



Research Article

From Subsistence to Market: Consumption, Identity, and Cultural Transformation in Contemporary Naga Society

Shimreipam R S



Research Scholar, Sociology at Jamia Millia Islamia, India

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT



Keywords:

Tangkhu Naga, Tangkhu Naga Market, Market Consumption, Consumption Identity, Identity Culture

Article History:

Received: 11-12-2025

Accepted: 25-04-2026

Published: 06-05-2026

This article examines the aspects of consumption, identity, and cultural transformation in contemporary Naga society, with particular emphasis on the Tangkhu Nagas, through the analytical lens of market integration. Based on historically grounded ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ukhrul district, Manipur, this study examines the transformation of socio-economic practices and identities among the Nagas over time. The study situates these transitions within broader theoretical discourse of modernity and identity construction. It argues that the transitional process is not merely an economic reorientation but a profound cultural transformation, in which local actors actively navigate tensions between tradition and emerging forms of social and material life. By centring the experiences of the Nagas, this study deepens our understanding of rural transformation and the contested terrain of tribal modernity in an increasingly globalised world.

Cite this article:

Shimreipam, R. S. (2026). From Subsistence to Market: Consumption, Identity, and Cultural Transformation in Contemporary Naga Society. *Sprin Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 22–28. <https://doi.org/10.55559/sjahss.v5i1.599>

Introduction

The Nagas are an indigenous group of ethnolinguistically related ethnic communities inhabiting the north-eastern borderlands of India and parts of north-western Myanmar. In India, they are primarily concentrated in the state of Nagaland, and spread across the hill districts of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam (Thong, 2016, p. 6). In Myanmar, they are found predominantly in the Sagaing Division and parts of Kachin State (Naga Youth Organisation Report Burma, 2010, p. 9). Despite being dispersed across multiple geographical regions and political territories, the Nagas historically shared a number of socio-cultural institutions, including clan-based social organisation, customary law, and subsistence-based agrarian practices, such as terraced and shifting cultivation (Horam, 2016; Shimray, 2001; Thong, 2016).

For much of their history, Naga communities sustained themselves through a subsistence-based economy embedded in kinship relations, with limited contact beyond their immediate regions (Vashum, 2022). This relative isolation was disrupted during the colonial period in the nineteenth century, which marked the beginning of a more open interaction with external political and economic forces (Thong, 2016; Ruivah, 1993). Since then, and especially in recent decades, Naga society has experienced profound transformations. The integration into broader state structures, the expansion of market economies, and the growing reach of consumer culture are collectively reshaping traditional institutions, gradually redefining both material livelihoods and the kinship-based structures that have long

underpinned Naga social organisation. As these institutions undergo transformation, individuals and communities actively negotiate new identities and modes of belonging within an increasingly dynamic and competitive socio-economic landscape.

Contemporary Naga society stands at a complex intersection of tradition and transformation. As the Nagas navigate the shifting currents of modern market forces, changing consumption patterns, and identity construction, understanding this transition requires a close examination of how historical forces, economic change, and modernity intersect with everyday lived experiences and local aspirations. This study employs a historically grounded ethnographic approach, based on fieldwork conducted in Ukhrul district, Manipur, to examine how socio-economic practices and identities among the Nagas have transformed over time. The article explores the interrelated dimensions of economic restructuring and cultural transformation, situating the Naga experience, particularly the Tangkhu Nagas, within broader theoretical discourses on modernity and identity construction. By tracing the shift from subsistence-based livelihoods to market-oriented economic practices, this analysis foregrounds the transition as a critical axis for understanding contemporary transformations in Naga identity and the broader cultural landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines social change in Naga society through a critical engagement with colonial encounters and the diffusion of Western cultural forms. Although processes of modernisation can be historically traced to colonial intervention, they cannot be

*Corresponding Author:

✉ shimreipamronra@gmail.com (R S Shimreipam)

🌐 <https://doi.org/10.55559/sjahss.v5i1.599>

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merely explained through linear or deterministic models of social change. Social formations are historically contingent and continuously reshaped by intersecting political, cultural, and historical forces. This study foregrounds modernity as a plural, negotiated, and multidirectional process, constituted through the interplay of external influences and indigenous interpretations (Eisenstadt, 1999; Sharman, 2006). Modernity, in this sense, is not merely imposed but actively reworked through local agency, selective adaptation, and, at times, resistance, as communities seek to reconcile new forms of social organisation with enduring cultural values and collective identities. (Sahlins, 1999; Smith, 1982).

Much like other tribal societies, traditional Naga society was characterised by the social embeddedness of economic life within kinship-based social structures, where production, distribution, and exchange were governed by social norms and reciprocal obligations (Malinowski, 2002; Polanyi, 1944). However, the expansion of market forces and consumer culture has gradually restructured these relations, leading to an erosion of this embeddedness as economic activities become increasingly autonomous from communal obligations and kinship-based modes of production. This transition is marked by the growing influence of capitalist logics of individual accumulation and commodified exchange (Harvey, 2003, pp. 145-152). Interlinked with this, identity, once rooted in clan, lineage, and territorial affiliations is undergoing a parallel transformation. Identity is understood here as a dynamic and contested process, continuously shaped by changing material conditions, institutional interactions, and cultural imaginaries. As Hall argues that identities are not fixed but are continuously produced within specific historical and cultural contexts (Hall, 2013).

As individuals and communities engage with markets, education, religious institutions, entrepreneurial ventures, and consumer practices, new subjectivities emerge that both draw from and depart from traditional modes of self-understanding. The reach of globalisation intensifies these dynamics, as translocal flows of goods, images, and ideas increasingly influence local aspirations, desires, and socio-economic strategies (Appadurai, 1996). These developments unfold within a relational framework that links individual experience with broader social and structural transformations. In particular, economic and cultural transformation generate new social positions, aspirations, and modes of distinction, thereby reshaping how identity, belonging, and status are constructed and negotiated in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1996). Among the Nagas, these shifts are particularly visible as traditional sources of social capital, such as clan affiliation, kinship networks, or elder authority, are increasingly juxtaposed with, and contested in relation to emerging forms of economic and cultural capital, including market participation, formal education, and consumption practices.

Methodology and Data Collection Techniques

This study is situated within a constructionist paradigm that views social reality as historically situated, contextually grounded, and continuously produced through everyday cultural and material practices (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). It assumes that knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed by social actors as they navigate shifting socio-economic and institutional landscapes. In this framework, consumption and identity are understood as culturally dynamic processes shaped by lived experience, negotiated meanings, and situated interpretations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hall, 2013). Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to access the local lifeways and meaning-making practices of Naga communities as they engage

with and respond to the penetration of market forces and consumer culture.

The data presented in this article are drawn from the research undertaken during my doctoral studies. "Ethnography-as-fieldwork" (Brewer, 2001, p. 10) was conducted in Ukhrul town and in four villages—Chingai, Challou, Langli, and Punge—located in the Ukhrul district of Manipur. Fieldwork was carried out over a period of thirteen months, between 2018 and 2020. A total of 136 face-to-face (44 in-depth and 92, semi-structured interviews) were conducted using a snowball sampling technique. This approach facilitated access to respondents through existing networks of trust and social relations. Interviews were approached as "conversation with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984, p. 102), prioritising an emic perspective to capture participants' interpretations and context-specific meanings. Participants included men and women of varying age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. Extensive participant observation was also undertaken by immersing in daily socio-economic activities, including agricultural work, church gatherings, market transactions, and household exchanges. The aim was not only to document material change but to understand how these transformations are lived, contested, and navigated from within.

Situating the Study: Background and Historical Context

Ukhrul district, located in the north-eastern state of Manipur, India, serves as the primary field site for this study. Geographically situated in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands, the district is predominantly inhabited by the Tangkhul Nagas, one of the major Naga ethnic groups. With its rugged terrain, moderate climate, and forested landscape, Ukhrul district presents a rich mosaic of ecological diversity and culturally distinct lifeways shaped by longstanding traditions. In addition to Ukhrul, significant Tangkhul Naga populations are also found in Senapati and Thoubal districts, as well as across the international border in Sagaing Division, Myanmar, particularly in the Somra Tract region (Vashum, 2014, p. 11).

Historically, each Tangkhul Nagas villages comprised a coalesce of different clans and functioned as a small autonomous unit governed through customary institutions, with authority exercised through clan-based councils and normative practices (Shimray, 2001; Horam, 2016). These institutions not only regulated internal governance but also upheld social cohesion and inter-clan relations. Economically, the community was traditionally reliant on subsistence-based cultivation and allied agricultural activities. However, Tangkhul Naga society has undergone significant transformations in its socio-economic and political organisation over time. The colonial encounter in the late nineteenth century marked a major rupture in their traditional world. The advent of British colonial rule introduced new territorial demarcations, administrative structures, and facilitated the spread of Christianity. While colonialism politically marginalised the people and segmented their administrative landscape, it also opened new avenues for engagement with modern institutions, particularly through Western education and formal governance mechanisms. Christianity, in particular, played a transformative role by supplanting indigenous belief systems while also fostering new forms of literacy, a common religious identity, and political consciousness (Vashum, 2022; Thong, 2016).

The postcolonial period has been marked by both integration and resistance. The formation of the Indian nation-state and the subsequent assertion of state control over the region catalysed decades of political unrest, armed insurgency, and demands for sovereignty (Fernandes & Borgohain, 2017). These conflicts have profoundly shaped the Naga political imagination and historical narratives. At the same time, developmental policies, road

connectivity, migration, and the increasing penetration of market forces have significantly altered the region's economic and social fabric. These processes include the expansion of formal education, the emergence of market-driven agricultural practices, the rise of salaried employment, the development of an entrepreneurial culture, and the increasing seepage of consumer goods. Although these developments have expanded new opportunities, they have also generated tensions around identity, tradition, and inequality, while simultaneously raising critical questions about cultural continuity, emerging social stratifications, and the broader implications of development within indigenous contexts.

Traditional Economy and Culture of Consumption

Prior to colonial encounter, Naga villages functioned as autonomous, self-contained units (Horam, 2016). For generations, they sustained their livelihoods through localised systems of production and consumption, largely operating outside the wider circuits of market economies. Economic organisation was not merely a matter of material exchange but functioned as a social enterprise, deeply embedded within kinship structures and governed by the principles of a moral economy (Polanyi, 1944; Scott, 1976). This moral framework entailed practices of "reciprocity" and "redistribution", which regulated economic behaviour through socially and culturally embedded norms that prioritised collective well-being over individual accumulation (Polanyi, 1944; Malinowski, 2002).

Among the Tangkhul Nagas, the social values and moral obligations embedded in the economic relationships were exemplified through the principle of "mikashai". Loosely translated as "gift-giving" or "resource-sharing", mikashai represented a culturally sanctioned ethic of reciprocity and redistribution within the community. This practice was particularly observed in the context of harvested grains and edible goods, such as crops, meats, and homemade breads, where individuals were expected to share with kin, neighbours, and those in need. Far from being an act of charity, mikashai was a normative obligation that reinforced social cohesion, reciprocity, and the moral economy underpinning everyday economic life. This dense web of social relations ensured that economic conduct was inseparable from one's social standing; transgressing communal expectations only led to a loss of status within the community. Social relations were thus deeply embedded in economic life, with production practices shaped by communal expectations rather than autonomous economic motives.

Production was subsistence-based and modest, with cultivators exercising direct ownership and control over the means of production. While goods were occasionally exchanged, production never acquired the character of a capitalist enterprise, as the means of production were not commodified or subjected to market logics. Although labour was largely organised around the household, broader social arrangements, such as reciprocal labour exchange, mutual assistance, prescriptive generosity, and communal land use, ensured emotional support and collective food security (Scott, 1976).

Uniformity was a defining feature of both material practices and everyday rhythms across Tangkhul Naga villages. While variation in scale existed, households typically adhered to similar modes of subsistence production; cultivating the same crops, raising the same livestock, and organising labour through shared customary practice. Central to this social fabric was agriculture, particularly paddy cultivation, which was not merely a means of livelihood but an honourable and culturally embedded way of life. Agricultural activity structured the ritual calendar of the community where each phase of the cultivation cycle, such as paddy sowing, transplantation, harvesting, was marked by collective rituals, seasonal festivals, and communal feasts

(Luikham, 2013; Peter, 2004). Similarly, material culture displayed little variation; where hand-spun traditional attire, clay or wooden utensils, and locally sourced tools were common across households. Such uniformity in production and consumption reflected not only economic parity but also a deep sense of collective identity, with minimal social or economic differentiation.

Even dietary practices were seasonally determined and embedded within a subsistence-oriented economy. Although daily consumption was modest and need-based, traditional notions of lavish consumption were largely confined to the domain of ceremonial food and drink, particularly meat and rice beer. Beyond fulfilling basic subsistence needs, households were also socially obligated to allocate portions of their produce and livestock toward ceremonial purposes, especially for life-cycle events such as marriages, funerals, and seasonal festivals. These ceremonial allocations, often referred to as "ceremonial funds," (Wolf, 1966, p. 7) not only enabled the smooth functioning of social rituals but also cultivated a spirit of competitive generosity. Wealth and prestige were publicly displayed through acts of slaughtering of pigs, buffaloes, or dogs during festivals. Within this traditional context, wealth was not abstract or monetised but materially measured in the volume of stored food grains and livestock owned.

Further, food and drink carried symbolic weight and played a central role in ritual life. Through processes of religious ritualisation, they were imbued with cultural significance and functioned as important markers of social status. For instance, the Maran Kasa, commonly referred to as the "feast of merit", was a ritualised ceremony through which families legitimised their wealth and elevated their social status. Central to this event was the hosting of an elaborated communal feast, often spanning an entire week, alongside the ceremonial erection of wooden posts and stones (Tarung) in the host family's courtyard (Luikham, 2013). The visible presence of these Tarung served as enduring symbols of honour and prestige, publicly affirming the family's elevated position within the community. Such ritualistic feasting not only brought community members together in shared space and time, generating "collective effervescence" that reinforced social cohesion (Durkheim, 1995), but also imbued material objects like the Tarung with symbolic and religious meaning. Remnants of Tarung can still be found today in many Tangkhul Naga villages.

This interplay of ritual obligation and performative generosity reinforced both social bonds and subtle hierarchies within the ostensibly egalitarian structure of the village. While the act of ritualistic feasting serves to display one's wealth and enhance social visibility, it simultaneously functions as a mechanism for redistributing the wealth of the affluent within the community. Moreover, such redistribution of material resources into publicly recognised ceremonies constitutes an accumulation of cultural capital, thereby reinforcing symbolic power and social recognition within the community.

Colonial Experience and Socio-economic Transformation

The colonial experience in the nineteenth century marked a significant rupture in Naga society, fundamentally reshaping its socio-economic structures and political organisation. During this period, the colonial British extended their control over the land and introduced Western ideas and values, primarily through the establishment of formal education systems and the widespread propagation of Christianity. This interaction was marked by an asymmetrical power relationship inherent to the colonial project. Colonial rule reconfigured local economies by introducing monetary exchange and commodified transactions, thereby integrating Naga communities into wider market circuits.

The initial socio-economic transformation of Naga society under colonial rule began with the imposition of the annual house tax of Rupees 3 (Shimray, 2008), a policy that introduced formal mechanisms of state control and marked a decisive reconfiguration of subsistence-based livelihoods. This taxation system not only disrupted indigenous economic relations but also necessitated participation in a cash economy. Previously unfamiliar with wage labour, many villagers were compelled to seek employment outside their villages, occasionally engaging in petty trade and wage-based labour to meet their tax obligations. For instance, the colonial administrators hired and forced the locals to repair roads by paying wages of Rupees 2.5 per mile (Peter, 2004, p. 190).

In parallel, the proselytisation process and the introduction of formal education systems under missionary influence instilled the internalisation of Western ideals and values (Ruivah, 1993; Thong, 2016). This transformation not only expanded the traditional socio-economic landscape by introducing new occupational roles beyond agriculture but also simultaneously embedded an ethos of economic rationality within the fabric of local life (Weber, 2013). For instance, educated Nagas began to take up positions as mission workers, school teachers (Lolly, 1985), clerks, and colonial intermediaries. Moreover, mission centres, often strategically located, evolved into new economic centres, facilitating both religious conversion and economic circulation. These processes collectively eroded the social and spatial isolation of village life, thereby integrating the communities to broader networks of exchange and market logic.

Under these shifting socio-economic conditions, the Nagas were increasingly drawn into the broader colonial economy. While initial engagement was motivated by utilitarian needs, particularly the desire to acquire basic manufactured goods such as shirts, trousers, and aluminium or copper utensils, the implications were far-reaching. These commodities gradually replaced indigenous household items like earthen pots, wooden bowls, and bamboo containers. As dependency on these goods grew and deepened, these items transcended mere utility and became embedded in cultural expectations (Wolf, 1966). This gradually gave rise to the growing demand for manufactured goods, reshaping not only consumption patterns but also the underlying ethics of production (Weber, 2013). New forms of livelihood emerged, as individuals began engaging in cash-based occupations to generate income for market participation. These phases marked not merely an economic adjustment but a deeper transformation in the moral economy and the structure of everyday life.

This gradual shift led to the emergence of livelihood diversification and the erosion of traditional economic relations. It also marked a significant transition from a communally rooted economy to one increasingly driven by individual aspirations and economic rationality. As such, interactions with external markets and the permeation of new cultural values catalysed a reorientation of socio-economic priorities, where consumption became increasingly shaped by personal desires rather than collective norms. Consequently, the social fabric of economic relations, once grounded in reciprocity and mutual support, began to mutate, giving way to new logics of production, exchange, and value.

Market Expansion and Evolving Pattern of Agriculture

The agrarian economy of the studied Tangkhul Naga villages remains largely rooted in traditional subsistence practices, yet it has undergone rapid and significant transformation under the growing pressures of market integration. Rain-fed paddy cultivation continues to form the backbone of rural livelihoods, ensuring household food security and stability. At the same time,

the long-standing ethos “safety-first principle” (Scott, 1976, pp. 4-5), where risk-averse strategies prioritise subsistence over surplus, now coexists with an emergent logic of economic rationality oriented toward surplus production and income generation.

Ethnographic data from the field shows that villagers are actively reconfiguring cropping strategies and labour allocations in response to expanding market opportunities. In addition to paddy cultivation, villagers are increasingly reallocating their labour towards the cultivation of cash crops, driven by the need to generate household income. Agricultural plots, although relatively modest in size, typically ranging from one to two acres per household, are strategically cultivated for market exchange. Given the region's sloped and hilly topography, which limits mechanisation and large-scale production, this intensification is largely dependent on household labour. Nonetheless, this has not impeded villagers from engaging in commercially viable agricultural practices. Instead, smallholder farming is being recalibrated to meet the demands of market participation, demonstrating an adaptive reorientation of rural livelihoods.

A key indicator of this shift is the widespread cultivation of stink beans (*Parkia speciosa*), locally known as yongchak. Previously grown primarily for household consumption, yongchak has emerged as a highly valued cash crop due to its consistent demand and profitability in regional markets such as Ukhrul and Imphal. In tandem, villagers are increasingly diversifying fruit cultivation, such as lemons, mangoes, oranges, papayas, apples, and avocados. These practices indicate an evolving responsiveness to market preferences, seasonal trends, and potential profitability. In a way, villagers are asserting a form of economic agency that is both responsive and strategic, while signifying deeper integration into markets.

This expanding engagement with the market is also evident in the diversification of rural livelihoods through animal husbandry. Traditionally, indigenous domesticated livestock such as buffalo (hao-sei), pig (hao-hok), chicken (hao-har), and dog (hao-fa) served both subsistence and socio-cultural purposes. The buffalo, in particular, carried symbolic weight, signifying wealth, status, and ritual importance. However, in recent decades, livestock have increasing assumed commercial value. New breeds and species, such as cows, goats, rabbits, ducks, broiler chickens, et cetera, have been introduced and are reared not just for subsistence, but also to diversify income sources. Moreover, these livestock-rearing practices are dynamic and adaptable, in a way that households tend to rotate livestock species based on the availability of labour, feed resources, and seasonal market demand. Such decisions not only indicate a pragmatic response to shifting economic pressures and opportunities, but also reflect the increasing commodification of rural livelihoods and the reorganisation of traditional agrarian practices in response to contemporary market imperatives.

These developments point to an evolving agrarian landscape, wherein traditional subsistence-oriented systems are intersecting with the imperatives of the market rationalities. This process manifests a layered adaptation, rather than an abrupt rupture and departure from indigenous economic practices. Local actors are not being passively absorbed into the market; rather, they selectively appropriate market mechanisms to stabilise livelihoods, fulfil emergent consumption needs, and secure new forms of social mobility.

Dynamics of Consumption and Identity Construction

The integration of Naga society into wider cultural and economic circuits has not only transformed modes of production but also reshaped patterns of consumption and the ways in which individuals construct and express their identities. Historically rooted in subsistence economy, consumption was regulated by communal norms and oriented toward functional needs.

However, with greater exposure to market economies and global media, consumer desires have undergone a profound shift. The acquisition of manufactured goods, ranging from clothing and household appliances to electronic gadgets and modern housing materials, has expanded beyond utilitarian value to signify social distinction, aspiration, and participation in the contemporary world. This shift indicates a broader reconfiguration of values, wherein identity is no longer anchored solely in customary institutions or kin-based affiliations but is also increasingly negotiated through material practices and symbolic consumption. Consumption, as such, is increasingly functioning as a medium through which individual express cultural capital and negotiate social positioning (Bourdieu, 1996).

The influx of mass-produced goods, even in remote areas, has not only altered the material landscape of everyday life but also reshaped how people perceive needs, desires, and social status. Although consumption is a universal activity, its meanings vary across cultural and economic contexts. For instance, in Western industrialised societies, items such as refrigerators, indoor plumbing, and private vehicles, once considered luxuries, are now viewed as basic necessities (Bocock, 1993, p. 105). In contrast, for economically constrained communities like the Tangkhul Nagas, these same items are perceived as luxury goods and serve as markers of upward mobility and higher living standards. While this distinction reflects disparities in material capacity, it is crucial to recognise that consumption is not merely an economic act, but entails a deeply social and symbolic process.

Ethnographic data shows that consumption aspirations vary markedly according to household economic status. Lower-income households typically aspire to acquire items like televisions, motorcycles, refrigerators, and washing machines, as these objects symbolise entry into a modest modern lifestyle. In contrast, more affluent households aim for higher-value assets, such as brick houses, cars, and high-end gadgets, that serve as visible markers of elevated social status. However, irrespective of economic standing, consumption practices increasingly indicate not only the pursuit of material comfort but also the desire for social recognition and prestige associated with the possession of certain goods.

Through a wide array of channels, consumption practices are becoming integral to the construction of identity and social mobility. As consumption becomes a field for the display of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1996), individuals are increasingly differentiated not merely by traditional markers of clan or kinship ties, but by their ability to access, acquire, and display consumer goods. Ethnographic data shows that locally affluent individuals are typically those who have transitioned away from traditional agricultural livelihoods. This group comprises of salaried employees, contractors, politicians, social workers, and businessmen—most of whom reside in towns and cities but return to their native villages during festivals, events, and holidays. During their visits to native villages, these individuals often engage in performative displays of modern lifestyles, characterised by the conspicuous exhibition (Veblen, 2007) of consumer goods—such as private vehicles, branded clothing, latest phones and gadgets, as well as luxury food items. These performances serve not merely as demonstrations of personal taste or convenience but function as symbolic assertions of status and modern identity. By showcasing commodities that remain out of reach for many villagers, these individuals actively contribute to emerging forms of new economic hierarchy and social differentiation within the community.

Further, festive seasons have emerged as prominent space for material display and symbolic consumption. For instance, during Christmas, Ukhrul town transforms into a bustling commercial

hub, resembling a large open-air market filled with second-hand clothing, Chinese goods, as well as branded commodities. These seasonal markets attract people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The cultural expectation to appear well-dressed, particularly in new or fashionable attire, has become a central feature of the festive experience. This trend is especially visible among the youths and return migrants from cities, who bring with them urban sensibilities and consumer tastes shaped by exposure to global and metropolitan lifestyles (Appadurai, 1996). For many, participation in festive consumption becomes a way to affirm differentiation and a form of expressing a renewed sense of self and social positioning. Moreover, in addition to fashion, festivals are also marked by community games and sporting events. While these activities provide entertainment, their growing popularity is closely tied to the material value of the prizes on offer. For instance, during the 2018 Christmas Eve celebrations in Chingai village, the local club organised a tombola game in which household appliances, such as a washing machine, refrigerator, and blender, were offered as prizes for the winners. The allure of winning material rewards attracted widespread participation, with many viewing such events as opportunities to fulfil unmet household needs or consumption aspirations. These items not only heightened enthusiasm for participation but also reflected broader desires to acquire consumer goods through alternative means.

Financial constraints limit the majority of households from fully participating in emerging consumption practices. To navigate this, villagers engage in various informal, social network-based financial strategies. One notable example is the organisation of women's groups, in which women of different age groups form social circles to collectively pool financial resources towards shared goals and aspirations. Each group typically adopts a local name with the suffix "society", for example, the "Ngachamrin Society" in Chingai, one of the studied villages. In these groups, each member contributes a fixed amount of money with the aim of acquiring specific household items. The pooled funds are invested collectively with interest, allowing the total amount to grow over time. After a year or more, when the funds mature, the group jointly decides on the purchase of agreed-upon items, such as blankets, refrigerators, dining tables, cupboards et cetera, which are then distributed among the members. This financial cycle is repeated with new objectives, enabling continued collective saving and consumption. The system represents a form of community-based economic organisation that supports long-term consumption goals while fostering mutual support and financial discipline.

Overall, the dynamics of consumption among the Tangkhul Nagas reflect a multifaceted interplay of economic change, cultural negotiation, and emerging identities. As market integration deepens and manufactured goods become embedded in everyday life, traditional markers of identity, once grounded in kinship, clan, and subsistence practices, are increasingly mediated through material acquisition and symbolic display. Consumption, as such, is not merely about access to goods but also about the construction of meaning, status, and belonging in a rapidly transforming socio-economic landscape (Bocock, 1993). Within this shifting terrain, individuals actively craft new subjectivities that are both locally situated and globally informed, revealing how consumer culture serves as a powerful medium through which modernity is interpreted, contested, and embodied in contemporary Naga society.

Challenges of Transition: Between Tradition and Market Rationality

The ongoing socio-economic transformation within Naga society is not without tension. As communities become

increasingly embedded in market economies, traditional institutions and cultural values are being redefined in ways that present both opportunities and profound challenges. The transition from a subsistence-based moral economy to a monetised system driven by market rationality has introduced contradictions that many households are still learning to navigate.

The transition to a market-based economy entails a complex negotiation between traditional moral frameworks and modern market forces. As collective ethos and community-oriented reciprocity gradually erode, economic practices become increasingly disembedded from their social and moral moorings under the ascendancy of market rationality. This transformation has precipitated a discernible shift toward individualism, wherein calculative rationality increasingly prevails as the dominant logic of economic behaviour (Weber, 2013). Consequently, traditional forms of mutual support are undermined, and the social bonds that once structured village life are weakened, as household aspirations become increasingly individualised, competitive, and oriented toward material accumulation.

This increasing rationalisation of economic activities has significantly accelerated the commodification and privatisation of communal land relations, undermining traditional frameworks of collective ownership and resource stewardship (Harvey, 2003). Ethnographic data from the field reveals a growing trend among villagers undertaking farming projects within community forestlands, driven by aspirations for income generation and material advancement. Traditionally, both land and forest were collectively held resources, governed by customary norms (Chahongnao, 2021). These norms dictated that land used for cultivation would, after a period of use, revert back to the community (Shimray, 2007), thereby ensuring equitable access and sustainability of communal resources. However, this customary norm of land tenure and cyclical reversion appears to be increasingly undermined. Emerging patterns of land use indicate a shift toward de facto permanent landholding, as ethnographic accounts reveal that many respondents intended to retain cultivated plots rather than revert them to communal control. Alongside this trend toward the privatisation of agricultural land is the growing commercial exploitation of forest resources, particularly timber harvesting for market sale. Despite the magnitude of this shift, clear regulations regarding land size, tenure duration, and the limits of community land usage are notably absent in the studied villages. This increasing shift toward individualised land use and commercial exploitation not only marks a significant departure from customary frameworks, but also presents substantial challenges for the future of communal resource governance.

Furthermore, the economic benefits of market participation are unevenly distributed. Some households, particularly those with salaried employment or engaged in business activities, have successfully leveraged market opportunities, while majority others remain constrained by limited resources, capital, and mobility. This disparity has contributed to the emergence of new class distinctions within the community, which contrast sharply with the traditionally egalitarian values of the society. For instance, this is manifested in housing styles, educational access, and patterns of consumption. As conspicuous consumption increasingly becomes a marker of success and social mobility, those unable to participate fully in the consumer economy often experience a sense of marginalisation. While the pressure to emulate emerging standards of living, symbolised through the acquisition of modern goods, creates a socio-cultural environment in which material possessions become central to social recognition and belonging. Among economically disadvantaged households, aspirations for consumer goods are

frequently pursued through borrowing, informal lending networks, or participation in rotating savings groups. While these mechanisms offer temporary and limited access to desired commodities, they also expose poorer households to financial vulnerability, indebtedness, aspirational frustration, and psychosocial stress. Consequently, consumer culture not merely reshapes material aspirations but also intensifies emotional and social inequalities within the community.

Cultural identity too faces complex and contested negotiations amid expanding market forces and shifting value hierarchies. Traditional forms of recognition rooted in clan affiliations, age hierarchies, and indigenous knowledge systems are increasingly supplanted by new markers of prestige associated with education, material wealth, consumption, and lifestyle. With the intensification of global flows of media, commodities, and ideas, cultural transitions are increasingly marked by “disjuncture and difference,” as local identities are reconstituted under the influence of distant and dominant imaginaries (Appadurai, 1996). While this process is neither uniform nor linear, but what emerges is a complex terrain of negotiation, where values, aspirations, and identities are continually contested, reshaped, and re-signified. This shift reflects a broader displacement of traditional identities, wherein selfhood is no longer fixed but is continuously produced and reproduced through changing cultural practices and social imaginaries (Hall, 2013).

For tribal communities such as the Tangkhul Nagas, this transition to a market-based society entails more than a transformation in material practices—it signifies a profound reconfiguration of selfhood, collective memory, and modes of social belonging. In this evolving landscape, identity is no longer anchored solely in tradition or communal affiliation; rather, it is increasingly negotiated at the intersection of local histories and global imaginaries, where inherited customs and communal values converge with modern aspirations and individual positioning. As such, the experience of cultural transformation becomes a dynamic and deeply contested process, reflecting the tension between continuity and change, between rootedness and reinvention.

Conclusion

This article has traced the reconfiguration of socio-economic life in Naga society, focusing on the Tangkhul Nagas, to show how expanding market integration and changing patterns of consumption are reshaping livelihoods, values, and forms of social belonging. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the analysis reveals a gradual but consequential shift away from a moral economy grounded in subsistence, reciprocity, and communal obligation toward increasingly individualistic, monetised and market-oriented relations. This transformation has reconfigured traditional institutions and ethical frameworks, placing pressure on kinship-based reciprocity, customary land use, and redistributive practices, while simultaneously generating new forms of inequality and social differentiation.

Consumption has emerged as a particularly salient domain in this process, functioning not merely as an economic activity but as a key medium through which social status, aspiration, and identity are articulated. Material goods now operate as symbolic resources through which individuals negotiate modernity, signal distinction, and rework their social positioning. Although these changes do not necessarily amount to a simple displacement of tradition, yet they constitute an uneven and contested process in which actors actively mediate between inherited cultural meanings and the pressures of an expanding market order. What emerges, therefore, is not a simple rupture or replacement, but a contested and dynamic field in which individuals and communities navigate the promises and perils of a changing

world—crafting new identities at the intersection of local histories and global aspirations.

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