

Cultural Continuity and Identity: Insights into Naga Traditions in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

Dibpriya Bodo (dibpriyabodo123@gmail.com)

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hills Degree College, Haflong, Dima Hasao, Assam, India



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee [The RCSAS \(ISSN: 2583-1380\)](http://www.thercsas.com). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). **Crossref/DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.55454/rcsas.5.03.2025.001>

Abstract: Northeast India, comprising seven unique states, is marked by various sovereignty movements and ethnic changes that arose during and after British colonial rule, complicating its national identity in relation to mainland India. The region, particularly Nagaland, grapples with sovereignty and ethnic reform challenges, as conflicts persist between the Indian government and ethnocentric movements. British colonialism and the arrival of Christian missionaries significantly transformed Naga cultural identity, resulting in a state of plurality and confusion. The present paper aims to examine the rich heritage of Naga culture as a pathway to peace in a historically violent region, drawing on Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. The book features collection of ten stories that aims to reclaim cultural heritage rather than dwell on conflict, affirming human values and capturing the cultural essence of the Naga people. Ao's short story collection transcends the typical focus on violence in North-eastern literature, promoting unity amidst fragmentation, rooted in Naga historical consciousness and storytelling. Thus, this paper highlights the significance of Naga historical consciousness in addressing ongoing issues of terror, violence, and identity crises. Through this she seeks to restore Naga identity by reconnecting with ethnic heritage.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Nagaland, Naga Traditions, Temsula Ao

Article History: Received: 18 March- 2025; Accepted: 25 March- 2025; Published/Available Online: 30 March- 2025

Introduction

North-East India is intricately linked to the complexities of national identity, often perceived as somewhat isolated from the larger Indian narrative. This region experiences unrest and a widespread sense of alienation, largely due to various separatist and sovereignty movements. The concept of Naga identity is both constructed and fluid, sparking discussions about its historical legitimacy as a distinct ethnic group. The Nagas assert their unique cultural identity and seek independence from India, emphasizing self-preservation as a sovereign entity. In contemporary times, many Nagas pursue political and economic revitalization through socialist ideals while also seeking spiritual fulfilment through Christianity, sometimes neglecting the historical context that shapes their identity. The notion of 'culture' is complex and often contested, leading to various interpretations. It extends beyond a mere definition of essence of being and is better understood as a dynamic signifier. Generally, culture pertains to individuals' lifestyles, reflecting their capacity for harmonious coexistence within society. Defining this term requires caution due to its complexity. It is not static but fluid and subject to change over time. As time advances, the symbols representing cultural significance also evolve. Indigenous communities often navigate the tension between tradition and change, influenced by modernization. The Naga tribe of Nagaland in north-eastern India exemplifies such a community with its culture displaying notable distinctions from the broader Indian context. Under British colonial rule, Nagaland experienced significant changes in its ethnic and cultural landscape. Temsula Ao advocates for cultural revival, viewing it as essential for restoring the dignity of the Naga people. She remains optimistic that the rich traditions of Naga creativity and humane values will prevail. In her short story collection, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, Ao challenges conventional narratives in Northeast literature, which often focus on violence and homogeneity instead promoting unity amidst fragmentation drawing on Naga historical consciousness enriched with myths and storytelling.

Heritage and Identity in North-Eastern Literature

The literature of the North-East explores a variety of themes, including the Separatist movement, regional struggles, traditions, value systems, and folk narratives. This cultural framework connects individuals to their roots, fostering a deep appreciation for their heritage. The inhabitants of the North-Eastern regions exhibit a strong love for their culture, with their identities closely tied to ancestral traditions and values, which significantly impact their well-being and motivate them to preserve their cultural legacies. This commitment to tradition is a hallmark of indigenous cultures, characterized by a joyful embrace of the past that enhances

their sense of belonging. They prioritize maintaining their identity in line with inherited cultural values, recognizing the importance of historical traditions for personal growth.

The region is often noted for the underlying terror that contrasts with its tranquil hills. The works of Temsula Ao, a prominent North-Eastern writer, aim to capture and preserve the essence of Naga culture. The narratives surrounding Temsula Ao reveal the fear-laden experiences of individuals deeply connected to their cultural heritage, demonstrating a strong commitment to their customs, traditions, and religious practices. Culture significantly shapes personal identity, illustrating the intricate relationship between individuals and their cultural contexts. Thus, culture is central to the lives of these individuals. Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* offers a profound exploration of the hyphenated national identity of the Naga people, a term that masks their inherent diversity. Furthermore, their cultural identities are intricately tied to their ancestral lands, making the forced displacement of tribal communities by state authorities and the influx of non-native populations due to urbanization significant threats to their traditional ways of life.

2

Naga Culture and Identity as Depicted in *These Hills Called Home*

Temsula Ao's collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), is set against a backdrop of turmoil and aims to impart existential history and essential tradition to future generations, facilitating an understanding of the impact of conflict on the Naga people. Her anthology explores the intricate relationship between Naga culture and identity amid violence and conflict. Set against the historical backdrop of the Naga insurgency in Nagaland, India, Ao's narratives illuminate the struggles of individuals striving to maintain their cultural heritage in the face of oppression and displacement. For Ao, storytelling is the primary means of preserving history, land, ethnicity, and identity. Through her storytelling, Ao highlights the resilience and beauty of Naga traditions during challenging times, incorporating elements of folklore, myths, legends and daily practices such as weaving and traditional ceremonies. This approach offers a nuanced representation of Naga culture while countering stereotypes that depict the Naga people as violent or exotic. Temsula Ao expresses a deep yearning for a peaceful past rooted in the collective memory of the Naga people. Her work reflects a search for an authentic identity obscured by colonialism and modernity. Ao explores the complex nature of Naga identity, which oscillates between rural and urban influences. This duality is evident in her stories, where she seeks to revive historical awareness by showcasing cultural practices that flourished before British colonialism.

The book features ten short stories that illustrate the effects of modernization on Naga culture, significantly impacting the community's psyche. Ao reflects on the historical traditions of the Naga people and the current generation's growing indifference towards their cultural heritage. She notes, "A Few of the stories in this collection try to capture the ambiance of the traditional Naga way of life, which, even for our youngsters today, is increasingly becoming irrelevant in the face of the 'progress' and 'development' which is only now catching the Naga people." (Ao x)

Among the narratives the one "Soaba" vividly illustrates the effects of modernization through the story of Imtima, an orphan labeled 'Soaba', meaning 'idiot.' Ao depicts the tragic life of this innocent boy whose fate is marred by the region's political violence. She develops a new narrative that highlights the Naga people's struggle with their historical consciousness. The story "Soaba" portrays the traumatic experiences of Naga villagers who are forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, leading to both physical displacement and a significant psychological transformation as they are forced to adopt new homes and identities. The introduction of a 'grouping system' within the Naga context is a severe affront to their dignity, relegating them to the status of outsiders in their own land. The community is introduced to terms like 'situation', 'grouping,' 'curfew,' and 'convoy', revealing the interplay between local dialects and English. The incorporation of English terms signifies the villagers' connection to modernity, while the blend of tradition and contemporary language reflects the realities of the Naga people. The effects of colonialism and globalization on Naga identity and culture are poignantly depicted in the narrative "Soaba," which illustrates the detrimental consequences of a grouping system that forcibly relocated villagers from their ancestral lands for enhanced surveillance by security forces. In contrast, some individuals have adopted this newly formed identity, often at the cost of their cultural heritage.

The tumultuous 1950s in Nagaland saw the emergence of a group of self-interested businessmen who prioritized personal gain over communal values. One such figure, Boss, exemplifies the new identity and, rather unexpectedly, neglects the principles of his own culture, ultimately betraying his community. The

character of Boss symbolizes the malevolent intentions linked to authority, as his environment is filled with the anguished cries of suffering souls. The night resonates with otherworldly screams and laments of victims, and although the record player attempts to drown out these sounds, the walls of the house amplify their torment.

In “**The Last Song**”, the story focuses on Apenyo, a young girl known for her talent for singing in her village that converted to Christianity during the colonial era, a reflection of British cultural colonialism. She possesses a natural talent for singing, inherited from her father, Zhamben, a school teacher and talented singer of traditional folk songs and Christian hymns. Zhamben was well-regarded in the village and became the leading male voice in the church choir. Unfortunately, he died when Apenyo was only nine months old. His strong connection to Naga traditions is reflected in his folk music proficiency and adaptability to new hymn melodies. He represents the spirit of the North-East people, who value their traditions, particularly community singing. After her husband’s death, Libeni faces ongoing pressure from relatives to remarry for a more secure life for herself and Apenyo. She declines the offer to concentrate on raising her only child and instilling cultural and moral values. Apenyo inherits her father’s musical talent and learns weaving from her mother. Growing up without a father, she is supported by her mother, gaining recognition as both a singer and an expert weaver. Like her father, Apenyo maintains a strong connection to her cultural roots, exemplified by her role as lead soprano in the church choir. The villagers adopted Christian customs and Apenyo often accompanies her mother, Libeni, to church, where she develops a passion for singing. Each Sunday, she participates in the congregation whenever the congregation sing. The story powerfully illustrates the suffering of Apenyo and her mother, who are violated by the Captain and his soldiers while she continues to sing her final song until her last breath. This song can be interpreted in multiple ways. Primarily, it expresses a longing for a time of innocence preserved in their primal consciousness. It also highlights the pain of being unable to reclaim that innocence; however, what initially seems like sorrow transforms into a narrative of resilience as she confronts those who have stripped her of her purity. Defying the stereotype of a submissive victim, she uses her song to challenge her oppressors, who are aware of the moral dichotomy of their actions. The text says, “Only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her” (Ao, 2006, p. 27). Apenyo embodies the resilience of the Naga spirit, demonstrating her ability to transform memories of turmoil into a source of strength in a rapidly changing world.

The text also highlights the collective joy of the Naga people, who foster communal bonds. Villagers contribute by donating in both cash and kind to construct a new church, eagerly anticipating its inauguration and the Christmas celebrations. Apart from that it highlights Nagaland’s intricate weaving traditions, showcasing the exceptional craftsmanship and artistic talent of its people. Handloom weaving is integral to daily life in the North-eastern region of India, representing a significant family-oriented traditional industry. The diverse products produced reflect the area’s rich cultural heritage, showcasing the creativity and skill of the weavers. In the story, Ao highlights the shawl-weaving tradition among village women, particularly focusing on Libeni, whose exceptional weaving skills make her shawls highly sought after. The story also illustrates the attire worn during festivals, with tribal men draping shawls and women donning ‘lungis’. New garments are bought for all family members, including fresh shawls for men and skirts for women. A significant day is chosen for the festivities, with villagers actively involving in the preparations. This portrayal underscores the unity among the Naga people, a vital aspect of their culture.

In *These Hills Called Home* Ao’s narratives focus on the traumatic historical experiences of the Naga people and the resulting identity crises—both collective and individual—arising from globalization, misguided nationalism, idealism, colonization, insurgency, and inter-state conflicts. Each story examines the characters’ displacement amid the chaos that devastates their homes and fields. Some individuals lose their youth as they are pressured into joining underground movements, while innocent girls suffer violence. Against this backdrop of conflict and regulated existence, familial issues also arise, as seen in “**The Night**” where the young girl is betrayed by a soldier, resulting in her ostracism from the community after becoming a mother. The portrayal of women in this context highlights a complex layer of oppression. The young girl who experiences societal neglect, makes a determined choice to provide a better future for her children. The narrative candidly explores familial tensions stemming from youthful desires and societal expectations. Imnala, a beautiful young woman, becomes involved with Repalembe, a contractor with two children. Their

secret relationship attracts community gossip when Imnala becomes pregnant for the second time, as children from such unions are often unacknowledged by society.

In “**The Pot Maker**”, Ao highlights the significance of pot-making as a vital craft in Naga society. Village elders encourage Arenla to teach this skill to her daughter, Sentila, emphasizing to Sentila’s father that such skills, which fulfil community needs and embody cultural traditions, do not belong to individuals. Naga society is characterized by a collectivist ethos that prioritizes communal interests over individual desires. In the story, it follows Sentila, a young girl enchanted by her family’s pottery tradition. She aspires to follow in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother, dreaming of becoming a potter herself. Arenla’s mother opposes her daughter’s engagement in pot-making due to the significant physical demands it entails. Recognizing that the parents are unaware of the importance of preserving their cultural traditions, the village council approach her father, Mesoba. They urge him to remind his wife of the duty to impart skills passed down through generations, emphasizing the benefits this would bring to the community. Ao argues that Naga identity should rise above the superficial divisions created by colonization and globalization. The notion of a unified Naga identity is portrayed as a construct, as the Nagas have never existed as a single tribe or cohesive entity. The Naga people’s understanding of their identity reflects a limited awareness of the externally imposed identity, highlighting both their commonalities and differences. Their collective identity is deeply rooted in their relationship with nature and rural living, while their distinctions stem from the various dialects and languages they speak.

4

In “**Curfew Man**”, the protagonist, Satemba, ventures into town after curfew to observe his Naga compatriots for his employers. He feels compelled to act as a spy but grapples with the moral dilemma of betraying the Naga struggle for freedom. This scenario highlights the crisis of Naga identity, placing Satemba in a state of liminality. Temsula Ao appears to seek redemption by creating a narrative space that addresses such crises. Satemba is conflicted between his loyalty to his Naga brothers and the expectations of his imposed role. His inability to maintain this position stems from a profound sense of betrayal towards his ethnic community. As Ao notes, “The real trouble was his heart, for the first time in two and half years, he was beginning to question himself and his so-called job” (Ao, 2006, p. 40)

Temsula Ao’s Vision for Reclaiming Naga Cultural Heritage

Temsula Ao views cultural memory as a means to transform the collective psyche and preserve heritage. She contends that by reconnecting with their roots, the Naga people can challenge the narrative that depicts them as barbaric and their struggle as violent. She emphasizes the importance of the Naga’s often-neglected past, which is rich in unique wit and wisdom. She emphasizes the urgent need to establish an environment that can counteract the adverse effects of modernity on Naga identity and culture. By resisting these detrimental influences, it becomes possible to address the misrepresentation of history and the harmful reinterpretation of the Naga narrative in contemporary society. Ao seeks to reclaim the past not through narratives of animosity and violence, but by crafting a story that is reflective and grounded in the core truths of the Naga spirit. She expresses optimism, recognizing that the current turmoil has led to a deeper understanding of their identity and progress. She argues that by reconstructing their cultural identity, they can foster a collective historical consciousness that connects them across different times and spaces. This effort could facilitate the reclamation of their marginalized identities, provided they act as guardians of their cultural heritage rather than as violators. A new path to resolution may emerge from the integration of their traditions with genuine engagement.

Our identities are significantly shaped by our roles in historical narratives. This notion highlights the paradox of Naga identity, as the once-celebrated history of the Nagas has been eclipsed, resulting in a focus on violence alone. This reality is poignantly illustrated in the short story “**An Old Man Remembers**”, where a young grandson inquires of his grandfather that if he and his grandfather Imli had killed many people when they were in the forest. Temsula Ao underscores the critical importance of creating an environment that mitigates the negative impacts of modernity on Naga identity and culture. By resisting these harmful influences, it becomes feasible to rectify historical misrepresentations and the distorted narratives surrounding the Naga experience at present. Ao aims to reclaim the past not through tales of conflict, but by crafting a narrative rooted in the fundamental truths of the Naga spirit. She conveys optimism, noting that current challenges have fostered a deeper comprehension of their identity and advancement. She posits that by reconstructing their cultural identity, the Naga people can cultivate a shared historical consciousness that

transcends time and space. This initiative could aid in reclaiming their marginalized identities, provided they adopt the role of stewards of their cultural heritage rather than transgressors. The Nagas, unaware of being trapped by their oppressors' deceptive allure, adopt an identity that betrays their community.

Temsula Ao's narrative about life in Nagaland aims to uncover the true identities of its people. Through her literary works, she examines factors that could help preserve their cultural values. She focuses on the human experience, grounding her writings in essential truths of existence. This exploration, however, necessitates a collective effort to uncover the fundamental meaning of life. Her narratives shed light on the root causes of regional violence, as she takes on the responsibility of exposing the harsh realities faced by those deeply affected by exploitation.

In mainland India, there is often a neglect of diverse lifestyles and cultures that do not align with Eurocentric ideals. In her book, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, Temsula Ao seeks to challenge prevailing national narratives by vividly depicting the rich cultural heritage of the Naga tribe. She moves beyond the violence and conflict between the Indian State and Nagaland to emphasize their cultural artefacts. Her critical perspective highlights the importance of showcasing the Naga tribe's extensive cultural legacy.

Conclusion

The indigenous culture of the Naga people holds significant relevance at the present day. The Nagas encounter various challenges, including environmental degradation, economic development, and social change. Despite these obstacles, Naga culture serves as a source of strength and resilience for the community. Embracing Naga cultural practices can offer essential support to these indigenous groups as they navigate their challenges and work towards a brighter future. Temsula Ao's writing delves into the complex relationship between 'culture' and 'identity,' making it a central theme. She posits that 'culture' is essential in forming Naga identity, emphasizing the deep connection the Naga people maintain with their cultural heritage. This relationship is vividly illustrated in her narratives, rich with Naga folktales, myths, legends, and rituals. Culture serves as a catalyst for the identity of specific indigenous groups and challenges the perception of culture as static. Ao highlights its dynamic nature, demonstrating its capacity to adapt to individuals' evolving needs. Consequently, culture impacts various facets of human life to differing extents. In her work, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, Temsula Ao endeavours to revive her community's lost heritage by depicting the religious beliefs, weaving and pottery traditions, social customs, and rituals of Nagaland's tribal groups. Her aim is to shift the narrative of her region from one dominated by violence to one that embodies peace. By emphasizing the face-to-face community culture, she seeks to present Naga culture and its dynamics to a broader audience, thereby challenging existing stereotypes about the Naga people and their cultural identity. Labelling Ao solely as a North Easterner or an Indian is insufficient, as she represents the broader essence of humanity. Engaging with her work allows readers to connect with her humanist ideals and their celebration. The reference to the Naga psyche she invokes is significant for all races and communities, reflecting a disconnection from their historically valued heritage.

References

- Ao, T. (2006). *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone*. India: Penguin and Zubaan Books.
- Ghosh, R., and Boruah, D. M. (2023). "Revisiting Naga Cultural Heritage through Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*". *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 4(6), 031-038.
- Gogoi, M. (2019). "Rethinking the Problematics of Identity in Northeast India with Special Reference to Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and *Laburnum for my Head: A Discourse of Cultural Recovery*". *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 8(2), 177-180.
- Rai, L., and Tripathi, D. (2021). "Redemption of the Naga Historical Consciousness: An Analysis of Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home- Stories from a War Zone*". *4th International Conference On Research In Humanities & Social Sciences*, 133-141.
- Rathee, R. (2017). "Conserving the Cultural Legacy in Selected Stories from Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*". *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities*, 5(7), 207-214.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares "No conflict of interest".

AUTHOR'S BIO-NOTE

Dibpriya Bodo is an Assistant Professor of English at Hills Degree College, Haflong, Dima Hasao, Assam, affiliated to Assam University, India. She has a Master's Degree in English from Gauhati University. Her areas of interest are British Literature and Modernism.