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The polity of Naga indigeneity and identity: Historical, political and anthropological perspectives

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Abstract
The discourse on Naga indigeneity and identity occupies a central position in the historical and political narratives of Northeast India. The Nagas, inhabiting the mountainous regions of present-day Nagaland and adjoining areas of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and north-western Myanmar, historically maintained autonomous socio-political institutions and cultural traditions. Prior to colonial intervention in the nineteenth century, Naga societies were organised around village republics characterised by communal land ownership, clan-based social organisation, and participatory governance. The expansion of British colonial rule and missionary activity significantly transformed these indigenous institutions and reconfigured the political and cultural landscape of the Naga homeland. Subsequent integration into the Indian Union further complicated the articulation of Naga identity and aspirations for self-determination. This article examines the polity of Naga indigeneity by integrating political and anthropological perspectives. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Sanjoy Hazarika, Dolly Kikon, Arkotong Longkumer, Abraham Lotha, B. Datta-Ray, and Temsula Ao, the study analyses the historical evolution of Naga socio-political institutions, colonial transformations, and contemporary debates surrounding indigenous identity. The paper argues that Naga identity is not merely a political construct but a deeply embedded cultural system shaped by kinship networks, land relations, oral traditions, and indigenous governance structures. Understanding these anthropological foundations is crucial for interpreting the ongoing political discourse surrounding Naga indigeneity and identity.

Keywords: Naga indigeneity, political identity, indigenous governance, political anthropology, Northeast India

Introduction

The question of indigeneity and political identity among the Naga people remains one of the most complex and enduring issues in the study of Northeast India. The Nagas comprise a collection of ethnolinguistic communities inhabiting the hill regions along the India–Myanmar border. Although the Naga tribes differ in language, customs, and traditions, they share a broad cultural worldview and historical experience that contribute to a collective identity.

Historically, Naga societies existed as independent village communities that maintained their own systems of governance, social organisation, and cultural practices. Anthropological studies have shown that these communities were largely self-sufficient and politically autonomous prior to the nineteenth century (Hutton, 1921; Mills, 1926) [7, 11]. Their governance structures were based on customary laws, communal ownership of land, and participatory decision-making.

The expansion of British colonial administration into the Naga Hills during the nineteenth century marked a significant turning point in the history of the region. Colonial expeditions and administrative policies gradually incorporated Naga territories into the British Indian Empire, introducing new systems of governance and territorial boundaries (Hazarika, 1994) [6]. Missionary activities further transformed the social and cultural landscape by introducing Christianity and Western education.

Following India's independence in 1947, the political future of the Nagas became a subject of intense debate and conflict. Many Naga leaders expressed aspirations for self-determination, while the Indian government sought to integrate the region within the national framework. The creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 represented a political compromise, yet questions concerning Naga identity and territorial integrity persist.

This article explores the polity of Naga indigeneity by integrating historical, political, and anthropological perspectives. It examines the indigenous foundations of Naga society, the transformations brought about by colonial and missionary encounters, and the evolving political discourse surrounding Naga identity.

Literature Review: Perspectives on Naga Identity

The academic study of Naga society has evolved significantly over the past century. Early ethnographic works by colonial administrators such as Hutton (1921) and Mills (1926) [7, 11] provided detailed descriptions of Naga social organisation, political systems, and cultural practices. These studies remain valuable sources for understanding the structure of traditional Naga societies.

More recent scholarship has expanded the analytical framework by examining Naga identity within broader political and anthropological contexts. Sanjoy Hazarika (1994) [6] emphasises that the political conflict in Northeast India cannot be understood without recognising the historical experiences of indigenous communities such as the Nagas. His work highlights the role of colonial policies and postcolonial state formation in shaping contemporary political tensions.

Abraham Lotha (2007) provides an important critique of colonial anthropology, arguing that early ethnographic studies often portrayed Naga societies through a colonial lens. Nevertheless, these studies also contributed to the documentation of Naga cultural traditions and social institutions.

Arkotong Longkumer (2018) [9] examines the relationship between religion, nationalism, and identity among the

Nagas. He argues that the encounter between Christianity and indigenous traditions has produced a distinctive form of Naga cultural identity that continues to evolve in response to political and social changes.

Dolly Kikon (2019) [8] focuses on the everyday experiences of indigenous communities in Northeast India, particularly in relation to resource extraction, militarisation, and state power. Her work demonstrates how issues of land, identity, and political marginalisation shape the lived experiences of Naga communities.

Temsula Ao (1999, 2005) highlights the importance of oral traditions and storytelling in preserving Naga historical memory and cultural identity. Through literature and folklore, Naga communities transmit collective memories of their past and reinforce cultural values across generations.

B. Datta-Ray (2017) [3] analyses the philosophical and political dimensions of Naga nationalism, arguing that the political aspirations of the Nagas are rooted in their historical experience of autonomy and self-governance.

Together, these scholarly perspectives reveal that Naga indigeneity is not solely a political concept but a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by cultural, historical, and social processes.

Anthropological Foundations of Naga Indigeneity

Village Republics and Indigenous Governance

Traditional Naga societies were organised around autonomous village republics. Each village functioned as an independent political unit responsible for managing its own resources, resolving disputes, and defending its territory.

According to Hutton (1921) [7], village councils composed of elders or respected community members played a central role in decision-making processes. Decisions were typically reached through consensus rather than coercion, reflecting a participatory form of governance.

Mills (1926) [11] observed that although leadership structures varied among different Naga tribes, most communities emphasised egalitarian principles and collective responsibility.

Elwin (1961) [4] described these systems as examples of indigenous democratic governance that predated modern political institutions.

Kinship and Clan Systems

Kinship networks form the foundation of Naga social organisation. Each tribe is divided into clans that regulate marriage alliances, inheritance patterns, and social obligations.

Clan affiliation plays an important role in shaping individual identity and maintaining social cohesion within communities. Through kinship ties, Naga societies establish networks of cooperation that extend beyond individual villages.

Temsula Ao (1999) notes that oral narratives often emphasise ancestral origins and clan relationships, reinforcing the importance of kinship in the cultural consciousness of the Nagas.

Land and Territorial Identity

Land occupies a central place in Naga cultural and political identity. Traditional systems of land ownership are largely communal, with village communities exercising collective control over agricultural fields, forests, and hunting territories.

Dolly Kikon (2019) [8] argues that indigenous relationships with land continue to influence contemporary political debates surrounding territorial rights and resource governance in Northeast India.

For the Nagas, land is not merely an economic asset but a symbol of ancestral heritage and collective identity.

Cultural Institutions and Indigenous Knowledge

Traditional Naga institutions such as the *morung*, or youth dormitory, played a significant role in transmitting cultural knowledge and social values.

The *morung* served as a centre for education, training, and cultural transmission. Young members of the community learned about warfare, craftsmanship, folklore, and social responsibilities within this institution.

Arkotong Longkumer (2018) [9] suggests that although such institutions have declined in modern times, their legacy continues to influence contemporary Naga cultural identity.

Similarly, festivals and rituals serve as important mechanisms for reinforcing communal solidarity and preserving cultural traditions.

Colonial Encounters and the Transformation of Naga Society

The nineteenth century witnessed the gradual expansion of British colonial power into the Naga Hills. Following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, British authorities sought to establish political control over the region in order to secure trade routes and maintain regional stability.

Sanjoy Hazarika (1994) [6] notes that colonial expeditions into the Naga Hills encountered significant resistance from local communities. Despite these challenges, the British eventually established administrative control and created the Naga Hills District in 1866.

Colonial policies introduced new administrative structures and legal systems that reshaped traditional governance institutions.

At the same time, colonial ethnographers documented Naga customs and traditions, contributing to the development of anthropological knowledge about the region.

Missionary Influence and Cultural Transformation

The arrival of American Baptist missionaries in the late nineteenth century brought significant changes to Naga society. Through educational institutions and churches, missionaries introduced literacy, Western education, and Christianity.

Over time, Christianity became the dominant religion among the Nagas, replacing many indigenous religious practices. However, as Longkumer (2018) [9] observes, the interaction between Christianity and indigenous traditions produced a distinctive form of Naga Christianity that incorporates local cultural elements.

While missionary activity contributed to social transformation and modernisation, it also resulted in the decline of certain traditional cultural practices.

Emergence of Naga Political Consciousness

The early twentieth century marked the emergence of organised political consciousness among the Nagas. The formation of the Naga Club in 1918 represented an important step toward collective political articulation.

In 1929, the Naga Club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission requesting that the Nagas be allowed to

determine their own political future after the departure of the British.

B. Datta-Ray (2017) [3] argues that this memorandum represented a crucial moment in the development of Naga nationalism and political identity.

Postcolonial State Formation and the Creation of Nagaland

Following India's independence in 1947, negotiations between Naga leaders and the Government of India produced significant political tensions.

The eventual creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963, along with the constitutional provisions of Article 371A, recognised certain aspects of Naga customary law and land ownership.

However, as Hazarika (1994) [6] points out, the creation of Nagaland did not fully resolve the political aspirations of many Naga groups.

Fragmentation and Contemporary Challenges

The division of Naga-inhabited territories across multiple administrative states remains a central concern in contemporary political discourse.

Arkotong Longkumer (2018) [9] emphasises that identity movements in Northeast India are closely linked to questions of territory, culture, and political representation.

Meanwhile, Dolly Kikon (2019) [8] highlights the ways in which modern economic and political developments—such as resource extraction and militarisation—continue to shape the lived experiences of indigenous communities in the region.

Theoretical Perspectives on Indigeneity and the Naga Claim to Ancestral Territory

The concept of indigeneity has emerged as an important analytical framework in anthropology, political science, and indigenous studies for understanding the historical rights and identities of indigenous peoples. Indigeneity generally refers to communities that possess long-standing historical continuity with pre-colonial societies, maintain distinct cultural institutions, and assert collective rights over ancestral lands and self-governance (Smith, 2012; Subba & Karlsson, 2006) [13, 14]. From this perspective, indigeneity is not merely an ethnic label but a political and cultural claim grounded in historical occupation, collective memory, and indigenous systems of governance. Applying this theoretical framework to the Naga context provides a deeper understanding of why many Naga intellectuals and political leaders argue that Naga territory historically belongs to the Nagas themselves rather than to the modern states of India or Myanmar.

Historically, the Naga homeland existed as a network of autonomous village republics that exercised effective control over their territories long before the emergence of colonial and postcolonial state boundaries. Anthropological records demonstrate that Naga communities maintained clearly defined territorial boundaries, regulated through customary laws and defended collectively by the village community (Hutton, 1921; Mills, 1926) [7, 11]. Land was held communally and was deeply connected to clan identity, agricultural practices, and ritual life. The authority to manage forests, fields, and hunting grounds rested entirely within the village polity, reflecting a form of indigenous sovereignty rooted in customary governance systems.

From a historical perspective, the incorporation of Naga territories into colonial administrative structures occurred relatively late and largely through military expeditions rather than voluntary political integration. Following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, British colonial authorities gradually expanded their influence into the Naga Hills primarily for strategic and administrative purposes, particularly to secure trade routes between Assam and Burma (Hazarika, 1994) [6]. However, colonial administrators themselves often recognised the distinct status of the hill tribes and maintained a degree of political separation through policies such as the "Excluded Areas" and the Inner Line Regulation. These policies acknowledged that the hill regions, including the Naga Hills, possessed social and political systems distinct from the plains of British India.

Anthropologically, the Nagas possess cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics that differentiate them from the dominant populations of both India and Myanmar. Naga societies belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic family and share historical connections with other upland communities of the eastern Himalayan and Southeast Asian regions (Shimray, 2005) [12]. Their social organisation, kinship systems, customary laws, and ritual practices evolved independently of the classical civilisational traditions that shaped much of South Asia. Scholars have therefore argued that Naga identity should be understood within the broader cultural sphere of the eastern Himalayan uplands rather than within the historical framework of the Indian subcontinent (Longkumer, 2018) [9].

Politically, the assertion that Naga territory does not historically belong to India or Burma is closely tied to the process of colonial boundary-making. The modern international border between India and Myanmar was created by colonial administrative decisions that divided contiguous Naga-inhabited areas without the consent of local communities. As a result, Naga territories that historically formed a continuous cultural and political landscape were fragmented across two nation-states (Vashum, 2005) [15]. This fragmentation disrupted traditional networks of kinship, trade, and cultural interaction that had existed for centuries.

The emergence of Naga political consciousness in the early twentieth century reflects an awareness of these historical realities. The memorandum submitted by the Naga Club to the Simon Commission in 1929 clearly expressed the desire of the Nagas to determine their own political future following the departure of the British, emphasising that the Nagas had never been part of the political systems of the Indian plains (Datta-Ray, 2017) [3]. This assertion represented an early articulation of indigenous political identity grounded in historical autonomy and territorial rights.

From the theoretical standpoint of indigeneity, therefore, the Naga claim to ancestral territory is supported by three interrelated dimensions: historical continuity of occupation, the existence of distinct cultural and political institutions, and the experience of colonial incorporation without prior political integration. Historical, political, and anthropological perspectives collectively demonstrate that Naga territories were historically governed by indigenous institutions and were later incorporated into modern states through colonial processes rather than through organic political development. Recognising these historical realities

is essential for understanding contemporary debates concerning Naga self-determination and the enduring significance of indigeneity in Naga political thought.

Conclusion

The polity of Naga indigeneity and identity is rooted in a complex historical trajectory shaped by autonomous governance, cultural distinctiveness, and a deeply embedded relationship with land and kinship systems. As discussed throughout this article, Naga society historically evolved outside the socio-political structures that characterised the Indian subcontinent. The Nagas developed independent village republics governed by customary laws, communal land ownership, and participatory decision-making systems long before the expansion of colonial rule into the Naga Hills. These indigenous institutions demonstrate that Naga political organisation was neither derivative of Indian political traditions nor integrated into pre-colonial Indian polities (Hutton, 1921; Mills, 1926) [7, 11]. Rather, the Naga political order represented a distinct form of indigenous governance that formed the foundation of Naga identity and collective consciousness.

Anthropological scholarship has consistently highlighted the autonomous nature of Naga socio-political institutions. Each village functioned as a sovereign entity responsible for managing its territory, regulating social relations, and defending its boundaries. Decisions were generally made through consensus within village councils composed of elders or respected community members. Such systems reflected egalitarian and participatory political structures rather than hierarchical state formations commonly associated with South Asian kingdoms and empires (Elwin, 1961) [4]. This tradition of localised self-governance contributed to the emergence of a political worldview centred on autonomy and self-determination, which continues to influence contemporary Naga political aspirations.

Historical migration patterns further reinforce the distinctiveness of Naga identity. Linguistic and anthropological evidence suggests that the ancestors of the Naga tribes belong to the broader Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic family that migrated into the hill regions of Northeast India from East and Southeast Asia over several centuries. Many scholars trace these migratory movements through the eastern Himalayan corridors and the Patkai mountain ranges connecting present-day Myanmar, Yunnan in China, and the upland regions of Southeast Asia (Shimray, 2005; Vashum, 2005) [12, 15]. These migration routes differ significantly from the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian population movements that shaped much of the Indian subcontinent. Consequently, the Nagas developed cultural traditions, languages, and social institutions that are more closely aligned with other Tibeto-Burman communities of the eastern Himalayan region than with the historical civilisations of mainland India.

The linguistic diversity of the Nagas also supports the argument for their unique ethnocultural identity. Naga languages belong primarily to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, which differs fundamentally from the Indo-European and Dravidian language families dominant in India. These linguistic differences reflect deeper historical and cultural distinctions that reinforce the argument that the Nagas constitute a separate ethnolinguistic civilisation within the broader Asian context (Eriksen, 2010; Shimray, 2005) [5, 12].

In addition to linguistic and historical differences, the cultural practices and social institutions of Naga communities further highlight their distinct identity. Traditional institutions such as the *morung*, clan-based kinship networks, communal land ownership, and elaborate ritual and festival systems illustrate a worldview centred on communal solidarity and ancestral heritage. Oral traditions, myths of origin, and customary laws preserve collective memories of migration, settlement, and inter-village relations, reinforcing the sense of belonging to a shared historical community (Ao, 1999) [1]. These cultural foundations demonstrate that Naga identity is not merely a political construct but a lived social reality transmitted across generations through indigenous knowledge systems.

From a political perspective, the articulation of Naga nationalism and the demand for sovereignty must be understood within this broader historical and anthropological framework. The emergence of organised political consciousness in the early twentieth century—particularly through institutions such as the Naga Club—represented a continuation of the longstanding tradition of local autonomy rather than the creation of a new political ideology. The memorandum submitted by the Naga Club to the Simon Commission in 1929 clearly expressed the desire of the Nagas to determine their own political future following the withdrawal of British colonial rule (Datta-Ray, 2017; Hazarika, 1994) [3, 6]. This political position reflected the perception that the Nagas had historically existed outside the administrative and cultural framework of the Indian subcontinent.

Postcolonial developments further complicated the relationship between the Nagas and the Indian state. While the creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 and the constitutional safeguards under Article 371A recognised certain aspects of Naga customary law and land ownership, these measures did not fully address the aspirations of many Naga communities for political self-determination (Hazarika, 1994) [6]. Contemporary debates surrounding Naga sovereignty therefore continue to be shaped by historical memories of autonomy, colonial boundary-making, and the fragmentation of Naga territories across multiple administrative regions.

Anthropological perspectives emphasise that indigeneity involves more than legal recognition; it encompasses the preservation of cultural heritage, traditional knowledge systems, and territorial relationships. Scholars such as Dolly Kikon (2019) and Arkotong Longkumer (2018) [8, 9] demonstrate how issues of land, identity, religion, and political representation remain central to the lived experiences of Naga communities. These studies reveal that the Naga struggle for recognition is closely tied to the defence of indigenous institutions and the protection of ancestral lands from external political and economic pressures.

The polity of Naga indigeneity and identity is sustained by a combination of historical autonomy, distinct migration histories, unique linguistic and cultural traditions, and deeply rooted systems of indigenous governance. Historical, political, and anthropological perspectives collectively support the argument that the Nagas represent a distinct indigenous people with a political tradition that predates colonial and postcolonial state formations. Recognising this historical and cultural distinctiveness is essential for understanding the continuing debates surrounding Naga

sovereignty and self-determination. The preservation of Naga indigeneity ultimately depends on acknowledging the legitimacy of indigenous political institutions, protecting communal land systems, and respecting the cultural heritage that has sustained Naga identity across centuries.

As the Nagas continue to negotiate their place within modern political structures, their cultural traditions and indigenous institutions remain essential foundations for the preservation of their collective identity.

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