Gender Performativity: An Examination of Femininity and Masculinity of the Naga Society

N Rosa Kashena

Assistant Professor, Asuffii Christian Institute, Mao, 795150, Manipur

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to discuss the ideas of feminine and masculine among the Naga societies of Northeast India. It highlights the importance of different socio-cultural norms, activities and expectations of performing certain gender roles which in turn shaped their identities in the society. The various customs or ways in which the different traditional patriarchal societies of the Nagas sought to govern the society became a process of gendering the sexed bodies. According to Judith Butler, gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts where repeated performance of certain acts and behaviors contributed to the construction and maintenance of gender identities. Different traditional norms and customs of the Nagas has been historically enforced and practised which is reflected in all social, cultural, economic, religious and political sphere. An analysis on how these various processes impacted the gender roles and performativity is done with some selected communities of the Nagas like Mao, Angami, Ao, Tangkhul, Zeliangrong, Konyak to name a few. It also explores how performativity, masculinity and femininity shape individual identities and societal structures in the Patriarchal society of the mentioned Naga societies.

Keywords: Naga, Gender, Performativity, Idenity, Role.

Methodology: This study is analytical as well as descriptive. Colonial ethnographies, official documents, tour diaries, and qualitative data gathered through oral history are examples of primary sources. Additionally, previously published secondary materials are also consulted.

Introduction

The Nagas are a group of communities who fit in to the Mongoloid race and belong to the family of Tibeto-Burman speaking group. They are believed to have migrated from Southeast Asia mostly from the Southern provinces of China especially the Yunnan province. The term 'Naga' is a nomenclature used for more than sixty different communities inhabiting different regions of Northeast India and some areas in the north western part of the Sagaing Region of Myanmar. As early as the thirteenth century, the Nagas are mentioned in the Ahom *Buranjis* as hill dwellers who resisted Sukalpa, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam (Das, 1970). In *Tarikh-e- Aasham,* Shehabuddin Talesh describes the Nagas as a tribal community, who lives in the southern hill ranges of Aasham. According to his description, they have fair radish complexion, bulky figure and strong physical structure (Mir, 2009). The different communities due to their similarities in culture, geographical and physical features has been grouped under the same nomenclature by the British administrators which is still used widely by the people of

these communities to identify themselves as belonging together. Their habitat is very closely linked with the nature. Therefore, their polity, society, culture, economy and religion largely centers on their natural environment. The inter-relationship between the people and the geography is an important aspect on which the gender dynamics was also constructed as well. These communities settled in the hills and elevated terrains. Therefore, the availability and accessibility of resources, their settlement patterns, economic activities and division of labour, cultural beliefs and practices, mobility and interaction and the technologies they used determined their cultural construction of feminine and masculine. Along the lines of this cultural construction of gender are the different performative rules and roles assigned by the patriarchal structure to each sexed bodies.

Performativity and Gender

Performativity and gender are two of the most explored concepts in academic fields like gender studies, sociology and philosophy today. It was first coined and used by philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler in her work "Gender Trouble" (Butler, 2006). She challenged the traditional notion which understands gender as something fixed having innate qualities. According to her, gender is fluid and socially constructed where a person identifies itself as feminine or masculine through the performance of different roles and acts. In simple terms, it is the people who "do" gender through their behaviour, words, and body language, continually reinforcing and reaffirming social norms and expectations related to masculinity and femininity. One important argument of Judith Butler is the distinction between sex and gender where she stressed that sex refers to the bodily differences between male and female while gender is the culturally constructed norms and meanings associated with the sexed bodies. Her theory of gender performativity created new perspectives on the understanding of gender identity, power and resistance. It examines how gender is constructed, governed and challenged by bringing attention to the performative aspects of gender.

Judith Butler's framework of performativity has further been expanded by various scholars where they examined the intersections between performativity and other identity markers like race, class and sexual orientation (Halberstam, 1998). While some have examined the ways individuals used their performances to negotiate and defy gender norms demonstrating how gender identity is a dynamic and debatable concept (Connell, 1995). Such evolution in performativity theory helped in providing elaborate usage and interpretations across various scenarios.

Apart from the theoretical debates, researchers have also conducted investigations on the practical applications of performativity as well. Studies have been done on how gender roles impacted social interactions, work environment and public spaces which in turn affected the experiences and opportunities of the individuals (Acker, 1990; Risman, 2004). Recent researches has analysed how popular culture, marketing and media have played important roles in upholding gender norms by underlining the power dynamics in the creation and distribution of gendered representations (Butler, 2006; Gill, 2009).

In this way gender performativity theory emerged and the framework was further advanced by different scholars to understand and analyse different phenomena associated in the expression of gendered identities in the society.

With an emphasis on some of the Naga societies like the Maos, Angamis, Zeliangrong, Tangkhuls, Konyaks, and Aos, the study employs the notion of gender performativity to examine how gender roles

and identities are developed and maintained within the traditional and cultural context of the diverse Naga societies.

Femininity, Masculinity and Naga Society

The Naga societies also have its own perspectives on gender dynamics and performativity. The idea of what is feminine and masculine existed within them like any other societies of the world did. In Mao society, gender manifests itself differently in humans and animals. For humans, *Neto* (female), *Pfoto* (male), and for animals, *Kheni* (female) *Khelo* (male) were the terms used and the two recognised gender classifications for birds were *Rekrii* (female) and *Redzii* (male) (Kashena, 2023). Gendering starts the moment a child is born, categorising it as a girl or a boy. There was never a preference for one gender over another but the joy of parents, grandparents, and the community at the birth of a boy child was felt more strongly. Maos used the phrases *Kotsiimei* for adults and *Onamei* for children. The distinction between "male" and "female" was essential to family and society, as evidenced by the way certain customs were upheld and how people lived their daily lives.

Maos also employed the dichotomy of feminine and masculine to characterise nature. The phrases *"ojii mashii apfii"* (*ojii*-land, *mashii*-lying flat on back/facing upwards, *apfii*-mother) and *"orache madei apfo"* (*orache*-sky, *madei*-blue, *apfo*-father) designate the land as the female and the sky as the male (Kashena, 2023). They face each other and are parallel to one another. Another meaning of the word *"mashii"* could be that it refers to how everything on the soil, which is female, looks up towards the sky, which is male. *"Ojii"* stands for life and procreation, whereas *"orache"* is another word for heaven, denoting divinity and God. According to the *"Dziilimosiiro"* creation story, *"kahe kakra,"* the white cloud, was the one who hovered about the first lady (Kashena, 2019). Here, the lady who gave birth to the first beings represented life and birth, while the white cloud represented the masculine sky. Thus, the Maos assigned gender to nature and other living things. Everything that is feminine is related to fertility, as seen by the act of allocating the gender of the female to the land due to its fruitful nature. The masculine sky was also linked to the sexual and biological characteristics of men. Therefore, after closer examination of these narratives and concepts, it can be concluded that the Mao cultural construction of gender since the past was consistent with the idea that genders should be assigned according to biological distinctions and the performativity of the sexed bodies.

The cultural construction of gender assigned to the biological sex was cemented through the various separate roles, duties and responsibilities which women and men played in the family and society. For young girls, the emphasis is placed on domestic duties and nurturing roles, such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, and assisting with agricultural tasks. They are also expected to embody qualities associated with traditional femininity, such as modesty and elegance. This upbringing suggests a societal expectation for women to primarily focus on household and familial responsibilities. Conversely, men are expected to fulfill roles that involve protection, provision, and leadership. This includes engaging in activities like warfare, hunting, fishing, and participating in economic endeavors alongside women. Men are also expected to take the lead in decision-making for both the family unit and the broader community. The values placed on traits like strength, courage, assertiveness, and leadership underscore the societal emphasis on traditional masculine attributes. This assessment highlights the traditional gender roles within Mao society, delineating distinct responsibilities and expectations for men and women.

In the Angami society, unmarried women were identified by their haircut. Until they became engaged or married, they were not permitted to grow long hair. Their shaved head or short hair served as a representation of their virginity and unmarried status. The goal of shaving the head can be taken as a symbol of restraint to keep women from showing off their beauty and to avoid having sex with males until they were of marriageable age. It expresses what society expects of women in terms of morality and chastity. Men were not subject to the same demands or penalties as women, despite the fact that women were required to maintain "pure" moral and ethical behaviour. There was another ceremony when a girl might marry the *Kharu*, represented by the village gate, if she did not want to get married or wanted to keep her long hair (Yano, 2014). Many other Naga societies also followed the practise of shaving a maiden's head. Among the Angamis, Cowries were only worn by men. The cowrie clothes were considered as "male dress" which was worn as a sign of martial achievements (Hutton, 1921). What physical features makes women feminine and which clothes were suited for masculine men were decided and enforced upon the people by the society. This was evident on how the society expects women and men to maintain their physical look or even on the type of clothes they can or cannot wear.

For the Aos, stories on the practise of tattooing among men were less popular as compared to women. J.P. Mills has recorded that Ao warriors who had successfully hunted heads had tattooed circles on the backs and curved circles on their chests (Mills, 1926). But they were known to have abandoned the practise because of restrictions on certain type of foods for those who were tattooed. Unlike men, every girls of the Ao community were tattooed all over the body which usually stops only after her marriage. In this regard, women endured all the pains and necessary restrictions on their foods and drinks during and after the tattooing to meet the societal standard of beauty and being accepted as a member of the community. While for men, tattooing was done as a sign of honour and greatness. During celebration of certain rituals and sacrifices, the role of men was to perform all the necessary rituals as the head of the family, clan and the leaders of the village. They were permitted according to the customs of the community to avail the sacred places where rituals were done. The duty of the women on the other hand were to prepare and keep ready all the necessary things like food and wine to be used for the ritual (Longchar, 2021). It can be understood that femininity was connected to traits like physical beauty, endurance of pain and hardships, performance of household duties and accepting the role of secondary position in both the private and public sphere.

Within the traditional culture and beliefs of the Konyaks, headhunting was a common practice. They considered headhunting to be a ritualistic rite connected to their social and spiritual identity, rather than just a violent act. Men say that they are as powerful as clouds that throw fireballs and thunder, and they are as furious as tigers when a head is brought. Man gained fame and demonstrated his virility by taking a head. After a head was brought there was dancing and tattooing. His face and neck tattoos indicated that he had actually severed a head, while his body tattoos indicated that he had participated in raids. Haimendorf writes about the head hunting of the Konyaks where men compared themselves to tigers, terrible to their enemies, pursuing their enemies like which made their enemies shake and tremble (Haimendorf, 1939). The head of both men and women were hunted but there was more joy and celebrations in the community when the head hunted was of a man.

The practice of headhunting suggests the existence of hegemonic masculinity among the Nagas. Other than dominance over women it also proves that competitions within men themselves were a major factor in the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. The desire for domination over one another can be a driving factor behind behaviours like headhunting, as they were eventually judged and rewarded

according to their manly attributes. This practise among the Nagas can be considered as the manifestation of masculinity in its highest form when compared to any other existing features of masculinity. The intense competition for their own community and personal well-being, security, fame as well as wealth somewhat led to the development of toxic masculinity.

One important social institution of the Nagas in the past which greatly helped in fostering feminine and masculine roles was the *Morung* popularly known as the 'dormitory'. The idea of community living, which promotes a strong sense of solidarity, friendship, and mutual assistance among its residents, is fundamental to the Morung system. Young Nagas were taught the nuances of their culture in this communal setting through storytelling, song, dance, and other customs that have been passed down through the generations. As mentors, elders and seasoned community members are vital in mentoring the youth and imparting in them the qualities of discipline, respect, and responsibility.

For the Tangkhuls the male dormitory was called as *Longshim* and *Ngalalong* was the girl dormitory (Horam, 1977). After the attainment of puberty boys were accepted into the dormitory where they were taught to demonstrate their physical strength and moral courage by solving tasks and challenges set by their seniors. Members of the *Longshim* were expected to follow the rules and regulations that were exclusive to the group. Punishments were imposed for violations. Even though the *Longshim* was autonomous, the village rules and customs nevertheless applied to it. As the *Longshim* had its own leaders and laws, it was a preparation for the young men for leadership positions in the clan or village in the future. All things considered, the *Longshim* was an important part of Tangkhul social and cultural life, giving young males useful skills and moral direction as they grew older. Most Naga societies permitted the initiation of young boys into the dormitory only after they performed certain purification or initiation rituals. On the other hand no such customs were practised for the women. In the women dormitory where girls usually of same age groups slept together, they also learnt different roles and duties befitting a woman. According to R.R. Shimray, who views the Morung as a school for Nagas, it is from these institutions that the ideal village citizens, capable of carrying out social duties, emerge. He also thought that these were real-world institutions where young people's behaviours, manners, characters, and disciplines were formed, built, and taught (Shimray, 1985).

After the contact of the Nagas with the British colonisers in the nineteenth century both in Naga Hills (Nagaland) and Hill Tribes of Manipur (Nagas in Manipur), there emerged more sense of mobility in feminine and masculine roles than before. Although, it is true that the emergence of Christianity further reinforced the existing patriarchal norms, the gender dynamics underwent important changes as well. It can be rightly understood that in the earlier phase of the introduction of Christianity and Western education, it was men who availed all the new opportunities because the financial inadequacy of the Naga families did not encourage women to be a beneficiary of the new education system. The economic workload of women must have increased because they had to fill the void left by men who were absent from home for the purpose of seeking education or were involved in the construction works of the government like roads etc. In regard to the impact of Christianity and education, one cannot ignore the earlier impact in Nagaland as compared from Manipur. In Nagaland, by the early part of twentieth century, the Angami women appeared to have witnessed changes because the girls availed the education facilities by attending schools brought by the American missionaries (Yano, 2014). On the other hand, in Manipur, a document from 1865 indicates that the Director of Public Instruction stated in a report regarding a plan for Manipuris' education in Sylhet why the Missionaries of Carrow and Naga Hills do not plan to enter Munipore.

(Eduation Proceedings, 1869). One important reason was the existence of Vaishnavism in the plains of Manipur where the majority Meiteis were followers of the cult. At the same time, they had their own script and system of education so they did not feel much need to welcome the foreign system. Therefore, the introduction of Christianity was perceived more as a British plot to force their faith on them. However, a number of records that are currently available date back to 1868 and include teachers in planned school and student-related reports in Samoogoting (Education Proceedings, 1868). Additionally, according to archival sources, girl schools and the hiring of mistresses for the schools were documented in Naga Hills from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. By 1904, native Christian girls had taken up European customs and lifestyles (Education Proceedings, 1904).

The changes occurred later in Manipur as compared to the Nagas of Nagaland. More men availed themselves of the new opportunities created while women further sacrificed themselves to adapt to the new change that came about. It cannot be denied that there were a lot of positive impacts for women as well. Somewhere in mainland India, the early twentieth century witnessed a growing sense of nationalism which advocated against colonial rule. Both men and women played active roles in the public sphere. Women were also called out and encouraged to play their part in the struggle for independence. In this regard, the role of Haipou Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu in the Zeliangrong political movement against the British is a remarkable example of how when necessary, the leadership of the movement was not confined to masculine role. After the death of Jadonang, Gaidinliu took up the leadership of the armed guerilla force and engaged in warlike activities against the British (Sonia, 2016). Leadership and war activities were masculine roles before, but the situation necessitated the flexibility of such roles during the twentieth century in the Naga societies as well. Apart from this we see the performance of more masculine roles by women in economy as well. But the striking fact was that their roles did not give them the power to be a part in the administration of the village or even take part in making important decisions even today. This shows that power was and is showered to male sex and the female sex was subject to a secondary role that exists to assist the male dominated patriarchal society.

Gender Performativity and Naga Society

The exploration of gender performativity within the diverse Naga societies offers valuable insights into the complex interplay between culture, tradition, and evolving social dynamics. Through an examination of femininity and masculinity, deeply rooted in cultural practices, rituals, and societal expectations, it becomes evident that gender roles are not fixed but rather fluid and subject to change over time in the Naga society. Drawing from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, we understand gender as a socially constructed phenomenon, continually reinforced and challenged through individual and collective actions. The traditional gender norms observed within the Naga communities exemplify how roles, behaviors, and attributes associated with femininity and masculinity are performed and regulated, shaping individual identities and societal structures.

The narratives from various Naga societies such as the Maos, Angamis, Zeliangrong, Tangkhuls, Konyaks, and Aos illustrate the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics, encompassing diverse cultural interpretations and expressions. From the division of labor to rituals and ceremonies, from the Morung system to encounters with colonialism and Christianity, gender roles have been negotiated, contested, and sometimes transformed, reflecting the adaptability and resilience of Naga societies amidst changing socio-political landscapes.

Moreover, the examination of gender performativity within the Naga context underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, privilege, and agency. While traditional roles may have been rigidly defined, historical shifts, such as encounters with colonialism and modernization, have led to the emergence of new opportunities and challenges for both men and women. However, the persistence of patriarchal structures highlights the continued marginalisation of women and the favoring of masculine identities within Naga societies.

Reflecting on the implications of gender performativity in the Naga context, it is imperative to recognize the agency and resilience of individuals and communities in renegotiating and challenging traditional gender norms. By fostering inclusive dialogues, promoting gender equality, and empowering marginalised voices, Naga societies can strive towards creating more equitable and just social systems that honor the diversity of gender expressions and identities. In essence, the examination of gender performativity within the Naga societies invites us to critically engage with the complexities of culture, tradition, and social change, offering valuable insights into the dynamic nature of gender dynamics and the transformative potential of inclusive and progressive approaches towards gender equality and justice.

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