



## Performing Identity

### The Transformation of a Tangsa Festival in Assam, Northeast India

This article looks at the Wihu kuh festival, which was celebrated by the Tangsa living in Assam in 2010 as their “traditional” festival in an attempt to create a common pan-Tangsa identity. This study reveals the compromises made by the recently converted Christian Tangsa, as well as those still following their traditional practices, in order for them to discover and even invent common shared ground. The factors determining the final form of the festival and the impact this representation has had on the self-image of the Tangsa and their projected identity is also discussed. I illustrate that the new Tangsa identity has been consciously fashioned in a form that not only enables internal consolidation but which also bolsters the social and political position of the Tangsa in the wider world around them. Their principal aim is to project a new multi-faceted identity which draws both from their traditional ethnic past and from their modern multi-religious present.

KEYWORDS: ritual and performance—instrumentalization of identity—agency—culture and tradition

**T**ANGSA IS an umbrella term for a collection of small ethnic groups (supposedly related to the Naga) who have migrated to India from Myanmar, most of them within the last couple of centuries, and have settled in the northeastern Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. In the last few decades, rapid changes to their lifestyles and to their traditional practices have occurred as a result of their migration down from the Patkai hills to the plains of Assam, their consequent exposure to and acceptance of the way of life in the plains, and their subsequent participation in the democratic processes of the Indian state. Furthermore, the conversion of most of the Tangsa population in Assam to Christianity in recent years has implied that many Tangsa have given up their old cultural practices.

The newly converted Christian Tangsa had initially believed that their new religion could also suffice as their culture, but many have now come to understand that religion alone cannot help them secure their ethnic identity. On the other hand, the few non-Christian Tangsa still left have also realized that putting religious divides before ethnic unity could lead to their ethnic annihilation. Therefore, there have been intense efforts on the part of both groups in recent years to come together to jointly celebrate a “traditional” festival in an attempt to create a common pan-Tangsa identity.

According to TURNER (1982, 22), “Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances.” Hence, the representation of Tangsa culture as evidenced in the act of it being performed at village festivals can also offer valuable insights into what it means to be Tangsa today, both to the people themselves and to those around them. Studying these processes can also reveal how village festivals reflect as well as cause cultural change in Tangsa society.

In this article I wish to take a closer look at the Wihu kuh festival that was organized, ostensibly jointly, by all the Tangsa living in Assam in 2010. I will view it in light of smaller festivals organized by the non-Christian Tangsa in earlier years to discover the compromises that have been made on both sides in order to put up a united common front. Factors determining the final form of the festival and the impact this representation has had on the self-image of the Tangsa and their projected identity will also be discussed. In doing so, I hope to illustrate that they wish to project a new multi-faceted identity that draws both from their traditional

ethnic past and from their modern multi-religious present. I also hope to justify my claim that this new shared Tangsa identity has been consciously fashioned in a form that not only enables internal consolidation but also bolsters the social and political position of the Tangsa in the wider world around them.

As suggested to me by Philippe Ramirez (personal communication), I shall differentiate between traditional rituals and newer ones on the basis of whom the ritual is addressed to or is meant for. While traditional rituals are usually addressed to some spirit or deity, the newer rituals are addressed primarily to the audience. Hence they are “performed,” as are songs and dances, and will be assumed to be part of the cultural performance<sup>1</sup> or show. Here I am assuming traditional rituals to have both symbolic and “performative” (in AUSTIN’s [1962] sense and usage) meaning while the newer rituals will be only symbolic. Given this distinction, it becomes possible even for older traditional rituals to be “performed” and hence transformed into newer ones, where the actions remain the same, but the intention has changed. I thus also argue that the exercise of finding common shared ground acceptable to all has brought about the transformation of some of their older traditional rituals into cultural performances.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion that follows has been divided into six parts. I will begin with an introduction and some background information about the Tangsa, followed by a description of the Wihu kuh festival as celebrated by the Tangsa at three levels: at home as a family, together in the village, and centrally as a community. Basing my analysis on empirical data, I will then demonstrate that Tangsa identity, or as much of it as can be seen in these festivals, is no longer so much about *observance* of traditional rituals as it is about their *performance*. Next, I problematize some of these issues further to show the connection between construction of identity and acquisition of agency, the unstated motives of the principal actors and their not-so-obvious stakes in the whole matter, and the parallels to be seen in Nagaland. Finally, I note the role of the anthropologist in influencing and impacting the very field she sets out to understand and faithfully report about.

#### THE TANGSA IN ASSAM TODAY: A MEDLEY OF IMAGES

Tangsa is a term adopted by Indian administrators post independence to gather together about thirty-five different trans-Patkai tribes<sup>3</sup> who had come into India from Myanmar but were too small in number individually to merit a separate listing of their own. The motivation behind this was perhaps to keep the Tangsa separate from the Naga<sup>4</sup> who had already started their struggle for sovereignty by then. One meaning of the word Tangsa is “hill people.”<sup>5</sup> There were 40,086 Tangsa in India in 2001<sup>6</sup> but there are many more Tangsa still in the Sagaing Division in Myanmar (where they are also called Tangshang). In India they are mainly concentrated in a small area that is partly in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh and partly in the Margherita subdivision of the Tinsukia district of Assam. The route of migration is an old one, but is still in use and migration from Myanmar into India still continues.

It is inevitable that such a numerically small group will feel marginalized in a country of more than a billion people, but even among ethnic communities in Northeast India today there are groups (like the Bodos) that number more than a million. Furthermore, the Tangsa are scattered in little pockets and can make no claims to a territorial or locational identity; moreover, their relation to the Naga is still very controversial and problematic.<sup>7</sup> For these and many other reasons,<sup>8</sup> and following cues from other ethnic groups in the region, they have proactively adopted the term “Tangsa” for themselves and are now consciously trying to forge a distinctive and new Tangsa identity. On the other hand, since many of the tribes clubbed together as Tangsa do not share language, cultural traditions, or even religion, it is very hard for them to find shared common ground. Added to this are problems of homogenization and the leveling of differences caused by the intermixing with other communities, the influence of and exposure to the pan-Indian media, and the adoption of a “modern” way of life.<sup>9</sup> In this the predicament of the Tangsa seems to closely resemble that of the Naga:

Today the Nagas are fighting for a joint, supra-tribal identity which in practice proves difficult to grasp. In particular the young urban generation is caught in a feeling of inner conflict. Its traditional culture has by and large been consigned to oblivion, while any number of obstacles stand in the way of a new, all-encompassing identity: an underdeveloped economy and infrastructure, tribalism, the religious fundamentalism of the parent generation, the smouldering “Indo-Naga-Conflict,” and a concept of culture colored strongly by the new media, that is, as a second hand experience fed to them by any number of foreign programmes on satellite stations and via the internet.

The search for an identity between headhunt and Bible, between village structure and national sentiments, is often directed towards those few elements that still allow a link to be forged between the old, traditional culture and present-day lifestyles. (OPPITZ et al. 2008, 12–13)

Although I will concentrate mainly on the Tangsa living in Assam, the situation of the Tangsa in Arunachal Pradesh can be thought to be similar, with one important exception: Arunachal is a tribal majority state<sup>10</sup> while Assam is not. The Tangsa population in Assam today is no more than ten thousand strong, and they are spread throughout about twenty-six villages.<sup>11</sup> Those who came into India a long time ago (like the Katoi) have become Hinduized and have been assimilated into the mainstream Assamese population. Those (such as the Tikhak) who came about a couple of centuries ago along with the Singpho are mostly Buddhist today. There are also a few households left where old traditions are still practiced. In the early 1970s, a wave of missionary activity led by the Ao and Sema Baptist missionaries from Nagaland resulted in many Tangsa converting to Christianity. These efforts were so successful that of the Tangsa living in the twenty-six villages mentioned above, only six villages are now majority Buddhist. As a result, the non-Christian Tangsa in Assam number only a few hundred people in total. We shall look at just two villages, Kharangkong and Phulbari, in Assam. The majority tribe in Kharang-



FIGURE 1. Drinking rice beer and making merry at home. Kha-rangkong, 5 January 2009. Photograph by Juergen Schoepf.

kong is Cholim (Tonglum) and they are either Buddhists or unconverted, while the Rera tribe in Phulbari are almost all Baptist Christians today.

#### VILLAGE FESTIVALS OF THE TANGSA

As with the Nagas, the question of identity has become a central concern for the Tangsa. Moreover, as RAMIREZ (2007, 92) remarks,

It is not cultural homogeneity that makes an “ethnic group” but a perception. It is through such representations that people feel they belong to a coherent and perennial entity. In this sense, the Assamese ethnic groups, or “tribes” as they are called and call themselves, are real. Thus remains the task of analyzing the competing articulations of identity discourses and the “reality” of other domains.

Village festivals are important sites for discovering the community’s own processes of self-expression and self-representation. Although traditional Tangsa village festivals have undergone drastic changes in their relevance, significance, and cultural content in recent times, they have also become interesting for exactly those very reasons.

I thus wish to take a closer look at the festival of Wihu kuh,<sup>12</sup> which was traditionally celebrated by some Tangsa tribes at the end of the harvesting season as a kind of thanksgiving festival.<sup>13</sup> Wihu is the spirit of the earth and Wihu kuh was traditionally celebrated in each Tangsa home at dawn by sacrificing a chicken while saying the traditional ritual prayer called “Rhim-rhim” at the ritual post,<sup>14</sup> thanking



FIGURE 2. The decorated ritual post, usually in the kitchen, in a Tangsa home. Kharangkong, 5 January 2011. Photograph by Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh.

FIGURE 3. Rice beer being served in the field. Kharangkong, 5 January 2009. Photograph by Juergen Schoepf.



the spirit of the earth for giving them a good harvest and asking her to bring them greater prosperity in the future. This was usually followed by doing augury with the claws of the chicken, visiting each other's homes, singing the Wihu song,<sup>15</sup> drinking rice beer, and making merry.

Most of the tribes belonging to the Pangwa subgroup of the Tangsa did not have hereditary kings but had powerful village chiefs.<sup>16</sup> Rich and powerful Tangsa chieftains used to perform a sort of "feast of merit" called the Wangjang kuh to show off their wealth and to gain greater prestige and power. It involved carrying out the ritual sacrifices of animals (and in some Tangsa groups, also humans; see BARUA 1991, chapter 7), feasting, singing, and merry-making lasting many days. One of our main Tangsa consultants, Lukam Tonglum from Kharangkong village, is a self-styled present-day Tangsa chief. He is the president of various Tangsa organizations like the Tangsa (Naga) Cultural Society and has recently become the vice chairman of the recently constituted Development Council awarded to eight ethnic groups in the Tirap area, including the Tangsa. Respected and admired by many, he is very concerned about preserving their "old traditions and culture,"<sup>17</sup> and is very keen to ensure that the Tangsa in Assam celebrate at least the Wihu kuh festival every year.

To do so he has tried to combine elements from the Wihu kuh festival and the Wangjang kuh to create a new kind of festival, which he celebrates every year on 5 January. He claims he has been doing so since 1985, but we were present at the festival only since 2008. What follows is a description of the festival celebrated in Kharangkong on 5 January 2009. As the self-appointed host of the celebrations, Tonglum personally bought a pig and a cow and had them sacrificed on the morning of Wihu kuh. He also invited (by sending out printed invitation cards in English) not only the entire village of Kharangkong and his relatives but also Tangsa and non-Tangsa elders from elsewhere and government officials to attend the celebrations. The format of the festival was very much like that of a secular government meeting, with a flag hoisting ceremony in the beginning followed by a public meeting, where the language spoken by almost everyone was Assamese, the official language of the state. Traditional games and sports as well as "folk dances"<sup>18</sup> were included in the program, and lunch was served to about two hundred people. The most surprising element was an elaborately decorated replica of the ritual post (at which the ritual prayer is traditionally done at home) that was set up in the middle of the village field, at the foot of which a large container with rice beer was placed. A few older Tangsa ladies later sang the Wihu song drinking rice beer at that post; in this manner the first step towards dissociation of the older ritual from its original site was made.

Although this was how Wihu kuh was celebrated locally in Lukam Tonglum's house and in the village of Kharangkong, the broader picture is somewhat different. Some Buddhist Pangwa in Assam also celebrate Wihu kuh in a similar form but without sacrificing animals. The Baptist Christians are strict about not drinking rice beer and not sacrificing animals and hence have given up celebrating Wihu kuh altogether. But all sections fear the loss of ethnic identity due to the gradual

FIGURE 4. The sacrificial altar at the village boundary. Kharangkong, 5 January 2009. Photograph by Juergen Schoepf.



FIGURE 5. Singing the Wihu song in the field. Kharangkong, 5 January 2009. Photograph by Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh.

loss of knowledge of language and of cultural and ritual traditional practices. This last worry has led to a gradual convergence of ideas: on the one hand, there is Lukam Tonglum's wish to unite all the Tangsa groups and to preserve their traditional culture, and on the other the gradual realization by the progressive section of the Christian Tangsa that their religious identity cannot compensate for their ethnic identity. In addition, the Baptist Church wished to demonstrate that it supports the preservation of cultural traditions and is not opposed *per se* to indigenous traditions.<sup>19</sup> What has resulted is the Sawi kuh festival (Sawi kuh is the Rera term for the Wihu kuh festival) that was celebrated in the Baptist Christian village of Phulbari on 5 January 2010.

So what was special about this festival? It was organized jointly by all Tangsa villages in Assam, there was large scale community participation, and there was a manifold increase in scale. Many important community leaders, highly-placed government officials, and the media were invited. The organization was done in a very professional manner;<sup>20</sup> elements from secular government meetings and from popular "cultural shows" were incorporated. A "souvenir" was released to mark the occasion, and more than five hundred people had lunch that day at Phulbari. Significantly, quite a few young Christian boys and girls from Phulbari wore traditional dresses and participated in the folk dances that day, many for the first time in their lives.

There was much accommodation to be seen from all quarters that day in Phulbari. Everyone joined in the Christian prayer that was offered at the beginning of the day's program. No animals were sacrificed, but the ritual altar was erected and the ritual prayer was performed by older ladies from Kharangkong. There was no brewing of rice beer in Phulbari, but it was served. The Wihu song was sung, not in homes or in the open fields, but only at the ritual altar and on stage. Although both the Christian and the non-Christian hosts did present a united common front to their guests, fissures erupted almost immediately afterwards. For example, the Phulbari elders and church leaders were extremely unhappy over the free flow of rice beer during the festival—they claimed they had agreed only to it being used for ritual purposes.

In any case, the transformation from what we had seen in previous years to the large community festival we saw in Phulbari was quite dramatic. It was projected and advertised as a pan-Tangsa festival spanning religious, ethnic, linguistic divides, and it had incorporated elements both from the traditional festival and from modern-day, state-sponsored festivals.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as we saw in the case of the Wihu song, traditional cultural items were moved out of the house, to the fields, and then to the stage;<sup>22</sup> traditional rituals (like sacrificing animals) were replaced by secular rituals (like the hoisting of a flag); and new rituals (such as a cultural procession) were invented to replace older ones. Non-Tangsa cultural troupes and popular entertainers were also invited to give the program wider appeal. Finally, in order to make up for what they had to leave out to meet the acceptable-to-all criterion, they inducted some new and popular elements from the pan-Indian cultural cauldron into their cultural repertoire—pop singers were invited to perform and the Tangsa flag has been designed. Tangsa anthems are now being composed, and



FIGURE 6. Flag hoisting. Phulbari, 5 January 2010. Photograph by Stephen Morey.



FIGURE 7. Cultural Procession. Phulbari, 5 January 2010. Photograph by Stephen Morey.

the day is not far off when we shall see a fashion show become part of a traditional Tangsa festival.

In this process the popular performative visual component has increased at the expense of the traditional ritual component.<sup>23</sup> The inclusion of some mainstream elements into their repertoire implies conformism, and the public meeting—which was conducted mainly in English and Assamese, giving it a marked similarity to official government meetings—perhaps gave the festival greater legitimacy and made it seem representative of the entire Tangsa population in Assam, both in the eyes of the Tangsa people themselves as well as to the highly-placed non-Tangsa who were invited to attend.

#### IDENTITY AND ITS PERFORMANCE

Before discussing the implications of these occurrences for Tangsa identity, let me briefly enumerate the reasons, both stated and implied, for holding such a festival. It was a celebration of a supposedly “traditional” Tangsa festival, aimed at internal consolidation within the Tangsa, the preservation of cultural traditions (but often with some modification, modernization, reinvention, and standardization), the creation of a new pan-Tangsa identity, and the consequent increase in their visibility and agency<sup>24</sup> in the non-Tangsa world around them. Most of the Tangsa who came to attend the festival came because they felt the need to be present at “their” festival, although not many knew much about what they could expect from it. Many others came to meet friends and relatives from other villages; the younger people attended basically because they wanted to enjoy it and have some fun. In addition, by organizing the festival, the political aspirations of the main festival organizers were also furthered, as in this particular instance both Lukam Tonglum and Molu Rera (the local organizer at Phulbari) were nominated as members of the Development Council (with Lukam Tonglum as vice chairman) which was announced early in March 2011.

In Phulbari, a unified but multi-faceted identity was sought to be projected, asserting both their modern Indian-ness as well as their ethnic distinctiveness. Furthermore, it was clear that this “new” Tangsa identity has been *consciously* and *deliberately* fashioned by a few Tangsa leaders,<sup>25</sup> keeping in view broader as well as personal considerations in order to substantiate their claims of difference within sameness.

But this analysis begs two questions: First, can such an effort—to construct such a pan-Tangsa identity—ever be successful? The answer is not at all clear, for the fact is that not every Tangsa tribe has the Wihu song or the Sahpolo dance. Additionally, the Hornbill feathers cannot become a Tangsa symbol so long as the Naga-Tangsa connection is not sorted out, and furthermore, there is no common Tangsa language, so even if they learnt how to dance it would not be easy to decide in which language they should sing. Finally, this was perhaps the first and last time<sup>26</sup> that Wihu kuh was celebrated in this manner in Phulbari if the extreme unhappiness expressed by the Phulbari church elders after the festival is any indication.

The second question is even more obvious—is it not the case that large festivals of this kind, by their very nature, cannot hope to achieve much in terms of what they can tell the audience about the ethnic identities of the participating communities? Moreover, there is nothing novel or distinctive in any of what was seen in Phulbari. This phenomenon is not peculiar to the Tangsa alone—in fact the Tangsa are doing today exactly as many other ethnic groups in Assam have done<sup>27</sup> in recent years in their effort to reinvent themselves and to give themselves a new identity in keeping with the modern order of things. And therein lies the first contradiction—in trying to present their ethnic distinctiveness, the Tangsa begin to look and behave more and more like others.

While this might typically be another case of common cultural identity creation, it is nonetheless fascinating to look behind the curtains to discover the processes of standardization, reinvention, and modernization of traditions that these festivals are witness to. It is hard to discern the vintage of their traditions, but at least there is the feeling that there is something actively being done to create a full repertoire,<sup>28</sup> either by injecting fresh life (by using modern choreography) into almost-forgotten dances or by composing Christian lyrics to fit traditional tunes, which are on the verge of being lost forever. The Wihu song, which is on the verge of disappearing along with the older generation, is now being resurrected in the form of a Wihu dance. Both adaptation and creativity are very hard at work in this ongoing process.

#### PROBLEMATIZING THE ANALYSIS

Let me conclude by problematizing some of my own conclusions stated above. First, how is one to explain the surprising readiness and ease with which these diverse tribes have accepted the term “Tangsa” and have made it their own?<sup>29</sup> Even in this the Tangsa seem to be following the path shown by the Nagas who adopted the foreign term “Naga” as an ethnonym that provided a sense of identity (OPPITZ et al. 2008, 24). Hence the recognition of the need to find a common name for themselves, albeit prodded on by Indian administrators, was perhaps the first step towards recognizing the need to have a new identity. Earlier, perhaps their tribal affiliations were enough, but not in a modern democratic state, where numerical strength matters. I have already described how the exercise of finding common shared ground has restricted their identity presentation to a few symbols and a few items of cultural performance, at least when using village festivals as a platform to present themselves.

All these processes point to modification, reinvention, and local standardization on the one hand but also to homogenization, modernization, conformism, and the influence of the larger world on the other. However, disregarding these details, as already mentioned there is possibly nothing new in the processes I observed. But if we differentiate between the “older” tribal identities that these groups supposedly held when they were still their own masters in the hills and the “new” pan-

Tangsa identity that they are trying to construct and project today, many apparent contradictions come to light.

First, for reasons already mentioned, it is clear that the very need to have a shared common identity is itself a “modern” need<sup>30</sup> partly imposed by the Indian state. Second, this modern need is felt more acutely only by a small group of Tangsa leaders<sup>31</sup>—perhaps the emerging new Tangsa elite—who usually have other, often personal reasons for wishing to project a new and consolidated Tangsa identity. Third, the emic understanding of Tangsa identity (and of their culture) itself has undergone a transformation from one defined by characteristic and meaningful traditional ritual to one based on visually attractive performance.<sup>32</sup> This is so much the case that today most of the Tangsa youth believe their culture to be associated simply with dance, song, dress, food, language<sup>33</sup> and perhaps not too surprisingly, also with festivals—but not festivals of the old vintage variety, but modern-day ones like the Phulbari event.<sup>34</sup>

However, the older Tangsa leaders still believe and claim that they are organizing these festivals to protect and preserve their traditional ethnic culture and distinctiveness. As for what they might consider “traditional,” Oppitz et al. state:

So what is now regarded as “traditional” is often equated with the terms ‘pre-colonial’ or “pre-Christian.” Although isolated elements of their lost culture have found their way into present times, they mostly lack their former context.... Personal memories of the “olden days” have become rare, because few of the generation that still experienced them are still alive. (OPPITZ et al. 2008, 18)

While it is true that concerted efforts have been made to discover and retain elements from the Tangsa past that are acceptable to all,<sup>35</sup> ironically it is also evident that in the process of doing so, they have also presided over the dismantling of some of the essential elements of their older, traditional culture. The very things they believed they were preserving are being dismembered—the ritual meaning edited out from the performance, the lyrics made irrelevant to the song, the meaning made redundant to the message. And these are very serious stakes, for on the day they lose their Wihu song they will have also lost their migration history. From all current indications, the Tangsa festivals will repeat, in close detail, what one has already seen happening to the Naga and their much-hyped Hornbill Festival:

But what effects has the festival had outside of these political motives? The government wishes to offer the inhabitants of Nagaland elements from their old culture with which they can identify, but only those elements that harmonize with Christian precepts of morality and religion. And everything that does not correspond to the current—politically correct—idea of cultural identity is left out. Non-Christian rituals are reduced to a farce, and if a ritual actually is performed, then it only occurs after a loudspeaker announcement has stated that it is a practice from the past. The screenplay for this “culture show” consists of the same fare that is served up the world over at folkloric events: an empty husk done up in a banal presentation as nothing more than kitsch. Much of what is shown at the festival serves a highly commercialized, superficial understanding of culture;

only carefully selected, innocuous elements of the old culture are presented as a kind of symbolic gesture. (VON STOCKHAUSEN 2008, 71)

### CONCLUSION

I hope I have adequately demonstrated that various considerations—some nostalgic, some contingent, some religious, and some largely pragmatic (and fuelled by the political and economic aspirations of a small, active elite)—have led to a shift in function and purpose of these festivals, from a predominantly ritualistic, celebratory, thanksgiving, or victory-in-war meaning of earlier times to a predominantly social and festive meaning of today. They are now aimed at visual and cultural entertainment and at presenting the ethnic as well as modern credentials of the Tangsa to the world. And with the change of function, the form of the festivals has also undergone a lot of change; for instance, that it is now held in an open arena with a stage and lasts only for a day. In other words, Tangsa festivals have been reinvented both in form and function.

Finally, as far as their process of identity construction is concerned, it seems as if it does not really matter so much *what* their identity is as long as they have one. From this it follows that the tiny Tangsa population living in Assam have succeeded in figuring out how best to *instrumentalize* the concept of their ethnic identity, in their efforts to gain visibility and agency to further their own interests in the world around them and to give them more reasons for proudly flaunting their new-look Tangsa antecedents.

### A FINAL CAVEAT

This article is based on fieldwork done as part of a project research team that includes Dr. Stephen Morey (linguist, Melbourne) and Dr. Jürgen Schöpf (ethnomusicologist, Vienna). Before I end, I need to add a caveat because I am not sure how much of what we saw happening in Kharangkong and Phulbari happened simply because of our presence there. Lukam Tonglum and many others have told us repeatedly that the very fact that we, a team of foreign researchers, want to know more about their traditions has helped them to value and feel proud of their own cultural heritage, and this, coming at a time when they were beginning to realize the need to be seen and heard in the world around them, has possibly added fuel to, if not kick-started, the whole succession of events as we have witnessed them in the last few years. In other words, I am not sure this is what we would have seen happening if we had not been there to see it. While it is a fact that identity considerations have become a very important issue in the discussions and deliberations of the Tangsa elite in recent years, it is not clear whether festivals and their performances would have assumed such a significant role in this process of identity construction and projection if our team of researchers had not landed on the scene and expressed great interest in documenting and recording their Wihu song and dances.

## NOTES

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1. I use the word “performance” here in TURNER’s (1969) or SCHECHNER’s (1988) sense. Performative actions will be understood to be not just reproductive, but at the same time also reflexive and constitutive.

2. RAMIREZ (2007, 106) has a similar opinion when he says “the fact is that today, people rely largely on cultural appearances in their identity building.”

3. I will use the term “tribal” while referring to the Tangsa because the Tangsa do this themselves and also because in India the word “tribal” is used as official terminology. The Tangsa are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) by the government of India under the “Other Naga groups” category where they are listed as “Tangsa” (Naga).

4. The Naga, like the Tangsa, are also another collection of ethnic groups in the northeast Indian state of Nagaland. There are sixteen recognized Naga tribes and many more if one counts those living outside Nagaland and in Myanmar.

5. This is literally “children of the hills” in some Tangsa languages, and it belongs to the Pangwa subgroup. Another meaning of the word *tang* is “to cut,” perhaps alluding to their earlier practice of performing human sacrifice. For more information, see BARUA 1991.

6. See the statistics provided by the Census of India: [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_Data\\_2001/Census\\_Data\\_Online/Language/Statement/htm](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/Statement/htm) (accessed 14 September 2013).

7. The Tangsa-Naga issue has become further convoluted in recent times because of the relation of some of the underground Naga groups to the Tangsa living in Changlang and in Assam.

8. The most important reason is that they need to secure their Scheduled Tribe status. This ensures various concessions and privileges from the Indian state that the Tangsa are keen to avail themselves of.

9. A “modern life” roughly means having electricity, television, mobile phones at home, reasonable infrastructure (roads and transportation), and access to basic health and education. The Tangsa living in the plains of Assam have not only taken to the relatively less demanding wet rice cultivation but also to the reasonably more lucrative tea cultivation.

10. This means that landownership in Arunachal is restricted to tribal people, and the tribal communities living there have certain privileges and concessions not available to non-tribals.

11. These villages are almost all mixed villages. For instance, Kharangkong and Phulbari are villages with about two hundred families, of which the Tangsa account for roughly a quarter. The rest are mainly Ahoms, Nepalis, Biharis, and other ethnic groups. However, in both villages, the Tangsa population live together in one side of the village.

12. “Wi” is the Tangsa word for grandmother and generally “kuh” means to gather or to assemble. So the term “kuh” is a general term for festivals but traditionally the Wihu kuh festival was also called *kuh*.

13. The concept of thanksgiving is not used here in the Christian context.

14. This is usually one of the inner posts of the house, often located in the kitchen, at which most of the rituals are done.

15. These days the Wihu song is usually sung in the form of a duet by a host and a guest wherein the host invites the guests into their home to partake of the rice beer and the roast meat on the occasion of Wihu kuh. The long version, however, tells the migration history of the Tangsa tribes—it is a song of epic length (it used to be sung by two singers for several hours, often from dusk to dawn). The language of the song used in the Wihu and other traditional songs is different from the everyday spoken language, as a result of which not many Tangsa understand the meaning of the Wihu song any more. Moreover, the fact that all the Tangsa languages are still oral further endangers the survival of the old songs and stories. For more on the Wihu song, see BARKATAKI-RUSCHEWEYH and MOREY (2013).

16. BOUCHERY (2007, 116) claims that “The Konyak, Wancho, Nocte and Tangsa groups, who occupy the northernmost part of the Naga Hills, have both stratified lineages and paramount chiefs (Ang, Lowang, Lungwang respectively) whose authority extends over a territorial domain consisting of a group of allied villages, and often behave like true autocrats.” However, I did not see much evidence of this among the Tangsa Pangwa groups.

17. By his own admission many of the dances that are performed in Kharangkong today are new and have been choreographed by Mr. Tonglum himself from older dances that they used to perform in the hills. Earlier it was the tradition that when the drums were brought out blood had to flow (that is, some animal had to be sacrificed—even human sacrifice was not unknown among some Tangsa tribes). Tonglum claims that it is mainly through his efforts that today drums can be played as part of any cultural event—again a dissociation of the cultural (the playing of the drum) from the ritual (the sacrifice) and hence a reduction in the significance of the drum from a ritual object with a ritual function to that of a mere musical instrument.

18. This is the term used by Mr. Tonglum in the invitation letter. As it turned out, a few dances, including the Sahpolo dance (which would traditionally be performed only during the Mol festival celebrated in April or May by some other Tangsa groups), were performed and the Wihu song was also sung, not at home, as was the case traditionally, but out in the open festival field.

19. The Baptists have been accused of destroying traditional culture and forcing new converts to burn their traditional objects in the 1970s. Although VON STOCKHAUSEN (2008, 67) describes what he saw in an Ao Naga village, the situation in Christian Tangsa villages are very similar: “It can be established that the longer the Christian church has had a foothold in a village, the more of the knowledge of the old culture has been abandoned. I was able to witness an eloquent example of this in a village belonging to the Ao: the population there had been forbidden for a number of decades to sing their traditional songs. Even love songs were banned on account of their non-Christian origins. Since the ban has been maintained for a long while, there is now almost no one left in the village who can still recall parts of the traditional songs.”

20. Committees were formed; professionals were engaged to help out with the construction of the pavilions as well as with managing the lights, sound system, and so on; and donations were elicited.

21. A good example of this is the Dihing Patkai Festival, which is organized on an abandoned WWII air-strip near the Assam-Arunachal border in January or February almost every year.

22. This therefore brought about a dissociation of ritual (of the singing of the Wihu song at home to invite the spirit of Wihu or guests to their house) from place and function, as it was presented in the festival merely as just another item in the cultural program.

23. Some traditional rituals have been reinvented as cultural performances while new secular and modern rituals have been invented and added to the repertoire. The cultural program had more dances than songs, and there was a greater emphasis on costumes and accessories, rehearsals, and onstage effects.

24. For example, the Tangsa are now demanding a local holiday on 5 January every year in order to celebrate their annual Kuh festival.

25. Again a parallel is to be found in the Naga story, as seen in VON STOCKHAUSEN's article (2008, 58) in which he "wishes to demonstrate how the possibility of formulating identity continues to be exploited in our times for both political and religious ends... identity seems to be consciously 'shaped' and 'calculated' in equal measure.... More than ever, identity seems to be a political expedient among the Nagas—in both the religious as well as the political context."

26. This prediction has proved correct till the time this article went to press in Autumn 2013.

27. However, unlike many other groups, the Tangsa have so far stopped short of resorting to violence to have their demands met.

28. As a middle-aged Tangsa leader told me, "We have to go to the [Patkai] hills [of Myanmar] to *find* our traditional dress! Once we have found it we have to then make sure we get our women to weave and have enough dresses ready in time for the next festival."

29. Although the Hakhuns are officially included under the Tangsa umbrella, linguistically and historically they are very close to the Noctes. But despite this, all Hakhuns we asked told us, without a single exception, that now they consider themselves to be Tangsa and not Nocte.

30. This "modern" need is in any case not older than the official recognition of the term "Tangsa" itself in the 1950s.

31. Except for a small group who took all the decisions, the rest of the Tangsa people we met at Phulbari and Kharangkong did not have much of an idea or very strong opinions about how the festivals would be organized.

32. This dissociation of ritual meaning from its performance can also be explained as a separation of the sacred from the profane/secular as described by DURKHEIM (1965, 47). As long as the rituals were being performed in the proper time, place, and context, ritual meanings were retained, but as soon as sacred rituals were turned into mere secular performances, the meaning was necessarily dissociated from it. One could carry this train of thought further into Phulbari, where the annoyance of the church leaders over serving the rice beer can be explained not only as unhappiness over the corruption of the innocent, but also as an uncalled for and unexpected reentry of the sacred (now turned profane for them) into a realm that they thought they had cleansed.

33. Let us consider each of these in turn: the oral Tangsa languages are quickly disappearing, dress codes are becoming Westernized, and what is left of their so-called traditional dances, songs, and dresses are today to be seen only at festivals. Though many Tangsa still continue to eat their traditional food at home, but even their food habits are gradually changing. The same can be said of their lifestyles, their houses, and so on.

34. They are perhaps influenced by the idea many youth have that Naga culture is to be seen and found in the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland.

35. Some traditional objects like the ritual altar have been retained, but their function has changed—from the altar where animals would be brought for sacrifice to a mere decorative, symbolic function. The "rhim-rhim" prayer was said without actually performing the ritual sacrifice, and hence was more performance than ritual; traditional Tangsa dress and traditional Naga symbols such as Hornbill feathers were also conspicuously displayed as visual symbols. Certain cultural elements such as the Wihu song and the Sahpolo dance have been standardized and were presented as symbols of pan-Tangsa identity and culture. But, as already mentioned, the dances are partly new and few of the younger generation know how to sing the Wihu song, and even fewer understand the meaning of the words.

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