



Narratives of Peace: Naga Women in the Self Determination Struggle

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Abstract

Naga women live in a politically sensitive environment given their people's prolonged struggle for self-determination. They also face the complexity of a society that is undergoing the binary of change and continuity, with the pull towards modernity, on the one hand, and strong undercurrents of traditional and customary practices on the other. The latter are often geared towards a strong patriarchal system that is often inclined to disavouring women. Nevertheless, Naga women have managed to engage themselves effectively within their traditional space and have significantly impacted their society. Through a tactful and non-contentious stance, they have continued to influence the dynamics of peacemaking. This article looks at some narratives of contemporary Naga women who are active peacemakers in a geographically and politically divided Nagaland.

Introduction:

This article will look briefly at Nagas' relationship to their land and how, in their struggle to protect the land and its people, they have encountered numerous challenges, including having to deal with the internal strife and bitterness amongst their own people. My main focus will be on

Naga women's responses to the internal Naga political conflict through their mediating initiatives for peace.

1. Nagas, their History and Society:

Nagas comprise of around eighty tribes (K. Iralu 495) with a population of about three and a half million, dispersed across the Indo-Burmese international border. They are spread across four states in India, namely *Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh*; and in Burma, *Kachin State* and *Sagaing Division*. Their political struggle for self-determination has continued for over six decades and several generations of Nagas have lived in a highly volatile environment, marked by armed struggle.

[3] The Naga struggle for self determination began with fighting against the Indian army's occupation and aggression, but gradually turned into internal strife amongst Naga factional groups. Since the beginning of the struggle, the estimated number of Naga lives lost, according to official records, is above 200,000, but the actual figure exceeds this number, not counting the deaths on the Indian side (E. Iralu).

[4] It is important here to briefly mention the background of the dispersion of Nagas and their land. The division of Naga areas into six

different states across two countries has impacted the Nagas significantly and cost them dearly. When British colonialism began to spread, it soon put its mark on the future of Nagas through the Treaty of Yandabao, which demarcated boundary lines between Burma and Assam; and Burma and Manipur; which meant that Nagas were divided into Burma, Manipur, and Assam. Moreover, after the defeat of Nagas in 1880 by the British, Naga areas were further ramified into different zones for the administrative expediency of the British. These areas were later seized by India, resulting in today's dispersal of Nagas into the six states in India and Myanmar (Linyü 43-44; Shikhu 9).

[5] In 1975, when the Nagas had been greatly weakened after having fought the Indian Army for more than two decades, the Shillong Accord was signed between the Indian Government and the Naga National Council (NNC). This was done under great duress and humiliating pressure, and it sowed seeds of distrust among Naga national workers. The signatories' refusal to abrogate the Accord which its Naga opponents called a "sell-out and a surrender" pact, led to the formation of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) on January 31, 1980, led by Isak Swu (Sema Naga from Nagaland), Thuingaleng Muivah (Tangkhul Naga from Manipur), and S. S. Khaplang (Hemi Naga from Burma). Then, in 1988, S. S. Khaplang and his military commander General Kholi (Konyak Naga) broke away and formed

the NSCN- K, while the other group came to be known as National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN –IM). This conflict, which birthed the factional war between the various groups, has unfortunately spread throughout the entire Naga nation.

[6] The harrowing memories of bloodshed, betrayal, heavy loss of lives, and continuous struggles, form a major part of the montage of influences on contemporary Naga society. And due to their multiple locations, as mentioned earlier, the boundaries not only exist geographically, but also politically, spatially, experientially, and culturally.

[7] Naga scholar and social activist Rosemary Dzüvichü, observing Angami Naga women's experiences, expressed in her speech at a peace gathering in Kohima (2007), that their geographical location in and around the Kohima battlefield of World War II had exposed them to the intolerable effects of war. The bloodshed and brutality of World War II did, according to Rosemary Dzuvichu, traumatize women and homes. It is a trauma that has been carried on through the Naga struggle for freedom, which has seen thousands of their men dead, their homes and granaries burnt to the ground time and time again.

[8] The traditional peacemaking role of Naga women in the community

dates back to the times before colonialism. Women were considered peacemakers between disputing families, and sent as mediators between warring villages. Naga women continue to face the challenging task of upholding this traditional role, with a deeper understanding of the mechanisms involved in the conflicts, particularly in sensitive times when rifts between Naga factions deepen.

[9] The historical aspect of this study in terms of the political connotations pertains to the larger Naga national experience. However, the women participants are from within Nagaland state, now situated in northeast India. The deeply patriarchal Naga society has been further reinforced over the years through encounters with the colonial presences, such as the British administrators, American missionaries, and now the Indian government, all of which are cultures with strongly patriarchal roots.

[10] The Naga customary laws protected and upheld by the Indian Constitution's Article 371Aⁱ has worked both to the advantage and disadvantage of Naga society. It has helped in protecting the traditional life of Nagas, but Article 371A has also led to discrimination in many areas, particularly against women. For example, women are least likely to be given leadership privileges and are therefore excluded from decision making bodies. Discrimination also arises in inheritance and property ownership.

According to Naga scholar Vitso (2003), "Houses, lands, fields are always inherited by males whether rich or poor...Immovable properties if inherited by women would belong to others.ⁱⁱ Therefore, to retain those in the village itself, most of the properties given to the daughters are movable properties" (72). Urban women who are economically sound and capable of buying their own land, are less affected by this, as there seems to be no restriction on them, but being unable to own property affects women in rural Nagaland where the prevalence of customary laws is even stronger.ⁱⁱⁱ

[11] Despite the emergence of some studies on Naga women's peacemaking role (Banerjee 2000; 2010; Chenoy 2004; Manchanda 2004; 2005), there has been a dearth when it comes to looking at peacemaking through Naga lenses. Hence, this article is an attempt at privileging and voicing Naga women's perspectives. In not only using written sources but also Naga women's stories and testimonies, this study validates Nagas' oral tradition as a legitimate source of knowledge critical to understanding present Naga society and celebrates their survival as a people through their stories, in this case, translating these into written documentation.

[12] The findings of this study are partly an outcome of the author's PhD dissertation, which looked at the contemporary challenges Naga women face in nation building, in which 15 Naga women from different Naga tribes, age

groups, and professions participated. The study adopted an expansive view of nation building, reflecting a holistic understanding of Naga women’s overall concerns for the general health and well-being of their nation.

[13] Ethical guidelines specific to the communities to which the participants belonged, have been observed. The values of respect, kindness, caring and sharing, which are congruent with Naga traditional teachings, have been observed in the research relationships. Human rights have been protected; free and informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews began. The following diagram shows the major elements incorporated in the methodology of the study.



Elements incorporated in Methodology

[14] This work is a blend of both Indigenous and Western approaches to research. *Relationality*, or relationships, as put forward by Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) is a suitable term for describing the relationships in a Naga research setting and relationality is woven into all aspects of the research process. Wilson expressed that relationships do not merely shape reality, but that they *are* reality.

[15] Respect for cultural protocols and traditional values were observed; and reciprocity, solidarity and relational accountability were maintained. In terms of giving back, the author's way of contributing to the community is through writings like this in which the women's concerns and their efforts are communicated through written form to a wider audience.

2. Nagas' Relationship to the Land:

In order to position the women's narratives of peace in this article, I would first like to briefly mention the relationship of Nagas with their land, as it relates to the theme of this Issue (6) of *InTensions*: 'The Resurgence of Indigenous Women's Knowledge and Resistance in Relation to Land and Territoriality: Transnational and Interdisciplinary Perspectives.'

[17] Land is considered a gift, and Nagas have a deep sense of stewardship towards the land. It is highly valued and treated with respect in keeping with

a view of reciprocal co-dependency between the people and the land. In the words of Naga scholar Imkong I. Imsong, “The Naga concept of identity includes the embodiment of the human being in the triune concept of God-Land-People” (17). He further states that the Naga identity is shaped by this concept of land, denoting an intrinsic relationship between the Naga and the land (18). Imsong’s words capture the essence of what land traditionally means to Nagas, in that, this concept of Naga identity in relationship to the land is inherent and so strong amongst Nagas that it has withstood the powerful influences of colonialism over the years.

[18] Nagaland has an agrarian economy, with more than 70% of the total population depending on agriculture as their mainstay. Most components of Naga culture, as well as the festivals around the year are connected to the agricultural cycle, and both women and men have



Rice terraces in Khulazu Basa
Chakhesang Naga village, 2008.
Photo: author

particular roles in the agricultural process. Nagas’ daily and annual life is organized largely around care for, survival from, and celebration of the land.

[19] Over the course of history, however, the Naga political struggle has profoundly impacted their lives. The daily activities of Nagas have been significantly altered, one of which is hampering the normal agricultural activities. Where once Naga cultivators peacefully worked in their fields and enjoyed the harvests, now people fear violence might erupt anywhere, especially in the fields and forests. Sadly, paddies have often become killing fields. Naga author and scholar Easterine Kire Iralu's gripping poem-film *When the Soul of a Nation Dies*, presents a segment that expresses the irony of the situation. Lamenting over the internal warfare within the Naga national movement, and relating it to the significance of land to Nagas, she wrote:

When does the soul of a nation die?
 Is it when a young man, unarmed
 sees black figures at the edge of the field
 rapidly close the distance between them
 and hold a gun to his father's temple
 the coldness in their eyes when the women plead and weep
 the deafness in their ears when the kneeling man begs for mercy
 the hardness in their hearts when they empty their guns into
 him...
 That field, where his blood seeped into the soil
 as life swiftly fled him

how could they ever till it again?
That field, these hills, those skies
was what he had fought for all his life
so his people might call it theirs...
When does the soul of a nation die?
Is it then that the soul of a nation dies?
When the cries of mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, sons
fall on indifferent ears?

[20] In September 2008, the author attended a gathering where Alih, the *Anghya* (wife of the *Angh* – Chief) of Longwa Konyak Naga village spoke. Longwa lies right on the Indo-Burmese border. More specifically, the international boundary goes right in the middle of the home of Alih and her husband, the *Angh's* family. In her speech at the function, Alih expressed:

I live in a place where



Alih, the *Anghya* (wife of the *Angh*: Chief) of Longwa Konyak Naga village, at Kohima, Nagaland. September 2008. Photo: author

maximum activity of our National movement is seen. Many of our young men and women have given their lives while fighting against the common enemy. Those days we have not fought against ourselves. As mothers and sisters we are deeply sad to see our own brothers fighting against each other. I would therefore say that such kind of fighting is not a means but an end to our birthright endeavour.

[21] Alih's words are an expression of the reality of living a bordered existence. They also communicate the frustration women across Nagaland feel when they helplessly watch their men fight amongst themselves and take away each others' lives. Alih's words also represent the desire of the Naga public for peace as expressed by many over the years. Most of the Naga women the author interviewed conveyed the desire for peace as their primary vision for Nagas. As these women insisted time and time again, without peace, Nagas are unable to move forward, as they are paralyzed by fear and tension.

[22] In her speech at a peace gathering in Kohima in 2007, Dzúvichú commended the strength and resilience of Naga women. She noted that they, having lived in a conflict zone with its multiplicity of effects on families and relationships, have been taught right from a very early age to cope with

resolving conflicts both within the confines of the family, as well as the society that surrounds them. Dzúvichú further expressed that Naga women, in doing so, have learnt to form a strong network of sisterhood advocating better understanding and peace in the land among the Naga warring factions, tribes, villages and clans. Peacemaking by Naga women is done both at the individual level, as well as in groups.

[23] Authors Manchanda (2005) and Banerjee (2000) point out the uniqueness in which Naga women have negotiated peace with various groups (state and non-state armed actors, between warring factions, bridging intercommunity divides, mobilizing mass support and democratising the peace process) through a space, that does not threaten the traditional patriarchal leadership structure, and as such can be acknowledged by the men and the society in general. Naga women's peace efforts and initiatives have been compared with those of women in other states of India, such as Manipur (Manchanda, 2005), Assam and Kashmir (Banerjee, 2010), and also in the South Asian context (Banerjee, 2010; Chenoy, 2004). In her book (2010), Banerjee states: "That the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) has assumed enormous influence in Naga politics is borne out by the fact that they are the only women's group in South Asia who has participated in a ceasefire negotiation" (150).

[24] Another perspective comes from Naga writer Ningreichon (2006), who in her online article looked at the role of various Naga women's groups in the peace process. Ningreichon observes that when confronted with intimidation and violence either by the military or their own people, Naga women form a powerful vanguard, and are able to mobilize remarkably well against the injustices meted out to them. Ningreichon further maintains that Naga women organizations have a national character as they have the mandate of the people and represent the voice of women, most of who were borne out of the conflict and are therefore an integral part of nation building.

[25] Women in numerous Naga villages have intervened during battles; some have gone into the midst of firing and clutched onto guns, and pleaded the men to stop the shooting. Between 2005 and 2008, the author met with several women who organized visits to factional camps, some of whom participated in this study. These women approached the leaders, calling for an end to violence and bloodshed. Women mediated particularly in times when only they could, as the men were then not in a position to listen to one another. These women either represented the church, the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) or its tribal affiliates, the Naga Women Hoho, or other women's groups. The killings between the factions have inculcated fear in the minds of the public, causing apprehension to approach the leaders in honesty, despite sincere concerns. The women have, however, had open and

honest discussions with the leaders, which is a courageous move, considering the risks such undertakings involve.

[26] It is worth mentioning the NMA's responses to the deteriorating political situation and the rising factional violence and killings. The NMA was formed in February, 1984 as a voluntary organization mandated to fighting social evils, particularly since alcoholism and drug addiction problems had become rampant in Nagaland in the late 1970s and 1980s. Since their activities are all based on what the current situation necessitates, over the years their areas of involvement have expanded.

[27] Witnessing the increase in violence and deaths amongst Nagas, which was raising serious concerns amongst citizens, the NMA launched "Shed No More Blood," a campaign for peace. Under this banner, the NMA on numerous occasions approached the factional leaders and pleaded for an end to violence and bloodshed. Their appeal is always made through the stance of motherhood.

[28] Manchanda (2005) in a comparative study of the NMA and the Naga Women's Union Manipur^{iv} (NWUM), made this observation: that the NMA mobilizes around motherhood, while the NWUM was found to represent a

more secular, modern associational style around a rights-based agenda, as a result of which they have faced numerous setbacks.

[29] According to Sano Vamuzo, founding member of the NMA, and its first president, "Naga women are one when it comes to the issue of peacemaking amongst Nagas. We have no party; we are above political factions and parties. Our message to our brothers is the same" (Vamuzo, Sano. Personal interview. December 5, 2008). Regardless of the factions and their ideological differences, the NMA's position has always been that, all of the young cadres in all the factional armies are their sons; that when they hear of a young man being killed, they think of his mother as they put themselves in her shoes, and ask themselves, "What if that was my son?" On this aspect, Paula Banerjee (2000) commented:

One reason women's peace groups in Nagaland remain effective for longer periods is that they are able to blend the political with the social...Naga women do not operate independent of social value systems...It can be argued that one reason the Naga women in peace movements have achieved such success is that these movements do not challenge the traditional role of women but instead negotiate spaces within these roles. Peacemaking in the family has always fallen on women's shoulders; it is part of their traditional role. The Naga women have appropriated this

aspect of their traditional role for present-day political purposes. They appeal for peace as mothers, wives, and sisters. Their rhetoric is always personal (141).

[30] Reinforcing their association with peacemaking in Nagaland, one of the NMA's initiatives has been to gather Naga traditional shawls through its various tribal affiliates, and reserve them to be used as a covering for those who are killed in the factional fighting (a traditional Naga practice of honouring the deceased), and ensuring an honourable and dignified burial for them. In the words of Neidonuo Angami, (former NMA President), whom the author interviewed, "We still have a long way to go. From experience, we can say that there is no syllabus to follow or no methods to practice in peace-building work. We need to be constantly creative, responsive and proactive in our approach and must humbly accept difficulties and challenges if we want peace and justice to prevail..." (Angami, Neidonuo. Personal interview. August 12, 2008). Neidonuo acknowledged "the experiences and knowledge of the modern day intellectuals and leaders" in guiding the NMA's actions; but she also expressed a crucial element, that NMA continues to be "led by the traditional inspiration of our elders." A *Times of India* article online expressed this dynamic along the following lines:

... ask any NMA member about the leader of the group and there is almost 100% chance that she will say "the elder women". It's

almost codified in the oral history of NMA: contribute but don't claim (Times of India, March 8, 2007).

[31] Some of the participants of this study have led women groups to the factional camps to meet with the leaders, while others have spoken out individually as intermediaries in the midst of harsh circumstances. One of them is Naro, Secretary of the Nagaland Baptist Church Council's Women Department (NBCCWD). Naro had a remarkable personal experience in 1996, where there was a clash between two separate Naga factions (K and IM) in Changtongnya village (Mokokchung district, Nagaland).

[32] In order to protect the civilians of the village, the village authorities warned the factional armies to either leave, or face consequences. Having received no response, Naro, along with five men, decided to go to Changtongnya from Impur village to speak to faction cadres. Just as Naro and his team started their journey, a bomb exploded. Naro and the team then took a loud speaker from the church and began to speak to the cadres, pleading with them to stop fighting. They prayed for them and requested them to leave the village (in Nagamese^y). The faction cadres fled, but the IM cadres remained, which prompted the men in the village to chase them up a hill, and surround them. Naro explained (Naro. Personal interview. August 8, 2008):

Rev Kari Longchar, a Naga church leader spoke in English to them, but the person in command said that they did not understand English. He said, "Speak in Nagamese." So Rev. Kari requested me to speak. And I spoke on behalf of mothers, and pleaded with them to leave peacefully. It was God Who helped me to speak the right words. I was not prepared for that. They requested that they be given enough time to cook, eat, and leave. So we allowed them to do that. And eventually, they left. Through women`s prayers, these people survive. They should realize that. Unless we come to a settlement our economy and growth are always affected by this ongoing struggle. And generations have been lost in this fight.

[33] As mothers, wives, or sisters when women appeal in the spirit of non-violence, and to the conscience and familial sensitivity of the armed cadres, most often they relate to their appeals and listen to them. Women have been able to make negotiations from within their traditional space because it is then deemed non-contentious and non-threatening.

[34] Another woman leader directly involved in peacemaking was Rev. Dr. K. Kapfo, who with her friends from various Naga tribes approached the two warring factions. In Kapfo`s words, "realizing the urgent need for forgiveness

and reconciliation amongst our people, particularly the leaders, we gathered and went to their camps twice and met with the Council of Ministers of each faction. We acknowledged that they may have ideological differences. But we pleaded with them, stressing on the futility of killing each other” (Kapfo, K. Personal interview. July 1, 2008). K. Kapfo and Naro represent countless women and women groups across Nagaland, who are waging peace in their own corners.

[35] In other instances, the police or civic bodies have called on women organizations to approach the warring factions as a last resort when other efforts had failed, or when the situation was getting out of control. It is a position or role women alone can engage in because at such tense moments the men are not disposed to heeding one another.

[36] This article has established Naga women’s mostly voluntary, peacemaking contributions in a deeply divided Nagaland. A complex issue as the Nagas’ current political situation cannot be trivialized. However, in a situation where their primary goal of self determination has been overshadowed by far lesser goals through internal warfare, Naga women’s understanding and wisdom of the intricacies of conciliatory procedures should be appreciated and employed on a wider scale. If given the opportunity, Naga women have the potential to insightfully and meaningfully

transform the Naga peace process, as their approach has always been inclusive.

ⁱArticle 371A of the Indian Constitution gives special provisions with respect to the State of Nagaland in terms of (i) religious or social practices of the Nagas; (ii) Naga customary law and procedure; (iii) administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law; and (iv) ownership and transfer of land and its resources.

ⁱⁱ This means that when the woman marries, she joins her husband's family/ clan. Hence, the property that was given to her becomes the property of her husband's family/ clan.

ⁱⁱⁱ People in rural areas make up about 75% of Nagaland's total population

^{iv} Manipur is the neighbouring state of Nagaland. NWUM is the counterpart of NMA in Manipur.

^v A pidgin language, blending Assamese, Nepali, Bengali and Hindi, spoken in Nagaland when people from different tribes converse with one another

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