

## **History, Identity and Language: *Tenyidie* and Its Literary Networks**

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### **Abstract**

Historically, the *Tenyimia* is a group of Naga tribes which trace common ancestry. According to the oral sources, these people basically dispersed from two villages known as Maikhel (Mekhrore) and Khezhakenoma to different parts of the present-day Nagaland, Manipur and Assam. Their claim of common descent is endorsed by shared memories and conjoined geographical spaces besides the close linguistic lineage that is found among the varied dialects. However, before the colonial and American missionary experience, this kinship relationship was limited by historical factors and *Tenyimia* as a socio-cultural and political entity was not as defined as in the contemporary times and neither was there a common language called *Tenyidie*. It is in this context that the influence of western cultural traditions since the nineteenth century made a durable impression on the socio-cultural and political processes of the *Tenyimia* people across vast geographical spaces. As a result, *Tenyidie* language, which is basically a language adapted from various dialects by the American Missionaries became standardized among the *Tenyimia* people over time.

In this paper, one of the main objectives is to see how a literate tradition has been fostered and embraced across dialectal and geographical spaces. To understand this phenomenon, the paper would try to locate the nature and interplay of history, identity and language in reinforcing historical consciousness and creating new sensibilities.

**Keywords:** *Tenyidie*, *Tenyimia*, Cultural Identity, Historical Communities, Kinship, Linguistic Lineage, Linguistic Chauvinism, Lived experiences, Shared Memories

## Introduction

The discourse on identity formations is often vague and inconclusive. One of the reasons for such a phenomenon is because identities are all rooted to individuated contexts and cultural conditions. In this way, the definition on identity becomes as diverse as the innumerable individual cultures. Here, the paper would like to delve into a specific cultural identity and locate how experiences of divergent phases of history shapes identity (re) formations.

In this case, the *Tenyimia*, historically is a family of Naga villages which trace common ancestry although the nomenclature was coined only in the 1970s (*Structural Description of Tenyidie* 4) and the actual progenitor cannot be safely located, even if scholars like Kuolie, Sanyu proposes that *Tenyiu* was the common ancestor (*Tenyidie Diemvü Chü Kehie Kevor; A History of Nagas of Nagaland*). The claim of *Tenyimia* people for a common descent is endorsed by shared memories and conjoined geographical spaces, close cultural symmetries, besides the close linguistic lineage that is found among the varied dialects. Nevertheless, before the colonial and American missionary experiences, this kinship relationship was limited by historical factors and *Tenyimia* as a socio-cultural and political entity was not as defined as in the contemporary times and neither a common language called *Tenyidie* existed.

It is in this context that the intervention of western cultural traditions since the nineteenth century made a durable impression on the socio-cultural and political processes of the *Tenyimia* people across vast geographical spaces. As a result, *Tenyidie*, basically a dialect of few villages appropriated and adapted by the American Missionaries became standardized among the *Tenyimia* people over time. To understand the operation of this new cultural dynamic, the paper tries to situate the nature and interplay of history, identity and language in reinforcing historical consciousness and creating new sensibilities.

## Section I

### Historical Context: People, Migration and Kinship

*Tenyimia* basically is identified with the indigenous Naga tribes, namely, Angami, Chakhesang, Rengma, Zelianrong, Mao, Maram, Poumai, Memai and Pochury interspersed in

three states of India. According to D. Kuolie, *Tenyimia* is a community with largest speakers of a standard language (a standard language) and share single largest socio-cultural and political identity in Nagaland (*Structural Description of Tenyidie* 3). *Tenyimia* community inhabits the districts of Kohima, Phek, Dimapur and Peren in Nagaland, Tamenlong and Senapati districts in Manipur, part of North Cachar and Karbi Anlong in Assam. The present topography of the *Tenyimia* inhabited areas suggest that ethnic affinities can continue to exist outside of the colonial and post-colonial political boundaries.

The two terms *Tenyidie* and *Tenyimia* are popularly derived from the common antecedent *Tenyiu*. Meanwhile, most of the scholars who have worked on Naga history suggested that the Nagas migrated to the present places in different waves, most probably three waves (*A History of Nagas of Nagaland* 23-24). Looking at the settlement patterns and cultural practices of different regions, it somehow suggests so. As for the *Tenyimia* people, the major dispersion points can be traced to Maikhel village in Manipur, and Kezhakenoma and Leshemi in Nagaland (*A History of Nagas of Nagaland* 18-24; Zapami village council 2017). Moreover, oral sources indicate that many groups out-migrated from neighboring villages. These villages were crucial points of mass dispersion of many Naga communities. Shared memories, cultural and historical symbols, legends, folklores, etc. endorses such views. For instance, there is a popular legend about a ‘magical stone’ in Khezhakenoma village, which has been told in folklores across different communities. Similarly, the story of a big tree, believed to be an offshoot of the original tree planted by Koza (*A History of Nagas of Nagaland* 16) in Maikhel village has become a cultural symbol in folklores. And *Kuzhanuokhru* (Recorded as *Khezhanuokhru* in colonial records, and appropriated and regularized by colonial government. The term literally translates as tax from descendants of Kuzha), was an ancestral tribute owed originally to *Kuzha netho ketsu* (consisting of *Lasumi, Leshemi and Zapami*) by many Naga villages in olden times (*Shifting Democratic Experiences of Nagas; The Heritage of Zapami Village; Socio-cultural Heritage of Kuzhami Chakhesang Nagas* 101-106). Such shared and lived experiences reinforces kinship identities and lineages of the ‘almost forgotten identities’. Kuolie attributes further migration from these ancestral villages to problems of insufficient land and other resources with the increase in population (*Structural Description of Tenyidie* 2).

Perhaps, as a result of space constraints and even because of internal dissensions, people migrated to other parts and formed new villages. However, tradition forbade new villages to follow the exact cultural practices and speak the same language of ancestral villages (Interview with elders of Zapami Village). To substantiate this argument, there was an instance where a group of villagers from Kikruma who attempted to out-migrate to start a new village had to eventually return because they could not invent a dialect of their own (In conversation with Dr Venusa Tinyi). This traditional practice of diversification of language and culture and isolation caused by inter-village warfare most probably caused divergent cultural and linguistic conditions.

This process of cultural diversification and linguistic variation caused by existent political circumstances had amplified to a condition of unintelligibility. Although, most *Tenyimia* villages are/were located at visible distances, hostility had consumed a great deal of the ethnic sensibilities. Sudipta Kaviraj in one of his papers argued that language not only creates feelings of identity but also enmity. To him often the most indestructible barriers among people are walls of words (*The Imaginary Institution of India* 127-128). His assumption was made on the Indian sense of identity, nevertheless, it also applies to other isolated historical situations, for hostility creates cultural asymmetries.

Although, collectiveness both in relational and symbolic sense was limited to a few villages, some traditional practices still give credence to common historical roots. It has been told in folklores that younger *Tenyimia* villages wait for the ancestral villages to offer rituals during festivals and invoke blessings during the start of every new agricultural cycle. Otherwise, it was a taboo to secretly or ignorantly indulge (Conversation with Dr Venusa Tinyi). As a result, traditional imperatives were upheld religiously and sacredly. And importantly, almost all the *Tenyimia* villages practice terrace cultivation, unlike other villages which does jhum cultivation. These are some of the persistent traditional practices that are still operational in Naga society.

As a matter of fact, until the colonial and missionary encounter, the village societies were highly individuated. Subsequently, with the gradual experience of colonialism and Christian evangelism, some core aspects of culture, identity, history and language underwent structural makeover. The medium of literary tradition, as a fluid colonial-missionary agency, actively influenced the local cultural systems to establish western precedents in the years to follow.

## Section II

Going by the historical evidences, colonial officials and the American missionaries devoted great interest in the development, literalisation and circulation of literary languages. As we shall see, the politics of language was crucial to the engagement of the local cultures.

### Spoken to Written

The indigenous Nagas originally did not have a written tradition prior to colonial and missionary cultural encounter. Evidently, the ‘Angami’ language was recognized by the government even before 1870s (*English Language and the Formation of Public Sphere in the Colonial Naga Hills* 59). According to records, it was used as one of the official languages for administrative purposes and the administrators were required to qualify proficiency tests both in written and spoken formats (ibid). However, this evidence go against the general assumption that literary culture commenced with the arrival of American missionaries. In all probability, the official usage of ‘Angami’ language was for data collection and official transactions, and therefore it was limited to the colonial officials.

The entry of American Baptist missionaries to Naga Hills since early 1870s marked the beginning of literary culture into the local cultural systems. In the first instance, Clark took the help of locals to literalize Chongli Ao language in phonetically written form by the early 1870s (Government of Nagaland (ABAM) 1901, 6). The early missionaries specifically chose the Roman alphabet with Italian sound of vowels<sup>i</sup> over Sanskritized Assamese for the Naga languages. With the gradual success of literary development in the Ao mission, the missionaries produced literatures for evangelism. Evidently, basic primers were printed and primary schools were simultaneously introduced with local evangelists serving as teachers (ibid). Under the

Kohima mission station, Rev. Rivenburg and his wife Mrs Hattie took up the incomplete literary works left by Rev. C. D. King and successfully literalized the ‘Angami’<sup>ii</sup> vernacular, besides evangelistic and medical works (*A Corner in India* 119; Rivenburg 1904). However, due to complex linguistic landscape in the Naga Hills, the American missionaries initially undertook parallel literary projects of ‘Chongli Ao’ and ‘Angami’ and steadily extended to other languages.

While the literalized dialects gradually obtained progressive circulation within the colonial and missionary domains, many other spoken dialects were marginalized.<sup>iii</sup> Nevertheless, this literary process simplified the Naga linguistic landscape to some extent. That being mentioned, it is also pertinent to find out the dynamics that had sustained the literary culture.

### **Print, Translations and Literary Production**

The coming of print culture envisaged a new trajectory of history and history writing on the Nagas. Anindita Ghosh (*Power in Print*) has done a comprehensive study on the literary history in Bengal to locate how print was instrumental in establishing colonial hegemony. It is very evident in the case of Nagas and Naga languages also that print as a modern phenomenon was a significant factor in carving out new identities and furthering colonial and missionary influence and impact.

In order to expedite literary development and sustain the first missionary school, Rev. E. W. Clark requested for a hand printing press from Boston in the early 1880s (*A Corner in India* 108-109). Subsequently, a much larger machine arrived. Mary Mead Clark described that the Nagas voluntarily contributed two whole days to the ‘tremendous task’ of bringing the machine to the hilltop (ibid). The coming of this printing machine to Naga Hills brought about a revolution in the literary development of the Nagas. It also swayed many Nagas towards the growing and impressive emergence of a “modern domain”. According to missionary sources, by 1885, the gospels of Matthew and John, a catechism, a collection of hymns, and elementary school books were published in the Ao dialect (*A Corner in India* 118).

Meanwhile, the literary works of American Baptist missionaries, especially the translated works, were subjected to undergo scrutiny by the government before publication. Nevertheless, after government's approval, books were published at state's expense (Refer Government of Nagaland 1904, p. 7). With the arrival of missionary printing machine at Molungyimsen and colonial government's assistance, literary production was expedited enormously. Some of the earliest publications are still preserved in its original form. These include Rev. Clark's compilation of the 'Ao Naga-English Manuscript Dictionary' and 'Ao translation of Matthew 1883', besides many other works. Under Kohima mission station, Rev. Rivenburg had widely published including 'Hymns in Angami Naga 1892' (Rivenburg 1892), 'The Gospel According to Matthew in Angami Naga 1890', 'Phrases in English and Angami Naga, 1905' (Rivenburg 1905), etc. The first 'Angami New Testament' bible appeared in 1927 translated by Rev Tanquist, who was assisted by several Angami Christians (*Comparative History as World History* 259). In this way, the literary domain of missionaries had impacted Naga languages and cultures. The missionaries had actively engaged the earliest literate Nagas to the literary project and this strengthened literary activities in chosen directions.

Thus, in the words of Bernard Cohn, the production of texts and others that followed them began the establishment of discursive formation, defined an epistemological space, created a discourse (orientalism), and had the effect of converting Indian forms of knowledge into European objects (*Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* 21). In the case of the Nagas, the American missionaries and the colonial rulers through their discursive strategies—schools, education, literary culture, print—had defined a new epistemological space.

### **Section III**

#### **Orality, Literary Politics and Ambiguities**

The coming of literary tradition and print had gradually altered the local cultural dynamics. Needless to say, oral culture was the store house of collective consciousness and cultural repository of Nagas. So, for the locals, culture was in some sense contained in the oral culture itself and vice versa. Hence, to a great extent, oral culture was the definition of culture. One way to justify this argument is that the progressive penetration of literary tradition into local

cultures has resulted in gradual loss of cultural knowledge from memory. This implies disturbance to the oral cultural systems.

However, with the commencement of literary culture a new wave of identity consciousness has evidently emerged. The propagation of Christianity was one of the major factors as to why new form of identity consciousness needs to be understood in relation to literary culture. Another reason is clearly a localized phenomenon, where, dialectical narcissism was at play, which in fact was produced by the literary politics. For instance, some of the major villages, whose dialects had more influence on the literary vernaculars engaged in promoting and patronizing its influence over the other villages. It is in this sort of instances that we find the inter play of language and history. Therefore, we cannot ignore the language politics in the process of standardization of a dialect over others. In doing so, the paper locates the historical process of literary development to explain how and why in the first place, certain dialects were appropriated.

Even though, this paper deconstructs some preconceived assumptions, it also argues as to how these early literary vernaculars or simply a literary culture, *Tenyidie* in this case, had resuscitated historical identities. Thus, it engages a paradoxical approach to correcting certain assumptions to comprehensively understand historical communities and in some sense even oral societies better. Colonial and missionary experiences were crucial to this understanding.

### **The Politics of Standardization**

As we have discussed above, the missionaries had picked up certain dialects and literalized it for education and Christian evangelism. With the literalization of these dialects and the commencement of literary productions through print, the linguistic landscape of the Nagas in general and *Tenyimia* in particular, had witnessed a massive shift. This was made possible because the literary vernaculars were standardized across dialectical spaces. Therefore, linguistic standardization prompted formation of new forms of identities in some cases. As a case in point, ‘colonial naming of categories’ may be cited here (*The Tyranny of Labels*). It is not sure how far the ‘tribal identities’ in the case of the Nagas can be considered as distinct ‘historical identities’,



but with the literary factor at play, generic tribal categories were legitimized. These colonial categories have become the point of reference for different people in the post-colonial or neo colonial times. In this sense, telescopic identities had emerged out of multiple/village identities. That being said, the paper argues that the case of *Tenyimia* identity was different. Even though, *Tenyidie* cannot be claimed as the historical language of the people, the literalization had proven to be strategic in reinforcing its historical sensibilities.

In order to sustain the standardization of literary *Tenyidie* and importantly institutionalize the standardization set by the American missionaries, the Angami Literature Committee was constituted by Rev Tanquist in 1939 with five members including Sir C. R. Pawsey, the then Deputy commissioner of Kohima. Thereafter, the Deputy Commissioner sent notification to all the schools, directing that the system of spelling and word division of *Tenyidie* taught in Kohima Mission School, would be the standard form of *Tenyidie* language and that this new system would be followed in all the schools (*Structural Description of Tenyidie* 7). The role played by the local agencies in the spread of Christianity and *Tenyidie* language is crucial to the way *Tenyimia* identity consciousness was reinforced. Later, the Angami Literature Committee expanded and changed its nomenclature to ‘Ura Academy’ in 1971. The main objective of this new institution was not only the development and spread of *Tenyidie* but also to promote other socio-cultural and political aspects of the *Tenyimia* people (*Structural Description of Tenyidie*).

Basically, the standardization of *Tenyidie* by the missionaries was a significant factor in taking the literary language to the different parts of *Tenyimia* inhabited areas. As it has been pointed out earlier, one historical explanation to understand the *Tenyimia* identity is the contagious geographical space, where most of the cognate villages are located. This contagiousness enabled local missionaries and teachers to venture into different parts for Christian evangelism and education alongside. Moreover, during the colonial period, bulk of the *Tenyimia* inhabited areas in the Naga hills comprising present ‘Angami’ and ‘Chakhesang’ tribes were referred to as ‘Angamis’ and Kohima, which was the nucleus of colonial rule and missionary activities, the circulation and currency of a standardized language was practically easier.

Moreover, as a result of the rapid spread of Christianity, churches in towns with multi lingual congregation began to appropriate *Tenyidie* as the common medium of communication. This was all the more functional as the Bible and the Hymnal books were printed in *Tenyidie*. In fact, most of the Christian literatures in the *Tenyimia* churches have been in the *Tenyidie* vernacular, including the medium of communication. The literary production which the missionaries initiated became widespread and popular amongst the village folks and semi-literate people, besides the educated who were at the helm in promoting *Tenyidie* and English. In this way, even though people speak in different dialects, *Tenyidie* emerged as a ‘high language’ of the people seated next to the English language.

## Section IV

### The Interplay of History, Language and Identity

The close juggle between Christian evangelism and colonialism not only captured the imagination of the people in a new light but also left perennial assumptions about ‘self’ and ‘others’. It was through these psychological and intellectual undertakings that new identities were created and these also revived some historical identities. The reinforcement of *Tenyimia* identity as an ethnic or historical identity involved the interplay of history, language and identity which implies that *Tenyimia* identity resuscitated through the colonial and missionary politics of literary language. In this way, even though *Tenyimia* identity was historical, the colonial and missionary patronization of this identity was totally from a different frame. In other words, this historical identity was paradoxically redefined through the means of evangelism, colonialism and ‘modernity’.

The term *Tenyidie* means the language of the *Tenyi* people. However, the origin of standard *Tenyidie* can be traced to a couple of villages which stationed the American Missionaries and colonial rulers. According to Dr. Shurhozeli, a prominent scholar on *Tenyidie*, the standard vernacular is closely related to dialects spoken in Meriema, Khonoma and Kohima villages (*Tenyidie Dze*). Nevertheless, how this politics of historical appropriation of literary language have come about is not certain; perhaps, such politics was basically strategized by the American missionaries. But it is clear that some of the villages which were in close proximity to

the colonial and missionary enclaves had a sort of ‘sub-colonial’ advantage in the promotion of *Tenyidie*. As such, the dialects of a few villages on being developed and literalized, underwent huge literary production at the missionary and colonial bases in Kohima. The printed literatures were circulated through colonial and missionary networks and agencies across the ethnic space as the ‘historic’ or ‘mother language’ of the *Tenyimiam* people. These sort of colonial strategies created new assumptions of the ‘self’, the ‘other’ and their histories. Nevertheless, the discreet population somehow did not strictly question these rhetorical advances and enabled its circulation and popular currency.

Needless to say, the historicity of the present literary *Tenyidie* is largely debatable. Some *Tenyidie* scholars would often confer to themselves a colorful history by claiming the antiquity of *Tenyidie* with *Tenyimiam* history. According to Kuolie, the term ‘Angami’ was changed to *Tenyidie* around the 1970s because of the traditional, historical and cultural factors (*Structural Description of Tenyidie* 4). He projects *Tenyidie* as the mother language and owes the dialectical variations to the large geographical space and the presence of sub-ethnic groups within the community (ibid). This argument implies that *Tenyidie* is the original language of the *Tenyimiam* people and that the process of dialectical substrata were the outcome of space, time and social-cultural isolation. Nevertheless, the present literary form of *Tenyidie* cannot be termed as the mother/natural language of the community. Otherwise, it manifests cultural narcissism and linguistic chauvinism on the part of the scholars.

In fact, it is more appropriate to discuss *Tenyidie* in the present literary form as a ‘conceptual language’ (*The Imaginary Institution of India* 140)<sup>iv</sup>, developed for a specific interest or purpose. It is in this particular context, regardless of origin and historicity of the language, *Tenyidie* has positively impressed a renewed sense of belongingness on the people. Perhaps it was the sense of belongingness, derived out of close ancestral relations and cultural symmetries that had provided favorable conditions for literary *Tenyidie* to become popular. This particular aspect of *Tenyidie* is significant in redefining the *Tenyimiam* consciousness in the contemporary times.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the colonial government with the help of the missionaries attempted to establish primary schools in all the villages in the Naga Hills (American Baptist Conference 1905). Prior to this venture, the missionaries had opened schools in many villages although the management was quite ordinary. This new colonial and missionary collaboration on education extended its networks enormously. As a result, interactions among different villages intensified which enabled communication at different levels

### ***Tenyidie* and Its Literary Networks**

The coming of literary culture and colonialism had created a new obligation for its 'subjects' on the aspect of marginality and access as literacy progressively became the yardstick for a new social mobility and material culture. In this way, as Kaviraj has critiqued colonialism, it has imposed on society unfamiliar discourses, conceptual grid and an alphabet without which institutions were uninhabitable, unintelligible... (*The Imaginary Institution of India* 144). With all these western precedents at work, *Tenyidie* which could be originally identified with a couple of villages was spread to different parts in course of time. Literary culture and print were crucial in the formation of an extensive literary network with Kohima as the radius of this ethno-linguistic spectrum.

This network created a public sphere which was absent in the pre-colonial times. Gradually, *Tenyidie* vernacular became popular alongside English language. Thus, contemporary socio-political and cultural sensibilities of the people were generated through this new bilingual medium. Subsequently, *Tenyidie* became a stepping stone to English education, and to the people back then (and even now), English education was perceived as 'modernity'.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper argues that there are 'identities' which are not necessarily imagined. In the case of historical identities, it may exist within an imagined framework, as well as exist independently. This is where it differs slightly from the original idea of an 'imagined community' conceptualized by Benedict Anderson. His work although includes historical sense of identity, focusses more on the political aspect of identity formation (*Imagined Communities*).

This study is about an identity which is based primarily on kinship. A context in which a historical identity which was almost lost has been resuscitated by a literary vernacular basing on the kinship chain.

It is also in the context of the absence of an absolute majoritarian language besides English, that the question of regional discontent did not arise so much in the past even if *Tenyidie* was popularized. *Tenyidie* has established a widespread literary network over the *Tenyimia* spaces ever since the colonial and missionary occupation. However, scholars require institutional circumspection while tackling the issue of history, language and identity. Otherwise, the larger intelligentsia may see the cosmopolitan state as a mere case of subterfuge which might, in the near future, endanger the very historicity of *Tenyimia* identity as a whole. However, if the linguistic development of *Tenyidie* could progressively embrace a comprehensive approach to include all stakeholders and its dialects, the new literary culture represented by *Tenyidie* that emerged under colonial and missionary auspices, shall continue to buttress a common history and an identity even more in the future.

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<sup>i</sup> A—sounds like a in father, E—has two sounds: short vowel like e in pen; long vowel, similar to ai in fair, I—sounds like ea in tea or i in marine, O—has two sounds: like o in cozy or similar to o in cost, U—sounds like u in rude. <http://italian.about.com/cs/pronunciation/ht/pronouncevowels.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> During the colonial times, Angami as a group of people was a common reference for the present Chakhesang and Angami tribes, and the literary vernacular was called ‘Angami language’. It was only in 1971 that Angami was changed to *Tenyidie* for broader usage.

<sup>iii</sup> The process of literary standardization of Ao Chongli dialect, evidently spoken by smaller group secured prominence over the larger linguistic group known as Ao Mongsen.

<sup>iv</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj has talked about two kinds of languages i.e. natural and conceptual, by elaborating Gramsci’s idea that language contains a certain conception of the world. According to him, the origin of vernaculars are closely linked to new conceptions of religiosity. See *The Imaginary Institution of India* 140.

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