

# NAGA SOCIETY, ITS UNIQUE HERITAGE, CULTURE AND DANCE

BY

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Until just about a century and a half back, until the arrival of the British in northeast India, the ethnic tribes of Nagaland lived and worked on the premise that the knowledge and the skills of one generation must be passed on to the next for sheer survival purposes. Thus, the customs, beliefs, values, and opinions of Naga society were handed down from their ancestors to posterity by word of mouth or by practice since the earliest times.

With the colonization of this part of the country along with the rest of India came new influences, primarily the stress on literacy and the written word. This supposedly "civilizing" contact, changed the way the Nagas had lived their lives from prehistoric times and had maintained their traditions such as managing and acquiring property, their search for food, from harvesting to hunting and the way they had relaxed when work was done.

The Naga elders teach their young, from birth, about survival, endurance, and respect for nature and all mankind. They do this through stories and legends, using even toys and playthings, including tools and traditional dress, specially fashioned for them so that they may learn early about the roles they will assume. Little girls, it is interesting to note, have, as toys, packing parkas in which they carry their dolls on their back, just as they will carry their children in the future. They are also taught the traditional styles and methods for sewing and designing clothing.

Boys are trained equally early on to train as budding warriors, introduced to traditional games, group play, and exercises to learn alertness, improvisation, and endurance. Children in Naga culture, as , quickly come to understand that time-honored skills and attitudes can never be relegated solely to the past, that they ensure a way of life and survival in the present and for the future.

Children spend a great amount of time listening to the elders as they recount tales of their past, and sing individual songs called haolaa. These songs usually speak of events that occurred in the past and detail their reaction to them. As with all old civilizations, the ties to the past have essentially been passed down orally, through legends, anecdotes, and songs.

Every child learns the legacy of his or her land, also that failure to practice and uphold the wisdom of the elders can only result in tragedy or disharmony for an individual or a whole group.

The Naga have a strong sense of self: of who they are, and why they are as they are. Through their legends we speak, sing and dance of their close ties with the

The tribes of Nagaland celebrate their festivals with gusto and fervor. More than 60% of the population of Nagaland depends on agriculture and therefore most of their festivals revolve around agriculture. They consider their festivals sacred and so participation in these festivals is compulsory. Nagaland is known as the land of festivals as each tribe celebrates its own festival with dedication and passion. Some of the important festivals celebrated are: Tsukhenyie by the Chakhesangs in January, Mimkut by the Kukis in January, Bushu by the Kacharis in January, Sekrenyi by the Angamis in February, Aoling by the Konyaks in April, Moatsü by the Aos in May, Tuluni by the Sumis in July, Nyaknylum by the Changs in July, Mongmong by the Sangtams in September, Tsokum by the Khamniungans in October, Tokhu Emong by the Lothas in November, Yemshe by the Pochuris in October and Ngada by the Rengma's in November. Since 2000 the Hornbill Festival supported by the Assam Government has become a popular festival for everyone.

It is only by means of more field work in all these areas that new layers can be unravelled, and that is the main purpose of this research and study.

The time has come to look deeper into each of them and to find their common and distinctive characteristics. Time to assess their unique position and role in the societies of each of these tribes.



Tiwa dance, Bodo dance, Goalpriya Lok Geet, Bihu dance, Tokri Geet, names that fly off the handle as cultural expressions of the ethnic tribes that live in Assam in the Northeast. But there are riches waiting to be tapped in the culture of The Seven Sisters of India's northeastern borders, from the largest Arunachal Pradesh to Arunachal Pradesh, one of the 28 states of India, for instance, borders the states of Assam and Nagaland to the south, and shares international borders with Bhutan in the west, Myanmar in the east and the People's Republic of China in the north. Itanagar is the capital of the state. China claims most of the state as part of Tibet and calls the disputed area South Tibet. Obviously we need to look in depth at this strategically important region and find the links that will bring it closer to mainstream India. Arunachal Pradesh is also known as the "land of the dawn-lit mountains", literally meaning the "Land of the rising sun" (Sanskrit: *Arun*: Sun, *Pradesh*: state, province or region) in reference to its position as the easternmost state of India. It is also known as the "Orchid State of India" or the "Paradise of the Botanists". Geographically, it is the largest among the North-east Indian states. Its people native to the state trace their origins from the Tibeto-Burman and Mongoloid race. A large number of migrants from various parts of India and foreign lands have and have been affecting the state's population. No reliable population count of the migrant population exists. Interestingly, Arunachal has the highest number of regional languages in South Asia enriched with diverse culture and traditions.

Similarly, Assam, the largest state, bordered by all the other six sisters of the region, is an important element in India's Look East policy.<sup>[3]</sup> Assam became a part of British India after the British occupied the region following the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–1826.

Assam is rich in culture, ethnic groups, languages/dialects spoken and literature. It is known for Assam tea, large and old petroleum resources (the first oil reserves of India were discovered in Assam in the late 19th century), Assam silk and for its rich biodiversity. Assam has successfully conserved the one-horned Indian rhinoceros from near extinction, along with the tiger and numerous species of birds, and it provides one of the last wild habitats for the Asian elephant, with both the well-objects known Kaziranga and Manas sanctuaries declared World Heritage sites.

Or take Nagaland, the smallest state in this region, again replete with a culture that goes back to primeval times and has rich layers in its dances and its music. Its 16 main tribes have developed different colours and designs in their textiles and even something mundane like a shawl denotes the social status of the wearer. Shawls, shoulder bags, decorative spears, table mats, wood carvings, and bamboo works are commonly crafted. Some of the more known shawls include *Tsungkotepsu* and *Rongsu* of the Ao tribe; *Sutam*, *Ethasu*, *Longpensu* of the Lothas; *Supong* of the Sangtams, *Rongkhim* and *Tsungrem Khim* of the Yimchangers; the Angami *Lohe* shawls with thick embroidered animal motifs and so many other variations of colour and design.

Folk songs and dances are essential ingredients of the traditional Naga culture. The oral tradition is kept alive through the media of folk tales and songs. Naga folks songs are both romantic and historical, with songs narrating entire stories of famous ancestors and incidents. There are also seasonal songs which describe various activities done in a particular agricultural season. Tribal dances of the Nagas give an insight into the inborn Naga reticence of the people. War dances and other dances belonging to distinctive Naga tribes are a major art form in Nagaland.

spiritual world, and of their reverence for and understanding of wildlife. Stories handed down through time depict our interrelationship with the animal world, and tell of animals and humans exchanging roles, acquiring supernatural powers, and teaching and providing for one another.

The Naga paintings and artwork also reflects these relationships, as do rituals that show respect for and acceptance of this oneness and harmony, which is displayed in their carvings and shawls. All these, and more, are an eloquent testament to the way of life of a people, representing the spirit, attitude, wisdom, and life-style which the Nagas have lived, have believed, and have passed on from generation to generation for many centuries. They are the product of experience rooted at a particular time in the life of the society, in the myths, legends, proverbs, superstitions, songs, and recitations of their ancestors.

Today we have new awareness of these ancient cultures and their invaluable, intangible cultural heritage, of civilizations different from our own and from whom we have so much to learn. These are the people whom the British and later even we labelled "primitive" and "uncivilized". This happened because they did not conform to our superficial "civilized" standards.

Early missionaries, who considered the Naga culture and folklore as primitive, without depth or sophistication, missed the point completely. While we have yet to analyse and understand some of the common-sense beliefs and superstitions in the Indigenous communities, it is important to note that these have existed side by side with some of humanity's most profound philosophies, as well as some of its deepest truths.

The focus of this work will be specific dances in the above framework. Naga dance of Zachunu Keyho, under SNA's training project at Chetheba, Nagaland, for instance, will be studied and documented.