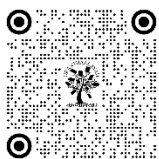


# CULTURE, MEMORY AND MEDIA: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY PAINTINGS FROM NAGALAND

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## ABSTRACT

The paper examines the significance of visual art in the context of Nagaland, how during a time in the past, traditional visual and material art served to retain and externalise cultural memory, and now in the modern context, due to a phasing out of the older culture, other media have been necessitated to take its place. The study considers painting as a media that has come to perform a similar function providing continuity. The research is a qualitative study which examines the traditional material arts and culture of the Nagas as media of communication. For its theoretical basis, the study takes from Jan and Aleida Assmann's (1991) concept of Cultural Memory and communicative memory to study painting in the contemporary Naga context, as a media that offers a site for both these registers of memory to interact. Here established cultural ideas and metaphors resurface and are re-presented in the light of contemporary conceptions and identities.

The findings show that painting is a viable media for today for expressing and negotiating cultural memory and provides an alternative media, standing in for traditional artefacts or material signifiers, continuing to be a means for culture to remember and speak for itself.

**Keywords:** Cultural Studies, Naga Traditional Arts, Cultural Memory, Contemporary Media, Painting

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The tribal culture of Nagaland has traversed through an oral period and has arrived at a literate, modern era. Culture as experienced today goes back to the past and the exigencies of its evolution. Despite linguistic diversity among the 17 and more tribes in Nagaland, the art and cultural expressions have wide similarity and concurrence, operating beyond language at a meta level of signification. Traditional arts for the Nagas have been more than aesthetics, in fact, largely symbolic and communicative, as it served the requirements of an oral culture.

Contact with colonial Britain and American missions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century introduced the Roman script and literacy. When the society moved from an oral to a literate society there was a paradigm shift in terms of both manner and material used for expression. There was a shift from speech to writing, an externalization of memory, a change that trained the hand for precision. Materials like paper, pencil, chemical-based ink/paint became available. In fact, traditional practices of painting on cloth and wood and other surfaces were phased out possibly because of the ease of procuring newer, more effective and lasting materials.

The co-relation between cultural evolution of mankind and its dependence on a history of media which permitted the formation of 'social memory', is attributed to the French anthropologist, André Leroi-Gourhan (Erll, p.368). Taking from here, the paper looks at painting as one of the media offers that has become a site for retaining and creating social memory in the context of Nagaland.

As of known accounts, the modern type of painting became known in Nagaland only through its interaction with the outside world. It is conjectured that the introduction to the basic level of art, like drawing, painting, could have been initiated during the course of acquiring education. There is record of a local self-taught artist of the 1950s/60s who studied in the mission school in Kohima under the American Baptist and whose works were displayed in public places [1]. In Indian government records of privately run English schools in Nagaland in the post-independence period, particularly in the 1960s, there is mention of subjects like drawing and painting as part of school curriculum (*Gazetteers*, p. 190-195).

After Nagaland became a state in 1963, there was a felt need for promoting and studying Naga life and culture. The following year, the Department of Art and Culture, Nagaland was established in 1964 as the Naga Institute of Culture. An exhibition of paintings from Lalit Kala Academy collection featuring about 30 renowned artists, was held as a first at the Sahitya Sabha, Kohima in the early 1970s (possibly 1973), through the initiative of R.N. Bhattacharjee, a 1964 graduate of the Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta, recruited by the Nagaland Government and associated with setting up the State Museum. These early efforts at initiating fine arts of the modern kind to Nagaland proved beneficial for generating wide interest among the public and influencing the first generation of visual artists to be impacted in Nagaland [2]. The first art graduate from Nagaland was Bendangnungsang Ao who went to the Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta [3]. The early years of painting and visual arts in Nagaland have much to do with the support of state government and also the impact of fine art graduates from the colleges of West Bengal. Today there are more than 50 graduates in the state from different art colleges in West Bengal, and cities like Guwahati, Delhi, Bombay, and a larger number who are freelancers and those who dabble in art out of sheer passion.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The research is a qualitative study based on readings of available literature on the region, particularly looking at traditional material arts and culture of the Nagas as media of communication. Personal interviews of artists, and other stakeholders like gallery owners and patron institutions were undertaken, including visits to exhibitions, in order to understand the history of the development of painting in Nagaland and painting as media of cultural narratives.

For its theoretical basis, the study takes from Jan and Aleida Assmann's (1991) concept of Cultural Memory and communicative memory, two registers that draws from Halbwach's earlier postulation of collective memory. According to this, Cultural Memory is tied to cultural objectifications and is understood as established, formalized, ceremonial communication. In contrast, communicative memory is that which is living memory based on everyday interaction and the content of which is always changeable and not ascribed a determined meaning (Erll 28).

Astrid Erll (2011) alludes to Aleida Assman's distinction between the forms of cultural memory "the relative fluidity and fixidity, the more liquid and the more stable" and identifies the causes of similar tendencies in recent scholarship, of subdividing memory into two modes as stemming from,

the need to differentiate between the reference to events of one's epoch and the reference to more distant epochs; between unofficial and official forms of commemoration; between negotiable, identifiable everyday memory and meaning laden traditions; between oral forms of remembrance and a memory which relies on other, more elaborate media technologies (p. 30).

In Erll's view, both these registers of memory are not exclusive but are found to be overlapping in social experience today. For instance, in an age of mass media and new media, everyday life narratives are framed in stable media like blogs and facebook, and recognized sources like Wikipedia are also contributed by lay persons. (p.31) The present endeavour is to study painting, as a media that offers a site for both these registers of memory to interact, where established ideas of culture are reinforced or re-presented in the light of contemporary conceptions and identities.

### 3. CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN TRADITIONAL ARTS OF NAGALAND

The varied kinds of art practiced by the tribes in the past were expressed across different surfaces. The human body carried permanent tattoo designs which were aesthetic signifiers and visually read by the community. It could communicate about a clan or identify a taker of heads. The art of dyeing was practiced, colours were derived from processing leaves, barks and roots of certain types of plants. In textiles, each kind of woven body cloth belonged to a category within the community based on its pattern and colour. Some tribes like the Ao, Lotha and Rengma painted figures of animals and human heads on their warrior shawls, by using sap from the bark of a tree on a white band of cloth (*Arts and Crafts*, pp.7-10). Carvings adorned Morung pillars and frontage of houses with figures usually projected in high relief, heads on log drums, figures on village gates, these were accentuated by painting the eyes, head, etc. using dark pigments of soot or natural colours of clay and plants, and sometimes the blood of animals (Thong pp.181-84). Basketry, pottery, lie at another end of functional art.

#### 3.1. MOTIFS, SYMBOLS, COLOURS

Traditional motifs commonly found among the tribes are figures of significance to them found carved on house posts, village gates or painted on textile. The animals found in the Naga areas like mithun, tiger, elephant, cock, hornbill dominate these surfaces. These animals are a part of the myth, ritual and culture of the Nagas. V. Noudi, elucidates on the common motifs used in wood carvings and paintings; the Mithun head signifies wealth and prosperity, human heads signify power and success over enemy, hornbill indicates bravery and success in warfare and competitive activities, tiger signifies great spirit and ability, lizard signifies gentleness and spiritual power; the moon represented by circles of black and white signify time season and security (*Arts and Colours*, p.25). The Angami *kharu* or the village gate; with its painted carvings of mithun head, warrior, human heads, breasts, are installed with a ritual and a prayer to *Ukepenuophu* offering a prayer for blessing for 'every good thing – abundant crops many children, many cattle' (Jacobs, p.100)

Naga designs are abstract and representative, mostly pictograms having variations of line patterns, circles and arches, indicating certain virtual perception and ideation. The strong, vibrant colours of the body cloth were used as a statement; warriors, rich men, village leaders and significant people wore specific shawls of the most vibrant and distinguishing colours, like much the same way the gaonbora of a village today wears his scarlet waistcoat with pride. Among the Aos, a plainindigo-blue coloured coarse cloth was used by the poor or by those doing ordinary work (Pursowa, p.34). Hence, the more subdued the hue, lower the status in the hierarchy.

### 4. CULTURAL REPRESENTATION, ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

It is evident that among the tribes of Nagaland, visual representation in the past was about defining identity, communication, commemoration and even ritual. It was also mnemonic in the sense of conveying and reiterating collective memory through shared symbols. The culture of the past was effectively conveyed through the available 'media' of its times until the paradigm shift in terms of literacy, belief system and power structures.

Today much of the material culture of the older society has already disintegrated or are found as isolated artifacts only in select museums. The structures and social system that gave currency to the uses and reading of its cultural signs have been displaced. Whatever still remains of the older culture, have survived through its transformations and adaptations in modern times, but without its earlier authority. For instance, the body cloth of different tribes are still worn proudly by their members but the specifics of status or the notion of being 'earned' to be worn and its exclusive uses, is of little concern today. Newer frameworks, those that have to do with aesthetics, economy, socio-political currency have begun to direct its usage.

Ever since the phasing out of the old culture with a modern one that started sometime in the eighteen hundreds, the present generation's access to its history and past is through the help of media found in the present; like written and digitalized narratives, photographs, art, etc. In the changed dispensation there is an obvious reliance on media to retain and share social knowledge and memory.

Drawing parallels with similar media, Jens Ruchatz in "The Photograph as Externalization and Trace" dwells on the interaction between media and memory. He considers photographs as both *Externalization*, i.e. media that enhances the capacity of memory, and also *Trace*, which is social memory/ conventions interpreting and giving significance to the

subject (Erll 2008, pp. 367-378). Accordingly, photographs capture and store specific moments of the past, however if there is no specific knowledge available of that particular captured moment, social codes are applied and a more general reading based on social and cultural conventions occur.

Painting also functions as an externalization of memory however, unlike the photograph, it does not mirror a singular moment. Every stroke of the brush can trigger a different impression of the subject, hence paintings are more symbolic, evocative and representative. They operate largely as 'trace', interpreted according to the cultural frameworks and aesthetic conventions that are in place. The socio-cultural codes that are exercised in reading the paintings allow a dialectical interaction between the past and the present, engaging in a dynamic remembrance and iteration of social identity. The two kinds of cultural memory frameworks that may be found operational are firstly, as in the words of J. Assmann (1992), established 'memory figures' and culturally accepted symbols and codes, as designated in the old culture, that are embedded in the visuals. The second framework is of contemporary cultural memory, that draws its own parameters and objectivises the established codes, in order to create a contemporary narrative.

#### 4.1. CONTINUITIES AND NEGOTIATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

Since time immemorial visual arts have been used to immortalize important historical figures, beloved objects or significant moments of life. What is framed within the four sides of the canvas is expected to be relevant and worthy of social attention. It is found that paintings have become a convenient conduit to recreate culture and communicate identity today. In paintings the subject is memorialized and serves several social, cultural and emotional functions in a society. The commemorative act, the economic value that often translates to emotional value, and the symbolism, that all comes together through painting, is what makes this genre viable as a vehicle not only for marking personal memories but also social and cultural memories.

One of the objectives of the study conducted was to look at how culture is perceived and translated in paintings by Naga artists today. On a general perusal of public exhibitions and galleries and on the basis of studying the works of upcoming artists, it is found that representation of culture is broad-based and of a representative kind. This inclination to generalizations may perhaps be due to the change in cultural context, by the fact that the artists are about two generations distanced from the old culture, a case of loss of specifics. It might also be pertinent to consider the present concept of Naga identity as a conglomeration of tribes, and hence the generalized representation, an inflection from the present.

Looking at common themes in paintings of recent times, there are the striking portraits of tribesmen in their attire and ornaments, tattooed faces and body, reflecting the ethos of the community. In fact the Konyak head-hunter figure is a common subject that several contemporary artists have used to portray a generic concept of the Naga. The attitudes cherished and memories revived through the paintings have to do with how the Naga today would like to remember and define themselves – fierce, courageous, strong, resilient, skilled, honourable, and so forth. The first portrait (Fig.1.1.) exudes the quiet and subtle power of the *Angh* (king) and the tiger in the backdrop mirrors his spirit. The artist's depiction of the second portrait (Fig.1.2) uses the same motif, but the figure faces on the side, indicating a kind of move away towards another direction. According to the artist, the yellow light that beckons is towards something positive, leaving behind redundant practices. The element of 'Cultural Memory' is identified in the fundamental, established cultural signifier used here, and the 'cultural communication' is in the social messaging from a contemporary frame.



Fig 1.1



Fig.1.2



Still life paintings are another popular genre among the artists studied. The cultural character is reflected again in the choice of subject, derived usually from the local context. To most cognizant viewers, drying gourd, unsheathed corn hanging or tumbling from carrying basket (Fig.2.1), local varieties of pumpkin and other fruits and vegetables, local brew in bamboo cups, severed pig head (Fig.2.2), blackened kettle and other articles from a kitchen (Fig.2.3), succulents in rusted ceramic coated tin cups, would be typical to the Naga environment and present context. Still life painting as a genre requires the subject to be current and present. Therefore utility objects, like the kettle and cups, which are iconic and representative of the recent times, have been depicted. To choose to portray local food and items in a realistic, non-idealized manner, is also a statement about sustenance and about the way of life of a people connected to cultural memory. Similarly, local flowers of the hills like the scarlet Rhododendron, Blue Vanda orchid, which are indigenous to Nagaland are indicative of the indigenous character and identity of the subject. Some of these objects are referred to in folktales, songs and practices of the Nagas, becoming signifiers of the Naga way of life.

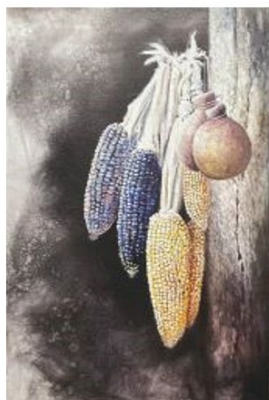


Fig.2.1.



Fig.2.2



Fig.2.3

One of the most familiar themes used by artists in Nagaland is the local landscape. The natural environment is a point of reference, a ubiquitous subliminal presence that can represent the people's existential expressions; of tranquility, sorrow, satiety, ennui, desire, etc. An ordinary idyllic scene of terrace fields, Dzükou valley or Dzuleke at frosty dawn (Fig.3.1), takes the viewer beyond its scenic beauty, to the experience of a unique place and to a narrative entrenched in its dynamic culture. The paintings are not just to capture the beauty of the landscape but to hold on to an experience, perhaps of an idyllic past of their childhood, quaint places, folks from the countryside, to evoke the memory of life experiences among the hills (Fig.3.2). The paintings have to do with nostalgia, a recreation of a memory, which is a common reason given by several of the artists in consideration. The subjects of paintings also draw contrast to the artists' present dwellings which are in urban, semi-concrete areas, far from the freedom and expanse of places they have experienced in their native villages.

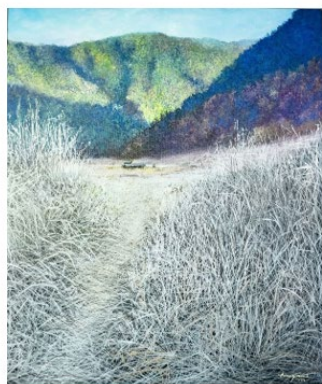


Fig.3.1



Fig.3.2

Among the works of some of the more experienced artists, there is an attempt to create metaphors and visual symbols anew in a changed context, where interaction of established Naga traditional symbols and motifs and contemporary culture takes place. In an untitled work by Seyie Tepa there is fusion of Naga concepts and Christian

doctrines, an Angami head dress stands for the biblical 'crown of glory' and a traditional *Kharu* or village gate opens to usher in light from the cross of Christ (Fig.4.1).

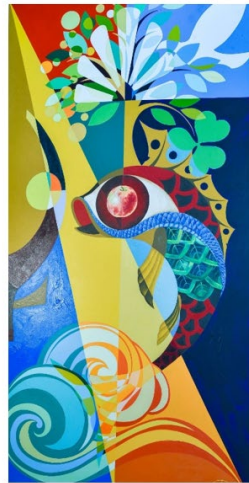


Fig.4.1



Fig.4.2



Fig. 4.3

Athrong Yimchunger also taps into traditional belief system and in one of his recent paintings (Fig.4.2) has used the metaphor of a rooster believed to ward off spirits or sickness, as a point of departure to provoke questions as to whether the younger generation would still hold the belief true. Lipokmanen's series "Nature Connectedness" created in 2022 during the pandemic, speaks a new message of conservation, respect for nature and reconnecting with one's roots (Fig.4.3). He uses recognizable cultural signifiers to convey his message. One notes the increasing appropriation and abstraction of the cultural symbols and codes, to more complex levels of communication, embracing the sophistication of new idioms.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The inherent attributes of painting, which includes an unparalleled power of visual impact, its mass appeal, a highly evocative nature, and its convenience, makes it a viable media for preserving, expressing and negotiating cultural memory today. More than any other visual media, contemporary paintings in Nagaland serve as a space for connecting the past and the present, using cultural memory as its meeting point. In a similar way in which traditional artefacts or material signifiers were valued in the past, there is a corresponding economic and social value attached to paintings which help to sustain its relevance in society. Comparatively, paintings sell much more today in Nagaland than any other time in the past, attests N. Keyho [4]. Based on viewing of public exhibitions and art outlets, the themes that generally sell are of those that depict something of the local culture and traditions of the people.

Painting is an expensive enterprise, in Nagaland it is still above the reach of the middle class, who may enjoy, appreciate and give constructive inputs yet fall short of buying them. Institutions or wealthy patrons would buy paintings for gifting purposes, to grace homes or display in hotels, etc. Tourists and visitors also contribute to the purchase of art. In some instances families have also pooled in resources and commissioned paintings for commemoration of an important event/person in the family. Despite the entry of new media, and with it digital art, painting still holds a status and attention above these other media offers. In the context of Nagaland, paintings hold a unique space to mediate culture, to remember and speak for itself.

## NOTES

- 1) Personal Interview of Vilalhou Noudi retired Senior Artist of the Art and Culture Dept. GoN. on 7th June 2024. Mention of his father, Kazumo Noudi, whose paintings of the early American missionaries displayed at the Angami

Baptist Council Centre (ABCC) in Kohima. Later recruited as Artist by the Nagaland Government to the Medical Department in 1967.

- 2) Personal interview with artist Buddhi Thapa, July 1, 2024.
- 3) Interview of pioneer artists Bendangnungsang and Sandy Ao. See <https://www.telegraphindia.com/my-kolkata/people/from-college-romance-to-marriage-the-love-story-of-kolkata-artists-nagalands-bendangnungsang-and-sandy-ao-from-kolkatas-chinese-community/cid/1924327> (n.d.)
- 4) Personal interview of N. Keyho, Art Executive, Art and Culture Department, Nagaland, 5th June 2024.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## APPENDIX

Art works featured:

Fig.1.1. “Take Me as I Am” by Vineizotuo Tase. Exhibited during Hornbill festival 2023.

Reprinted with permission.

Fig.1.2. Painting of Konyak headhunter by Among Venuh. Exhibition at RCEMPA, Kohima 2023.

Reprinted with permission.

Fig. 2.1. Still life painting of corn and gourd, by Among Venuh. Exhibition at RCEMPA, Kohima.

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Fig. 2.2. Still life painting of kettle and cups, by Lipokmanen. Reprinted with permission.

Fig. 2.3. Still life painting of pig head by V. Mor. Public exhibition, Kohima. Oct. 2023.

Reprinted with permission.

Fig. 3.1. Dzuleke at dawn, by Among Venuh. 2023. Reprinted with permission.

Fig. 3.2. Untitled, by Lipokmanen. Painting of girls resting at a shack in the field.

Reprinted with permission.

Fig. 4.1. Untitled, by Seyie Tapa. 5x10ft ainting. Personal collection. Reprinted with permission.

Fig. 4.2. Untitled , by Athrong Kiba. Exhibited in India Art Fair, New Delhi. 2023.

Reprinted with permission.

Fig. 4.3. Nature Connectedness series, by Lipokmanen. 2022. Reprinted with permission.

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