Politics of festivals in North East India: Indigeneity, integration, identity and territorial integrity

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ABSTRACT

Festivals are used to advance political goals in ethnically sensitive regions such as North East India by instilling a sense of "belongingness" while simultaneously justifying the concept of "otherness". Although there has been a considerable amount of research on festivals and politics in this region as separate studies, the attempt to link these two areas is rarely studied academically. This article looked at how the three major ethnic groups of Manipur state, which has a population of over 3.6 million people, emphasized their political interests and aspirations during the celebration of some key festivals. The primary focus of this article is the examination of the connection between the *Mera Houchongba* festival and indigeneity, the *Lui-Ngai-Ni* festival and integration, the *Kut* festival and identity, and the two state-level Sangai and Shirui Lily festivals and territorial integrity. The study concludes that, while the "primary goal" of the selected festivals remains, there is evidence of political exploitation of these celebratory platforms.

KEYWORDS: Manipur, festival, ethnic group, Meitei, Naga, Kuki-Chin-Mizo

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, festivals have been an essential part of every society, reflecting peoples' desires to engage in a wide range of socio-political and sporting activities. It has become an integral part of human life in almost every society, offering possibilities for human interaction which we do not find in day-to-day life. While festivals as a "phenomenon have a long history, actual festival research began only some 30 years ago" (Lyck, 2012, p. 9). In most cases, the origin of festivals can be traced to "ancient social rites, religious practices, or anniversaries of some memorable events" (Chaudhry, 1988, p. 6). The term festival–derived from the Latin word *festus,* meaning "of a holiday" (Turner, 1996, p. 484)–is one that has been used for hundreds of years and can be defined in its simplest form as "a public, themed celebration" (Getz, 2005, p. 21). In other words, functionally, a festival is a public themed celebration that is concentrated in time and delivered with a clear purpose.

Festivals emanate from the spontaneity of emotions of common people and are "basically traditional in character" (Smith, 1972, p. 164). Festivals' relation to the group or community stands in close association with the seasons, rituals, ceremonial practices, or the occupational

operations and leisurely occasions. In other words, it is an event that is usually and ordinarily staged by the local community and focuses on and celebrates some unique aspect of that community and the festivals. Festivals celebrated under certain themes aim at increasing political engagement, as well as encouraging social change and critical thinking (Mawon, 2017, p. 163). Some of the most common themes are celebrations of the arts, including music and dance, feasts, carnivals, heritage celebrations and milestone events including anniversaries and centenaries. "Ceremonial events underscore the special, nostalgic, traditional nature of the festival" (Gillespie, 2006, p. 521).

Festivals are ephemeral, yet their observance can have lasting significance. One of the things of such significance can be the bringing of people together from all walks of life. Since a festival is generally organized and sanctioned by the community, its theme usually reflects the culture, practice and belief system of the community. It is observed that most festivals are characterized by the deliberation on the unique aspect of the festival, the organisation of feasting and merrymaking, the performance of music and dance, and the playing of games and sports. Festival reflects and reinforces the social order and the important values of the host group or community.

The North East, which accounts for about eight percent of the country's geographical area and about four percent of India's population, is one region with diverse cultures and traditions. The region is "hugely diverse within itself, an India in miniature" (Bhaumik, 2009, p. 1). One can find a list of seasonal feasts and festivities in all eight northeastern states. *Bihu* of Assam, *Solung* of Arunachal Pradesh, *Wangala* of Meghalaya, *Saga Dawa* of Sikkim, *Hornbill* of Nagaland, *Kharchi Mela* of Tripura, *Pawl Kul* of Mizoram, and *Lui-Ngai-Ni* of Manipur are some major festivals of the region. Among other things, these festivals, in the words of Cantwell (1992, p. 150), strengthen the "self-esteem of folk artists otherwise neglected… and may enrich their understanding and appreciation of the culture of which they are the bearers." In the meantime, in politically disturbed regions like North East India, festivals are also used as excellent opportunities to advance one's political agenda by instilling a sense of belongingness and also by justifying the notion of "otherness" of a given territory. Although the tens of armed groups functioning in and around the region have not directly participated in the festivals as the main stakeholders, their nexus with civil organizations and the people's support for the groups have made it convenient for them to advance their genuine or otherwise political issues related to indigeneity, identity, integration, and territorial integrity, among others.

The North East as a region of India is "rooted more on the accident of geography than in the shared bonds of history, culture and tradition" (Bhaumik, 2009, p. 1). The region is a "good example of how new forms of ethnic identity politics has arisen since the 1980s. Consciousness of being part of an ethnic group and asserting their identity has risen steadily. Devoid of any broader platform except their narrow ethnic identity such as politics have turned into conflict with the other" (Karat, 2011, p. 46). "New identities can be acquired by learning new languages, cultures, intermarriages, and through migration process" (Khan, 2009, p. 167). However, in the process of acquiring new identities by groups, identity crises arise, particularly when group members of communities encounter conflicts of interest on which identity to adapt or disassociate. Such cases can be found in North East India. Arbitrary (re)drawing of states' boundaries in the region by both the colonial administration and the Indian government have placed several groups into a minority situation. In some cases, groups must merge or become assimilated with dominant groups in order to be protected and gain access to the state system. Although identity is not something tangible, many, including this region, claim that "its presence is so prevalent today that nearly everything has become a matter of identity" (Malesevic, 2006, p. 13). And thus, almost all groups in the region consciously and willingly subscribed to the idea of what Sinisa Malesevic (2006, p. 228) calls "identitarianism." One, among others, reason for this could be attributed to the "fear of being in a minority or being reduced to one in the near future in what one imagines as one's homeland opens up a new era of ethnic politics in this region" (Das 2007, p. 6).

INDIGENEITY

Indigenous people as a concept emanates from the concept of indigeneity (Gosart, 2012, p. 112). They exist in every region of the world, even though the term "indigenous" was only recently used to define human groups and gained popularity in the last decade of the twentieth century. They are frequently identified as the first inhabitants of a particular geographical location (Steeves, 2018; Srikanth, 2014, p. 42), and they are often a minority within the given territory (Gosart, 2012, p. 87). Numerous indigenous peoples "weave indigeneity through a multifaceted array of space and time to revive identities and cultural practices and to regain land, human rights, heritage, and political standing" (Steeves, 2018). Indigenous peoples are estimated to comprise of 300-370 million people, accounting for around 5-7% of the world's population (Sarivaara et al., 2013, p. 369; Gosart, 2012, p. 89). From the Indian context, "indigeneity is now above all a political question, closely bound with claims to territory, status, identity, and political power" (Srikanth, 2014, p. 41).

Indigenous peoples, such as those of Manipur in India's northeast, have sought to define their indigenousness, with oral tradition serving as a key source of their claim to indigeneity.

All three major ethnic groups in Manipur asserted their indigenous identity. If everyone is so certain that they are indigenous, then no one should be hesitant to use 1947, the year when India gained its independence, as the starting point for determining whether someone is an indigenous citizen of the state. The Kukis' civil and social organizations, as expected, are vehemently opposed to such a baseline. Contrariwise, the Meiteis of the valley and the Nagas of the hills have no objections to using 1947 (or earlier) as a base year, and they do not consider the Kukis to be indigenous people of the state; rather, British colonialism was partially responsible for bringing the "new" Kukis to the present Manipur state. A good number of oral narratives on the origin and migration shared by both the Meiteis and the Nagas that the Kukis do not have can be found. According to one myth, the Tangkhul and Meitei had the "same progenitor" in the distant past, with Hungpung's village chief being the Meitei king's older brother. This narrative is subscribed by some and contested by others. In the writings of T.C. Hodson (1975), A.S.W. Shimray (2001), and Sothing W.A. Shimray (2000), among others, a "loose relationship" that was maintained in the past between the Hao Naga and the Meitei was explained. However, as far as their past history is recorded in oral tradition, the question of domination or suzerainty over the other does not arise (Mawon, 2017, p. 171), and no community in North East India was strong enough to control others in the pre-independence period (Srikanth, 2014, p. 43).

Some claim that Meitei celebrations like *Mera Houchongba* are "rooted" in a folktale "shared" by the Meiteis and hill people like Tangkhul. Aside from cultural performances and showcasing during this festival, the practice of lighting a lamp at Kangla in Imphal is an age-old tradition. In a sense, this is a traditional celebration of unity in Manipur, held yearly in September or October by the indigenous ethnic groups. In recent years, this festival has been celebrated to reaffirm close bonds and ties between hill and valley people and for the "consolidation of the idea of Manipuri nationalism" (Kamei, 2014). Although not everyone in the state could be considered indigenous, it is now celebrated by the three broad ethnic groups. Two among the most symbolic individuals in the festival, who usually exchanged gifts, are the Meitei king and the chief of Hungpung, a Naga village. Keeping in mind the fragility of the political and social fabric of Manipur, the event currently attempts to celebrate the unity of the diverse ethnic groups and their capacity for peaceful cohabitation. This event was not observed for a while due to a number of reasons, including animosity amongst ethnic groups, before it was brought back by the state government in 2018. The Meitei's nominal

king and Rajya Sabha member Leishemba Sanajaoba wished that "this age-old festival would bind the relations of all ethnic communities as one in the days to come" (Imphal Free Press, October 10, 2022). Today, as part of the ceremony to symbolize the safety of the people, a lamp tied to a tall green bamboo pole is lit and put at Kangla during this festival (Imphal Free Press, November 1, 2020). There is no question that the state's indigenous people and the origin of this festival are connected. In some aspects, the festival's celebration is an assertion of ethnic unity as well as an effort to define who the indigenous people of the state are. This academic exercise contends that the focus placed on Manipur's nativeness can be seen each time this festival is organized.

One of Manipur's most controversial chief ministers for the Tangkhuls in particular and Nagas in general is a Congress veteran, Ibobi Singh. During his 15 years as Chief Minister, i.e., March 2002 to March 2017, Manipur experienced some of the harshest ethnic tensions and turmoil; bandhs, economic blockades and counter-blockades, strikes, agitations, and protests, among other things, frequently hampered the state's day-to-day livelihoods. Ibobi Singh, despite hardly visited the Tangkhul hills on key occasions during his political career, "unveiled the monument erected at the residence of Hungpung village chief on the occasion" of the village seed-sowing festival on March 6, 2010 (Mawon, 2014, p. 39). This monument unveiling by a high-profile and contentious figure is "viewed as one political move wherein the government of Manipur attempted to 'relive' the myth of brotherhood" of Tangkhul and Meitei (Mawon, 2017, p. 171). In a way, the Manipur government uses a Tangkhul indigenous festival as a site for furthering its political goals of unifying the contesting ethnic groups. This, however, was not a successful game played by the government, as the state experienced a total collapse of law and order a few months following the unveiling of the monolith, mainly in Naga districts. As a result, the Manipur Police Commandos and Indian Reserve Battalion tortured and executed two Naga students at Mao Gate in Senapati district, and two peace rallyists were gunned down in Ukhrul town, while torturing hundreds more and internally displacing thousands. All the deaths, torture, looting, property damage, and other forms of human rights abuses occurred conveniently in the name of territorial integrity and a law and order situation.

Indigeneity is a touchy issue all over the northeastern states, and even political actors and the state governments are hesitant to address it for fear of jeopardizing their vote bank politics. However, in the context of Manipur, not everyone agrees on the description of the state's indigenous population. For instance, the Federation of Haomee, an organisation with a predominantly Meitei and some Naga membership, has been vehemently opposing any

stakeholder or individual who attempts to "distort" the list of indigenous people of Manipur or who comes up with "concocted" tales and narratives on the origin, migration, and settlement of the state's people. Because the term "Manipur" is not a native term or construction, this organization advocates renaming Manipur "Haoleipak", which means the land of the Hao people (Jadumani, 2021). Non-indigenous people are not included in their definition of the word "Haomee" (trans. Hao people), and thus the use of "Haoleipak" as nomenclature of the state is controversial for the reason that generally Meiteis and Nagas do not consider Kukis, Nepalese, etc. to be indigenous people of the state.

The Tangkhuls and Meiteis have begun developing more platforms for interactions at a time when ethnic groups are becoming increasingly wary and worried about the indigeneity of individuals residing in the state. On December 2 and 3, 2022, the first edition of a cultural festival called *Tangkhul & Meitei Ngashan Kumhei* was scheduled to be observed. The theme chosen by organizers was "Pheichon Khayun," which can be loosely translated as "tracing the root" or "tracing the footstep." Although the festival was postponed, the intent of this event is to "heal" old wounds and "rebuild" ethnic relationships between the two indigenous peoples of Manipur.

INTEGRATION

Many societies have catered to state- and regional-level nationalism by defining local festival promotion as "cultural heritage" and "intangible heritage" under the UNESCO definition. This echoed and reinforced the language of "safeguarding," "promoting," "keeping alive," and "authenticity" of local traditions (Berti, 2011). In many post-colonial societies, festivals have evolved into identity markers. Bernstein (2005, p. 67) noted that "research on nationalism invokes the language of identity politics and raises similar questions regarding how culture is related to the political economy, how identities are strategically deployed as essentialists and how outcomes are related to organizing based on status identities." We learned from history that the late 19th and early 20th century Christianization of the more than 60 Naga tribes in north-eastern India and north-western Burma (now known as Myanmar) was principally "responsible for the rise of Naga nationalism" (Longvah, 2017, p. 122). On his return from France as a Labour Corps, for instance, R. Ruichumhao of "Shongran village in Manipur assayed to bring unity among the Naga tribes by Christianizing them" (Mawon, 2022, p. 25). The struggle for the integration of the Naga territories–which were bifurcated by British colonialism and later by the government of India–was a result of the Nagas' sense of "self-awareness as a political community that shared a common identity and destiny" (Longvah, 2017, p. 122).

There are currently 2.9 million Nagas living in four Indian states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland, as well as in the Naga Self-Administered Zone of Burma. In the "ethnically homogenized" states of North East India (Das, 2008, p. 22), the Nagas are in the minority in all regions with the exception of Nagaland state. In their effort to establish themselves as a distinct nation and integrate their divided territory, the Nagas began to define their identity and how they differed from other neighboring communities. The idea of "other" is essential to comprehending one's own identity because "national identity becomes meaningful only through contrast with others" (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 593). The Nagas' sense of "separateness from the rest of India has been widely shared by" them, and it may be seen as one of the key motivational factors in their struggle against India (Mishra, 2000, p. 17). As a result, since the first quarter of the twentieth century, Nagas have been expressing and defending their national identity. Horowitz observed that the Nagas coming together and struggling to "protect the Naga way of life" and "asserting the sense of peoplehood" is considered a classic case of "ethnic mobilization" (as cited in Mishra, 2000, p. 17).

The first official document to propose the merger of the Naga areas under one administration was the memorandum to the British Simon Commission in 1929 submitted by the Naga Club, an organization formed by some Naga leaders of that time. On the eve of India's independence, the Nagas in Manipur opposed their inclusion in the state within the Indian Union. Instead, they endorsed the political struggle for the Naga people, and the "Naga National League headed by Athiko Daiho was organized in September 1946 to consolidate Nagas of Manipur in order to bring together Naga people separated by colonial boundaries" (Haksar, 2016, p. 177). The symbolism of "no house tax payment" to the government of Manipur but to pay to the Deputy Commissioner of the then Naga Hills District in Assam was adopted in protest against the arbitrary inclusion of Naga areas in Manipur state (Ngalung, 2010, p. 30). The Naga National League, then, handed Charles Pawsey, Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District of Assam, the annual "house tax" collection in Kohima in 1948 (UNC, 2010, p. 18). Over the years, the State Legislative Assembly of Nagaland passed five resolutions on the integration of all Naga areas in 1964, 1970, 1994, 2003, and 2015.

Today, the Nagas' struggle for the right to self-determination, which involves the integration of all Naga territories as one major demand, is one of the world's longest-running political movements. Festivals, which are becoming focal sites "for performing identity and fostering unity among ethnic Nagas" (Mawon, 2017, p. 163), are seen more often now than ever. In their quest for political liberation, the Naga tribes use festivals as one site to differentiate

themselves from neighboring ethnic groups in particular and from Indian and Burmese national identities in general. For instance, the Nagas in Burma celebrate the annual New Year festival in January, where all the Naga tribes congregate to express their sense of Naganess, exhibit togetherness and solidarity in their political struggle, and demonstrate their cultural identity, which is distinct from that of other national communities. Similar accounts can be found on the Indian side of the border, such as the *Lui-Ngai-Ni* festival of the Nagas in India's Manipur state.

Lui-Ngai-Ni signals the season of seed-sowing and also marks the beginning of the Naga year. It is held annually on February 14 and 15, and is alternately hosted by the Naga populated district headquarters of Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Ukhrul. This yearly celebration is organized by tribal bodies under the aegis of the United Naga Council (UNC), an apex civic entity representing around twenty Naga communities in Manipur. This apex body is one of the key stakeholders demanding a settlement to their political struggle from the Indian government, with the integration of all Naga-inhabited territories being one of its core objectives. Opinions among the readers differ on whether the founders of this cultural festival in 1987 had a political motivation for organizing *Lui-Ngai-Ni*. However, the political climate at the time of its establishment was one of the darkest for Nagas, particularly in Manipur. For instance, in the same year, the so-called Indian security forces conducted "Operation Blue Bird" in Oinam and adjacent villages in Manipur's Senapati district. Elderly men and women of the villages have all the traumatizing accounts of how civilians were killed, hundreds were tortured, and innumerable houses were burned down during this infamous and horrific operation, among other human rights violations. Thus, the festival invariably holds "broader political overtones" (Mawon, 2017, pp. 163-64), and the supposition of creating a common platform for the Nagas of Manipur in the form of a festival may not be an unreasonable argument.

Although the festival began as a small event, it has grown into a grand celebration in which many Naga tribes, including Anal, Aimol, Chiru, Inpui, Kharam, Khoibu, Lamkang, Liangmai, Mao, Maram, Maring, Moyon, Monsang, Poumai, Rongmei, Tangkhul, Tarao, Thangal, Zeliang, and others, converge and showcase their rich cultural heritage. In addition, other Naga tribes from Nagaland, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh also partake in the festival as special guests and invitees. Thus, *Lui-Ngai-Ni* is no longer, in the words of Longkumer (2013, pp. 95-96), an indigenous "micro-event" but a macro-event. More significantly, it might be viewed as a site for Nagas in Manipur to reaffirm their definitions of "self" and "other." This is not to say that the two cannot exist under one political government or that

"self" and "other" should be in one administration no matter what. Instead, this can be seen as the Nagas wanting to showcase their culture and identity, which strengthens their fraternal tie, as well as their desire to exhibit their distinct traditions and their "expression of a common Naga heritage" (Mawon, 2017, p. 163). Festivals not only assist "in the preservation of culture," but also in "re-establishing much culture that is in danger of being lost" (Kurin, 1989, p. 19). Festivals like *Lui-Ngai-Ni* allow the Nagas to preserve and transmit their culture to future generations, including their forgotten and dying cultures. This study argues that the Naga tribes of Manipur use this seed-sowing festival as part of their cultural identity and as a site to enhance their political consciousness of oneness. In a sense, the celebration of this festival unites the Naga tribes in Manipur, which strengthens their political struggle for the right to self-determination. Some of the recent celebratory themes, such as "Oneness through culture," "One culture, our journey," and "Know thy roots," among others, can help one find a connection between cultural identity and their political struggle. To a great extent, the construction of a Naga nation and its political identity can be linked to the similarities and affinities of the oral traditions and cultural identities of the Naga tribes. Their political struggle for independence, dating back to British colonial days, has spanned some generations, and their journey for territorial integration is still a continuing political process. As a result, the Nagas in Manipur use, among other sites, *Lui-Ngai-Ni* to foster unity among the tribes in order to enhance their sense of Naganess and advance their right to self-determination.

IDENTITY

There are a number of elements that can be seen in festivals across all cultures, but no single festival shows them all. One of the elements on which "this raising awareness discourse is built is ethnic identity: culture, by means of its own manifestations such as the dress, the music, and the language, is reified and acquires, in the context of the festival, the value of a symbol" (Cervone, 1998, p. 102). The concept of a festival is inextricably linked with cultural identity. Stevenson (2002, p. 31) wrote that "a key result of the festivals has been the creation of national and cultural identities through the arts." Identity influences who is accepted as a member of the community and who is rejected as "other" (Bechhofer & McCrone, 2009, p. 190).

Identity has recently been conceptualized as a "negotiation among forces both internal and external forces to the nation in question" (Rusciano, 2003, p. 361). Identity politics stresses difference and separateness in order to reinforce one's distinct identity. Karat (2011, p. 42) defines identity politics as "people getting together and mobilising on the basis of a common

identity, whether race, ethnicity, caste or religion, to put forth their demands or assert their rights of the state and society...” Identity is a dynamic concept that describes who an individual is and his or her sense of belonging to a larger group. It is a sense of ownership or attachment connected to a person’s race, nationality, religion, language, culture, history, ideology, or even political inclination. So who makes the decision as to what a community should be called? Since identity is largely a social construction, a group’s social identity is always being negotiated and redefined, especially in regions like Northeast India where there are several tribes, sub-tribes, or communities. All ethnic and sub-ethnic groups in this region, including the Kuki of Manipur, can link their festivals to the formation of their larger identities. Kuki terminology as an identity was most likely constructed during British colonialism because there is hardly any tribe that identifies as Kuki today used such nomenclature prior to colonial period.

The Kukis, especially from the last quarter of the twentieth century, have been attempting to organize themselves as a “national group or a political entity through various processes based on ethnic connection” (Haokip, 2012, p. 64). The notions of “Old Kuki” and “New Kuki” emerged during the process of giving it an identity, despite the fact that “there is no scientific basis for the classification” (Kipgen, 2011, p. 1048). Lal Dena hypothesized that the “Old Kuki” may have migrated to and settled in the Manipur Hills in pre-historic times (as cited in Kipgen, 2011, p. 1048). The “New Kuki,” on the other hand, migrated to the present-day Manipur hills during British colonialism; the first of this group arrived at Chassad in the Naga Kamjong area in 1877 with the “assistance” of Meitei kings and their colonial masters (Pheirei, 2010, p. 169). The majority, if not all, of the tribes that are referred to as “Old Kuki,” such as Anal, Aimol, Lamkang, Maring, Monsang, etc., actually identify as Nagas in both official and day-to-day activities. According to the theory of identity politics, “a person may have multiple identities, but it is the identity that he or she perceives to be the defining one that determines that person’s identity” (Karat, 2011, pp. 41-42). A similar rationale can be applied to explain the “Old Kuki,” meaning that these tribes identified as “Nagas” could be considered as being part of the larger Naga political and national identity. As a result, it is not the responsibility of the “other” tribes to dictate which identity a group of people must use; by doing so, the “self” imposes identity on the “other”. Kukis who migrated to the Manipur hills during and after the colonial period generally identify as Kukis. Many kindred tribes, including the Hmars, Paites, and Mizos, prefer a more accommodating terminology, such as Kuki-Chin-Mizo as an ethnic marker. Contrariwise, the term Kuki is officially used a tribe identity in the India state of Nagaland, and they are actively participating in the

construction of Naga national and political identity. In some aspects, the Kuki tribes are going through an "identity crisis," and sites like the *Kut* festival are being used to help construct the Kuki political entity.

Kut, also known as *Chavang Kut*, is an annual autumn festival celebrated after the harvest season and a cultural expression of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo people, observed on November 1. Most festivals of North East India, like this one, can be "approached as sites for examining the relationship between indigeneity and assimilationist modernity" (Mawon, 2017, p. 163). This event marks the end of the harvest season and serves as a site for them to thank their deities, now the Christian God. After a gap of many years, this festival was reintroduced in Manipur in the early 1960s. This festival, as is the case with all other festivals of neighboring ethnic groups and communities, has changed due to a variety of factors such as Christianization, modern education, and "outside" influence. Aside from the custom of offering thanks for a bountiful harvest season, some major attractions of this event today include, among other items, a beauty contest, folk dance, and folk and popular music performances. It is, without a doubt, a platform for the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes to celebrate their cultural event with gaiety and enjoyment. Festivals, such as *Kut*, provide "a kind of training ground for the representation of culture" (Cantwell, 1991, p. 150). Cultural program can increase community spirit and instill a sense of civic pride among locals. Cultural forms with a political slant can be used to draw people's attention to a specific issue.

For a long time, as the state's political environment became less tolerant of ethnic groupings and government machinery politicized ethnic tension, all of the state's festivals became increasingly ethnically homogenized, with mingling and participation by other ethnic groups becoming increasingly unusual and rare. The *Kut* festival is no exception. Aside from political actors and government administration, it is uncommon to see Naga and Meitei civil and political organizations participate in this festival, and vice versa. The Biren Singh-led BJP administration attempts to create a more suitable climate so that state festivities such as *Kut* appear more inclusive and accommodative of the state populations. "Unity through Culture" is a common theme used during this festival. Whose unity is it? This is a frequently asked question that necessitates a more thorough analysis. This theme makes sense when the unification is for Kuki and its kindred tribes; however, the unification of the state's three broad ethnic cultures is a dubious goal. Most ethnically related conflicts in the state, such as the Naga-Kuki conflict in the 1990s, the Meitei-Pangal crisis in the 1990s, the Kuki-Paite ethnic clash in the late 1990s, and the Meitei-Naga conflict in the early 2000s, have been directly or indirectly linked to cultural identity and land ownership. Therefore, utilizing the

diverse major cultures of the state's ethnic groups to unite its populations is probably an unfeasible political tactic until questions of cultural identity and political concerns are sincerely settled first.

TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

"Territorial integrity" of the state of Manipur is a phrase frequently used by the valley dwellers, who are predominantly Meiteis, and the state government each time they observe a movement linked to autonomy or a similar political issue. The constitutionality of such a claim needs to be carefully examined. "…protection for the territory is an expression of the sovereign equality of all states" (Marxsen, 2015, p. 9), and the idea of territorial integrity is a fundamental principle in the contemporary world. The concept of territorial integrity calls for more than just protection against external interference of any kind (Marxsen, 2015, p. 10). However, this territorial protection only applies to independent nations and not to regions, provinces, or federating states like those that make up the Indian Union. In a sense, the international law of territorial integrity is not applicable in the case of Manipur since Article 3 of the Indian Constitution empowers the Parliament of India to create new states and change any territory, borders, or names of an existing state. This does not, however, imply that the Indian Parliament may alter the borders of any state without taking into account the political realities and sensitivities of the given populations. Recognizing the constitutionality of Parliament's right to change its territory, the state government, through its resolution, requested the Government of India to add a special sub-clause under Article 3 to protect the territory of Manipur. Since the 1990s, Manipur's successive governments, regardless of which political party is in power, have dedicated time and money to protecting the state's territory. Over the years, the state governments passed six resolutions in 1995, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, and 2005 to protect the territorial integrity of Manipur (Mawon, 2022, p. 30). One initiative by high-profile political actors, notably from the valley areas, to convince others that the diverse peoples of the state are one is the official and unofficial use of the term "Manipuri" to refer to all peoples of the state.

In recent years, state political actors in the valley have begun to use the term "Manipuri" as a domicile status; however, this has been viewed as the ethnic majority exercising hegemonic power over the state's ethnic minorities, as the terminology has no historical or cultural connection with the hill people. Manipur is not even an indigenous Meitei terminology, since they have several indigenous names such as *Kangleipak*, *Sanaleipak*, and *Porei Meeteileipak* (Sanajaoba, 1993, p. xi; Shimray, 2007, p. 56), which were changed to "Manipur" once Hinduism was introduced to the Meitei populations (Rhodes & Bose, 2012, p. 7), and

subsequently the inhabitants of this kingdom came to be known as "Manipuri." Some colonial writers, such as E.W. Dun (1886, p. 13), J. Shakespeare (1907, p. 7), A. Mackenzie (1884, p. 154), Robert Reid (1942, p. 87), and others, used the term "Manipuri" to refer to the Hindu dwellers of the valley areas. Whereas, the hill people were known by terms like Naga, Kuki, Lushai, etc. The ideals of identity and cultural pluralism apply to all of North East India's states, and the assertion of domicile status obscures the value of ethnic diversities. Not every citizen of Assam state is an Assamese, Nagaland state is a Naga, Mizoram state is a Mizo, Tripura state is a Tripuri, and so also not every citizen of Manipur state is a "Manipuri". A minority of one or more distinct groups can be found in every state in North East India, and one major reason for this is the arbitrary boundary-drawing by the British administration and the Government of India, frequently without the knowledge or consent of the locals in the area. Therefore, an attempt to depict the oneness of populations by homogenizing the racially and culturally diverse communities would do more harm than good in the pursuit of protecting the state's territorial integrity.

Apart from economic reasons, the state machinery's active engagement in promoting and popularizing festivals, such as the Manipur Sangai festival and the Shirui Lily festival, in recent years might be interpreted as an attempt to unite the state's ethnically sensitive groups. Festivals have long been seen as "conscious community displays, often showcasing versions of community ideals rather than lived experience" (Regis & Walton, 2008, p. 428), which is also the case in the two state festivals of Manipur. The Sangai festival, renamed from the erstwhile Manipur Tourism Festival in 2010, is a state grandest festival held annually from November 21 to 30, named after the state animal, the Sangai, a brow-antlered deer found only in Keibul Lamjao National Park in Manipur. This 10-day festival showcases the state's culture and traditions, arts and handicrafts, indigenous sports, and classical and folk performing arts, among other things, in order to establish Manipur as a world-class tourism destination. The theme for the 2022 celebration was "Festival of Oneness," with the goal of instilling a sense of belonging and creating pride in land ownership among people. To attract more tourists to the festival, the state must not only develop its infrastructure, such as roads and other basic necessities, but also strengthen the frail social fabric of the state's ethnic communities. The Manipur government makes an effort to show the world that the state's diverse groups of people are one, and such oneness is to be reflected in this festival. In a way, the state administration is restoring its damaged reputation of ethnic conflict and lawlessness to a more inclusive and accommodating one. Another state-level celebration is the Shirui Lily festival, which is named after the rare state flower, the Shirui lily called Lilium Macklinae,

which is found only at Shirui Peak in Manipur's Ukhrul district. The inhabitants of Shirui village celebrated and paid tribute to this flower every year until it was named a state festival by the government of Manipur in 2017 to create awareness and conserve the endangered flower, as well as to promote Manipur as a tourist destination. Aside from indigenous sports, traditional arts, and folk performances, some of the festival's main attractions are *Shirock*, *ShiChef*, and a beauty contest, among others. In 2019, the iconic *Strength of Unity* statue was erected–a symbol of how great things can be accomplished when people work together. The objective of this festival, like that of other major festivals, is typically to unify and build connections among ethnic communities, as well as to provide a site to promote and popularize the event in order to attract tourists. However, Manipur's past political experiences have shown that the population's oneness and unity rarely exist beyond feasting and festivities.

CONCLUSIONS

Festivals, be it cultural, traditional, or modern, have the potential to instill a sense of unity and also the force to display the differences. In India's Northeastern contexts, it often displays otherness. Unless the core issues related to political and economic inequalities are managed and resolved, the organisation of several festivals by the state planners can never be considered inclusive politics, which is "non-hierarchical and peaceful" (Dusche, 2010, p. 83). Comparatively, there is a greater inclusiveness of ethnic participation now than in the recent past. However, none of the aforementioned festivals may stand the test of time if an ethnically tinged issue arises. Although the themes of festivals have the scope of incorporating all ethnic groups of Manipur, the platforms often indicate protecting oneself and thus try to strengthen the "self" and distance itself from "others". Furthermore, the formation of all, if not most, civil society organizations on ethnic lines is hugely hindering the process of unification of all ethnic groups. Festivals in Manipur cannot be merely translated in literal form; instead, they are mostly politicized. *Mera-Houchongba* has now very little to do with the age-old folk narrative; instead, it is used as a platform to assert the indigeneity of the state as well as to unify the ethnic groups. *Lui-Ngai-Ni* is now trying to define Naga political identity through its cultural platforms. Today, *Kut* festival is nothing much to do with agricultural operations as non-farmers are often the organizers of it, and it is more of a platform to construct Kuki identity. Sangai festival has less concern with saving the endangered antler deer; instead, the state has been using this site to protect territorial integrity. Similarly, the Shirui Lily festival has less to do with protecting Manipur's endangered state flower and more to do with tourism, despite Shirui village volunteers

cleaning and attempting to guard the peak where this rare flower grows. In conclusion, this paper argues that the observance of several festivals in the state would achieve its desirable outcomes only after the ethnically sensitive issues such as indigeneity, integration, identity, and territorial integrity are politically and constitutionally resolved, whereas the use of festivals as sites for resolving such sensitivities is highly unlikely to be productive.

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