas in order to understand how Naga personhood is constituted. It posits that Naga personhood is constituted through the performance of cultural practices and norms which are formed both discursively and through embodied acts and practices. In drawing upon a range of arguments about performativity, personhood and identity, I have tried to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of Naga cultural practices. I also develop in this paper a theory of performativity, drawing on the work of a number of writers in performance theory and ritual studies. The two arguments – the constitution of personhood and forms of cultural performativity – constitute the conceptual framework that I use to examine and problematise Naga personhood. I follow an interdisciplinary method drawing on both discourse analysis and concepts from anthropology as methodological tools to understand the symbolic universe of the Nagas past and present.

Keywords: Personhood, performativity, Naga personhood, dividuality, individuality, identity politics, proselytization

Personhood in Naga Society

This paper looks at the cultural practices of the Nagas in order to understand how Naga personhood is constituted. Naga concepts of personhood involve both the everyday and religious practices, although there is no clear demarcation between the two. It includes practices like feasts of merit, stone-pulling ceremonies, headhunting, the oral histories of the tribes, customary life-skills, community rituals, forms of worship, and institutions like the bachelor dormitories where the cultural knowledge was transmitted and preserved. These form the semiotic universe of Naga self-understanding. In indigenous societies like that of the Nagas, personhood is constituted through ritual acts and practices that involve the entire community and are linked to one's place in the social hierarchy. It is important to differentiate the term 'personhood' from other similar terms like 'self' and 'identity, which I take up in a later section of this paper. In societies that do not have a tradition of writing, personhood and a sense

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of belonging are constituted largely through the performance of ritual practices. They are also, of course, discursively constituted, through the oral forms of origin stories, tales and songs. I also develop in this study a theory of performativity, drawing on the work of a number of writers in performance theory and ritual studies. These two arguments – the constitution of personhood and forms of cultural performativity – constitute the conceptual framework that I use to examine Naga culture.

At the outset, however, I must state emphatically that there is no such thing as a ‘Naga culture’: rather, cultural practices are taken up in a wide variety of forms and contents across different tribes, clans and even villages. To speak of a ‘Naga culture’, therefore, is to construct a false homogeneity. However, there have been attempts in recent years to homogenize the diversity of cultural practices and norms into a singular identity, for political and ideological reasons. I do not thereby mean that this is regrettable: no culture, as anthropologists like Arjun Appadurai and James Clifford have argued, is ever ‘pure’ or ‘pristine’. Every encounter with another group – either by way of travel or conquest – leaves its traces on a cultural community, reconstituting its practices so as to institute both breaks and continuities. It is through such breaks and continuities that cultures grow in time: dynamism, and not stasis, is their essential quality. The task of studying a culture, therefore, is an interpretative and not an evaluative one, and it is with that conviction that I have undertaken this work.

The Nagas

The generic term Naga is used to refer to various tribes residing in the northeast of India and north Myanmar¹. According to the Government of India 2001 census, there are 35 Naga tribes in India: 17 in Nagaland, 15 in Manipur and 3 in Arunachal Pradesh. The 17 Naga tribes in Nagaland are Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Chirri, Khiemnungan, Konyak, Lotha, Makhori, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Tikhir, Yimchunger, Zeliang. Nagaland is located in the northeast of India bordering Burma to the east, Assam to the north and west, Arunachal Pradesh to the north, and Manipur to the south. The language of the Nagas is categorized as Tibeto-Burman. There is hardly any documented evidence of the origin of the Nagas. In his book *Nagaland*, Verrier Elwin (1961: 2) notes that there are very early references to the Indo-Mongoloid tribes settled in the northeast of India, then known as “Kiratas”: “Siva Mahadeva, the great God, is described, as early as the *Mahabharata*, as taking the form of a Kirata, with Uma beside him as a Kirata woman, and going together to meet Arjuna”. Hutton (1921a, 1924: 254, 20-22) estimates that the Nagas go back to the Neolithic period, based on smooth stones found during excavations. These suggest that the Nagas have inhabited the region for centuries. There is another theory which holds that most of the Naga tribes migrated from South-East Asia through the Indo-Myanmar border. Visier Sanyu (1990: 10), a Naga scholar, states that the Nagas belong to the Mongoloid family who migrated from China, and speculates that this wave of migration passed through upper Burma and moved west to reach the present site.

Many Naga origin stories, however, trace the histories of specific tribes to locations within the northeast. The Tenyimia group of tribes, which comprises the Angami, Chakhesang, Rengma, Pochury, Mao, Poumai, Zeliangrong, Maram, Thangal and

Inputi spread over Nagaland, Manipur and Assam, considers Meikhel, a village in Senapati district of Manipur, to be the point of origin and dispersion. It is said that they erected monolith stones to commemorate their dispersal, which still stand at Meikhel. The stones of Meikhel were installed by the ancestors of the tribes before they migrated in different directions. Similarly Khezhakeno, a village in the present Phek district of Nagaland, is believed to be the ancestral home of the Angami, Lotha and Sema tribes. The origin stories may be considered mythical, but they suggest a pattern of dispersal from a few original tribes that seems convincing. New tribes may have emerged in history from these original groups through processes of dispersion and through the merging of smaller tribes. For instance, the Zeliangrong were formed through the merging of three tribes, the Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei, from which they take their name. Hutton (1921b: 19) mentions that the Chakhesang were initially part of the Angamis, but broke away to form a distinct tribe.

The exact meaning of the word 'Naga' is unknown but there are multiple interpretations from various anthropological and historical accounts. A prominent theory links the word 'Naga' to the Burmese word *naka*, meaning 'pierced ear', and quite possibly it was the source of the exonym Naga used by the British. According to Atai Shimray (1996: 4), the British, who came into contact with the Burmese in 1795, may have heard the word from them and later, after their first contact with the Nagas in 1832, applied it to the latter. It was in this period that the anglicized word 'Naga' came to be used widely in their anthropological and administrative accounts. The Buranjis, a group of Assamese chronicles dating back to the 13th century, mention the word *noga* referring to the primitive people residing in the Himalayan region and its surrounding hills (Shimray (1996: 5). Another theory claims that the word Naga originated from the Assamese word *noga manu*, meaning 'naked people' (Carlson 1925:168n1). Naga scholars like Vashum and Gangmumei Kabui (2000: 12) speculate that the word Naga may have come from the Cachari word *noklar*, which means 'warriors' or 'fighters', to refer to tribes like the Zeliangrong and the Angamis against whom fought many wars in the Cachar Hills. Of the origin of the name, Elwin (1961: 4) writes:

The derivation of the word 'Naga' is obscure. It has been explained as meaning 'hillman', from the Sanskrit word *naga*, a mountain. It has been linked to the Kachari word *naga*, a young man or warrior. Long ago, Ptolemy thought it meant 'naked'. It has nothing to do with snakes.

The most likely derivation – to my mind – is that which traces 'Naga' from the word *nok* or 'people', which is its meaning in a few Tibeto-Burman languages, as in Garo, Nochte and Ao. It is common throughout India for tribesmen to call themselves by words meaning 'man', an attractive habit which suggests that they look on themselves simply as *people*, free of communal or caste associations.

It is now widely held that the exonym 'Naga' was ascribed to them by the British, since when it has become a generic word to refer to what are actually distinct tribes. Of the various theories regarding the word 'Naga', Lieutenant-Colonel Woodthorpe

(1882: 47) notes: “not one of these derivations is satisfactory, nor does it really concern us much to know more about it, seeing that the name is quite foreign to and unrecognized by the Nagas themselves”. Elwin (1961: 4-5) cites Hutton on the inadequacy of the word to denote a distinct ethnic group:

It is generally assumed in a vague sort of way that those tribes which are spoken of as Naga have something common with each other which distinguishes them from many other tribes found in Assam and entitles them to be regarded as a racial unit in themselves. ... The truth is that, if not impossible, it is exceedingly difficult to propound any test by which a Naga tribe can be distinguished from other Assam or Burma tribes which are not Nagas.

Elwin’s own view, however, is that “there is an atmosphere, a spirit, in a Naga which is unmistakable” and unites all the different tribes in a common ethnicity (Elwin 1961: 5). There is, therefore, much ambiguity in accounts of the origin of the Nagas and the name applied to them as well. Before the advent of British rule, the different tribes knew each other by the names of their respective villages, which were all heterogeneous units with each village being sovereign and autonomous. It was only after colonial intervention that the term ‘Naga’ came to gradually incorporate all these diverse tribes into a singular entity.

The Nagas’ first encounter with the world outside, especially the colonizers, was with the signing of the treaty of Yandabo between the Burmese and the British in 1826. Burma had invaded Assam in 1817 and Manipur in 1819; the treaty ended the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). Following the treaty, the British established their supremacy over the Naga Hills, with the arrival of British soldiers led by Captain Jenkins and Lieutenant Pemberton in 1832 (Shakespeare, 1914: 211). The Nagas and the British fought many wars from 1832 till the late 1870s. According to Shimray (1996: 19), the relation between the British administration and the Naga tribes can be classified into three major phases. The first phase is the punitive expedition through military control, from 1832 to 1850. The second phase is a short period of non-interference in the Naga tribes from 1851 to 1865. The third and the last phase is a period of direct administrative control over the entire Naga Hills from 1866 to 1947. It was only in 1866 that the Naga Hill District was formed as a part of Assam, and large areas of the Naga Hills came under direct British control (Shimray 1996: 22). Subsequently, in 1878 the British set up their headquarters in Kohima and new policies were enacted by the colonial state to govern the Naga tribes (Elwin, 1961: 24). The administrative policies of the British government were to change the entire course of Naga life. As Iliyana Angelova (2017: 23) states: “the British introduced a new form of political organisation in the offices of *gaonbura*² and *dobashi*³, which transformed power relations and the construction of authority in Naga villages”. Likewise, governmental policies were set up to curb Naga cultural practices like headhunting, which had a major impact on the cosmological world of the Nagas. It must be noted that with the extension of the colonial state to the Naga Hills, the traditional life-world of the Naga underwent a drastic change.

If the encounter with colonial modernity was one of the major factors in the transformation of Naga culture, the encounter with American Baptist missionaries was the other. Miles Bronson was the first American missionary to arrive in the Naga Hills in 1840, but he left the same year due to illness. Thirty years later, Edwin W. Clark resumed the missionary activities he had started, along with Godhula, an Assamese evangelist, setting up the First Baptist Church at Molungkimong, an Ao village in 1872. However, their mission to convert the Nagas was seen with suspicion as it was polarizing the harmonious village community. New converts were excommunicated from the village in order to prevent more people from converting to Christianity (Downs 1971: 109). This strategy proved effective as for almost 20 years they could manage to convert only a handful of people. As noted by Arkotong Longkumer (2018: 7), the missionaries slowly changed their strategy to focus more on setting up schools rather than individual salvation. Thus, in February 1895, Clark established the Impur Mission Training School to use education to reach out to the people. Besides this, missionaries also established dispensaries and hospitals. Medical missionary work as a way of reaching out to new converts, had by the end of the nineteenth century become quite widespread (Pati, 2001). In 1901, John Jackson (1911: 273), a British missionary who visited leprosy missions in India, wrote in his report: “By educational, medical, and industrial, as well as by spiritual and philanthropic effort, the vital force of Christianity is steadily, if slowly, supplanting the lifeless creeds that have so long held the races of India in bondage”. However, among the Nagas the bulk of the conversions happened due to the efforts of native missionaries, and not the foreign. Following independence, the Government of India decided to repatriate all foreign missionaries working in the northeast. As Sanjib Baruah (2003: 329) observes, “The conversions of a number of Naga communities happened after the end of colonial rule and even after the Indian government expelled foreign missionaries from India”. According to him, it was primarily the Nagas’ conflict with the Indian state that helped spread Christianity in Nagaland and made it a significant part of Naga identity.

Following modernization by the colonial government and Christian proselytization, the traditional values of the Naga people came to be largely supplanted by new norms. One of the first practices to go was head-hunting. Consumption of rice beer and use of Naga shawls were also held to be sinful by the new converts, even though they had traditionally been an integral part of their everyday life. Despite the fact that conversion to Christianity marked a break, however, there have also been continuities with the traditional practices in newly articulated forms. This paper examines the traditional practices that constituted Naga personhood in the past, the ruptures that the colonial and missionary encounters instituted, and the ways in which a return to the past has been attempted by re-articulating traditional customs.

Personhood, Dividuality and Partibility

The central theme of this paper is the concept of personhood, and its difference from that of identity. While both concepts refer to a category of social existence, ‘person’ as used here is how one is socially understood while ‘identity’ is how one understands himself or herself. Or, to put it more precisely, ‘person’ is oriented more towards the

social while identity is oriented more towards the individual. These terms have been used to signify conceptual differences between historically and culturally differing social formations, the former associated with non-Western societies and the latter with Western. We will shortly examine the validity and usefulness of such a distinction.

In “Person, Time and Conduct in Bali”, Geertz (1973: 363-364) states:

The everyday world in which the members of any community move, their taken-for-granted field of social action, is populated not by anybodies, faceless men without qualities, but by somebodies, concrete classes of determinate persons positively characterized and appropriately labelled. And the symbol systems which define these classes are not given in the nature of things – they are historically constructed, socially maintained, and individually applied.

Traditional societies conceptualize personhood as a form of social existence constituted through relations with other persons, who may be living or dead (ancestors), natural or supernatural (spirits), individuals or collectivities (clans, kin-groups, etc). Such personhood may also be attributed to human beings as well as objects or supernatural existences. As Fowler (2004) puts it, “[p]erson is used to refer to any entity, human or otherwise, which may be conceptualized and treated as a person” (p. 4, italics in original). In the essay cited above, Geertz (1973) discusses the various ways in which personhood is constituted in Balinese society, one of which is the personal-naming system. In this system, the given name of a person is rarely used, implying that one’s individuality is not given much importance. With this “are muted the more idiosyncratic, merely biographical, and, consequently, transient aspects of his existence as a human being in favor of some rather more typical, highly conventionalized, and, consequently, enduring ones” (p. 270). Personhood is not restricted to one’s individual being, but is always interconnected with the other members of the community, a practice that Geertz describes as “depersonalizing”. Similarly, Marilyn Strathern (1988) observes in “The Gender of the Gift” that in Melanesian society “persons are composed out of relations between others, and the ongoing relationships each person engages in” (p. 13). Identity, in contrast, refers to one’s self-understanding in relation to others. “It pertains to cultural descriptions of persons with which we emotionally identify and which concern sameness and difference, the personal and the social” (Barker, 2004:93). We may say that personhood in this view is a social construct, corresponding to objective structures of relationship, while identity is subjective and psychological. We will return to the concept of identity in the next section.

With regard to the concept of personhood as being socially constituted, the anthropologist McKim Marriott (1976: 111) makes an important distinction between the concept of the “individual” and that of “dividual” personhood, especially in the context of non-Western societies like those of South Asia:

...persons – single actors – are not thought in South Asia to be ‘individual’, that is, indivisible, bounded units, as they are in much of Western social and psychological theory as well as in common sense. Instead, it appears that persons are generally thought

by South Asians to be ‘dividual’ or divisible. To exist, dividual persons absorb heterogeneous material influences. They must also give out from themselves particles of their own coded substances – essences, residues, or other active influences – that may then reproduce in others something of the nature of the persons in whom they have originated.

The idea of dividual personhood means that persons contain within them parts of the substance of others, which may be biological (blood, flesh, hereditary traits) or symbolic (gifts, services). The biological substances, of course, are coded as inheritances, and not as physical tissues – what Marriott terms “substance-codes”. From this perspective, persons have no singular essence; rather they are made up of multiple essences, that is, essences acquired from parents, ancestors and those from which they have received gifts and services. Dividual personhood is thus a composite and collective being constituted through the exchange of “coded substances” with other persons. Putting it a little differently, a dividual person is one who can be ‘divided’ across a matrix of different relationships such as lineages, kin groups, clans, tribes etc. One is known by his or her location in these networks, and not by traits that are more personal and individuating. We can see how Geertz’s account of the construction of personhood in the Balinese naming-system, which is “depersonalizing”, is linked to dividuality.

In theories of dividual personhood, a distinction is made between two forms: partible and permeable, of which the former accords better with our account of Naga personhood. Partibility refers to the concept that individuals are composed of parts which they both receive from and give to others. As Mark Mosko (2010: 218) puts it in a study of Melanesian society:

...persons are regarded as composed of gendered substances such as father's bone and mother's menstrual blood, plus a lifetime of donation of embodied and non-substantial labour by other kin and relatives such as food, magical knowledge, ceremonial wealth, land, and so on. Typically, these personal gifts should be reciprocated...thus persons' compositions change through time as they both attach others' contributions to themselves and detach personal tokens for attachment to others.

Mutual partibility implies that one is not a singular or autonomous being but contains multiple parts or essences from others.

Permeable personhood is conceptually different from the partible in that it involves not a composition through the receiving or giving of substances, biological or symbolic, but rather through the flow of influence and exchange such as lineage, property, caste, etc. A good example is the Hindu concept of person that links one to others in the form of cycles of inheritance. Thus, Cecilia Busby (1997) discusses the notion of personhood in south Indian as permeable, where it is lineages and inheritances that constitute the person rather than coded substances (p. 274-275). As I argue that Naga personhood is decidedly partible, the focus will be on the way substances are symbolically exchanged.

One of the ways in which this takes place is through gifts, either as substance or

as service. In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss (2002) argues that the gift signifies an extension of the self of the giver, in a way that commodity does not. Gift exchange is structured on three interlinked obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (p. 50-55). Two important characteristics of this system are: (i) it is collective, involving all members of the community in cycles of mutual gifting, and (ii) it is obligatory, that is, gift giving is simultaneously a free and voluntary act and is bound by custom. It is bound to the honour of the giver and the recipient, and on it depends one's success in securing alliances. Moreover, it is what Mauss (2002: 6-7) calls a "*system of total services*" and is not reducible to the things or services exchanged:

... what they exchange is not solely property and wealth, movable and immovable goods, and things economically useful. In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract.

It is through this triple obligation that the exchange of gifts makes possible enduring bonds of relationship between the members of a community. The gift, in other words, is what establishes community, binding the giver and the receiver in perpetual cycles of giving and receiving. Roberto Esposito (2010) explains the same idea by linking the Latin term for gift – *munus* – etymologically with *communitas* or community. *Munus* is both gift and duty – to give and to reciprocate – as well as the debt one owes to the community. "From here it emerges that *communitas* is the totality of persons united not by a 'property' but precisely an obligation or a debt" (p. 6). The crucial point made by Mauss (2002) insofar as partible personhood is concerned is that what is exchanged in gift is not an object or service but a part of the self of the giver: "by giving one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one 'owes' *oneself* – one's person and one's goods – to others" (p. 59). Thus, the gift bears the person of the giver as its *intrinsic* value, which is what makes it obligatory to receive and reciprocate. In commodity exchange, in contrast, the commodity bears only an *extrinsic* value, measured with reference to money, and neither imposes receiving and reciprocity nor enables enduring relationships. Moreover, in contrast to the communal or collective nature of gifting, it involves merely two individuals in a transaction that is free and not mandated by custom. "Commodities, like factory-made goods, can be divorced from their context of production and from their makers, and they are easily separated from those who sell them. They are not a part of any person at any scale" (Fowler, 2004:34). Extending Mauss's theory of the gift, Mosko (2010) discusses Melanesian personhood as dividual: "For Melanesia and possibly elsewhere, the person can be considered a dividual being, a composite formed of relations with plurality of other persons. In this view, a person is a product of the gifts, contributions, or detachments of others" (p. 218).

Naga concepts of personhood is one that involves the incorporation of multiple substances, through descent, inter-animation and gift exchange. A well known folktale that I will refer to frequently is about how spirit, man and animal were all born from the same mother-ancestress, and the siblings initially lived together before parting.

Descent is also indicated in the extensive tribal and clan genealogies that trace a community's linkage with mythic ancestor figures. Other folktales are about inter-animation through alliances between spirits and humans, and between humans and animals. Often, this takes the form of marriages that result in the begetting of children, who bear the substance codes of their mixed parentage. The practice of headhunting is founded on the idea of the transference of soul-matter, which is contained in a person's head. When a warrior takes an enemy's head, he as well as his community acquires the enemy's soul-matter, enhancing his own fertility and prosperity as well as that of the village. A widely-held notion concerns lycanthropy, or transformation of humans into animals. In the context of the Nagas, what is transferred from the animal to the human is the soul and not the body, so that a tiger-man is human in shape but tiger in essence. This is what differentiates Naga lycanthropy from the conventional understanding of 'shape-shifting'. The commonest form of gift exchange is through food. During every ritual, rice beer and food is offered to the spirits and ancestors, imposing on them obligations to reciprocate by protecting the village and ensuring its prosperity. Ritual sacrifices to spirits, which involve the offering of food, also function through the system of obligations. Among the Nagas, one of the most important customs is the giving of Feasts of Merit, an event of community feasting where sharing of food ensures communal order. The Feast of Merit is an elaborately structured ritual that is tied on the one hand to status hierarchy and on the other to redistribution of wealth in the village. By giving a feast, the feast giver enhances his status in society, and those who receive the food are obliged to acknowledge his new status. Given that it is expensive in terms of time, labour and resources, which constitute the 'substance' of the self that is transferred, only the wealthy can afford it; but by giving such feasts, one loses wealth and becomes equal to the others in an economy that depends on such redistribution. The Feast of Merit enhances composite relations between givers and receivers, in cycles that begin within the village and extend to include other villages. Richard Schechner (2003: 115) discusses a similar feasting ritual among the Tsembaga of Highlands Papua New Guinea, called the Kaiko Festival, where the cycles of feasting and dancing are "a way of facilitating trade, finding mates, cementing military alliances, and reaffirming (or reordering) tribal hierarchies". The *potlatch* sequences that Mauss (2002: 18) takes as his chief example: "Everything passes to and fro as if there was a constant exchange of spiritual matter, including things and men, between clans and individuals, distributed between social ranks, the sexes, and the generations".

There are problems, however, with Mauss's schematic distinction between western and non-western societies, as well as with anthropological theories of personhood that follow this schema. Mosko (2010) argues that this not only essentializes non-western indigenous communities but also fails to recognize the presence of both dividual and individual elements in all societies, western or otherwise. Central to such studies is "the distinction of the 'partible' or 'dividual' person from the bounded possessive 'individual' of western politico-jural discourse" (p. 215-216). Mosko also argues that this binarism is static, as it does not take into account the changes that such societies go through as a result of colonization and proselytization. It does not explain what happens to the Melanesian when they converted to

Christianity; similarly, it cannot be applied without difficulty to the Nagas post conversion. The assumption that the notion of dividual personhood continues in the same manner after conversion is also essentialist in its approach. Thus, Sabine Hess (2006), in her research on Vanua Lava, asks “what happens to people’s concept of the personhood when their dividuality engages with the Christian concept of the individual?” (p. 285).

Mosko (2010) argues that there is a concept of partible relationship of the dividual self even in Christianity (p. 219-220). One instance is the receiving of the flesh and blood of Jesus in the symbolic form of the Eucharist. Roman Catholics believe that the sacramental bread and wine are transubstantiated and actually become the body and blood of Christ, which in partaking they *incorporate* into their own beings. Mosko also refers to the notion of Holy Spirit, which is a part of the Trinity in Roman Catholicism, an attachment of God. Mosko (2020) suggests that the Christian notion of spirit that can be attached to or detached from a person indicates a dividual element in Christianity. In the same manner, the concept of baptism symbolizes rebirth and an acceptance of a new soul from God “in direct reciprocity for Jesus” (p. 224). From this point of view, Christian being includes partible elements and individualism is only one part of Christian personhood. Mosko points to similarities in rituals of Christianity and indigenous religions. Christian healing rituals like the laying on of hands resemble indigenous practices of sorcery. Because of these apparent similarities with the Christian ritual practices, conversion to Christianity was relatively easy for the indigenous communities of Melanesia. After conversion, these societies do not thereby assume a homogeneously individualist personhood.

Corollarily, it may be argued that what appears as dividualistic from the perspective of social custom may be seen as individualistic from a different perspective. A Feast of Merit may be a practice mandated by society, but it is at the same time a voluntary act on the part of individuals who seek to enhance their status. The individual decision to give the feast can be considered as an agential act, for a gain that accrues to the individual. The economic loss enables the feast-giver to increase his resources in cultural capital by establishing a stronger network of support. Agency here may be understood, as it is commonly understood, to refer to the capacity of persons to act on their social world, in order to effect a pragmatic change. In this, it is linked to free will, choice and the sovereignty of the individual over his or her decisions and actions, all ideological elements of individualism. However, some have held that agency is actually socially structured and not a subjective resource for action. As Chris Barker (2004) explains, “precisely because socially constructed agency involves differentially distributed social resources that give rise to various degrees of the ability to act in specific spaces, so some actors have more scope for action than do others” (p. 4). It is this differential access to resources that structures the agentiality of the feast-giver in the direction of individual personhood. Thus, when the practice of Feast of Merit continues in Naga societies even after conversion, taking place often during Christmas, it signifies both dividual and individual meanings without being reducible to either.

Any society, Western or non-Western, includes elements that contribute to both dividual and individual conceptualizations of personhood. Thus, Edward LiPuma

argues “it would seem rather that *persons* emerge precisely from that tension between dividual and individual aspects/relations. And the terms and conditions of this tension, and thus the kind (and range) of persons that is produced will vary historically (cited in Fowler 2004:20). We may distinguish between different societies based on the weightage they give to dividual or individual elements. As Fowler (2004) explains, “In some contexts, like modern Europe, individual features are accentuated, while in others, like contemporary Melanesia, dividual features are accentuated— but these are *dominant* features, not factors which completely repress or override the other” (p. 20-21). The main advantage of such an approach, which recognizes the dividual and individual as two distinct forms of personhood but does not reduce them to an essentialized binarism of West versus non-West, is that it can offer insights into the effects of conversion on forms of sociality.

Religious conversion has been relatively easy among the Melanesians, argues Mosko, because of perceived similarities between their traditional religion and Christianity. The same argument may hold good in the context of the Nagas, too. Initially, the Nagas resisted the proselytizing efforts of the American missionaries, just as they resisted the interventions of the British administrators: white men, colonialists, missionaries, tea-planters all were suspect. In fact, many new converts were either excommunicated from the village or socially excluded within the clan and kin groups. But, as Iliyana Angelova (2017) has shown for the Semas, the Nagas willingly adopted the new religion and by far the bulk of the conversion was due not to foreign but native missionaries. This was especially true in the twentieth century, when more natives were recruited for mission work. Perceived similarities in beliefs and ritual practices were one of the main reasons for this. The question is not whether they were in *fact* similar: what is important is the way people perceived them: what motivates people to act is not their objective condition, but their subjective perception of this objective condition. Thus, Rev Dr V.K Nuh (2006), a Naga preacher, claims that there was no clear break between Naga indigenous religious beliefs and Christianity, and that they voluntarily accepted conversion to Christianity as they found them compatible (p. 37-42). He claims that there are similarities between Leviticus law in the Old Testament and the indigenous religion: the Naga practice of offering of appeasement to the spirits is like the practice of burnt offerings by the Jews. Other parallels are the observance of taboos in religious rituals and the *gennas*, and similarities in the practice of feast-giving. Even the notion of a supreme being among the Nagas is akin to that of the monotheistic Christian God (p. 37-42). Nuh’s claims can also be understood as a strategy of justification to urge people to convert, but, as we have stated, the point is not whether parallels objectively exist but how they are perceived. It must be noted that Nuh himself is Naga, and his view may be taken to represent the insider’s perception. The fact that he – and others like him – *believe* this to be true is what makes it true for them, if not for the outside observer. Regardless of whatever view we hold, there was a certain continuity of the old practices in their incorporation into Christianity.

This would imply that Naga concepts of personhood post conversion included both dividual and individual components. If individualism was instituted through

ideas of personal salvation and life of virtue, dividual elements appear in the large networks of church groups whose dedicated service was to take care of the poor, the old and the ill. Similarly, the youth wing of the church renders service in community events as well as in times of personal calamity like death. These acts of selfless service may be understood as true Christian conduct, which is how they are most often understood, but they are also an important foundation for establishing community. An American missionary, A.S. Truxton made the following observation in 1952:

It is amazing to see how they are responding with a spontaneous quality of Christian stewardship which is hardly surpassed anywhere. In almost every Phom Naga village where a church has been formed, the Christian group cooperates together to cultivate a separate rice tract to supply the pastor's family for the entire year. This is in addition to their offerings of rice etc, brought to the church from their own fields. Also, it is not uncommon for a group of six Christians to divide their fishing catch in seven parts, the 7th part an offering to the Lord and to the work of His church (cited in Puthenpurakal 1984: 116).

From the above it may be understood how the two concepts of personhood come into convergence in Christian Naga society. Thus, it seems more persuasive to adopt a theory of personhood that includes both dividual and individual elements instead of essentializing them as a binary of West versus non-West.

Individualism, Identity and Identity Politics

Mosko's argument about dividual elements in western Christianity may be persuasive in critiquing and dislodging the binary of West/non-West, but it does not account for why Western Christian culture is seen as promoting individualism. In this paper, I argue that the notion of individualism is built on the foundation of an interiorization of the self. To understand the forms of this interiorization, we may turn to Foucault's account of Christian practices of self-examination and confession in early modernity. For Foucault, the subject is simultaneously social and individualistic, through a personal relation that one establishes with one's conscience or inner ethical being in practices like confession. If the essence of individualism lies in the degree of freedom that one has with regard to social relations – as Fowler (2004) puts it, “individualism values individual expression, autonomy, uniqueness, self-determination and freedom to act” (p. 9) – then in Foucault's (1982) account of the modern subject we have an individualism regulated by social control. Thus, in “The Subject and Power,” he defines a subject as one who is simultaneously “subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (p. 331). Foucault emphasizes the way Christian practices of self-examination became widely institutionalized in the church during the Reformation and Counter-Revolution. In *The History of Sexuality*, Vol 1, he discusses the pastoral practices of self-examination and confession, which brought into being a new relation to the self, and quotes from the 17th century Italian Jesuit preacher Paolo Segueri: “Examine diligently, therefore, all the faculties of your soul: memory, understanding, and will.

Examine, moreover, all your thoughts, every word you speak, and all your actions. Examine even unto your dreams, to know it, once awakened, you did not give them your consent” (1990:20). It was this internalization of the person that implanted, through pastoral practices of self-examination, the ‘self’ as individualized, what Foucault calls “hermeneutics of the self”; and these practices once confined to the pastorate became more widely disseminated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through secular forms of self-examination in medicine and the psychological sciences. In his essay “About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self”, Foucault examines the notion of self in ancient Greek and early Christian society by focusing on two key terms developed by the Greeks: *exomologesis* and *exagoreusis*. The concept of *exomologesis* was “a dramatic expression by the penitent of his status of sinner, and this in a kind of public manifestation”. *Exagoreusis*, in contrast, involved “an analytic and continuous verbalisation of the thoughts ... in complete obedience to the will of the spiritual father” (Foucault 1993: 179). These two different forms – public staging of one’s penitence and private confession – had in common the notion of self-renunciation, and they continued well into the Christian centuries. But they were opposed in form, and Christianity resolved this contradiction by emphasizing the latter:

... after a lot of conflicts and fluctuation, the second form of technology, this epistemological technology of the self, or this technology of the self oriented towards the permanent verbalisation and discovery of the most imperceptible movements of our self, this form became victorious after centuries and centuries, and it is nowadays dominating (Foucault 1993:180).

With modernity, this became the task of the hermeneutics of the self: how to free it from a self-negation and ground it in a positive foundation of the self? “That was the aim of judicial institutions, that was the aim also of medical and psychiatric practices, that was the aim of political and philosophical theory ... what we could call the permanent anthropologism of Western thought” (Foucault 1993:180). Corresponding to the modern hermeneutics of the self was a technology of governance that was individualizing, even as it subjected the totality of the population to its rule:

The main characteristic of our modern rationality... is neither the constitution of the state, the coldest of cold monsters, nor the rise of bourgeois individualism. I won’t even say that it is a constant effort to integrate individuals into the political totality. I think that the main characteristic of our political rationality is the fact that this integration of the individuals in a community or in a totality results from a constant correlation between an increasing individualization and the reinforcement of the totality (Foucault, 1988: 161-162).

Foucault’s (1982: 329-331) argument, then, is the way in which techniques of individualization and of interiorization came to be linked to the emergence of the self in Western modernity. Resisting these technologies, there also emerged a series of “‘transversal’ struggles” across the Western world that asserted the rights of individuals

“to be different”; and the question of identity – “Who are we?” – became the central issue in these struggles.

Identity is a concept of personhood characteristic, in Foucault’s argument, of modern societies. It is linked to the concept of the self, in that it is predicated on a distinction between self and other. Like the concept of the self, understood as an inner essence or core of one’s being, it is also essentialist, opposing self-essence to the essence of the other. The former provides the basis for identification with those who bear the same essence: the latter is the ground of distinction on which identity is staked. Crucial to the concept of identity, therefore, is a grid of similarities and differences. Thus, Chris Barker (2004: 94) defines identity as “a process of becoming built from points of similarities and difference”. At the same time, it is not a stable process, but one that is marked by “continual deferral through the never-ending processes of supplementarity or difference”. Stuart Hall (1996: 4), too, claims that identities are “fragmented, and never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions”.

With Christianization and modernity, the focus shifted from the notion of personhood to identity and the question of identity became an important subject of enquiry. It is now the question of identity as the outcome of the project of identification where the sense of the self becomes more pronounced. As understood earlier, identity is the product of ‘marking of difference’ and works on the notion of the binary. Thus, the claim for a distinct Naga identity was constructed through a mode of ‘difference’-from the Hindus, Muslims and other religions. The importance of Christianity has become embedded in Naga identity not only as a religion, but as an act of cultural resistance to the largely Hindu population of mainstream India (Baruah 2003: 329). Sanyu opines that the message of the gospel was the beginning of all things in Naga modern history (cited in Shimray 1996: 42). Hence, if we look closely amongst the Naga society, most of the non Christians Nagas are pressurized to convert⁴ to Christianity⁵. This is the result of their effort to homogenize the Nagas under one unit. An example to illustrate this point is the practice of drinking rice beer⁶. It was an integral part of the Naga diet, religious existence, as well as the corporeal existence. Rice beer was one of those few things that acted as a common factor among all these different Naga communities and it was integral to a sense of Naga personhood before their conversion to Christianity. What the church did by asking its members to abstain from drinking rice beer was that it fabricated a homogenized identity. Today, denunciation of rice beer started to homogenize the Nagas through Christianity. If in one context drinking rice beer signalled the performance of Naga personhood, in another it was the Christianised practice of not drinking rice beer that resignified Naga personhood. As a result of this, what happened was a homogenized identity of the Naga as educated, modern, Christian, and English speaking emerged. This was how the process of otherization of the non Christian Nagas began to take its root in Naga society.

Two Major Identity Formations in Nagaland

There are two major identity-formations in contemporary Nagaland, one deriving from a discourse of Naga nationalism that seeks to dissociate itself from India, and

the other from a governmental discourse of ethnicity that seeks to integrate the Naga under the sign of unity in diversity. The two are not mutually exclusive but intimately connected, and the conflict between them is staged every year at the Hornbill Festival. Internally, too, they are divided: Naga nationalist identity by factional differences as to the needs and aspirations of various groups, ethnic identity by those elements of the past that it suppresses in order to homogenize the Naga as both traditional and modern. The central theme of the paper is the complex way in which modernity and Christianization on the one hand, and a constructed and staged ethnicity on the other, have come to define a politics of identity that seeks to impose a powerful notion of personhood, each claiming to be the authentic representation of a homogenized and essentialist ‘Naganess’. Chris Barker (2004: 95) defines identity politics as “The forging of ‘new languages’ of identity with which to describe ourselves—actions aimed at changing social practices... they are intrinsically bound up with questions of power as a form of social regulation that is productive of the self and enables some kinds of identities to exist while denying it to others”. In such contexts, it is when identity becomes a political issue that new concepts of personhood as individualistic and oppositional juxtapose themselves with traditional notions of dividuality, partibility or permeability, and the continuous flow of substances and inheritances from person to person. The aim of this paper is to understand the forms that this juxtaposition has taken.

Performativity and Personhood

Constructionist theories hold that the categories of social existence such as personhood, identity and selfhood are constituted in discourse – that is, forms of knowledge and representation that are dominant in a society. Thus, Geertz (1973: 363-364) argues that Balinese personhood is constructed through “symbol systems” that represent the relationships of generation, birth-order, kinship and lineage, which “are not given in the nature of things” but are “historically constructed, socially maintained, and individually applied”. While such representations, expressed in everyday conversations, folklore and genealogies, do play a crucial role in the conceptualization of personhood, it is equally important to see how persons are also constituted through various practices. If discourse inscribes the norms of identity and personhood, practice becomes the ground for the concretization, sedimentation and transformation of these norms. In this section, we will discuss some of the important theories of practice and performativity in the constitution of social persons.

In performance theory, performance is broadly described as a “continuum of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainment, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performance” (Schechner 2003: 2-3). What distinguishes a performance from non-performative acts is that it is in some way staged – that is, either on an actual stage or framed in a context that stages it for an audience. Thus, in *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, sociologist Irving Goffman (1978: 22) defines performance “to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers”. Goffman studies forms of everyday behaviour in which individuals try, consciously or otherwise, to

make an impression on others, and draws on the dramaturgical metaphor to emphasize how such acts are staged. The crucial aspect of performance, that which defines it, is the coding of acts in accordance with a script or convention. Schechner (2003: 99) defines performance as "[r]itualized behaviour conditioned/permeated by play", that is, conventionalized ways of acting that are both entertaining and serve a purpose. What distinguishes a ritual performance from a theatrical one is the position it occupies in what Schechner calls the "polarity ... between efficacy and entertainment": ritual acts are closer to the efficacy pole, while theatrical acts are closer to the entertainment pole. "No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment" (p. 130). The script that codes a performance may be explicit in the form of a written document, as in theatre, or implicit in the conventional manner of the act, as in ritual. Thus, Schechner (2003: 68-69) hypothesizes that Paleolithic temple dance may have emerged from a repertoire of repeated actions that was known to both dancers and their audience, and maintained as a tradition. It was the implicit script which, in being performed correctly, assured the efficacy of the dance as a rite. This efficacy, moreover, "was not 'a result of' dancing the script but 'contained in' dancing the script".

In linguistic theory, the word "performative" refers to a particular type of utterance that, in being uttered, performs an action. It was introduced by the philosopher J.L Austin (1962: 6) in his book *How to Do Things with Words*, to distinguish performative utterances from constatives. In this book, Austin lists three types of speech acts: the locutionary, which describes an event or presents a fact; the illocutionary, which is a conventional utterance that brings about an action, such as promising, declaring, or bequeathing; and the perlocutionary, which is the intended outcome of an illocutionary act. The performative belongs to the second of these three categories: as Austin states, "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action". Thus, to promise is to say "I promise ..." and to declare is to say "I declare ..." What is crucial to the performative is that it performs or *produces* the very act that it names; constatives, in contrast, describe or refer to acts that are outside of the utterance, such as "I promised that ..." It is also crucial that performative utterances follow a specific convention, usually in the form of a first person singular present active verb form, and can work only where a social convention of their use exists. Thus, the "talaq, talaq, talaq" by which a Muslim man performs a declaration of divorce will not work in a non-Islamic culture, just as the performative "I do" that concludes a Christian marriage will not work in a non-Christian culture. These two features – the performative's conventionality and its productivity – have enabled the adaptation of the theory into a wide range of communicative social contexts.

Thus, Jacques Derrida (1988) in "Signature Event Context" extends the principle of performativity to all language and all communication in general, arguing that (a) the conventionally coded nature of the performative implies that it is the convention rather than the speaker that governs the performance, and (b) a performative may be grafted into new signifying contexts to generate new meanings. Drawing on Derrida's reading of Austin's theory, Judith Butler argues that gendered performances produce the very norms of gender that they seem to express, and that subversive performances like drag resignify the gender norms and expose their conventionality. As we will see shortly, Austin's theory has also been adapted by ritual theorists to explain the way

the performance of a rite produces both its meaning and the authority it enjoys.

In using the concept of performativity, this paper combines both senses of the term, in performance theory and speech act theory. A good example would be the performance of the Feast of Merit in Naga communities. I argue that it is in performing the Feast of Merit that the feast giver comes to acquire a higher status. Though Schechner (2003: 69) does not refer to speech act theory, the way in which he discusses the productive dimension of ritual performance is significant. In ritual performance, he states, “the doing is a manifestation more than a communication”. He discusses the Kaiko Festival among the Tsembaga of Highlands Papua New Guinea as follows:

The Kaiko entertainments are a ritual display – not simply a doing but a showing of a doing. Furthermore, this showing is both actual (= the trading and giving of goods resulting in new imbalances) and symbolic (= the reaffirmation of alliances concretized in debtor-creditor relationships). The dancing is a performance – and enjoyed as such, with spectators serving frequently as acerbic critics – but it’s also a way of facilitating trade, finding mates, cementing military alliances, and affirming (or reordering) tribal hierarchies” (p. 114-115).

Similarly, the Naga Feast of Merit is not only an occasion for community feasting but also an event of symbolic rite of status, carried out in accordance with the norms and conventions of the community. It establishes a social hierarchy and at the same time maintains a balance between groups through the practice of inter-village feasting. After the Nagas converted to Christianity the ritual feasting continued, but was rearticulated in the Christian context and became associated with Christmas celebration. Such “re-citation,” to use Derrida’s term in “Signature Event Context,” is a way in which cultural practices both continue and become transformed.

Stanley Tambiah’s (1979) study of ritual performance links it to “cosmological and ideological constructs”. As a “culturally constructed system of symbolic communication”, ritual performance is performative in three senses: as a performative act in Austin’s sense, as staged performance, and as indexicality in Peirce’s sense (Tambiah 1979: 119). In his tripartite schema of signs, Charles Sanders Peirce distinguishes between the icon, which bears a relation of resemblance with its referent, the index, which is existentially linked to its referent, and the symbol, which is purely arbitrary. An example of icon is the photograph, of the index is smoke as a sign of fire, and of symbol, the linguistic sign that, as Ferdinand de Saussure argues, is purely arbitrary or unmotivated. Thus, Tambiah posits that ritual represents the cosmological order symbolically, iconically or indexically, or even in all three ways simultaneously. An example of this may be the Naga house horns with which a warrior is allowed to adorn his house after performing a Feast of Merit. On successful completion of the first stage of the feast, he is allowed to put up one plank on the thatch of his house; on completion of the third stage, two planks with sharpened heads in the form of a buffalo’s horns, but not projecting over the thatch; on completion of the third, a big horn placed well above the thatch; and on completion of the fourth and last stage, two horns placed over the thatch, one at the front and the other in the back. First, the house horn represents status symbolically – that is, it has no self-evident link with

what it represents. Then, the house horn represents status indexically: it is existentially linked to successive performances of the Feast of Merit as a status ritual. Finally, it also represents status iconically, indicating the enhancement of status through successively enhanced forms of the house horn, its placement, and its number. As far as the Austinian sense of performativity is concerned, Tambiah contends that the ordering of the ritual activity is itself both a representation of cosmological order and an enactment of the order. In our example, the sequential ordering of the form, placement and number becomes similarly linked to the larger networks of order that constitute the Naga cosmos. The house horn as an element of the rites of the Feast of Merit both reproduces cosmological order and produces it in the domain of status hierarchy.

Roy A. Rappaport (1979: 175) considers performance as a “*sine qua non* of ritual”, which he defines as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers”. There is an evident resonance between the performance being “not encoded by the performers” and Derrida’s claim about performatives being determined not by the intention of the speaker but by the convention that governs it. Ritual performance, Rappaport argues, represents a particular state indexically: thus, when a Goodenough Islander or a Siuai “transmits the message that he is a man of importance, influence, or prestige by giving away large numbers of yams and substantial numbers of pigs he is not simply claiming to be a big man. He is *displaying the fact* that he is. The amount he gives away is an index of his ‘bigness’ because it is ‘really affected by’ that which it signifies – his influence, prestige, authority, or whatever” (Rappaport 1979: 175). Rappaport also gives the example of a Maring man who indicates his willingness to support a particular group in war by dancing at the festival hosted by them: “The conventional signal, dancing, is taken to be intrinsic to that conventional state, which is to say that to dance is to promise” (*Ibid.*). As we have seen in Tambiah, Rappaport too links ritual to the cosmological order. Liturgical orders are “orders in the sense of organization, form, or regularity (synonymous with the meaning of ‘order’ in such phrases as ‘the social order’). As such they constitute order, or maintain orderliness, in contrast to disorder, entropy, or chaos” (Op. Cit. 192). The performativity of liturgy produces it as a reality for its practitioners – it “does more than *remind* individuals of an underlying order. It *establishes* that order” (Op. Cit. 197). We may compare the arguments of both Tambiah and Rappaport with Clifford Geertz’s account of culture as both “model of” and “model for” social reality: as “model of” it represents that reality and as “model for” it constitutes it. Cultural patterns, argues Geertz (1973: 93), “give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves”.

As should be evident from the above, ritual symbols do not exist as abstract notions, but as concretized in performance. Edward L. Schieffelin (1985: 707) argues that in performance the meaning of the symbol can only be realized in the performance of the ritual: “symbols are effective less because they communicate meaning (though this is also important) than because, through performance, meanings are formulated in a social rather than cognitive space, and the participants are engaged with the

symbols in the interactional creation of a performance reality, rather than merely being informed by them”. Schieffelin suggests that it is the embodied performance in an interactional context that creates the ritual as a part of lived reality. Thus, the spirit beliefs of Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea simultaneously “articulate everyday and cosmological realities” and construct them as authentic (p. 719). An example from the Naga context is the genna as a structure of differentiated prohibitions organizing and giving meaning to the temporal-spatial contexts of everyday activity. The performance of various gennas, corresponding to different times and activities, construct the significance of these times and activities in a manner that is collective, embodied and existential rather than cognitive.

Personhood in Naga society is performative, and belongingness to the community is an outcome of performing the conventions specific to it. As Schechner (2003) writes of the *engwura* cycles of the Arunta: “On each day the performers enacted condensed and concentrated versions of their lives as they played and displayed their emergent relationships with their fellow Aruntans: the dances, stories, songs and actions that constituted the core of their Aruntanness” (p. 119). It is through the performance of these collective activities that community bonds are established and a sense of belongingness to the community inculcated in the performer. Rituals are not only the products of a code, they are also what constitute the code in their performance. Ritual acts evolve over time through reiterated performances, and become sedimented into a tradition that serves to unite the people in bonds of community solidarity, in a manner similar to the traditions of gift-giving that Mauss elaborates.

Conclusion

This paper posits that Naga personhood is constituted through the performance of cultural practices and norms which are formed both discursively and through embodied acts and practices. In drawing upon a range of arguments about performativity, personhood and identity, I have tried to develop a conceptual framework for the analysis of Naga cultural practices and how they have been transformed over time. These transformations did not mean a break with the past, but involved both continuities and deviations that constituted as well as reconstituted Naga personhood in response to changing social circumstances.

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Endnotes

¹ There are about 10 Naga tribes in Myanmar.

² The word means village elders. A local overseer appointed by the British.

³ Literally meaning two languages—referring to interpreters

⁴ In one of the Chakhesang villages that I had visited, they only have one non Christian. I took an appointment to meet him in one of my visits. Unfortunately, he had to go to

another village for an emergency. However, later I was told that he does not like to meet new people as they tend to preach and ask him to convert to Christianity.

⁵My own father was a converted Christian and I remember how he would say that there was a lot of pressure on the non Christians to convert before a major event such as the golden jubilee celebration to commemorate the arrival of Christianity in their village. An eight foot tall monolith stone was erected at Sakraba village to commemorate the complete conversion of the total population into Christianity on 31 August 2014. (Collected this data from Sakraba village on 1 October 2018)

⁶ The consumption of rice beer was an integral element of Naga personhood, and a mandatory part of Naga ritual. Missionaries from America, where there was a massive Temperance Movement, preached against the practice of drinking rice beer. It was initially directed against Naga personhood, but subsequently, Temperance became a part of Naga identity.

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