

**DOCUMENTING INTANGIBLE HERITAGE THROUGH TANGIBLE  
ARTIFACTS: A CASE STUDY OF NAGALAND**

ABANTIKA PARASHAR  
INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE ARTS  
NEW DELHI

---

This is land of handsome people  
Blessings are for the people of this land.  
People rejoiced, people are blessed  
People will rejoice, be rejoice people.  
(Free translation of a Naga song, sung in the honor of their homeland)

India, being the repository of cultural diversity, is home to innumerable ethnographic practices, ethnic cultures and communities, but as sheer fact of luck, is undergoing a severe cultural crisis due to the rapid cultural transition happening throughout the nation. Nagaland is a hilly Indian state, situated in the north eastern part of the country and known for its ethnographic elements and priceless intangible heritage. But fortunately or unfortunately, this state is also undergoing similar kind of crisis, which has made the ethnographic heritage of the state vulnerable. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight some museological issues associated with the intangible heritage of the state with the first hand experience of the author.

Naga art and craft, which is actually inseparable, is closely associated with socio – religious rituals, customs and practices. Much of the “Naga Art Tradition” is associated with customary practices like the traditional ritualistic believes and practices such as head hunting and stone worship<sup>1</sup>, cultivation based practices etc. actually artistic pleasure , whether as an everyday activity or as a creative passion, is universally felt by all the Nagas. Although the ideal of beauty differs from tribe to tribe<sup>2</sup>, the general character of enjoyment is of the same order everywhere. Even

---

<sup>1</sup> The stone dragging ceremony, in which two stones are dragged home.

<sup>2</sup> At present there are all total 17 different Naga tribes in Nagaland.

the poorest family produces work that has elements of aesthetic pleasure and minute craftsmanship.

Nagaland comprises of tribal and sub-tribal communities, their living patterns, festivals and believes. Commonly known as the Naga people, the local inhabitants of Nagaland belong to the Indo-Mangoloid race. Agriculture is the main livelihood of the Naga people along with animal husbandry and weaving. The social structure of each and every Naga tribe differs from one another. The cultural heritage of the Naga people is quite rich and the different ethnic communities of Nagaland have collectively formed a vibrant platform of cultural dynamism.

Turning to ethnographic heritage of the traditional Naga society, one can witness an abundance of songs, dance forms, oral traditions and practices, festivals etc. Their passion for beauty and artistic work, which inspired them to give artistic touch to almost each and everything surrounding them, appeared in their everyday life comprising songs, rituals, stories etc. The intangible components associated with ferocious acts like “Head Hunting” have their own aesthetic as well as creative value, which has contributed a lot in conceptualizing the Naga identity. It would seem that the entire philosophy of Naga life revolved around the practice of head hunting. A person who did not have a single head to his credit had difficulty in getting a bride and became an object of ridicule with the girls. In fact, the notion of head hunting was so deep rooted that, a person faced difficulty in getting bride, if he didn't have single head in his credit. Most of the traditions including songs, Body art, textile traditions, art and craft have their own association with the head hunting practice. At present scenario, head hunting is a banned (Head hunting ended among the Lotha and the Rengma tribes in 1880, among the Angamis and Aos in 1905, among the Semas in 1909, among the Sangatams in 1947, among the Konyaks in 1962ss and among the Khemumgans in 1963. The latest cases of head hunting occurred in 1963 and 1969)<sup>3</sup> and therefore its fruitfulness is beyond discussion, but in the same time, one cannot deny its role as the epicenter of cultural activities, both tangible and intangible, in the Naga society. This can be highlighted through few examples.

In terms of textile tradition, Spinning and weaving is the exclusive monopoly of women. Traditionally it could be started as soon as the first fruits of the new

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.webindia123.com/nagaland/people/naga\\_society2.htm](http://www.webindia123.com/nagaland/people/naga_society2.htm) (as seen on 12.08.2015).

harvest had been eaten. The design is mostly done by using different colors of warp at different stages or by the weft weaving method<sup>4</sup>. Traditional Naga textile includes lower garment for male and upper as well as lower garment for female, shawls etc. One of the common features of Naga shawl is that three pieces are woven separately and later on stitched together. In case of children's shawl and women skirts, the pieces are reduced to two.

One of the most interesting Naga textiles is the Naga Shawl. Different tribes of Nagas have different shawls of their own unique patterns and within the same tribe nobody is allowed to wear a shawl according to their choice. They vary from very simple white cloth to elaborate n complex designs and it is very interesting to know the taboos associated with this piece of cloth. The Naga tribes have their own social boundaries and these shawls help in identifying those boundary lines. The common people are not allowed to wear a shawl meant for the head hunters or the rich who have sacrificed Mithun in Feast of Merit<sup>5</sup>, disobeying of which is believed to have unpleasant outcome. For example Ao warrior shawl Tsungkotpsu is only for those who is either head hunter or has performed feast of merit. In case of the Angami cowry shawls, three lines of cowries indicate the wearer is a warrior and four lines stood for a renowned veteran and these are to be sewn by the owner himself.

Rongkhim, one of the most attractive Yimchunger shawls can be worn only by a man who has taken heads in war. In ancient times, only a reputed warrior could wear such shawls having 96 designs and other warriors wore that with 64 designs. Id this cloth is worn by any other men, who is not a warrior, he was believed to die in leprosy. Kechinger Rongkhim is another warrior shawl, which is entitled to a warrior who has taken the right hand of the slain enemy. Amerthre Khim, with red designs, is another attractive shawl of the same, which can be worn by a man who has killed a tiger. The patterns woven in the shawl is said to be copied from the strips of the tiger's skin. In fact, when the wearer of such shawl dies, a rough

---

<sup>4</sup> For extra weft weaving, the warp yarns are lifted by a stick like knitting stick or by porcupine quill with the fingers of the left hand while by the right hand the thread is passed through the shed so formed as per the designs.

<sup>5</sup> These feasts consist of a series of ceremonies, in a rising scale of importance, leading finally to the sacrifice of the Mithun, a domestic animal. In each of the feasts, the villagers are entertained with wine, rice and meat. The feasts bring the donor honor and he can henceforth wear special clothes and ornaments, can decorate his house in a special way and thus obtain a high status in social life. Only a married man is authorized to give these feasts.

outline of a tiger is made with spitted bamboo, which is covered by this shawl and placed in the grave.

The reoccurring motives of Naga textiles, especially shawls are some geometric patterns and some everyday objects like Mithun, elephant, tiger, human head, weapons etc. Mithun symbolizes wealth of the owner, elephant and tigers indicate valour of the man, and human heads indicate success in head hunting wars. Again, in a Naga society, cowries are symbols of martial achievements and no ordinary man is allowed to use it in their attire. On the other hand, according to Dr. Verrier Elwin<sup>6</sup>, the zigzag patterns of Naga shawl symbolize the winding path, which a head hunter follows to attack an enemy village along with natural expression of an aggressive forceful temperament.

The importance of a Naga Shawl as a social identity and the intangible elements surrounding it can easily be understood if one comes across the taboos and traditions associated with the manufacture of Teri Phiketsu, a warrior shawl of the Rengma tribe. This is woven specially for successful head hunters, who had brought trophies of human head to the village and in “The Art and Craft of Nagaland”, there is a detailed description of the event “...according to the believes, it is held that, when the warrior comes home with the trophies he is to stay in the Morung<sup>7</sup> for three day....on competition of ceremonies, that is after fifteen days, the wife of the warrior starts to weave this cloth while the smartest man in the village is sent to collect sap and other materials necessary for panting the white medium band in the cloth. As a matter of fact, the whole history of the war is painted on the cloth. The prominent paintings on the white band symbolize the soldier. Three or four inconspicuous heads are painted at intervals to distinguish the leaders or captains from the soldiers. The three lines of black thread about 5cms long on either side of the white band is the symbol of the ear-rings of the victors. The two lines at the bottom on either side of each of the soldiers and leaders indicate the arrows. The figures in the middle of each soldier represent the spoon. A warrior is taboo to eat with his hand, but should use a wooden spoon while eating so that the blood of the enemy is not washed away. The belief, in this practice is to remain the mana of the victim, for, by washing away the blood of the enemy, he is believed to become coward in life thereafter. Also by allowing the

---

<sup>6</sup> The Art of North-East Frontier Agency, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> Bachelor Dormitory.

blood to remain in his hands, he is supposed to be strong and grow more beards. Just below the representation of the spoon, there is a straight line in each of the painting to denote the bridge which a warrior use to come across into the area of the enemy after the enemy shut the gate and come out over the same bridge with his trophy. The zigzag panting on the lower side of the median white band is the symbolic representation of the sentry posts on which the soldiers kept gourd....such a cloth (original) is very rare to find nowadays”. In this regard J.P. Mills<sup>8</sup> has written “..... The pattern of this band is traditional and is regarded representing decapitated men interspersed with the men who have taken their heads. These bands used to be made in both Tseminyu and Tesophenyu, but the old craftsman in the former village is dead and no one has arisen to take his place, the work being regarded in some vague way as derogatory. In Tesophenyu, on the other hand, the tradition is vigorously alive and one Achukha is striking out on a line of his own and introducing a second band. On a cloth which I obtained in 1931, the lower band by his was decorated as follows taking the objects from left to right: a warrior’s tail, tiger’s eyes, a cow elephant, a bull elephant, tiger’s eyes, a tiger, a domestic Mithun, a bear, a Sambhur, tiger’s eyes wild Mithun, tiger’s eyes, a warrior’s “tail”, a very band man whose head has been cut off and underneath, a python swallowing a barking deer. On another cloth I have seen a pictorial record of the rescue of a man from a tiger by the warrior.”

### **Documentation and challenges:**

One of the most tragic losses of the unique cultural resources of the state of Nagaland as a result of rapid urbanization and cultural transformation is the death of virile art and performance from the yore.As a repository of ethnographic heritage, documentation of art and craft traditions of Nagaland is of urgent need. The process has already started in terms of both commercial as well as non commercial endeavor. However, the concept of museological documentation is still a new concept to this land. Nothing much has been done in this regard, apart from few acquisitions of different artifacts and their systematic documentation in their respective museums. The author happened to stay in Nagaland for one year due to work assignment and as a part of the job assigned, had to do documentation of Naga artifacts, which belonged to a private Angami gentleman. The team

---

<sup>8</sup> The Rengma Nagas, 1937 (Google Book)

comprised of two local persons from the Angami Tribe, another one from Assam and the author. In the first phase around 1500 tangible objects were documented, which were part of some intangible rituals or practices. However, during the process some challenges occurred, which made the documentation process very complex. In fact, some of the factors are deep rooted and have potentiality of great threat, while working in the field. Some of the problems are discussed below-

1. **Lack of written evidence:** the although Nagamese is the common language shared by most of the people, but each and every Naga tribe have their own dialects , which are comprised of numerous folksongs, folktales and proverbs. The oral tradition is kept alive through medium of folk tales and songs as Naga dialect have no scripts. Some excellent examples of Naga folk songs(dance) are Sokeses (Angami),Arr-ken(Ao),Khapii Li(Chakesang), Yea Onghin Leepii( Tactics of Head Hunting, Konyak), War Dance (Khamniungan), Sagolphei Khai(Kuki), Ekhyo Sharii( Victory song over enemy,Lotha), Nazhu festival dance (Pochury), Nok-Ohat dance (Phom), Ayi Kechi Khmi (Rengma),Jiimii Yangtsa Kiiliipsa (peacemaking, Sangtam), Lejoleh (Sumi), Zeliang (Social gathering song), Thime Takpu (Yimchungru) etc. Thematically these songs are based on everyday life, important events, cultural as well as mineral resources, social practices etc. Thus, these songs are themselves a medium of record keeping in a Naga society. But due to lack of a written script, these are inherited by successive generation in oral form. Every Naga takes pride in inheriting, singing and talking about these melodies, but lack of written records possess the threat of minimal partial loss of information with every passing generation, which may collectively cause a major loss of information in near future. Just like the songs, the dancing movements and techniques of traditional games like Phieda( Angami) and Kangkap( kuki), are not in written form, which is a serious threat.
2. **Decreasing knowledge bank:** One of the most tragic losses of the unique cultural resources of the state of Nagaland as a result of rapid urbanization and cultural transformation is the death of virile art and performance as well as the performers or the traditional knowledge bank. There is a constant threat of partial loss of data while passing aural traditions in every generation, which collectively create a big hole in the final output. Besides

there is also a tendency of outside influences being mixed up with traditional ways, which altogether results faulty documentation.

3. **Communication Gap:** Communication hindrances are a real issue, while venturing documentation in Nagaland, especially in interiors. Although English is the official language of the state, it is hardly spoken by the elderly generation, which is the real repository of knowledge for documentation intangible heritage. Besides, the ongoing insurgency problem is constantly contributing in widening up the communication gap in between Nagaland and the rest of the world.
4. **Religious conversion:** with religious conversion that is rapidly happening in Nagaland, has reduced the number of followers of the ancient religious practices into a handful only. With this conversion, the local people have lost interest in maintaining as well as in preserving the traditional rituals cum ritualistic ideas, songs, stories, believe etc. besides conversion has put a ban in performing some customs and rituals which are an integral part of Naga ethnicity. All these factors altogether has created a threat in carrying out the Naga cultural identify to the coming generations.

### **Kisama Heritage Village: Documenting Intangible through Tangible:**

Kisama Heritage village, which is 10km away from the state capital Kohima, is a heritage village built permanently in Kisama. The nomenclature of Kisama is derived from two villages namely Kigwema (KI) and Phesama (SA), with MA in last, which means village. The purpose of this heritage village is to serve as a “window to Nagaland, aiming to provide a preview of the entire state on a single platform. The heritage site in its display showcases the traditional houses or Morung, representing the 17 recognized tribes of Nagaland.” It aims “to protect and preserve all ethnic cultural heritages by establishing a common management approach and comprehensive data for perpetuation and maintenance for promotion of tourism. It also aims to uphold and sustain the distinct identity of dialects, costumes and traditions of all the ethnic tribes of Nagaland.” This is the venue for the annual “Hornbill Festival” which happens in the first week of December every year.

During the hornbill festival all the Naga tribes gather in this heritage village with traditional attire, which is followed by uninterrupted musical and dance

performances, ethnic cousins, traditional marketplace etc. In the bamboo pavilion arts and crafts of the different Naga tribes are displayed, along with technique demonstrations on demand. The ethnic food courts have unique food items of each Naga tribe, which are prepared in traditional way and are served to the people in traditional way in front of every Morung house. It has also kept alive the traditional games of Nagaland by opening a ground where people are called to participate and witness the pastime games that has been passed on from generation to generation. The Hornbill international Music festival organized simultaneously plays the role of a well built platform for displaying the indigenous musical instruments in present scenario.

Thus, the Kisamam Heritage Village has performed the role of a worldwide platform, where intangible is documented with the help of the tangibles. In fact, this heritage site has succeeded in demolishing stigmas associated with Nagaland to a great extent. Especially the annual Hornbill festival has plaid the most important role by laying not only the ground for authentic documentation, but has also contributed by creating craftsmen and artisans of ancient traditions. The local people and the performers are given opportunity to perform and display their rich cultural heritage in front of the world, which has broadened up the sphere of their cultural spectrum. With provision of both official as well as non-official audio-visual recording of this weeklong programme, this village has turned into a live inventory of Naga way of life. One characteristic feature of the site is that, it focuses on bringing back the traditions that are rapidly disappearing. Its collection (i.e. permanent architectures of the 17 Naga tribes along with decorative accessories) aims to glorify the ethnic cultural heritage of the state, so that people can find their root through it and can use the knowledge for own well being. Most importantly this has started re-producing performers, by injecting self pride as well as self realization, so that the legacy can be carried out generation by generation. In this way, Kisama is not only documenting their diminishing intangible glory, but also inspiring more and more people to be a part of this process, so that it can be revived, preserved, promoted and carried forwarded to the future generation.

In conclusion, here goes a saying of Dr. V. Elwin<sup>9</sup> “...with the growth of the material prosperity, there will be a cultural and spiritual renaissance. Naga dancing

---

<sup>9</sup> Verrier Elwin, renowned anthropologist.

is famous and as the people will dance more will revive in their hearts old memories and joy. The Nagas have excellent taste, a perfect sense of color and there are welcoming signs that they will not permit a so called modernism to banish color from their lives and depress them into the drab uniformity of the dress and ornamentation of today.”

.....



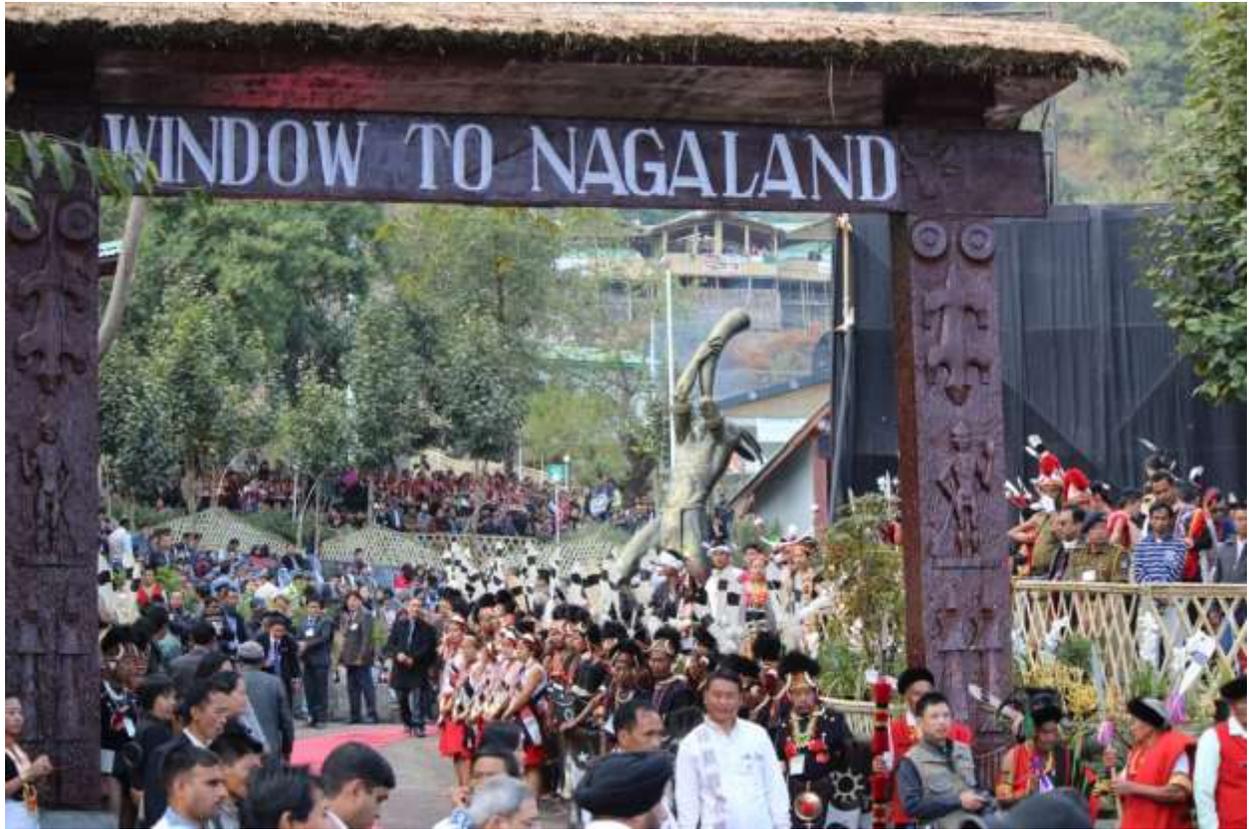
Naga Youth in traditional attire. Photo credit: Mr. Mrinmoy Das, Abhijna e-Museum



Scene from a food court during the festival. Photo credit: Mr. Mrinmoy Das, Abhijna e-Museum



Performers waiting to welcome the guests. Photo credit: Mr. Mrinmoy Das, Abhijna e-Museum



Entrance of the Festival. Photo credit: Mr. Mrinmoy Das, Abhijna e-Museum