

Representation, resistance and cultural hybridity of the *Naga* Indigenous people in India

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Representation
Resistance
Hybridity
Third space
Indigeneity
Naga
India

ABSTRACT

Governments have been criticized for being major actors in creating Indigenous identities. This study investigates the Indian Government's official touristic representations of the *Naga* Indigenous people and how the *Nagas* endeavor to develop their own self-representations. Findings reveal that the Indian Government represents the *Nagas* as timeless which rekindles internal colonialism. Conversely, the *Nagas* articulate cultural resistance towards the hegemonic Indian discourses thus seeking for social justice. They express *Naga* discourse through their religion (Christianity) to emphasize on modernity and enhance collective identity, but most importantly to oppose the Hindu and Muslim religions in mainland India. This study intends to make a theoretical contribution to tourism literature by revealing the hybridized nature of *Naga* identity, which contests established categorizations of culture and identity through 'third spaces'.

1. Introduction

"If the images of aboriginality do not actually reflect us, are not actually about us, what purpose have they served for those who constructed and adopted them? The definitions have served to meet the various and changing interests and aspirations of those who constructed them, the colonizing or 'modern' state"

(Dodson, 1994, p. 7).

"Official nationalism has a performative as well as a pedagogical function, in which the performative mode displays the unity and singularity of the nation, whereas the pedagogical mode reckons with the fact that all citizens cannot be treated equally because all are not 'proper' citizens"

(Chatterjee, 1993, p. 279).

Definitions of ethnicity and national identity are always multifaceted and problematic; however there is general agreement that they are "constructed" (Calhoun, 1998; Gellner, 1983). Anderson (1991, p. 7) in his influential study *Imagined Communities* defined the nation as an "imagined political community... it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship." Recently, the political aspects of ethnicity and nationalism have received significant attention from social scientists (Eriksen,

2002). Several authors have argued that governments are major actors in creating ethnic identities, and representations of minorities are dominated by the majorities (Baranovitch, 2001; Cohen, 1993, 2001; Leong, 1989; Williams, 1994; Wood, 1997). For example, in China the government not only controls how minority identities are defined and publicly represented (Sofield & Li, 2007) but also it influences even the perceptions and practices of some minorities regarding their own ethnic identity (Diamond, 1995; Harrell, 1990). As Gladney (1994) argued, the Chinese government has engaged in a 'commodified oriental orientalism' which is both a demonstration of power as well as a product of China's steady rise as a nation state. In government-produced tourism promotion, "The promotional literature of National Tourism Boards is nothing but a variation of the narratives that in the same countries articulate hegemonic versions of history, culture and identity" (Peleggi, 1996, p. 441). It is important to study the Indigenous peoples' self-representations as contemporary cultures form "new ethnicities" (Hall, 1996a, 1996b, 1997) and reflect their collective senses of identity (Edensor, 2002). Moreover, as Hechter (1975), in his book *Internal Colonialism* while arguing about the English exploitation of the Celtic peoples of the British Isles (the Welsh, Irish, and Scots) commented that those individuals and groups who have been disadvantaged by direct rule will tend to resist it by creating *peripheral nationalism*. Hechter's analysis is important to prompt further studies in investigating the nature of regional inequalities not only in the British Isles but also in other polities.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2017.10.008>

Received 26 May 2016; Received in revised form 17 October 2017; Accepted 24 October 2017
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In the context of India, scholars of nationalism, while discussing the everyday social and political life, always refer to the violence that occurred in the partition of colonial India into the nation-states of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the Hindu-Muslim violence. What they seldom talk about is the marginalization of the “tribal” people in India, like the *Nagas*. As Baruah (2003, p. 1) lamented, “one of the world’s oldest continuing armed conflicts is also one of the least known: the conflict between the Indian government and the *Nagas*.” In the political dialect of India today, the very term “North East” that comprises of seven states (i.e., Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) is a region characterized by ethno-political movements. As *Naga* scholar Kikon (2005a, 2005b), p. 2833 opined, “This region does not find itself within the narrative and memory of the nation, yet continues to occupy a central position regarding the territorial integrity of India.” Out of these seven states, Nagaland creates a serious threat as it has an ongoing demand for a separate ‘homeland,’ which the *Nagas* (the people of Nagaland) call “*Nagalim*.” However, the Indian Government has rejected the *Naga* demand as “the very demand of such states, let alone their formation, challenges the ‘ideological basis’ of the Indian government” (Das, 2004, p. 271) (Fig. 1).

“A stereotype image of the *Nagas* has been deliberately built up over the years as head-hunters, dog eaters, promiscuous and primitive... this is being slowly and systematically built up by the Indian Government” (Dutta, Agnes, & Adarkar, 1996, p. 136). For example, if any person in mainland India (part of the country other than the seven North East states) is asked what they mean by the term “*Naga*,” the answer would certainly be: “tribals.” The touristic representation of Nagaland by the Indian Government is also unique. One article in the Indian Tourism Ministry’s *Newsletter* (2014, p. 2) portrayed North East India as: “*They’re untamed and unexplored; they’re the states of Northeast India. Nagaland is a state that presents the most exotic tribal culture in the country*” and “*Nagaland is a unique symbiosis of cultures composed of multiple facets unknown even today, of practices that are surprising and at times even unnerving.*” By presenting the *Nagas* as “untamed” and “tribals” the Indian

Government suggests that these people are timeless, and the mainstream Indian nationals are very different to the conventional Nagaland people – politically or culturally.

What do the *Nagas* think about their representations as “untamed” and “tribals”? Do they consider these as derogatory terms that connote primitivism and inferiority? Accordingly, following questions guided this study: how does the Indian Government represent the *Nagas* in official tourism marketing? and, how the *Nagas* endeavor to develop an alternative image in their self-representation in order to countervail the stereotypes of the Indian State representations and their negative images that exist among the mainland Indians? While seeking answers to these questions, this study intends to make a theoretical and a political contribution to tourism literature towards studying how states and authorities in politically sensitive areas use culture to promote and create certain images. To find out how the *Nagas* contest the stereotypes of the Indian State representations and their negative images that exist among the mainland Indians, this study mainly utilized Bhabha’s (1994) postcolonial concept of “hybridity” which prompt new forms of cultural meaning and production. It was Salman Rushdie (1982) who pioneered the expression “writing back” in his article, *The Empire writes back with a vengeance: theory and practice in postcolonial literatures*. Since then, several postcolonial writers (Ashcroft, 2001; Bhabha, 1994, 1996; Spivak, 1988, 1990) including India’s Nobel Laureate and Harvard economist Amartya Sen (2005, 2006, 2009) have documented notable essays on ‘counter discourse’ towards colonial powers. According to Ashcroft (2001, p. 102), “counter discourse is intended to challenge dominant discourses on race, class, gender and nation... it is not a separate oppositional discourse but a tactic which operates from the fractures and contradictions of discourse itself.” In the context of historical political tensions, Bruner (1986, p. 144) justified, “Narratives are not only structures of meaning but structures of power as well... The resistance narrative is a justification for claims of redress for past exploitation”. In this study, the *Nagas*’ self-representations were analyzed informed by postcolonial theory to understand the *Nagas*’ perspectives of ‘national identity’. Thus, this study, taking the case of India, attempts to conduct a more nuanced analyses of Indigenous resistance while seeking answers to Malinowski’s (1922, p. 25) famous and complex observation, how “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world”?

2. Indigenous people and self-representations

One of the important phenomena in the last decade has been the efforts by Indigenous peoples from different parts of the world to formalize their own forms of representation in order to countervail the stereotypes of government representations (Appadurai, 1995; Brown, 1999; Brysk, 2000; Friedman, 1999; Montejo, 2002; Muehlebach, 2001; Niezen, 2003; Ramos, 1998). Commenting on the recent plethora of Indigenous resistance studies in the social sciences, Lila Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 313) pointed out, “[t]erms like voices, subversion, dissidence, counter-discourse and counter-hegemony, as well as resistance, circulate through such widely diverse enterprises as French feminist theories and social scientific studies of specific subordinate groups, e.g., slaves in the American South and the Caribbean, Southeast Asian peasants, and subaltern groups in colonial India...as well as among various groups of women in this country and elsewhere.” Several anthropologists (Dowell, 2006; Ginsburg, 2002; Ginsburg & Rapp, 2007; Michaels, 1994; Turner, 2002) have studied how Indigenous people have utilized small-scale media technologies and techniques of storytelling as forms of collective self-representation. One of the pioneers in resistance studies, James Scott (1985), in his book, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* described how the villagers in Malaysia articulated their resistance through small acts of protest like foot-dragging, pilferage, flight and obstruction. Graham Huggan (2001), in his book on cultural hybridity, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* commented on issues of transitional aesthetics/

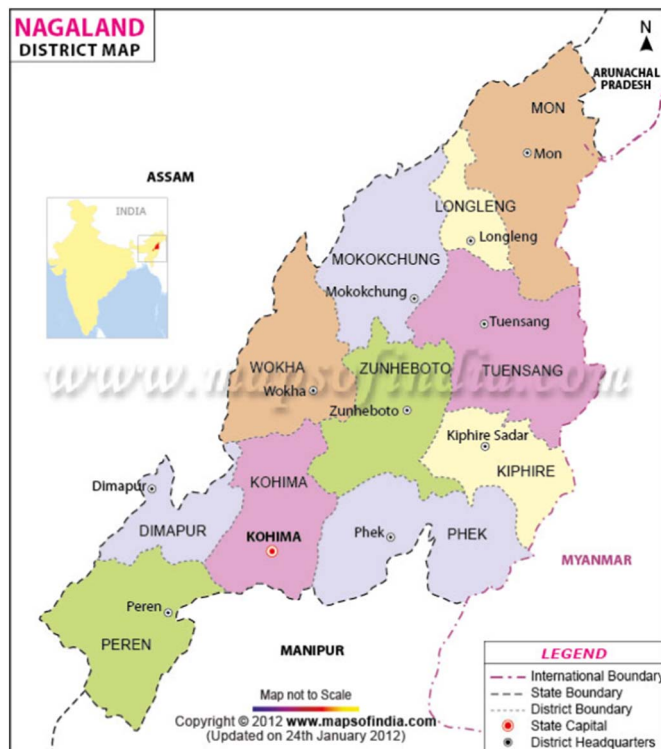


Fig. 1. Map of India and Nagaland. (< www.mapsofindia.com/maps/nagaland/nagaland.htm >).

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