

The Yimchunger Nagas: Local Histories and Changing Identity in Nagaland, Northeast India*

Debojyoti Das

Introduction

Ethnic identity, as Stanley J. Tambiah writes, is above all a collective identity (Tambiah 1989: 335). For example, in northeastern India, we are self-proclaimed Nagas, Khasis, Garos, Mizos, Manipuris and so on. Ethnic identity is a self-conscious and articulated identity that substantialises and naturalises one or more attributes, the conventional ones being skin colour, language, and religion. These attributes are attached to collectivities as being innate to them and as having mythic historical legacy. The central components in this description of identity are ideas of inheritance, ancestry and descent, place or territory of origin, and the sharing of kinship. Any one or combination of these components may be invoked as a claim according to context and calculation of advantages. Such ethnic collectivities are believed to be bounded, self-producing and enduring through time.

Although the actors themselves, whilst invoking these claims, speak as if ethnic boundaries are clear-cut and defined for all time, and think of ethnic collectivities as self-reproducing bounded groups, it is also clear that from a dynamic and processual perspective there are many precedents for changes in identity, for the incorporation and assimilation of new members, and for changing the scale and criteria of a collective identity. Ethnic labels are porous in function. The phenomenon of

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ethnicity embodies two interwoven processes that can be likened to a double helix. One is the substantialisation and reification of qualities and attributes as enduring collective possessions, made realistic by mytho-historical charters and the claims of blood, descent, and race. This results in what has been aptly called pseudo-speciation, that is, the collectivities in a certain socio-political space think of themselves as separate social kinds. The other contrapuntal and complementary process is that the making of ethnic boundaries has always been flexible and volatile, and ethnic groups have assimilated and expanded, or, in the opposite direction, differentiated and segmented, according to historical circumstances and political-economic possibilities. Ethnic identity unites the semantics of primordial and historical claims with the pragmatics of calculated choice and opportunism in contexts of political and economic competition.

The Yimchunger Nagas are one of the most economically backward among the Naga tribes inhabiting the remote Tuensang district of Nagaland bordering Myanmar. This paper examines issues of Yimchunger Naga ethnic identity formation and contestation. The emergence of tribal/sub-tribal consciousness corresponds to policies of state electoral representation and reservation (affirmative action) aimed at creating new constituencies of empowerment and social inclusion. This happens to the extent that these policies identify their intended beneficiaries, whose status is to be uplifted, on the basis of backwardness. The Yimchunger Nagas have been integrated into a statist discourse of development in which they have increasingly come to be identified with the development category of being backward. Equally, in the Yimchunger–Tikhir ethnic identity struggle, a key focus of this paper, identity is at stake in the struggle over rights to territory, land and the new opportunities offered by government reservation policy that aims to integrate the so-called backward Naga communities through positive discrimination policies.¹

1 Access to reservation benefits (employment, education and electoral representation) is determined largely by Scheduled Tribe status. In Nagaland, initially five Scheduled Tribes were recognised under the Constitution Scheduled Tribes Order 1970: Naga, Kuki, Kachari, Mikir, and Garo. Among these five, any 'tribes or tribal communities, or parts of, or groups within, tribes or tribal communities' were deemed to be Scheduled Tribes. In the Census of 1971, 16 Naga tribes/sub-tribes were listed separately for the first time, with a 17th added in 1991. In the 2001 Census, Tikhir and Yimchunger were listed separately and Sema, Konyak, Ao, Lotha, Chakhesang, Angami, Phom, etc., were recognised as major Naga sub-tribes, each having more than one lakh population (<http://>

In this conflict within the Yimchunger ethnic fold, the Tikhir people (a linguistic minority group) have sought to throw off their attributed identity as a Yimchunger sub-tribe and claim a separate disposition for themselves as a distinct major sub-tribe. This is a struggle that has seen extended, bitter and violent hostilities over decades in the Shamatur Sub Division of Nagaland. The success of Yimchungers in electoral representation and reservation benefits on the basis of tribal identity and majority tribe status is a major factor in this intra-ethnic dispute. In examining the Yimchunger–Tikhir identity struggle, this paper takes into account the influence and deployment of representations from the colonial and post-colonial past as well as modern development discourse. Representations of backwardness by outsiders have been mobilised to assert claims for benefits from state schemes, while at the same time Yimchunger villagers present themselves as motivated (hardworking) people trying to improve their standard of living and catch up with the outside world, which is imagined as more developed. Political scientist Sanjib Baruah claims it is part of the Indian state’s strategy to mainstream frontier communities by nationalising frontier space through development schemes and programmes that seek to integrate the margins (Baruah 2003).

According to the way our village interlocutors described matters, the new opportunities for employment and education created by the government reservation policy and development grants/subsidies have been instrumental in reframing cultural differences and even cultural alienation. The Yimchunger–Tikhir conflict, I therefore argue, evolved from an earlier sense of subordination and neglect by the wider Pan-Yimchunger community into one of economic and electoral deprivation. The key trigger in intensifying the identity struggle was that Tikhir sub-tribes saw themselves as not benefitting equally from state development programmes. This has led to new waves of violence, distinct from the head-hunting raids carried out by the Nagas during the colonial times.

censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_nagaland.pdf). However, these are specified at the level of the individual state, which issues periodic notifications as to district-wide jobs and education reservations and quota percentages assigned to each tribe. Although 16 major tribes are officially recognised in Nagaland, Nagascholars identify much larger numbers of tribes. Yonun Asoso (1974) lists ‘about fifty’, and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland lists 36 ‘tribes’.

Yimchunger Oral History and Narratives of the Past

Like most pre-literate societies, the Yimchunger Nagas do not possess a written history. They inherit a rich oral tradition through which knowledge of the past is transmitted to the present. The origin, dispersal and distribution of Yimchungers are embedded in their folklore, myths and songs that constitute their social history. I will discuss their origin history by looking at narratives and stories, and also through documents shared by Yimchunger tribal leaders (consisting of memoranda and resolutions). However, writing a history of Yimchunger is a daunting task. The perils of misrepresentation and misunderstanding are great and access to sources was restricted by the politics of narrative collection and key informants claiming to be true representatives of the community. My informants warned me to be aware of false stories, and to realise that there could be competing stories. Also, Yimchunger oral history has been in decline since their conversion to Christianity (Yim 2010). In my study village, the interviews failed to elicit any narrations of the origin story of Leangkungru itself, because the study village is a relatively new settlement established in the mid-1940s by immigrants from surrounding villages (it was a collection village)². The village itself is only one generation old, but in my interviews I recorded stories of people linked to 17 neighbouring villages, who narrated stories of the villages from which they originally came. There were only few storytellers except the most elderly villagers who were too old to converse coherently, but did pass on valuable information. Younger generation Yimchungers barely knew about their clan history or past warriors, as knowledge is no longer orally transmitted to the younger generation in *Murung* (young men's dormitory) houses.

The methodological problems that I encountered in trying to put together the collection of narratives illustrates the cultural attitudes towards the ownership and guardianship of the past. By this I mean the politics of narration that were embedded in the informant's articulation of their Yimchunger identity as being distinct from their neighbours. Many people were excited about telling the origin history, however, they often contradicted each other. At times there was utter confusion, while at other moments they produced directly conflicting accounts. Also, there

2 Villagers informed me that Leangkungru is a collection village; a village said to have original settlers from different villages.

are individual stories, linked to family and clan history. I soon became convinced that there was no single true version of Yimchunger origin and migration. Aware of such discrepancies, my Yimchunger informants liked to imagine that a unifying canonical text could be pieced together 'if only a few more old men were alive today, those who really knew the history of their forefathers and the village'. When a migration story was played to a neighbouring tribe, they would often question and contest it. On the other hand, similar stories were often told by neighbouring chiefs from surrounding sub-tribes.

Villagers were also curious about how I would use the materials I had collected and even suggested that I should write a Yimchunger history of origin in English, for the world to know about them. They also wished that their share of knowledge about Yimchunger past, as translated to me would be duly acknowledged, and would appear with photographs in my work so that they could show it to their future generations. In my many interactions with Yimchunger villagers I recorded a diversity of voices. I was constantly aware of the individuality of my respondents and the possible consequences of writing an authoritative history that could be potentially disputed and dismissed by others in the community. Equally, one of the overarching institutions that sanctified the Yimchunger history was the Yimchunger Tribal Council. It is nearly impossible to write an independent Yimchunger history without acknowledging or getting due consent to their insights into migration history. Bypassing their consent would have attracted enormous criticism. At the same time, I was highly conscious of the vociferous conflict over Yimchunger-Tikhir identity.

On the ground, people hold to their own narratives, which fashion their identity and struggle for space, territory, history and cultural identity. Local narratives of identity are presented through their origin history. For example, Khonoma village in Kohima district claims to be the cultural capital of the Angamis, based on cultural pride and tradition. In their everyday talk with outsiders, residents describe Khonoma as the oldest village (KTC 2005). Similarly, in my area of study, people expressed cultural differences and history by reference to place and area of origin. Certainly such competing discourses of identity construction shape local history, dispute origins and make the writing of history controversial. Additionally, debates on the origin and diffusion of Naga tribes are politically underpinned by community claims and community patron

interests. These claims need to be contextually understood as cultural resources that are used to make particular claims for cultural identities and struggles in the formation of ethnic identities.

Defining the Past

As noted above, the Yimchunger Tribal Council (YTC) plays a powerful role in defining the sanctioned and authorised version of Yimchunger history. Like other Naga tribal councils, the YTC is a collegium of Yimchunger elders and middle-aged people who hold authority and control over the community. Here I first present the migration history as narrated by the YTC patron, also endorsed by the YBBA (Yimchunger Baptist Buro-Church) and other powerful actors in Yimchunger villages: the Students Union, Citizen Body and the Church. The history that I present here should be read bearing in mind the prevailing circumstances under which it was recorded: it reflects the agency of powerful actors narrating their past.

As I sat on the bamboo sofa I began recording the origin story in a hut of one of the Yimchunger elders. The narrative was quite similar to that which my other Yimchunger friends in the study village had told me – but different from the Tikhir, Chir and Mikori versions. According to my YTC informants, the Yimchunger description of a distinct historical past that has shaped their identity was crucially asserted in 1948 when a resolution was passed by Yimchunger villagers and respected men in Kiussor (Chessore) village, under the leadership of Mr. P. Hopong Yimchunger of Aiponger village. It was at this meeting that the YTC was formed. According to the YTC office bearer, the Yimchunger tribe, like any other Naga tribe, has no written record of its origin or history. However, on the basis of narrated historical accounts handed down from generation to generation, the origin of the Yimchungers is believed to be in Thailand. The present Yimchunger were not known by any particular name as a tribe. They lived a mostly nomadic life, spending one or two generations at any particular place of settlement after which a group of them would move on to another place with land for cultivation, so as to meet the growing need for food and other means of subsistence. At other times, the population of entire villages was compelled to abandon their village and move to a safer place to avoid plague, epidemic diseases or as victims of headhunting.

According to the YBBA members, the route of migration of the

Yimchungers from Thailand lay through Burma (Myanmar), then from Burma to Moru (in India), from Moru to Chiru, from Chiru to Longyang, from Longyang to Thunyim Kiulong (Thunyim literally means 50 and Kiulong means village, thus a village of 50 inhabitants, within the present territory of eastern Nagaland). Thereafter, the route continued from Thunyim Kiulong to Tuphuong Kiulong (near Pokhur Village), from Kemiphu (on the banks of Thrak Kie, now popularly known as the Zungki River) and then from Keimiphu to Tukheakhup village below the present Waphur village on the banks of Zungki river. At each place of settlement only a portion of the population set out in search of a better place, leaving behind the remaining settlers as permanent residents of that village.

The Yimchunger settled for a long period of time at Yimchung Awun, but as the population expanded, a group of able people ventured out to establish a new settlement further north, at a place called Langa, below the present Kuthurr village. The group of Yimchunger who settled at Langa were well-built and were fierce head-hunters who dared to confront natural calamities and forest spirits through the ritual power of their forefathers. As they were brave and fierce warriors, they soon realised that they could not stay together as it constrained their power and their space of recognition as brave souls: they could no longer live in harmony. Thus, they went their separate ways, leaving the village deserted and uninhabited. The remains of Langa village still stand today, bearing testimony to a place that was once inhabited by hardworking and fierce Yimchunger warriors. From Langa the Yimchunger people scattered in almost all directions, even beyond present day Yimchunger settlements. One group moved towards present-day Chang, some towards present-day Sema and some towards the areas of Kheimungen, Sangtham, Konyak and Phom. A bigger band moved back downwards, reportedly along the river course to establish various villages within areas inhabited by Yimchunger in the present day. This is in addition to the residents who chose to stay behind, in areas stretching from Helipong mountain to Mount Saramati and far beyond into present-day Myanmar (Burma), who speak different dialects such as Langa, Tukhi, Mukhok, Chi, Longbva, etc.

In those days, it is said that each village had its own distinct administrative entity, not subject to any other, and each individual village was a sovereign entity under the governance of the *Kiulongthsuru* (meaning founder of the village or village head in Yimchunger language)

an elder of that village. Each village, big or small, was equally respected as far as their rights and privileges were concerned. There was hardly any concept of community as a tribe beyond one's village territory: head-hunting for trophies and glory ruled the land. But, with the coming of Christianity through Baptist missionaries, the idea of living together in harmony came into the lives of these people.

Such was the story as narrated to me by an YBBA elder, one of the learned and respected men of the tribe. He further observed that the Yimchunger as a tribe were unadministered Nagas until 1947, and that the British had political influence but no administrative presence in their territories, which were monitored through annual tours conducted by the Deputy Commissioners and Sub-divisional Officers in the Naga Hills.

Following this, one of the Yimchunger Tribal Council Members pulled out a document and showed me the written evidence that on the 18th January 1948, the Yimchungers came under a common banner with the establishment of Yimchunger Tribal Council (YTC). The YTC was formed by a convention held by Yimchunger village heads, representatives from 61 villages believed to be Yimchunger. The meeting was convened in Kiussor (a corruption of Chessore in Yimchunger dialect) village under the leadership of Mr P. Hopong Yimchunger of Aiponger village. The resolutions adopted on that day articulated Yimchunger identity as a distinct Naga sub-tribe based on their language, origin and migration history. The resolution passed in the gathering adopted Langa as the common language or the Yimchunger dialect common to all. The resolution also contained a strong resolve that any individual or group disruption of the unity of the Yimchunger tribe 'shall be dealt with severe punishment, including the imposition of fine or any other penalty as may deem fit for disobedience'. An influential Yimchunger political party worker passed on the typescript of this document to me.

The Yimchunger are not the only ones to establish their identity so recently in Naga history. The Chekasang (a combination of three sub-tribes Chokri, Khezha and Sangtam) only became a major sub-tribe in 1960s, after they separated from their Angami neighbours. The refashioning of cultural identities based on origin history, myths and cultural exclusiveness has a genealogy of its own that has shaped Naga identities in the twentieth century (Oppitz et al. 2008, Von Stockhausen 2009, 2014). Similarly, writing on Naga identities, B.B. Kumar (2005) makes

a subtle remark: 'The discussion on various tribal identity formations goes on even today. At several points of Naga history since the colonial incursion into Naga Hills, the Naga tribal identity has been constructed and reconstructed and dissolved.'

Conflicting Identities, Contested Tales of Origin

I described above the multiplicity of origin stories from my informants in Leangkangru village and related this to broader methodological issues. There was also an important pattern of differences within my study village, with its mixture of inhabitants. Narratives of origin varied between households. Yimchunger-speaking³ elders referred to Langa as the central site from where they had dispersed, while Tikhir-speaking households pointed to a different site of origin. One Tikhir villager explained, 'We migrated through the Zanki river, unlike the Yimchunger.' When we left his house my Yimchunger assistant told me heatedly that such histories were all constructed and fabricated, and insisted that the Tikhir and Yimchunger had a common origin. Similarly, the Chir- and Mikori-speaking people related their origin to a place across the Saramati Mountains in Burma, rather than Thailand, as in the Yimchunger elder's account.

Curiously, although the villagers spoke Tikhir and Yimchunger dialects in my study village, their dance performances were accompanied by tunes of the Sangthams. It is quite possible that, when the village was being established, some Sangtam villagers migrated there over decades and came to identify themselves as Yimchungers, while the dance forms had been influenced over long periods of contact with the neighbours of the Sangthams.

Yet such cultural forms have now become hotly contested. For a long time, the village pastor has been trying to persuade the Yimchunger GBs (headmen) to change the tunes to which they dance to Yimchunger tunes.

3 The Yimchungers are linguistically divided into four dialect groups: Chir, Mikori, Yimchunger and Tikhir. The shared language between these people is called Langa Yimchunger. If we look at the linguistic map of Nagaland prepared by Robbins Burling (2003), we find these four dialects shown as distinct linguistic sub-groups of the Nagas. However, in his book on Himalayan languages George van Driem (2001) puts them together as one Yimchunger linguistic entity. See George van Driem. 2001. *Languages of the Himalayas: an ethnolinguistic handbook of the greater himalayan region : containing an introduction to the symbiotic theory of language*. Leiden: Brill.

When I interviewed the village pastor, he expressed his fears that the villagers' indifference to his suggestion could cost them in the future, as the Sangtam villagers could easily claim this area as their own, based on the dance form that is being practiced. The fear of such a co-option of identities by stronger neighbours loomed large in the everyday discussions of villagers. One of my Yimchunger informants, a tribal leader, also expressed that some neighbouring tribes had copied the Yimchunger shawl pattern and claimed it to be theirs. Today, these fluid boundaries of identity are being consolidated along linguistic, cultural and historical lines.

Enunciating Identity: Historical Difference and Identity construction

My account in this paper draws on Stuart Hall's concept of articulation, in turn applied by Li in *Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia* (2000). Stuart Hall explains:

An articulation is ... the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made? So the so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'. The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects... (Hall 1996:141-2).

The Yimchunger-Tikhir conflict produces a classic non-class tribal identity struggle in the frontiers of India's northeastern borderland.

Tania Li's ethnographic research among the Merut mountaineers of Indonesia shows how Hall's work can be used in the context of tribal identities and identification:

'Hall's formulation offers a framework for addressing both the empirical and the political dimensions In relation to the empirical question of how the *tribal slot* is defined and occupied, the concept of articulation usefully captures the duality of positioning which posits boundaries separating within from without, while simultaneously selecting the constellation of elements that characterize what lies within' (Li 2000: 152-53).

The 'duality of positioning' relates to the fact that, for Hall, articulation has a dual meaning: 'it is the process of rendering a collective identity, position, or set of interests explicit (articulate, comprehensible, distinct, and accessible to an audience), and of conjoining (articulating) that position to definite political subjects (Li 2000: 152). More simply, articulation means both forms of expression (enunciations of identity) and connections with political subjects (the process of identification). 'In relation to the political dimensions of my problem, Hall's argument that identities are always about becoming, as well as being, but are never simply invented' (Li 2000: 152-53), a point that is also relevant to this analysis.

The Yimchunger-Tikhir struggle over identity is shaped by the day-to-day talk, pamphleting, court petitions and direct confrontations through violent outbursts of protest, which are expressed through feuds and revenge killings that have become everyday forms of struggle since the late 1980s. In asserting their claims, the YTC have deployed much of the colonial and postcolonial apparatus and the language of the state to assert their identity, such as written evidence-maps and memorandums. For example, in their writ petition to the *Dobashi* and higher courts (Guwahati High Court), the YTC used census data to validate their claims and to prove Tikhir minority status, i.e. their non-eligibility for major sub-tribal status. Census statistics have long been used as a powerful governmental tool to control people's lives throughout the colonial and post-independence periods (Cohn 1996). In the Yimchunger-Tikhir conflict census statistics have been appropriated by one party to deny the claims of the other party.⁴

4 The 2011 Census preliminary data makes it evident that census statistics are increasingly manipulated by Naga sub-tribes to assert claims for state development benefits allocated under the 'Backward Area Development Fund' and the State Department

The next section discusses the history of Yimchungers as recorded in colonial documents, photographs, memoirs and ethnographic fieldnotes and the technologies that were deployed by colonial administrator-anthropologists for documentation. In the final part of the paper I will return to the question of the articulation of tribal identities and consider how post-independence state policies of development (or the lack of it) were used in the creation of cultural differences, forging identity struggles.

Yimchunger Identity: The Colonial Legacy

Located in what was labelled a Backward Tract through the 1919 Government of India Act, grouped under a pan-identity of 'head hunters-slave takers-land grabbers' and 'naked trans-frontier unadministered Nagas', the Yimchunger are today officially recognised as one of the 17 major tribes identified in the Nagaland census records. The Yimchunger lived beyond the British-administered areas of the Naga Hills District (unadministered tract) and the boundary demarcated by the Dhiku River, grouped as part of the trans-Dhiku/trans-frontier Eastern Naga. Some Yimchunger remained completely outside the influence of any colonial administration. Along with their human-sacrificing kin across the Saramati mountains (Rangpang Nagas) in the present day Saging division of Myanmar, they formed part of the buffer zone between the British administration in Assam and Burma.

While the colonial officials had limited access to villages of the unadministered tracts, feuding and, later, head-taking and slavery provided them with reasons for forays across the frontier. For the colonial administrators, the wild transfrontier Naga tribes were contrasted with the non-raiding, non-head-hunting and non-slave-trading Nagas in the administered regions. Although they remained outside the colonial domain until 1938 (see Map 1 and 2-route of expedition and the final annexation of territory in 1937), when the Political Control Area was extended, they were indirectly administered through frequent punitive tours as news of headhunting concerned the frontier administration. However, it was not

for Underdeveloped Areas, created in 2003. In 2011, for the first time, the Census has projected a negative population growth rate for Nagaland, a decline in density and also a low decadal growth rate that contradicts the results of 2001, 1991, 1981 that projected Nagaland to have the highest decadal population growth rate in India.

until the Second World War that these areas were heavily militarised and administered more closely by British and Allied forces as Upper Burma was occupied by the Japanese army.

In colonial records and various publications by the administrator-anthropologists, the Yimchunger are known by various names – Yimsungr, Yachungr, Yachungre, Yachumi among others⁵. Tours conducted by Woodthorpe (1875, 1881), J.H. Hutton (1929), J.P. Mills (1995), and later by Pawsey and Archer and NEFA administration officials give fragmentary ethnographic descriptions of Yimchunger villages, while Fürer-Haimendorf captured the Yimchunger through his photographic lens during the 1936 Pangsha expedition, providing us with the only visual records of the Yimchunger Nagas (See photograph 1, Yimchunger Nagas drinking homemade beer). Hutton, in his tour to the Yimchunger villages in 1923, gives beautiful illustrations of Yimchunger artifacts such as the log drum with buffalo head carving from his visit to Shipungr village, the Yimtsing women's coiffure observed among Kuthurr women, an open-ended Yimchunger log drum in Sangpurr village and the distinctive Yimchunger Murung that were different from those of any other tribes he had visited so far. Yimchunger tattoo designs also figure in his notes. Fürer-Haimendorf also notes that the 'Yimsungr' outwardly resembled the Chang, but differed from them their 'manner of treating captured heads, and follow the custom which we were to meet again in the pure' (Fürer-Haimendorf 1938a: 207). He also discusses a Yimchunger log drum. However, he observes that 'nothing is known of their social organization.' He further notes, 'Among them as well as among Kalyo Kengyus much work is still to be done' (Fürer-Haimendorf 1938a: 212).

Yimchunger identity was thus characterised through a process of ethnicising and traditionalising, focusing on their material culture and racial typology. The records of Hutton, Mills, and Fürer Haimendorf serve

5 Hutton's 1921 monograph on Angami places Yachumi and K-K in Central Group of tribes (his classification) 'Yachumi (Yachongr). (called Yachumi by Semas, Yamsongrr by Aos, Yamchongrr by Sangtams, Yamsung by Changs). This tribe, calling itself Yachongr and called Yachumiby the Semas, is situated at the head of the Tita Valley and borders on the Changs, the Sangtams (on two sides), and the Semas (on the west). He writes that little is known about the Yachumi.. Yachumi are said to bury their dead beneath the deceased's bed, throwing out the bones of any of ancestors encountered in the process. The Kiungrrclan of the Yachumi is believed to correspond to the Awomi clan of Semas. The Yachumi do not appear to tattoo.' (Hutton 1921: 377).



Photograph 1: Yimchunger Naga drinking beer. Image taken in Kuthurr village by Christopher Von Furer-Haimendorf (1937). Source: SOAS Furer-Haimendorf Digital Archives (JICS), PPMS19_6_NAGA_1070.

to give these areas a common exotic identity as a repository of Naga material culture and as unexplored Naga tribes rich in tradition, customs, ritual practices and body art (tattoo) that produced their identity as people of another time, who were more primitive and traditional than their administered neighbours where missionary evangelism and the colonial modernisation had led to marked changes in native life. Their aim was to ‘rescue-record’ (Lotha 2007: 42-45) their culture by documenting, making still images and collecting Naga artifacts, both as personal mementos and for museums, so as to reconstruct their culture through exhibitions and displays in the colonial metropolis.

In many of the villages that J.H. Hutton visited in 1923, there were mixed groups of Sangtham, Chang and Yimchunger Nagas. He also observes villages of different tribes in the same areas: ‘I was surprised to see a Sema village (Hutami) on the range east of this, and all mixed up with Yimsung villages’ (Hutton 1923: 63). Such observations were not uncommon. Furer-Haimendorf also notes a village of mixed Changs, Kalyo Kengyus and ‘Yimsungrs’ (Furer-Haimendorf 1938: 207). Earlier, the annual administrative report on Assam for 1921-22 records: ‘Mixed up among the trans frontier Sangtam villages, which also extend nearly

to the Manipur border, is the tribe known as the Yachungr or in its Sema form, “Yachumi” (Hutton 1923:9: 90, emphasis added). The course of intermittent feuding and head-hunting forays did not allow the Yimchunger to interact frequently with their neighbours. Yimchunger identity was not consolidated beyond individual villages and clan lines. It was during the later establishment of administrative boundaries that issues of identity became important, especially in the 1970s.

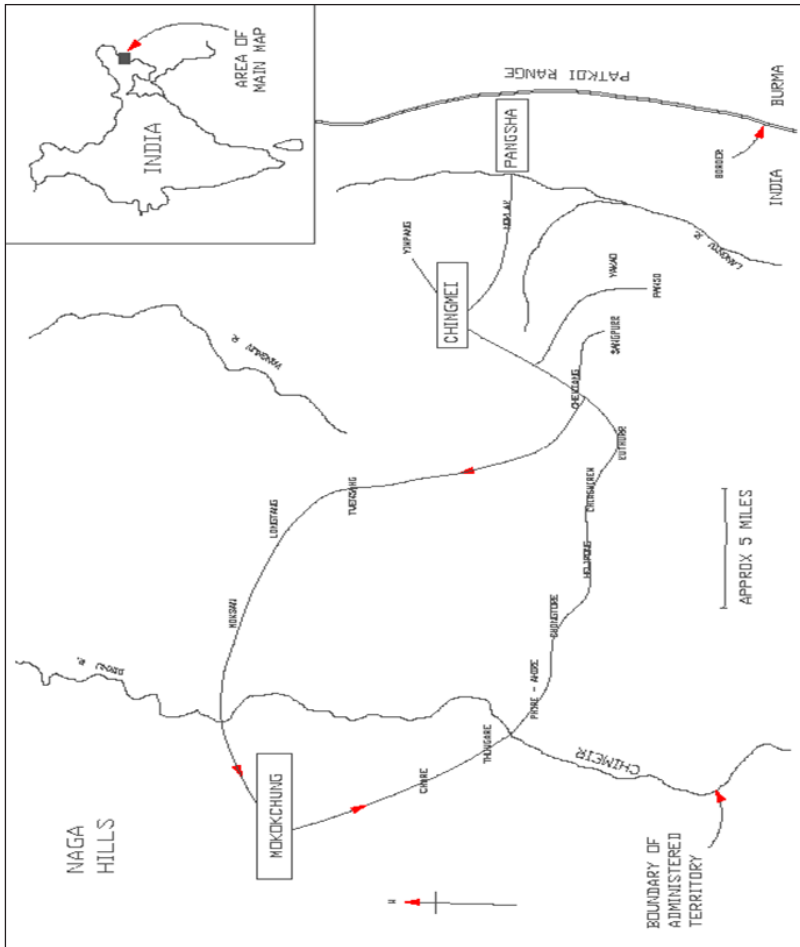
In colonial records the Yimchunger were recorded in the few villages that colonial administrators could visit during their annual tours. At least five prominent villages emerge in the writings of Mills (1937), Hutton (1922), Furer-Haimendorf (1938a, b) as Yimchunger villages. Interestingly Hutton identifies the original home of the Yimchunger as the same place as it is in the account given to me by the Yimchunger elders: ‘On 19th of April on his arrival in ‘Yachungrr’, Hutton writes that, ‘Yachungrr’ is a Sangtham name apparently and the Yachumi themselves call themselves Yimtsung, Yimtsung-Awenrr being the original home of the tribe’ (Hutton 1929: 62).

Post-Independence State Intervention and Identity Creation

Post-colonial interventions during the early years followed similar patterns of the colonial period, violence and military intervention mixed with political patronage along with depictions of backwardness. Post-1947, the tours conducted by circle officers, Assistant Political Officers of NEFA administration give more detailed accounts but they are mostly military notes that talk of the military action in Yimchunger village, the punishments meted out to offenders and rebel leaders. They also offer valuable insights on state schemes of improvement through the popularisation of Wet Terrace Rice cultivation as symbols of development and improvement.

Less prominent than military and punitive actions, the other notable feature of the post-1947 tour diaries is the multiple ways in which Yimchunger Nagas continued to be depicted as backward, an extension of the colonial representation. In fact, the only ethnographic description of the Yimchunger of any significant length appears in the rough notes of an Additional Deputy Commissioner in 1948 which was never published or even rendered in typescript; these are all hand-written scribbles. They describe in some detail Yimchunger farming practices, customs and traditions and Yimchunger dwellings. The tour captures the ADC’s

Sketch Map Showing Route of Expedition



Map1. Route followed by J.P Mills during the Pangsha expedition 1936-37 (Source: The Pangsha Letters 1995)

memories in five Yimchunger villagers as he makes his journey. Moralising on the uncivilised morals of Pangsha men and women, the ADC of Tribal Areas–Tuensang observes in his tour report of 1950-51:

Dr had a very busy day treating V.D [venereal disease] and other patients I am afraid it will be almost impossible to wipe out V.D at Pangsha. I suspect over 20 percent are infected from information

given by the D.Bs [*Dobashis*]. Their social customs is to be blamed for the spread of V.D, special to so called 'love houses' where young people practiced what amount to free love. It was not even possible to trace the source of the infection. The boys and girls having had relationship with so many that they are unable to tell from whom they got infection. I am asking the doctor to submit a report. It is unfortunate that 'civilization man's' disease has come into this primitive society and their moral and social customs have caused such a wide spread of the disease. Their code of morals is quite different from the accepted code of morals of the civilised man. Not to speak of unmarried people, but even married people both man and women have ultimate freedom of relationships. Husbands will smilingly say that their wives got infection from other man and vice versa. I am afraid that those who have been cured by the Dr. will go back and get infected again as soon as they are cured.⁶

Reflecting colonial scales of morality, the Yimchunger Naga were thus classified as 'immoral-naked, violent, indecent, non law abiding people of the hills', (Furer-Haimendorf 1938, Mills 1995) which, in the postcolonial administrator's mind, was paralleled by their status as 'impoverished and backward' people of the no-man's land (Rai 1956, ADC Report).

The post-independence administration tried hard to cultivate new ideas of improvement. In their official tour diaries, the Additional Deputy Commissioners and Political Officers write about the introduction of new terrace plots for the cultivation of paddy. In the 1951 tour diary of the ADC Tribal Areas–Tuensang, the Additional Deputy Commissioner, on his visit to five Yimchunger villages (Yakkor, Sangpure, Shametonger, Wunpunger and Leangkangru), notes that all these villages had some land available where terrace rice plots could be started, adding the observation that the Agricultural Department should help the villagers to do this.

With the formation of Nagaland state in 1963, these areas were merged with the Naga Hills District and made a formal part of the new state. Missionaries from the Sema and later the Ao areas were among the first to enter these so-called formerly unadministered areas of Yimchunger

6 Tour Diary of A.D.C. Tribal Areas, Tuensang, 1951. Record of Research Reports, Papers and Articles. Arunachal State Archives, Itanagar.

Nagas. The added territory of Tuensang was designated by the new state as backward and underdeveloped as it had been long outside the purview of colonial administration. Laws and rules governing these frontier districts were now reconstituted, with the Yimchungers placed under a new political structure, designated a Free Area.

During this period the state government embarked on a massive rice intensification programme, providing agricultural subsidies, extension and training programme through Village Level Workers (VLW) appointed by the Agricultural Department. The new modernisation scheme for local agriculture had a deep impact, not only on farming but also on social relations, identity formation and political patron building. With the region being classified by planners and state officials as underdeveloped and backward, the Eastern Nagas were also given special central government packages under the Borderland Area Development Programme. Six eastern Naga tribes were designated as backward (including the Yimchunger) and, in order to uplift the status of the backward tribes, the government offered development grants and made special provisions for affirmative action through reservation quotas.

The institution of Range and Area Councils lasted up to the late 1970s, when there was a nationwide shift in rural development policy that called for decentralised rural development. In 1980 the Nagaland state legislature adopted the Village Development Board model rules, which devolved financial power to a village level body for economic development of the village through financial decentralisation. The Village Council (a body of village elders) and prominent men including GBs (*gauh buras*) became the legal managers of the village. The Village Development Board was constituted in each village to devolve development grants. In some Yimchunger villages the devolution of financial powers has led to the demand for separate councils in villages that were dominated by other tribes.

This is the context in which the Tikhir–Yimchunger identity struggle has intensified as in other parts of Nagaland where other less recognised sub-tribes are today claiming their past based on cultural differences expressed in their dance form, music, dialect and customs.

The Tikhir–Yimchunger Identity Struggle: A Brief History

Until the 1970s, the Yimchunger and the Tikhirs lived together, although often with contempt and in-fighting between clans and villages. The

Tikhir were looked down upon by their neighbours as people who were inferior. Their speech was ridiculed, as it was Langa-Yimchunger that was recognised as the link language between Yimchunger dialect speakers. Initially, the Tikhir agitation started with claims about the historical discrimination against them as a belittled sub-group within the Yimchunger fold. The very term Tikhir, as used by the Yimchungers was belittling, as it means dirty people. This state of affairs can be seen as cultural differences and alienation, involving a sense of Tikhir subordination and neglect by the wider Pan-Yimchunger community. The question is, how did these differences lead to a demand for separate tribal status that would lead to one of the bloodiest feuds in post-independence Naga history?

With the coming of new roads, transportation facilities, medical clinics, bazaars, plantation seeds, political parties, elections and the church, things changed in the Yimchunger-Tikhir villages as they did in the rest of the Naga Hills. People's lives became connected to the broader social economy outside their villages and were shaped by government development plans and programmes primarily focused on agrarian improvement and political representation. Today, the Tikhirs complain of their lack of political presence, the lack of government jobs, education and the siphoning of development schemes, grants and projects year earmarked for them by their Yimchunger brothers and other advanced tribes.

Political representation became an issue in 1973, when the first general elections were held all over Nagaland. For the Yimchunger area, from 1973 onwards, the local representative in the State Legislative Assembly (SLA) has been a Yimchunger tribal member, which has irked the Tikhirs. 1973 was also the year in which the new Mon district was carved out of the Tuensang district. The new district boundary led to territorial claims and counterclaims between Chang and Konyak Nagas in Tobu, reaching a climax in the 1980s. Similarly, the Yimchunger villagers informed me that many Yimchunger-dominated villages had become dominated by Chang because of the influence of Chang *Dobashis* over the post-colonial administration. The same holds true of other villages on borders between districts and subdivisions, where identities had been negotiated between the dominant tribes.

However, it was not until the 1980s that identity contestation seriously came to the forefront and major clashes broke out between the Tikhir-

speaking sub-group of the Yimchunger and the rest of the Yimchunger tribe. This is when the Tikhir began to demand major sub-tribal status. The Tikhir accused the Yimchunger of appropriating development grants and reservations designated by the state legislature exclusively for the six Eastern Naga underdeveloped backward tribes. The special central assistance under the Backward Area District Schemes, and later under the Department for Underdeveloped Areas (DUDA), were claimed to have been appropriated by Yimchunger villagers. The Tikhirs also claimed that they had been discriminated in Nagaland Public Service Commission exams. These claims were rejected by the Yimchunger public leaders, *Dobashis* and the YTC.

Against the Tikhir's claim for separate tribal/sub-tribal status my Yimchunger interlocutors argued that, while the Yimchunger were a major tribe, the Tikhir simply did not have the numbers to count as a major tribe, like many other tribes in Nagaland who had recently recreated their identity. What is more, there simply were not very many Tikhir-dominated villages. And – the clinching argument for my Yimchunger informants – Yimchungers and Tikhirs shared a common history of origin that bound them together and fostered their identity as part of the Yimchunger. Some villagers explained to me that the Tikhir counter-arguments included the point that, although Tikhir population was small, the geographical spread of their settlement was large. Rumours were everywhere and each individual constructed and defined his own reality of this ongoing identity struggle. The story of a common origin was strongly disputed. Related to this, questions were raised about the meeting of Yimchunger elders in 1948 and the resolution that created the Pan-Yimchunger identity. How representative was this meeting, in fact? Having seen the typescript of the meeting document myself, I can confirm that the document shows that not all Yimchunger village heads/GBs participated in the historic gathering. However, it does seem that a significant majority of them did participate and pledged for consensus. Thus, it was not clear reading the document whether such memorandums were truly representative.

The dispute intensified in 1984 when the Tikhirs demanded that the Church building at Thonoknyu, which was built by Tikhir-speaking people, should be named after the Tikhirs. The matter was quickly taken to the Dobashi Court of the Deputy Commissioner, Tuensang. Since then the

matter has been *sub judice* under the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Tuensang.

In the 1990s the Tikhirs started protesting openly by spelling out the name Tikhir on their matriculation certificates. This, and the proposal to form a Tikhir Tribal Council, were violently protested against by Yimchunger groups. Violence broke out between villages and travelling between villages became life-threatening. Throughout the 1990s the Yimchungers and Tikhirs accused each other of revenge killings. Organised forms of violence were executed when the Tikhir formed armed groups, and they raised their own guerrilla army called *Limuzung*. They also established their own village armies. The armies ambushed each other, as Yimchunger and Tikhir-dominated villages raided and ransacked one other. The battles cost many lives and severely affected farming over many cropping seasons, as narrated by my interlocutors. The Tikhirs were accused of using *punjis* (poisonous booby traps made of bamboos) and arrows to hurt their neighbours during these conflicts. Tikhirs were also accused of disrupting Yimchunger Student Union meetings in Shamatur headquarters. The villages were now more like conclaves; communication between them was thin.

In 2007, a compromise deed was signed between the YTC Council and the Tikhir tribal elders, mediated by the *Dobashis* and political patrons from both communities. This came after a decade-long feud between the two groups. After this, according to my interlocutors in the study village, most of the Tikhir-dominated villages pledged to live in amity and peace with their Yimchunger neighbours. Since then, there has been relative peace, with only occasional clashes between the two groups.

Overview

Colonial ethnographers played an important role in ethnicising the unadministered Nagas through their monographs and photographs. However, in this process, a new category is established: the trans-frontier or free-land Nagas. With the proliferation of the state administration and the diffusion of development programmes, the Nagas of the formerly unadministered tracts were integrated into the circuits of state power. In these frontier areas where the Naga political structure was amorphous, they set about consolidating people into tribe-like groups under centralised, hierarchical leadership. The narrative of cultural alienation is used by the Tikhirs to identify themselves as different, while Yimchunger

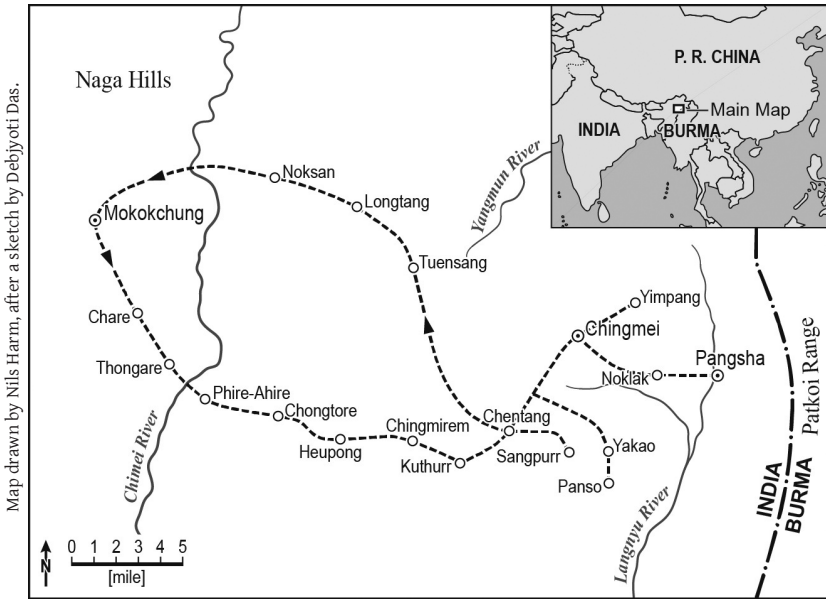
claim to draw reference from their past resolutions and tribal decrees passed in the eve of India's independence to claim their pan-Yimchunger identity. Both the communities are threatened by their public leaders and village elders of the fear to loss of political power and development grants. The Tikhirs point their political absence and resulting lack of development to being a sub-tribe of the Yimchunger, while the Yimchunger feel it as a major political loss of numbers if the Tikhirs would succeed in breaking away from them. The Yimchunger often expressed fears that the creation of new identities would give advantage to surrounding tribes to claim over Yimchunger-Tikhir territory. The unity of the Yimchunger thus was in the interest of the Yimchunger tribe.

As more and more Tikhirs and Yimchungers join the public service and see its benefits; they are no longer against development. Indeed these articulations of identity, I argue, are part of a Tikhir-Yimchunger strategy to improve their chances of being included in state development agendas, which in the absence of their articulation of a distinct ethnic identity will hitherto pass them by. They engage with the state, as Tania Li has argued, 'in a discourse consistent with their knowledge of themselves, their needs and aspiration, and their understanding of what it is ... are possible to demand and expect in this relationship' (Li 2000: 163). The Tikhir claims for a backward status as distinct from the Yimchunger have been brought to light by systematic violence and public vandalism, claimed by the Yimchunger claims to have been unleashed by the Tikhir in towns during public gatherings. Although the Tikhir- Yimchunger battle for authority diffused in recent years, through several compromise deeds and peace treaties, the atmosphere in the area remains tense. During my fieldwork some Tikhir rebels entered a village dominated by Yimchunger and the gun battles were heard as far as my study village. People advised me not to venture into Tikhir-dominated villages.

For their part, the Yimchunger Tribal council have articulated the identity of the pan-Yimchunger uniqueness by reflecting on the resolutions passed by their tribal heads and the status quo maintained by the Deputy Commissioners court and the High Courts. The court stay on the Tikhirs' appeal for a legal resolution of their demand is seen as a blatant denial of an illegitimate demand by the Yimchungers. The Yimchunger use the census count and legal call for the maintenance of status quo in this matter as a major moral victory that justifies their claim

for unity – to stay unified despite the realisation of cultural differences and their ridiculing of the Tikhirs. However, a finer reading reveals many subtleties in these accounts. When these claims and counter-claims are read through the prism of the Yimchunger history, we would come to realize that the Yimchunger had a more discursive history of their own. The Yimchunger men who are busy constructing their historical past are also the first educated men in the village. They hold important positions in the government and have a direct link with the state officials. The Yimchunger were one of the recognised tribes in colonial records. Their articulation of pan-Yimchunger identity adds another edition to identity construction in the Naga Hills based on sub-tribal status. They distinguish themselves from the neighbouring tribes through dress and cultural artifacts. Colonial tours used to collect Naga artifacts and images were a vital instrument in establishing such differences, which come out vividly in the photographic and sketch illustrations of Hutton (1929), Haimendorf (1937, 1938a, 1938b, 1939), Mills (1922, 1926, 1995) and in the tour diaries of the NEFA administrators as highlighted above.

This brings us to the fields of power that shaped the discourse on identity in the newly explored territories. As the colonial knowledge of these tribes grew, the tribes also established distinct identities. When Tuensang district was formed and the boundaries of Tuensang's major tribes were decided, my Yimchunger friends observed that a major section of the Yimchunger bordering villages were remapped as Chang villages by influential Chang *Dobashis* who were involved in demarcating the district and sub-divisions. All over the Eastern Naga territory inter-tribal boundaries are still settled by the powerful tribes. Within the Yimchunger territory the Sema-dominated *Khels* have established their own Village Council, for example Sekur village. Their identity is Sema within the Yimchunger territory. The Tikhirs have used this as a strategy to explore their own position in the struggle for a separate tribal identity that could give them both political representation and make them directly beneficiaries of Backward Areas Development Grants and provide other reservation benefits. Thus, the practice of constructing these identities is based on their historical uniqueness and on questions of distinct origin history, but also fashioned by historical moments of colonial representation of the Naga tribes in ethnographies that have given them a voice towards the making of new identities.



Map 2 Shows the area brought under colonial control after the Pangsha expedition of 1937 (Source: India Office Records and Private papers, British Library, IOR/M3/162)

The Yimchunger history is thus loaded with political meaning. Different narratives of origin emerge and complicate the history of their forefathers. As one Tikhir villager said, 'we migrated through the Zanki river.' When we left his house my Yimchunger assistant exclaimed that these histories were all constructed and fabricated, and that this narration was an exaggerated account of their common origin. The contest over the narration of past origin history has found meaning in contemporary struggles over resources and territories. Many rumours filtered into fieldwork notebooks, one being that the Tikhirs control a vast territory although they are small in number. The recognition of the Tikhir as a major sub-tribe would hamper the pan-Yimchunger identity. According to the Yimchunger Tribal Council, when the Yimchunger elders adopted the resolution of a pan-Yimchunger identity in 1947, on the eve of India's independence, they made sure Langa was upheld as their common dialect. Today in Yimchunger villages, Tikhirs speak their own dialect in the household and among their kin. My Yimchunger friends often cited examples of how Yimchunger terms differed from Tikhir. But the villages

I visited were dominated by Yimchunger households and lineages, where the Tikhirs also identified themselves as Yimchungers for fear of being persecuted for resisting unity. In many of the heated debates regarding the Yimchunger-Tikhir identity, the Yimchungers issued indirect messages that Tikhirs should be aware of their show-off, they had after all merged their identity for a common future. Still, in the few villages where Tikhirs command a majority, there were voices of resentment, frequent reports of violence, gunfire and an aura of fear between the two guerrilla groups formed by the community.

In conclusion, ethnic identity struggles between the Yimchunger and Tikhin Naga tribes illustrate new dimensions of the political and social life of people who were once excluded as hill people of the trans-frontier. Post-independent governments have acknowledged the backwardness and have made provisions for affirmative action through reservation in public employment and through political representation of frontier tribes in the State Legislative Assembly. This has created internal conflict among the tribes/sub-tribes. The politics of identity are thus subsumed in post-independence state politics and the agency of communities they serve to create.

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