

Rice beer: The intersection of Alcohol Prohibition and Cultural Importance at the Naga Hornbill festival.

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Abstract: Central to Naga culture is the traditional rice beer known as "Zutho," which holds immense cultural significance. Each tribe has its own unique name for this beverage, typically brewed from sticky rice. In the early days of Naga society, it was a staple element of daily life, consumed during meals and festive occasions alike. Special containers crafted from bamboo or bottle gourds were used to transport the rice beer to fields or celebrations. Today, it remains a cherished aspect of Naga culture, with its presence prominently felt during festivals. Notably, the alcoholic beverage enjoys considerable popularity among festival-goers and holds a significant profit margin compared to other local cuisines. This study aims to explore the narratives and interactions of individuals who participate in the festival without consuming alcohol, expressing strong disapproval of the prevalent culture of unrestricted alcohol consumption during festive occasions. Conversely, it will also examine the perspectives of those who relish the freedom to openly indulge in alcoholic beverages, albeit for the duration of the festival. Furthermore, the study will consider the perspectives of six tribal moorings that sell traditional beers, as well as the engaging viewpoints and stories of individuals on alcohol prohibition in Nagaland.

Key Words: Christianity; Hornbill festival; NLTPA; Morung; Naga culture.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Nagaland boasts a predominantly Christian population, with Christianity deeply ingrained in the moral fabric of its society. Even prior to the introduction of Christianity, moral principles have served as steadfast guiding principles for the Nags, influencing their actions and thoughts. However, despite their strong religious affiliations, the state has grappled with issues of alcoholism, which often fuel social and domestic violence. Historically, the rice beer has been an integral part of tribal customs and rituals. However, over time, the increasing availability and misuse of alcohol led to concerns regarding public health, safety, and social harmony. The Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act (NLTP) of 1989 represents a significant milestone in the social and legal landscape of Nagaland, aiming to regulate the consumption and sale of alcohol within the state. The Act prohibits the possession, sale consumption and manufacture of liquor and of import and export. It represents a landmark legislative initiative aimed at addressing alcohol-related challenges within Nagaland. The NLTP Act has sparked debates and discussions within Nagaland's society, highlighting the tensions between public health objectives, cultural practices, and individual freedoms. Advocates of prohibition argue for the act's role in safeguarding public welfare and moral values, while critics raise concerns about its impact on personal liberties and the viability of traditional customs.

Brief review of literature:

According to literatures the cultural clash that occurred when Christianity was introduced to the Nags, particularly regarding the consumption of rice beer posing a significant challenge for Christian missionaries, who emphasized total abstinence from intoxicants as a fundamental aspect of Christian identity. Converts were strictly prohibited from consuming rice beer. Kikon (2009) suggests that traditionally, the identity of the Naga as tribal—naked, associated with animism, and engaged in headhunting—was juxtaposed with the identity of the Naga as Christian, educated, and thus reformed. However, rice beer held deep cultural significance among almost all Naga tribes, being brewed and enjoyed as a staple drink in every household. Rice beer among the Lotha Nags, described by Odyuo R. (2022), traditionally involves a boy's family offering it to a girl's parents through a go-between, symbolizing acceptance of a marriage

proposal. Kreditsu asserted that before the Hornbill festival, "Christian identity held hegemony over ethnic identity" and in this context traditional folk songs were adapted to include references to the Christian God. Festival programs, including most social events, followed and still follow a structure reminiscent of a Church program (2014, p. 25). And according to Rodrigues (2020), The NLTPA was the result of active efforts by organizations like the Naga Mothers' Association and the Naga Baptist Church Council. Despite these laws, alcohol remains accessible in the state for those who know where to procure it. Studying provincial laws, it explores the impact of prohibition laws on everyday life in Nagaland, examining how these laws shape the modern state and its cultural dynamics.

Insightful exploration of the intersection between religious practices, cultural identity, and social transformations, particularly focusing on the significance of rice beer within local communities by Longkumer (2016). It delves into the multifaceted role of rice beer, not merely as a beverage but as a symbol of communal bonding, ritual purity, and contested cultural identity. The author critically engages with the idea of cultural purity and the ways in which it is negotiated and redefined in response to external pressures and internal transformations. Chasie (2005) delves deeply into the complex historical and socio-political transformations experienced by the Nagas and sheds light on the profound impact of British colonialism on Naga society, which led to a disruption of traditional structures and values, the introduction of Christianity, and subsequent modernization processes. Odyuo (2013) explored the tradition of feasts of merit in Naga society, where an individual's social standing was often determined by their ability to host such feasts, closely linked to their capacity for expenditure and public display of wealth. These feasts varied in frequency among tribes and were costly endeavours, requiring abundant provisions of cattle and rice beer. Kichu (2019) examined the ethical aspects of drinking culture among the Ao Nagas, discussing how colonial moral standards and religious affiliations influenced cultural practices. With the arrival of Christianity, the brewing and consumption of rice beer became stigmatized as 'unchristian' and morally unacceptable, leading to its gradual disappearance. The author concludes that this decline reflects broader shifts in Ao society, influenced by external forces impacting indigenous traditions and the interplay between cultural heritage, religious beliefs, and socio-economic change. Sinha (2020) explores "zutho tourism" as a unique facet of cultural tourism, emphasizing Nagaland's traditional rice beer as a potential attraction for tourists. The author suggests leveraging zutho to develop a form of beer tourism specific to Nagaland, akin to Germany's Oktoberfest. The Hornbill Festival is identified as a pivotal platform to promote zutho globally, showcasing its potential as a niche tourism product and offering opportunities for sustainable growth in Nagaland's tourism sector. Studies on physical, chemical, and microbiological examinations on zutho were done by Teramoto et al. (2002). Zutho has a pH of 3.6 and acidity of 5.1, with a unique fruity aroma and sour taste reminiscent of Japanese sake.

The introduction of Christianity among the Nagas was met with resistance, largely due to the requirement of forsaking traditional social practices, including the consumption of rice beer. Christian missionaries condemned the Nagas' way of life as ungodly and unhealthy, criticizing the widespread use of local rice beer in festivals, community gatherings, and ceremonies across Naga society. This review highlights the complex interactions between cultural traditions and religious conversion, shedding light on the challenges and tensions experienced during the early phases of Christianity's introduction among the Nagas. The use of rice beer posed a significant challenge for Christian missionaries, who emphasized total abstinence from intoxicants as a fundamental aspect of Christian identity. Converts were strictly prohibited from consuming rice beer

Materials and methods:

The research approach utilized in this study primarily involves observation, both formal and informal interviews, documenting personal life stories, and employing narrative or reflexive methods. The data collection occurred during fieldwork conducted at the Hornbill Festival 2022, which stands as Nagaland's largest cultural event, celebrating the diverse Naga culture and heritage.

Cultural perceptions on alcohol

During my visit to the Naga Hornbill Festival 2022, I had the opportunity to deeply immerse myself in my own culture. This festival is the most famous and the largest cultural festival in the state. As I explored the festival grounds and visited each tribal morung, it was a heart-warming sight to see local visitors and tourists alike, both familiar and unfamiliar faces, enjoying these traditional alcoholic beverages around the fire pits.

Undoubtedly, rice beer holds a central role as the quintessential festival beverage. The abundant and continuous supply of this traditional drink at the festival makes it one of the most sought-after and economically significant drinks. Each tribe has its own distinct name for the traditional beer they brew and enjoy. The Rengma tribe identifies their traditional beer as "Azü," while the Chakesang tribe recognizes it as "Zutho". In the Ao tribe, particularly in the Chungli dialect, their beer is referred to as "Yie." The Angami tribe uses the terms "Thutse" and "Zutho" to describe their beer. Among the Zeliang tribe, the traditional beer is known as "Tanazeu," and in the Lotha tribe, it is called "Chumcho." These unique

names highlight the diversity and cultural richness of brewing traditions across Naga tribes. Through interviews, all six morungs reported their expenditure on setting up and selling beer to be between Rs. 40,000 and Rs. 60,000. This expenditure includes costs of preparation few weeks prior and transportation from their districts to the festival grounds. They have also sourced rice locally from paddy fields and some commercially bought. The use of local red rice and sticky rice resulted in a higher price per cup of rice beer, ranging from 100 to 200 rupees. When asked about the average consumption per person at the morung, they noted that individuals typically consume 2-3 cups of rice beer per sitting, often accompanied by side dishes. They also mentioned that their profits increase significantly when customers order local dishes to complement their drinks. This symbiotic relationship between the beer and local cuisine enhances the overall profitability of the morungs during the festival. According to an individual responsible for accounting for rice beer, Arju¹ sold an average of 200-300 cups per day. Meanwhile, in the Zeliang morung, they maintained two small containers specifically for storing the beer and both are emptied by the end of the each day. They emphasized their contentment with the financial returns generated by offering this traditional beverage to festival attendees. The Sema morung abstained from endorsing the sale of rice beer due to moral considerations, as they do not support the consumption of alcohol on ethical grounds.

A member of the Pochury cultural group shared that while the leader of their cultural troupe discourages excessive drinking; they and their friends often indulge in a cup or two of rice beer to boost their spirits. The individual explained that performing in front of a large audience can be nerve-wracking, and a small amount of rice beer helps alleviate anxiety and instill confidence. Additionally, they find that consuming a bit of rice beer enhances their enjoyment while performing traditional dances. Moreover, the individual noted that the performance setting often feels chilly, and their traditional costumes do not provide adequate warmth. This added discomfort makes a small intake of rice beer appealing, as it can provide comforting warmth in the cold environment. Thus, for some members of the cultural troupe, a modest amount of rice beer serves as a source of both emotional support and physical comfort during their performances.

Although another participant, who abstains from drinking, was asked if he refrains even from the local rice beer available in his morung. He clarified that he doesn't object to drinking in general but dislikes the behaviour of individuals who become visibly drunk and disruptive, emanating a strong smell of alcohol. He emphasized that such behaviour reflects poorly on the community, particularly when they aspire to be seen as embodying a Christian identity. He expressed concern, stating, "It does not present a good image of us (Naga)," adding, "We claim to be 'Nagaland for Christ,' but when we behave in such a manner, who will take us seriously?"

Suraj, a Nepalese taxi driver, shuttles passengers between Kohima town and Kisama² multiple times a day, making the trip at least 4-5 times, or more, depending on traffic conditions. He noted that during the night, most of his customers are young festival-goers attending concerts and in high spirits after drinking. He expressed concern about the rash driving behaviour of these festival attendees at night, highlighting that he had encountered several accidents due to reckless driving. This reflects the danger on uncontrolled consumption and free availability of rice beer and commercial alcohol during the festival. The public bear the consequences of untapped behaviours by individuals leading to disruption in safety and normalcy in the society. Most of the churches stemming their concerns on the youngsters involved in alcohol consumption and substance abuse during the festival. Focused in eradicating such behaviours, according to Nagaland Page (2022) the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) comprising of 20 associations and 4 associate members with 1780 churches, urged the Government of Nagaland to implement the NLTPA stating "we stand firm on the Act and will advocate for full implementation".

While seated at the Angami morung, I struck up a conversation with a lady from Chandigarh and her husband. They were visibly thrilled and captivated by the richness and grandeur of Naga culture, expressing that it was one of the most beautiful and immersive cultural experiences they had encountered. Like many others, they commented on the warmth and friendliness of the local people, noting that they always received warm smiles in return. Despite their initial skepticism about their spice tolerance, they were eager to explore the local cuisine. They bravely tried *Thutse*, and even went back for a second serving. They also sampled rice beer from another morung, describing it as sweeter and thicker in texture and had the texture that of a porridge. Ishan from Assam, was enjoying the cozy ambiance around the fire pit at Rehanki³, holding a traditional bamboo cup filled with a local rice beer and savouring a dish of local pork with bamboo shoot. He expressed his delight, remarking that the combination of the flavourful pork dish and the indigenous rice beer complemented each other perfectly. Their adventurous spirit and openness to experiencing new flavours and traditions exemplified the festival's ethos of cultural exchange and celebration.

¹ Arju is the traditional male dormitory of the Ao Naga.

² The Kisama Heritage Village, also known as the Naga Heritage Village, is the annual venue for the Hornbill Festival, located 12 kilometers from Kohima.

³ Rehanki is the traditional male dormitory of the Zeliang. The term Zeliang, refers to the Zeme and Liangmai Naga tribes combined

It was heartening to witness visitors from different parts of India embracing Naga traditions with such enthusiasm and appreciation, adding to the vibrant tapestry of the Hornbill Festival experience. Although, the convergence of alcohol prohibition and cultural significance presents a nuanced and intricate issue impacting Naga society. Alcohol holds profound cultural and traditional value across many communities, serving as a pivotal element in social gatherings, religious observances, and rites of passage. However, the regulation and prohibition of alcohol consumption are sometimes instituted by governments or religious bodies due to concerns about public health, safety, or moral considerations, such as those seen with the NLTP in Nagaland.

In settings where alcohol prohibition conflicts with entrenched cultural practices, a range of tensions and complexities emerge. For communities deeply intertwined with alcohol in social and religious contexts, restrictions on its use may be perceived as a challenge to cultural identity and autonomy. Such prohibitions have the potential to disrupt longstanding traditions, communal rituals, and interpersonal dynamics centered on alcohol consumption. Conversely, proponents of alcohol prohibition often argue that restrictions are essential for addressing alcohol-related health issues, social disruptions, and crime. They prioritize public health and safety considerations above cultural practices that may contribute to adverse outcomes.

Intriguing Conversations and Discoveries

During the Hornbill Festival 2023, conventional alcoholic beverages were openly sold, contrary to the ongoing alcohol prohibition in the state. The festival venue was surrounded by drinking cafes and roadside vendors selling alcohol, raising questions about public sentiment regarding this sudden allowance of alcohol sales. Observers may question the enforcement and consistency of alcohol regulations, particularly amid a festival that celebrates Naga culture and traditions. The presence of alcohol vendors at the festival entrance likely evoked varied reactions from attendees, ranging from acceptance to skepticism or concern. This unexpected scenario highlights broader discussions about alcohol policies, enforcement, and their alignment with cultural events. Public opinion on such matters may reflect diverse viewpoints regarding alcohol use and regulation, particularly within the context of cultural celebrations and societal norms.

Engaging in a discussion with three scholars in the on the necessity of the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition (NLTP) Act. Among them were two scholars from Nagaland, where the NLTP Act is implemented, and one from Meghalaya, a state where alcohol generates significant revenue. According to Nagaland Post (2023) Nagaland state is losing excise revenue to the tune of around Rs.200 crore to Rs.300 crore annually at a conservative estimate on account of ban on sale of alcohol. All three scholars expressing opposition to the NLTP Act, arguing that it has had minimal impact on the state economy in particular. They highlighted the prevalent illegal sale of alcohol, often at exorbitant prices, particularly along the border between Nagaland and Assam. This illegal trade has resulted in substantial revenue loss for Nagaland, with many consumers opting to purchase alcohol from these border areas attributing to cheaper price. Acknowledging the moral concerns underlying the alcohol ban, they argued that Nagaland is not governed by religious or theocratic principles but operates as a secular state and should consider broader societal concerns rather than religious or moral grounds alone. They believed that most cases of alcoholism stem from societal stereotypes rather than the substance itself. Instead of viewing alcohol as the primary issue, they pointed to problems like adulteration, bootlegging, and societal perceptions. They noted that individuals struggling with alcoholism often seek help from prayers or religious institutions, viewing addiction as a spiritual battle rather than solely a mental or health issue. Seeking assistance from healthcare professionals is often stigmatized, while turning to prayer warriors is encouraged and praised within their community.

Another individual contributing to this topic shared their experience of having to allocate a significant sum of money to procure alcohol from Assam for their wedding celebration. They highlighted the issue of alcohol being sold on the black market in Nagaland at prices significantly higher than the Maximum Retail Price (MRP). Additionally, the cost of transportation further escalated the overall expense. A Naga residing and working in Meghalaya mentioned that they would purchase alcohol from Meghalaya whenever possible due to the exorbitant prices and poor quality of alcohol available in Nagaland. Furthermore, the specific types of alcohol preferred by this individual were not accessible within their home state. Concerns were raised about the substandard quality of alcohol found in Nagaland, often heavily adulterated with other substances. This poses serious health risks to consumers, compounding the inherent health hazards associated with alcohol consumption. An individual who previously held strict views on alcohol consumption within a Christian context has undergone a transformation, adopting a more open and flexible perspective. This change in outlook was influenced by biblical references, particularly citing the first miracle performed by Jesus—turning water into wine. The individual pointed out that wine, as depicted in the Bible, is undoubtedly alcoholic and holds ceremonial significance in Catholic practices, such as being used during the sacrament and at the last supper. The individual emphasized that the key factor lies in responsible consumption by individuals. They argued that illegal activities and violence in society are attributable to the actions of individuals, rather than solely to the presence of alcohol itself. This

shift in perspective underscores a nuanced understanding of alcohol use within a religious framework, recognizing the historical and symbolic significance of wine while emphasizing personal responsibility in moderating consumption. By focusing on addressing societal issues such as illegal behaviour and violence, rather than demonizing alcohol itself, this individual advocates for a more balanced and contextual approach to the topic.

There is a significant contest between two perspectives on this issue, each presenting its own compelling rationale. Rice beer, as an alcoholic beverage, holds immense cultural and traditional significance within Naga identity. It has deep affiliations with deities, rituals, and sacred practices. Moreover, it has been regarded as a health-promoting drink, providing energy and strength to farmers after exhausting days in the fields. Contrastingly, the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act (NLTPA) doesn't expressly prohibit the consumption of this traditional alcoholic beverage. Rather, it targets industrially produced alcohol. In essence, this debate lacks a definitive right or wrong stance; instead, it hinges on individual choices regarding consumption, whether of traditional or commercial alcohol. The focus should shift towards mindful alcohol consumption, prioritizing quality over quantity. This shift entails promoting a culture of responsible drinking, encouraging individuals to savour and appreciate alcoholic beverages in a mindful manner. Rather than excessive consumption for the sake of intoxication, the focus should be on enjoying alcohol as a nuanced experience, appreciating its flavours, aromas, and cultural significance. By valuing quality over quantity, individuals can cultivate a healthier relationship with alcohol, reducing the risks associated with excessive intake while enhancing overall enjoyment and appreciation of alcoholic beverages. Furthermore, the state needs to concentrate on establishing robust support systems and rehabilitation centers, offering comprehensive health and mental care services to individuals struggling with alcohol-related issues.

However, the regulation and prohibition of alcohol consumption are sometimes instituted by governments or religious bodies due to concerns about public health, safety, or moral considerations, such as those seen with the NLTP in Nagaland. In settings where alcohol prohibition conflicts with entrenched cultural practices, a range of tensions and complexities emerge. For communities deeply intertwined with alcohol in social and religious contexts, restrictions on its use may be perceived as a challenge to cultural identity and autonomy. Such prohibitions have the potential to disrupt longstanding traditions, communal rituals, and interpersonal dynamics centered on alcohol consumption. Conversely, proponents of alcohol prohibition often argue that restrictions are essential for addressing alcohol-related health issues, social disruptions, and crime. They prioritize public health and safety considerations above cultural practices that may contribute to adverse outcomes.

Navigating this intersection requires a delicate balance between respecting cultural heritage and addressing public health concerns. Communities and policymakers often grapple with finding solutions that acknowledge the cultural significance of alcohol while mitigating its potential harms. Finding sustainable approaches that uphold cultural practices while promoting public health remains a critical challenge in many regions affected by alcohol-related issues.

Conclusion:

The Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition (NLTP) Act of 1989 represents a pivotal legislative initiative in Nagaland aimed at regulating alcohol consumption and sales within the state. This prohibition has led to significant debates and discussions, reflecting the complex interplay between cultural heritage, public policy objectives, and individual rights in Nagaland.

Nagaland's rich cultural tapestry is deeply intertwined with the tradition of brewing and consuming rice beer, which holds immense significance in tribal customs and rituals. However, the introduction of Christianity brought about significant changes, with missionaries condemning local alcoholic practices as ungodly and promoting total abstinence among converts. This clash between traditional practices and Christian values posed challenges for cultural preservation and identity. The festival culture in Nagaland, particularly exemplified by the Hornbill Festival, underscores the cultural importance of traditional alcoholic beverages like rice beer. During festivals, rice beer plays a central role, fostering communal bonding and serving as a staple festival drink. Visitors from diverse backgrounds embrace Naga traditions, including the consumption of rice beer, as part of the immersive cultural experience. Additionally, it is also economically very significant during the festival where all the six morungs in study reported the highest profit from rice beer in comparison to other items.

Public sentiments surrounding alcohol policies in Nagaland are diverse and multifaceted. Scholars and individuals have raised concerns about the economic impacts of prohibition, including revenue losses due to illegal alcohol sales along state borders. Issues of alcohol quality and adulteration further compound health risks associated with alcohol consumption, necessitating stringent quality control measures. It's important to note that while alcohol consumption itself carries health risks, the added danger of consuming adulterated products underscores the urgent need for quality control and regulation within the alcohol market to safeguard public health and safety. Key stakeholders should advocate for mindful alcohol consumption, emphasizing quality over quantity, and stress the importance of comprehensive support systems and rehabilitation centers for individuals grappling with alcohol-related issues.

In conclusion, the intersection of alcohol prohibition and cultural significance in Nagaland underscores the need for a balanced approach that respects cultural heritage while addressing public health challenges associated with alcohol consumption. The ongoing debates and discussions surrounding alcohol policies reflect the complexities of navigating tradition, modernity, and public welfare in a diverse and evolving society like Nagaland.

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