INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL of
NAGA AFFAIRS

WORKING PAPER SERIES

June 12, 2025

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Tourism and the Politics of Worldmaking in Nagaland

No 2025-06

Abstract

Despite its alluring tourism advertisements with the tag “Land of Festivals”, tourism in Nagaland is also a space for contestation. The article revolves around this contestation of negotiated worldmaking processes in Nagaland that entails socializing the society to the interests of the dominant group's worldviews, where these are designed to project a particular image about the Naga society. This worldmaking process is explored by examining two themes that have become the essence of tourism in the state of Nagaland: first, the term “Morung”, a traditional communal house; and second, the term “headhunter”. The article suggests the need to cognize the often-hidden power dynamics involved in the everyday politics of knowledge production driving the worldmaking processes.

KEYWORDS: Cultural hegemony, Power and knowledge, Tourism in Nagaland, Tourism representation, Worldmaking

1 Introduction

Tourism is a space for contestation over values, norms, ideas, expectations, and worldviews that determine the accepted behavior concerning tourism: an accepted image for the rest of society. It conceals the worldmaking (Goodman 1978) power of tourism, where dominant ideas, identity, and expectations are established (Hollinshead 2009a, Hollinshead 1999). It is perhaps worthwhile to conjecture that worldmaking or image-making occurs at two levels: one that is (a worldmaking process) imposed from the advanced or affluent societies (these are generally where tourists come from—be they foreign or domestic) and the other that goes on within the local culture (that is, the tourist destinations). Here, however, we will be focusing on the latter by examining two themes of tourism that have come to define the essence of tourism in the state of Nagaland: "morung" and "headhunter".

2 Conceptual Framework: Worldmaking, Cultural Hegemony, and Power/Knowledge

Worldmaking is "…the ways we make what we make — call them versions or worlds as you like — and of the criteria we use in judging what we make" Goodman (1984: 43). In our context, we are more interested in the processes or the "ways we make what we make" that go on in the worldmaking. The processes of worldmaking require an already existing world, for it is from the world already at hand that provides the stage upon which to construct a new world. For it is "Not from nothing, after all, but from other worlds" (Goodman 1978: 6) a world is fabricated.

To explicitly demonstrate this worldmaking power entailed in the Nagaland state's efforts to promote tourism, highly selective symbols, cultural forms, and heritages are usually endorsed at the expense of others by those who explicitly take part in the promotion of tourism—such as the Nagaland state government with its enormous ancillary institutions responsible for the promotion of tourism are supplemented by selected few self-appointed intellectuals and keepers of the culture from the middle-class, who disproportionately come from and represent the dominant groups (Hollinshead 2009a, Hollinshead 2009b), i.e. 'tribes' in Nagaland. Such constitutions set the context in which the worldmaking of the society is to occur. These image-

making processes suggest how the state of Nagaland and its people are to be presented to the outside world (for the tourists) for tourism. In such a worldmaking process, the symbols of the people, and its various tribes are fabricated to depict and impress upon naïve others (i.e. tourists) a certain static, tranquil, innocent (perhaps, more importantly, unsullied by the intrusion of modernity) image of the society through the manipulation of cultural symbols and forms. Thereby, refashioning of fictitious cultural identity that displays an air of eternal permanence.

Here the ideas purported by Antonio Gramsci perhaps provide a lens from which to understand the contestation nature implicit in the process of promoting tourism in Nagaland. Gramsci's idea of "cultural hegemony" serves as a useful theoretical tool to flush out how the beliefs, values, and ideologies of the dominant group colors what is deemed "commonsense" (Gramsci 2005). By commonsense, meaning that which we take for granted. This is something akin to false consciousness which denotes people's inability to recognize their own subjugation. And because they are unaware of the structure that suppresses them, people tend to unknowingly participate in the perpetuation of the oppressive system that naturalizes and legitimizes the beliefs, ideas, and identities of the dominating group (Gramsci 2005).

3 State-Led Image-Making and Institutional Power

At first glance, this proposition may seem farfetched. Yet, let's examine closely to see if we can find something below the surface. From the Gramscian theory, we find the enormous role of the Nagaland state government and its apparatus in the promotion of tourism in Nagaland. The Nagaland state government recently published a comprehensive tourism policy (Department of Tourism 2024). For instance, in February 2024, the state government allocated Rs. 1,150.50 lakhs for tourism and tourism-related activities, especially for its flagship Annual Hornbill Festival (Nagaland Tribune 2024). The state apparatus heavily invests in the Annual Hornbill Festival supplemented by numerous other "Mini-Hornbill" festivals in all the districts of Nagaland. It is also a well-known fact that most of the personnel who constitute these governmental and state apparatuses mostly and predominantly represent or come from the dominant tribes. These are further supplemented by self-appointed interest groups and intellectuals who consider themselves the arbitrators of cultural authenticity and also primarily come from the dominant tribes. Together they form the mythomoteur, which is the myth-making

apparatus of tourism (Hollinshead 2009b). One of the outcomes, then, of such a *mythomoteur* is that this apparatus, "…influences what not only visitors, but locals come to see as being…" Nagaland, but it also, "…significantly comes to legitimate particular forms of inheritance and being over other less favored styles of cultural existence and becoming" (Hollinshead 2009b: 530). While the arbitrator of cultural authenticity or culture brokers, "…invent certain traditions as they favor some so-called found activities from the past and coterminously marginalize others" (Hollinshead 2009b: 530).

Case Study 1: The "Morung" as a Standardized Cultural Symbol

To illustrate this point, we can examine the term "*morung*", usually utilized to denote the traditional 'dormitory institution', barracks, communal houses, or "the institution of community houses" (Peal 1893, Fürer-Haimendorf 1938, Fürer-Haimendorf 1950). Since there already are extant treatments (Peal 1893, Fürer-Haimendorf 1938, Fürer-Haimendorf 1950) on the "Morung" system, we will not go in-depth into what the "morung" is or the functional role it played in the past for that is neither the scope nor the purpose of this paper. The term "morung", derived from its earlier form "morong", serves as a widely accepted umbrella term denoting the communal institution of community houses or barracks prevalent among diverse tribes across the historical Assam province and the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA). Determining the precise language or dialect origin of "Morung" or "Morong" proves challenging. Among the earliest references to these communal barracks, the Miris (presently known as the Mishing in Arunachal) referred to them as "Morongs" (Peal 1893, 244). S. E. Pearl, one of the earliest authors exploring the tribes in the present Northeast, adopted this term as a comprehensive concept to encapsulate the communal kraal among various tribes in the former Assam province and the NEFA.

Every tribe in Nagaland has its term to denote this traditional hut. For example, in Konyak dialect, it is called "*baa*"; in Phom dialect, it is called "*bang*"; in Lotha dialect, it is called "*chumpo*"; in Ao dialect, it is called "*Ariju*"; in Sumi dialect, it is called "apuki"; in Zeme dialect, it is called "*relei-ki*" (for female) "*rehang*-ki"; in Liangmai dialect, it is called "*khangchiuki*"; in Angami dialect, it is called "*kichuki*"; in Lailong dialect (a Naga tribe in Myanmar), it is called "*pang*" and so on. So, the question now is why and how did the term "*morung*" become the standardized word to denote the traditional communal house? How did

this vocabulary become the *lingua franca*, a recognizable word about Nagaland to visitors? This is aptly evident even among the local population when they denote the communal house as "*morung*" in their daily conversation with friends, neighbors, family, and so forth (or in their explanation, as a good host, to inquisitive tourists). Or, take, for instance, a resort in the Mon district in Nagaland named "Helsa *Morung* Retreat". These are a few examples of copious instances manifested in everyday experiences.

Foucault also provides us with a key instrument to identify how this process usually unfolds. For Foucault, power and knowledge are inextricably linked (Foucault 1980). Therefore, he conjoined the concepts of power and knowledge into a single concept "*power/knowledge*". Now how do we relate this to our context in the Northeast and Nagaland, specifically? According to Foucault, *all* knowledge is possible and takes place within a vast web and structure of power relationships that *allow* for a particular knowledge to come about. Such knowledge, for instance, dictates the terms of *what*, any statement is to be accepted as "true" or counted as "truth", *where* (or in what context it is) to be uttered, *who* can speak on behalf of the whole (Foucault 1982).

Hence, when applying Foucault's notion of *power/knowledge* to a particular context—in our case tourism in Nagaland—we are seeking to reveal a range of, often purposefully, concealed power relationships operating at every level within this specific context. With these conceptual lenses in mind, we get a sense of how the term "morung" became the principal parlance to denote the traditional communal houses, in the context of tourism in Nagaland. We are thus able to discern the plausible mechanism by which dominant groups—such as colonial anthropologists and administrators like John Butler, a colonial officer; S. E. Pearl, a geographer; and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, an ethnologist—imposed their version of distinctiveness by superimposing their versions of what a culture is (embodied in their dialect, "morung") to delineate and construct Naga's cultural landscape. This process continues to be facilitated by tourism today, serving as a conduit through which their dominance was either implicitly or explicitly asserted.

One of the first references to the term “morung” was probability made in John Butler’s *A Sketch of Assam* (1847), which was followed by more detailed and accurate descriptions by S. E. Pearl in 1893 on Konyak Naga. S. E. Pearl decided to retain the term “morung” to describe the communal kraal or youth dormitory system existing among the Naga tribes. As he writes, “Amongst the “Miris” of Assam these houses are called “Morongs”, and as this term is generally understood as applied to them here, I propose to retain it throughout this paper, when dealing with this subject” (Peal 1893: 244). It's crucial to acknowledge that S. E. Pearl's studies were among the earliest research endeavors conducted on the Naga tribes. Subsequent works on the "morung" were heavily influenced by Pearl's research, as evidenced by the contributions of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, who, following in Pearl's footsteps, adopted the same term for his ethnographic studies on the Nagas (Fürer-Haimendorf 1938, Fürer-Haimendorf 1950, Fürer-Haimendorf 1971). The significance of these figures in shaping the terminology and concepts integrated into Naga culture cannot be understated. This phenomenon parallels Edward Said's argument regarding the tendency of represented peoples to internalize and conform to the characteristics and features ascribed to them by external observers, rather than defining themselves according to their realities (Said 1979).

It is here that we find the convergence of cultural hegemony and power/knowledge. A dominant, ruling group (i.e. colonial officers, ethnographers, and geographers) maintains its worldmaking (i.e. domination) through cultural means—in this case, the cultural symbol, traditional communal houses (“Morung”). This is usually achieved and maintained through social institutions (state apparatus, tourism, education, civil societies, religion, etc.) that assign terminology and concepts ascribed to them by dominant external actors, which enable those with authority to strongly influence and prescribe the values, ideas, expectations, and behavior of the society. It does so by framing the worldview of the dominant group as customary and legitimate. What’s more, the dominant group, by being in a dominating position, dictates who can say *what*, *when*, *where*, *who*, and *how*. This is to say, *what* counts as “true,” *where* that “truth” is to be uttered, *when* it can be uttered, *how* that truth is to be conveyed, and *who* can speak on behalf of the whole (Foucault 1980). Indeed, modern contemporary studies on the culture of youth dormitories (i.e. communal houses) or communal kraal among the Naga tribes may face considerable difficulty in finding alternative terms to describe these institutions. They may even

resist doing so, as the term "morung" has entrenched itself deeply (thus making it part of the 'culture-since-time-immemorial' adage) within the discourse and the worldview of the Naga society. Hence, completing the process of worldmaking—the creation of a world. As a consequence, a dominant group terminology for the traditional hut, "morung", is *accepted* as the *lingua franca* vocabulary for the whole naga society—a new world is thus brought into being (where "morung" is not *a* term, but *the* term denoting traditional communal house, the very *essence* of the Nagas).

Case Study 2: The Politics of the "Headhunter" Label

This brings us to the label "headhunters". What makes this label "headhunters" a variable of interest is that even though Nagas as a whole falls under this label, tourism as a worldmaking process has reframed and modified this label by accentuating certain regions or groups/tribes in Nagaland, on the one hand. On another, de-emphasizing its association with other regions or tribes in Nagaland. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (Said 1979) will serve as a good conceptual lens from which to understand and tackle this worldmaking process. This will complement well with the other two conceptual lenses we have discussed earlier: cultural hegemony and power/knowledge. Said's notion of Orientalism deals primarily with the issues of "representation/representing" the "other" for the purpose of "knowing/to know" to "construct" an "image" about that other(s) as a way to consolidate one's domination over the other (Said 1979). Here too we find the issues of power/knowledge and cultural hegemony concerning the image construction of others to dominate the other(s).

The issue of representation, a worldmaking process, of others in Nagaland in the context of tourism inextricably involves and demonstrates the inseparable link between power and knowledge, i.e. the power dynamics between different tribes in Nagaland. The construction of an image about certain specific tribes/groups in Nagaland entails the process of 'the other' being reduced to an essentialized, distinctiveness being that is static, unchanging, and given an appearance of '*they-have-always-been-like-this*'. By doing so, i.e. constructing or representing such an image of the other, the constructor in constructing an image 'to know' the other thereby exercises an authority, power, and control over the named or represented (Said 1979). Even to the extent that the represented becomes the embodiment of the constructed image. Or rather, they

begin to assume that which is constructed about them, as we will see in terms of which (not all) regions and tribes in Nagaland implicitly fall under the "headhunter".

To illustrate this image and worldmaking representation in the context of the label "headhunters", it will be illuminating to explore how this label is subliminally promoted, in tourism ads, as a representation of a particular region of Nagaland, i.e. Eastern Nagaland, and not others. To begin with, the identified region, i.e. Eastern Nagaland, is largely underdeveloped and is also known in the state's common administrative parlance as the "Backward Areas", due to its depressingly low levels of political and socio-economic development. This specified area is primarily inhabited by the "backward" tribes (i.e. Konyak, Chang, Sangtam, Yimkhiung, Phom, Khiamniungan, and Tikhir). The tourism ads of Nagaland subliminally suggest the state to be a "Land of festivals" and home to "Morung" and "headhunters", where naive visitors and tourists can visit and experience the festivals as well as the static and primitive life of the headhunters. However, the often-concealed subliminal undertone of the tourism promotion is that the festivals can be experienced in the "advanced areas" of Nagaland, specifically and implicitly referring to that region of the state that is relatively developed, and welcomed modernity and consumerism. And one can experience the primitive lives of the past headhunters in the "backward areas" of Nagaland, where life is static, unchanging, and primitive (to a large degree). So, adventurous tourists can go to these backward areas to experience the exotic and innocence of the primitive unsullied by the intrusion of modernity and civilization.

This narrative of headhunters is perpetuated so effectively to the outside world that people flock to experience such the surreal primitive, the perennial past that *is* and *always has been* and *always will be*. As we see writers record their experience as, "…pretty daunting to spend a week living with and photographing a primarily isolated community whose notorious reputation precedes it" (Sara H 2021). While others register, "But what sets [Konyak Nagas] apart from the rest of the tribes of this northeastern Indian state is their fierce headhunting history…[where the] heads were then proudly displayed on the walls and doorways of the warriors" (Mukherjee 2018). Such narratives have become a unique selling point for tourism in Nagaland, while concurrently perpetuating the perennial backwardness of these people, eternally lingering in a primitive space where time and history have come to a halt.

What has happened here in Nagaland is that the label "headhunter" is subliminally tailored, adapted, and refocused in a nuanced manner, thereby changing the connotation of the label. The label now suggests and is associated with the backward tribes (portrayed in titles such as "*The Last Headhunter: Konyak Naga*"). The label becomes and is a worldmaking representational image of the other for domination. The undertone of the label suggests an image of representation where the backward tribes in Nagaland, because of their eternal backwardness, must perennially depend on and look to the advanced tribes (Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Lotha, and Sumi) for development, education, culture, and civilization. For the 'backward tribes' in Nagaland, the 'advanced tribes' thus represent the center of civilization, advancement, and dependency, just as the West represented the center of civilization and dependency for the "Orientals".

Impacts: Internalization of the Constructed Identity

What is more disturbing perhaps is that the local population in this eastern region of Nagaland begin to see themselves and become that which has been constructed for them: a headhunting primitive people lingering in backwardness. That is, they have become the constructed image fabricated by the constructors. This is evident in Said's notion of Orientalism, where the Orientals begin to assume the image constructed for them (Said 1979). Similarly, the locals begin to assume the identity (image of representation that has been constructed about them) by judiciously *conforming*, emulating, reproducing, and, most importantly, *accepting* the image-identity (i.e. false consciousness) of backward, and their perennial condition of dependence on others to be led out from their primitive space and time. Such psychological *compliance* and conformity *normalize*, *naturalize*, and *legitimize* the profusion of poverty, and their lack of progress and development to a magnitude that will be deemed unacceptable to other tribes in Nagaland. An image-identity is constructed as the representation of the backward tribes in Nagaland—that embodies a particular way of living and a life that is endorsed as 'natural' and 'expected' lifestyles of those living in these backward regions of the state.

Furthermore, even the state "…official publications, presentations and other productions of the tourism state help to train the public over time in what to expect of and about…" Eastern Nagaland, "…and how to be and behave as…citizens in…" Eastern Nagaland (Hollinshead 2009b, 535). These tribes then begin to conform, accept, and behave in compliance with the constructed image identity, thereby marking the completion of dominance, authority, and power over the subjugated tribes in Nagaland. Thus, a new world is created, a consequence of a worldmaking process. Indeed, the very term 'Eastern Nagaland' evinces how the domination process works, for this very term simultaneously identifies and homogenizes the subjugated, while at the same time implies a range of knowledge and an intellectual mastery over that which is named and represented.

4 Discussion: The Politics and Consequences of Tourism-Led Worldmaking in Nagaland

The tantalizing Nagaland tourism ads depicting exotic places, cultural symbols, foods, and adventures often and usually obscure the power relations between and among groups in the state. These power dynamics dictate what a prospective visitor sees in the ads and what they can expect to experience when they arrive in Nagaland. In the final analysis, tourism in Nagaland simultaneously is an arena for contestation and concomitant creation of identity and image about the self and that of the other. The ramifications can be seen played out in the actual lives of the people, as seen in Nagaland. By confining themselves to an image fixed, such as "*morung*" and "headhunters", their lives are determined and substantiated by their conformity to that constructed world. What's more, people in Nagaland have come to accept and normalize such beliefs and identity, as something natural, which they accept without question. So, next time one visits Nagaland or sees the Annual Hornbill Festival ads, remember to pause and think of the worldmaking process entailed in such alluring promotions.

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Published under the ICNA Working Paper Series.

www.icna.nl | ISSN 2949-7930 | Email: contact@icna.nl