

A Celebration of Indigenous Tradition: Hornbill Festival and Naga Identity

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ABSTRACT

Nagaland, a state in Northeast India, is home to diverse indigenous tribes with their customs, festivals and lifestyles. In this region, the rich Naga heritage is vividly displayed through the Hornbill Festival. The Hornbill Festival is one of Nagaland's cultural and tourist attractions, showcasing its unique customs. The Hornbill Festival is a renowned celebration of the Naga people's traditions in the region. The festival represents more than tourists visiting—it highlights how the Naga people stay connected to their culture and traditions. Over the years, it has become a place where people preserve their traditional practices, narrate their experiences, play and sing folk music, dance, and teach craft-making skills, passing them on to one another and to the younger generation. It shows how the festival brings together tradition and modernity, giving young Nagas a chance to understand their past while integrating into the contemporary world. This paper will discuss the importance of the Hornbill Festival, emphasizing its role in maintaining Naga cultural identity in the northeast. The objective of the paper is to examine how the Hornbill Festival helps preserve the Naga's cultural heritage. Using the observation method, the focus interview method and secondary data, the paper analyses this cultural event. Furthermore, it investigates the Hornbill Festival as a means of intergenerational knowledge exchange and the retention of traditional practices.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Naga tribes, Hornbill Festival, Indigenous culture, Cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

Nagaland is a state located in the northeastern region of India, a land of landscapes and vibrant cultures. To the north, it shares a boundary with Arunachal Pradesh, to the west with Assam, to the south with Manipur and to the east with Myanmar. “On December 1, 1963, Nagaland became the 16th state of the Indian Union”¹. The state has 17th official Naga tribes and many sub-tribes, each with its own unique customs, dialects, attire, rituals and even festivals. The agrarian culture of the Naga people is closely connected to Naga festivals that commemorate the arrival of new seasons and the harvest cycle. “But beyond agriculture, these celebrations are vital social spaces where communities gather to reinforce relationships, perform age-old traditions and express their shared identity”².

Naga culture is rich and diverse. There are many Naga tribes, each with its own language, customs and way of life. Culture is part of their daily life—evident in how Nagas work, eat, and live together. Community and social life are very important among the Nagas. People live in villages where everyone supports each other. Decisions are often made together and elders are respected for their knowledge and experience. The Nagas are known for their bravery and strong warrior history. Earlier, Naga practiced headhunting, which was connected to their beliefs and social status. Bringing back an enemy's head was seen as a sign of courage and strength and it could increase a person's respect in the community. In some tribes, it was also believed to bring prosperity, protect the

¹ Official state portal of Nagaland available at <https://nagaland.gov.in/pages/nagaland-profile>

² Pongen A “Tourist's Socio-Demographic Characters and Satisfaction Level with Hornbill Festival Experience, Nagaland” (2021) p.455

village, or ensure a good harvest. For instance, among the Konyak Nagas, warriors who successfully took part in headhunting were given special recognition. They could wear specific tattoos, ornaments, or headgear that showed their achievements. This made their status higher in society and marked them as brave individuals. This practice has eventually stopped. “However, the rituals associated with it have not been completely abandoned”³. Now, modern Naga society stays in harmony and is more focused on education, development and cultural preservation. Naga still remember their past as part of their history. During festivals like the Hornbill Festival, people wear traditional warrior attire or perform dances that showcase their warrior heritage.

In Naga culture, agriculture plays a major role in their lives. Practices like shifting cultivation (jhum cultivation) are common and many festivals are linked to farming activities such as sowing and harvesting. These agricultural cycles influence food habits, rituals and celebrations, showing how closely culture is tied to nature. The Naga people are also known for their traditional skills. They build houses using bamboo and wood. Handicrafts such as weaving, wood carving and basket making are important skills. Shawls, ornaments and tools often carry cultural meanings and can signify identity, status or achievement. Religion and belief systems have also shaped Naga traditions. Earlier, many Naga tribes followed animistic beliefs, in which nature and spirits were integral to life. In earlier times, many Naga tribes followed their own traditional belief systems. These beliefs were closely connected to nature. People believed that natural elements like forests, rivers, mountains and the sky had spirits. Nagas also believed in ancestral spirits and performed rituals and ceremonies to maintain harmony with nature and ensure good harvests, health and protection. With the arrival of Christian missionaries, many Nagas gradually converted to Christianity. Today, Christianity is the main religion among the Nagas and the church domain plays an important role in their society. Christianity is widely practiced, but many traditional values and customs continue to exist alongside it. This change did not completely remove older traditions. Many cultural practices have continued in everyday life. Traditional food habits, preservation methods, dress, music, and dance are still practiced and valued. Respect for elders, community cooperation and customary laws also remain strong. While religious beliefs may have changed, cultural practices and lifestyle have not completely disappeared. It is not a structural change but a positional change taking place among the Naga. Instead, they exist alongside Christianity, showing how the Naga people have adapted while still upholding their cultural identity. Some rituals once performed for religious reasons are no longer practiced in the same way. Since most people follow Christianity, they may not believe in the old spiritual meanings. However, these rituals are still kept as cultural practices because they are part of their history and cultural identity. Therefore, the present Naga society shows a blend of change and continuity. Christianity shapes their religious life, but traditional customs continue to influence their identity, social life and connection to their heritage.

Festivals play a very important role in Naga life and culture. Festivals bring people together as a community. During the festival, families, friends and people from different tribes gather to celebrate, share and participate in activities. This creates a feeling of unity and belonging. At the same time, festivals help keep culture alive. Younger generations learn about their traditions by taking part in these celebrations. In this way, festivals are not only for celebration but also important ways of preserving and passing on Naga culture. During festivals, people dress in traditional clothing that reflects their identity and cultural tradition. They perform dances and sing songs passed down by elders and these performances often tell stories about their history and beliefs. Special dishes are also prepared, reflecting their traditional cooking methods and local ingredients. Among Naga indigenous celebrations, the Hornbill Festival stands out as the most significant event. The Hornbill Festival is often called the Festival of Festivals. It began as a festival that brings together the diverse cultural expressions of Nagaland's tribes on a single platform. It is normally celebrated every year from the 1st to the 10th of December in the heritage village Kisama, located in the capital city of Kohima. The Government of Nagaland introduced the festival in 2000 with the vision of promoting cultural tourism and fostering inter-tribal harmony, thereby preserving Naga culture in a modernizing world.

The Naga people's traditional cuisine and cultural feasts form the centerpiece of the Hornbill Festival. These communal meals are important food practices that honor the ancestors' cuisine, strengthen kinship, and express gratitude. Food is a medium of unity in itself and as the festival unfolds, it becomes an empowering resource for community building, narrative and cultural preservation. Visitors and tourists experience the region's diverse

³ <https://www.naturesafariindia.com/konyak-tribe-the-last-headhunters-of-nagaland>. Retrieved on 19.04.2026

cuisine through delicacies prepared by each tribe, reflecting their origins. The festival's food and community kitchens are areas where traditional Naga cuisine is cooked and served in the most authentic form. Rice is the staple diet, and it is served with wild herbs, bamboo shoots, smoked meat, and spicy local chili. Signature dishes—such as smoked pork with *Axone* (fermented soybeans), bamboo shoot curry and *Anishi* (fermented yam leaves)—reflect old-age cuisine and practices. Traditional methods like smoking, sun-drying and fermentation are not just ways of preparing food but also part of the knowledge passed down through generations. Preservation methods make it possible to keep food for longer periods, allowing it to be used especially during seasons when fresh vegetables are not easily available. In this way, they help ensure food security. These practices are also closely linked to culture and tradition and they are passed down from one generation to another. Traditional food preservation, therefore, is not only about storing food but also about maintaining cultural identity and continuing knowledge from the past. These practices show how closely the Naga people live with nature and how they use available resources wisely to meet their needs.

Research Problem:

This research examines how rapid modernization is reshaping or changing traditional cultures and knowledge systems. New technologies, education, city lifestyle and global trends are spreading quickly. These changes offer growth and new opportunities, but they also create problems for traditional cultures. Many indigenous communities are gradually losing their traditional knowledge, including customs, foodways, languages and rituals. Traditional knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next through daily activities such as farming, cooking, storytelling, festivals and community events. When these traditions fade, the knowledge tied to them can be lost. This can weaken cultural identity over time. In this context, the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland plays an important role. It offers a chance to see and learn about traditional culture in one place. During the festival, various Naga tribes gather to share their unique traditions, including folk dances, songs, traditional clothing, crafts and food. These traditions are not just displayed but performed and experienced by everyone. For this reason, the Hornbill Festival is often called a living museum. Visitors can watch how traditions are carried out, how food is prepared and how rituals take place. This helps keep cultural knowledge alive and relevant today. Studying the Hornbill Festival helps to understand both how traditional culture is preserved and how it changes with modernization. In an era of rapid modernization, the Hornbill Festival offers a unique lens for studying how cultural events can be viewed as a living museum of the past.

METHODOLOGY

For this paper, both primary and secondary data have been used to provide a comprehensive analysis of “A Celebration of Indigenous Tradition: Hornbill Festival and Naga Identity”. The study employs qualitative methods, including observation and focus interviews with festival participants and visitors, as primary data sources. Secondary information is obtained from relevant literature, such as books, journal articles, local magazines, academic journals, cultural reports, and internet-based sources.

Historical and Cultural Background of the Naga

The Nagas are an ethnic group in the Northeast of India, with a rich culture and traditions, a warrior heritage, and a strong sense of communal attachment. Nagaland, officially recognized as the sixteenth state of India in 1963, is home to 17 major tribes: Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Dimasa Kachari, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Kuki, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Sumi, Tikhir, Yimkhiong and Zeliang, and with many sub-tribes and characterized by their differing dialects, dress, folklore and ceremonial ways.

The Hornbill Festival: Origins and Meaning

Before the establishment of the Hornbill Festival in 2000, the diverse cultures of the Nagas had their own festivals, marking the seasons and agriculture and celebrating them independently. Festivals are closely connected to agriculture, with many significant events held during agricultural cycles, such as sowing and harvest periods. These were not only social events but also all-round cultural events comprising rituals, music, dance, games and communal feasts, expressing each tribe's cultural identity and way of life.

In 2000, the Government of Nagaland launched the Hornbill Festival to unite all Naga tribes on a single platform to celebrate their culture, traditions and heritage. Earlier, festivals were held separately by each Naga tribe, but with the establishment of the Hornbill Festival, a shared space emerged where all individual cultures could be expressed simultaneously. Initially, the Hornbill Festival was held at *Khouchiezie* (the Kohima local ground) and lasted 5 days. It continued to be held at Kohima Local Ground until 2002 and was shifted to the present location at Kisama Heritage Village in 2003. During this time, the Hornbill Festival was extended to 7 days, and as interest and participation grew, it was later extended to 10 days. The dates have a specific objective: December 1 is Nagaland Day of Statehood, the day the state was created in 1963, and it is a celebration of the unity among the Naga people and a way to honor their rich culture.

The hornbill, a majestic creature with deep significance in Naga folklore, inspires the festival's name. The bird is considered a symbol of bravery, beauty, and cultural pride. "The Hornbill is elucidated in folklore, dances and songs of the Naga tribes. It is also a common practice of almost all Naga tribes to adorn themselves with the feathers of the hornbill on their ceremonial attire and headgear."⁴ Its image appears frequently in tribal dances, ceremonial headdresses, and traditional jewellery across many Naga communities. The hornbill stands for togetherness among people and respect for nature, which are both important parts of Naga life.

Hornbill Festival as a Cultural Identity

The Hornbill Festival began in 2000 and is the biggest cultural event in Nagaland, often referred as the "Festival of Festivals." It brings together all the tribes of Nagaland to share their songs, dances, food, games and traditional art. Earlier, each tribe celebrated its own festival, such as *Sekrenyi* for the Angami, *Moatsu* for the Ao, *Aoling* for the Konyak and *Tuluni* for the Sumi. The Hornbill Festival unites these tribes in one event, giving them a shared cultural identity as Nagas. For people in Nagaland, the festival is more than just entertainment. It is a way to express their identity. Through traditional dances, folk songs, stories and crafts, the festival celebrates its history and values. It is especially important for young Nagas living in cities or outside the state, as it helps them reconnect with their roots and learn about their traditions. The festival fosters a sense of togetherness and belonging, strengthening the idea of a shared Naga identity. At the same time, the Hornbill Festival blends tradition with modern life. It includes rock concerts, fashion shows and art exhibitions, as well as indigenous games, log drumming and folk performances. This mix shows that Naga culture can keep its traditions while also adapting to new change.

Nagaland festivals reflect the strong ties of the people to nature, people and tradition. While tribal festivals were once celebrated separately in their respective villages, the introduction of the Hornbill Festival has led to a cultural unification of their identity. It has become a space where tradition meets modernity, where culture is preserved even as it is introduced to the global stage. It provides young people with an opportunity to reconnect with their roots and the community with an opportunity to reinforce its cohesion amid the numerous tribes of Nagaland. Through this, the Hornbill Festival not only became a celebration of culture but also a living symbol of Naga pride, resilience and identity in the modern world.

Tradition Meets Modernity

The Hornbill Festival is an example of how tradition and modernity coexist in harmony. Although the festival is rooted in the age-old traditions of the Naga tribes, especially in dance, folk songs, rituals and indigenous games, it has been evolving to embrace new cultural aspects in the arts. Today's rock concerts, fashion shows, photography contests, film screenings and art exhibitions are part of the event.

This blending of the old and the new is not only for entertainment; it represents a way of preserving cultural identity. Hornbill Festival ensures that younger generations of Nagas can view their culture as a vibrant tradition that is still practiced today. For instance, the Hornbill International Rock Festival attracts bands and music enthusiasts from all around the world, offering a platform where contemporary music collides with log-drum music performed by the tribes. Similarly, Naga designers showcasing traditional patterns in modern fashion

⁴ <https://www.morungexpress.com/from-tourism-to-cultural-revival-25-years-of-the-hornbill-festival> Last retrieved on 21/5/2026

shows prove that indigenous art can adapt to new aesthetics without losing its authenticity. These contemporary activities render the Hornbill festival more appealing and captivating to tourists and other visitors. People come to witness rock concerts, fashion shows and art exhibitions. Still, they can learn about the traditional aspects of Naga culture through dances, folk music, local food and craft displays. This combination enables visitors to gain a better perspective on the Naga way of life and provides opportunities for cultural exchange among different communities. The festival also benefits the local economy. Tourists contribute to the local economy through food, crafts and lodging, providing livelihoods for artisans and performers and even benefiting local small business owners. Through this, the festival not only conserves and promotes Naga culture but also supports the livelihoods of those who keep it alive. The Hornbill Festival demonstrates that traditional and contemporary lives can coexist, and that culture should not be forgotten, but remain important to today's generation.

Cultural Significance in Preserving Naga Identity

The Hornbill Festival is held every year in December, beginning on the 1st and continuing until the 10th, in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland. It unites different Naga tribes; each tribe possesses its own customs, traditions and dialects. The main aim of the festival is to enhance community love and cultural exchange between the different Naga communities. It also offers tourists the chance to observe and learn about Naga art, music, dance and traditional crafts. For many Naga people and youth, particularly those who have moved out of their native villages, the festival offers a chance to reconnect with their roots. It is a time when stories are told not only with words but also with dance steps, with the carving of wood, with the weaving of cloth and the sharing of food around open fires.

As various tribes of Nagas converge on Kisama for the festival, it brings not only their cuisine and crafts but also their history. Every food has a narrative of place, the seasons required to make it and the people who served and crafted it. For example, smoked pork with *Axone* (fermented soybean) is not just a flavourful delicacy but a symbol of traditional preservation and community sharing. Sticky rice wrapped in leaves; meats made with fermented bamboo shoots have deep flavors and family traditions passed down through generations. Food preparation itself is communal. Elders, mostly women, take the lead in cooking and pass down these skills to younger family members. Lessons are learned around the firesides and in the kitchens: which herbs grow in the garden, how to smoke meat, how to tell when the seasons have changed by the flavor of the wild fruit. None of these is things taught in books-they are things you grow up with, hand down with love and a sense of responsibility.

Meanwhile, in the artisan stalls and craft demonstrations, skilled hands shape memory into material form. A woman who weaves a shawl weaves her identity into each thread using even patterns that could be used as a way of reflecting clans or myths of a tribe. A blacksmith creating a *Dao* (traditional machete) does not just produce a tool; he revives a practice that speaks to self-reliance, making things on your own, and craftsmanship. These experiences during the festival cultivate a powerful sense of belonging and continuity. For the youth, this is a moment to see where they come from and where they belong. For the elders, it is a moment to see their culture living on in younger hands and hearts. The cultural feast, in this sense, is as much about emotional nourishment as it is about food.

CONCLUSION

In today's world, where many indigenous traditions are being forgotten or diluted, the Hornbill Festival serves as a living resistance to keep heritage alive. It is not only a celebration but also a way to safeguard culture. It shows that tradition can adapt, evolve and still hold meaning for new generations. The festival remarkably holds on to its roots while embracing the present. Young Naga artists mix tribal hits with hip-hop, rock and digital media. Traditional patterns appear in tattoos and modern designs. These reinventions do not erode tradition but preserve it in ways meaningful to the younger generation today. The festival has become a way for people to connect and learn from each other. For many, the Hornbill Festival is their first real look at Naga culture. The festival reflects the Naga spirit and showcases its history. The Hornbill Festival is a living proof that heritage need not be confined to museums or textbooks. It can be danced, sung, tasted, woven and passed from hand to hand. The Hornbill Festival is more than a yearly event. It reminds everyone of the strength and beauty of Naga

culture. While festive and colorful, it primarily helps the Naga people remember who they are, where they come from, and how to keep their traditions alive. Traditional feasts, dances, music and crafts help the community stay connected to its roots. When older people teach young people to cook traditional meals, weave cloth, or join tribal dances, they pass on more than skills—they share values, stories, and identity. This intergenerational sharing keeps Naga culture alive and meaningful today. The Hornbill Festival is special because it not only looks back at the past but also looks to the future. Young artists and performers are finding new ways to share their culture by mixing traditional styles with modern ideas. As changes occur, the Hornbill Festival shows how a society can embrace new things while holding on to its traditions. It brings generations together and celebrates identity.

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