Identity and Globalization: A Naga Perspective

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Identity is a word loaded with meanings, evocative of multiple interpretations and in today’s context, implicated in a vociferous cry for assertion. The word means different things to different people at different times. It changes significance over the time-space continuum and either accrue or shed meanings all the time.

Assigning a common identity to the ethnic groups now collectively known as the Nagas, comprising of many different tribes, speaking many different languages and within a distinct linguistic group, many different dialects is problematic. For a Naga, identity is a many-layered concept. In order to understand the implications of identity in the wake of globalization in the Naga experience, the discussion will focus on some primary contexts of its conceptualization with certain specific examples from the Ao-Naga tribe.

Existential
The existential identity of the Nagas is immersed in mythical lore how they originated, the location of their origin and why they come to live at different places or inhabit the geographical area called Nagaland and outside the state in some places in the adjoining states. There is no concrete “historical” or material support for the myths of origin; however, these myths have been accepted by people as an inalienable principle of their tribal history. Each tribe with its distinct language, social customs and dress codes has continued to live as an identifiable ethnic entity within the group collectively known as the Nagas. The viability and continuance of this principle can be illustrated, for example, among the Ao-Naga tribe regarding the clan divisions and adherence to exogamy. According to their origin myth, three men and three women who belonged to three major clans emerged out of rocks at an ancient site called Lungterok. The myth goes on to say that the marriage among the six people took place with those from clans other than their own. The clan division as well as the practice of exogamous form of marriage among the Aos can be traced to the myth and is prevalent today. There are similar myths of origin in the lore of other Naga tribes, which have become the accepted oral history of the tribes as well as the principle of social ordering among them.

Locational
Within the tribe a Naga’s identity is deeply rooted in the village of his birth and residence. Being a citizen of a particular village is the most important aspect of a Naga’s existence because this identity is marked within a specified ethnic and linguistic space. The identity affiliated to a village draws attention to clan affinity, possession of ancestral and other properties in the form of land holdings, and underlines one’s responsibility to the community in the form of participating in community rituals, celebrations, and in the governance of the village polity. A Naga who is banished from his ancestral village for political, social or criminal offenses is like a person without a country. There can be no greater humiliation for a Naga than this fate that strips him of this symbolic identity and he is thus disaffiliated from his origin and tradition. At an inter-village level the antiquity and the size of a village lend a certain aura of superiority to a citizen of such a village. For example, a villager from Changki, when addressing a gathering of village representatives of the Aos, begins his speech by introducing himself, as “I am Changki, the father of thirty villages.” By this he means that he can claim seniority over others by virtue of the antiquity of his village. In a culture that respects age, such an introduction immediately enhances the speaker’s identity among his peers. On the whole, the combination of ethnicity and territory gives a Naga the most dynamic definition of his identity.

Artefactual
Art and its various forms never existed in the Naga context for its own sake. Whatever art forms identified with or assigned to the “Naga” today has evolved from utility items. When houses, village gates, textiles, tattoos and other household items became personalized through extra ornamentation or addition of colours or symbols, the ordinary artefacts began to acquire new significance and became a new set of identifiers within a local context. In men’s wear the most famous example among the Aos is the “Mangkotepsu” or “Tsungkotepsu” shawl, which traditionally could be worn only by men who had taken heads in warfare or given feasts of merit. Such shawls therefore would automatically be identified with persons of high status in society. Such identity markers abound in all the Naga tribes. Again, the structures and decorations or the lack therein on houses also evince status difference within a given community.
The notion of identity among the Nagas in relation to the three main contexts is indivisible from the community to which they belong. It is this sense of belonging within these parameters of any given group that validates their individual identities.

Subsumption of Identities
When it comes to being identified, for example, as an Ao, the locational identity as a member of a particular village is blurred when it merges into the broader identity of the tribe or group. But at this stage, within the group called Ao, the clan divisions remain distinct cutting across village boundaries. The process of subsumption which begins at this stage continues its spiral ascent as it sweeps aside the local identities of being an Ao, Angami or Sema etc. when it culminates at the apex point of being identified as a Naga. While the tribal identity is not altogether erased, s/he has to assume a different persona of belonging to a greater whole where all the contextual parameters of her/his identity become irrelevant. However, even across tribal boundaries certain clan affinities have remained recognizable and are respected. So if an inter-tribal marriage is being contemplated, care is taken to avoid an incestuous marriage between couples belonging to the same clan.

The progress of an identity from this point towards a national one blurs all existing parameters and offers a Naga an amorphous identity based solely on a geographical affinity of residing within the boundaries of the sovereign state of India, which is coincidental. The definitions of this identity are derived from political and economic dependencies rather than any cultural, traditional or linguistic affinities. The Indian identity therefore becomes a total disclaimer of all that a Naga has conceived of himself to be through generations. His being a Naga, and a citizen of India has to be readjusted in that his existential moorings have to be reinvented in a new context. In the absence of commonalities there can be no assimilation and without assimilation there can be no hybridization. Of necessity it then becomes a question of subsumption of lesser by the stronger force. In the Naga context, the acceptance of the new identity is a matter of political expediency and in the process of accommodating this duality; the people are inexorably pulled towards the forces of globalization.

Globalization
This purely economic theory being peddled to supposedly bring in unity and prosperity to the people will have to be assessed on the cost that it will extract from its adherents. The impact of globalization will be most felt in the area of indigenous cultural products because to meet global standards, the products will have to be modified, re-designed and at times even be distorted. The identities embodied in cultural products will thus be eliminated for greater marketability. For example, the famous Ao-Naga shawl called “Mangkotepsu” is a male attire but these days one sees that jackets made out of it have become unisexual and are sold at tourist spots with its lore and history totally ignored. Other handicrafts, dance forms are also being manipulated to ‘fit’ into the required mould. This process of de-identifying native cultures and their products for the sake of global recognition and economic expediency will inevitably lead to a hybridization of identities in cultural artefacts.

Hybridization implies the subsumption of original features that results in a new product. This inverse process of de-identification begins from the extrinsic domain of visible ethnic identifiers. But this cannot be dismissed as an isolated phenomenon because the extrinsic markers are an extension of the intrinsic identities. The loss of the visible distinctions in cultural products will eventually deplete much of the lore and history of the people so that a time will come when the product will account for writing a “de-humanized” history for the people.

The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity.