Decolonizing Archaeological Practice in Northeast India: Views from the Community Archaeology Initiatives in Nagaland

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Abstract

Nagaland has a significant wealth of oral traditions closely tied to ancestral sites. Ancestral sites represent pre-colonial indigenous occupation and serve as a collective memory for groups of descent, for example, as part of narratives of group migrations from prominent sites of dispersal. Despite such direct historical continuity, the participatory role and involvement of local communities in archaeological research in India are largely peripheral. Hence, whether in other parts of India or the Northeast region, due to the ancestral heritage and traditional knowledge of local communities associated with the ancestral sites, it is necessary to adopt a decolonizing approach in the study of these places. This approach includes community-based participatory research (CBPR) that involves descendant and non-descendant communities residing within the proximity of archaeological sites. Such research is essential to unlocking new challenges and opportunities within the disciplinary practice. Against this background, I present some case studies from Nagaland that demonstrate the potential and relevance of such an approach to the study of ancestral sites in Northeast India.

Keywords:
Nagaland, Northeast India, community archaeology, ancestral sites, decolonization

Zusammenfassung


Schlüsselwörter:
Nagaland, Nordostindien, Community-Archäologie, Stätten der indigenen Ahnen, Dekolonisierung
Introduction

Community archaeology has been one of the means to decolonize archaeology through the involvement, collaboration and participation of Indigenous, descendant and local communities in a way that is engaging and meaningful to them. However, one major complication in applying this practice is that the discipline of archaeology has historically been built around, and still relies on, Western knowledge systems and methodologies, and its practice has a strong colonial history (see Atalay 2006). Such foundations of knowledge have often been unfavoured by members of Indigenous groups, especially how Indigenous materiality is interpreted by archaeologists. Therefore, archaeological practice needs a decolonizing perspective that incorporates participatory research with community members and local stakeholders to be more inclusive. This research includes an array of perspectives, including the repatriation of human remains and items of cultural patrimony to affiliated communities and descendants (see Mihesuah 2000; Smith/Wobst 2005), a shift of Indigenous knowledge systems from periphery to centre (Smith 1999) and de-centralization of Western concepts relating to linear and compartmentalized view of time, systems of production and reproduction of knowledge and the role of research in society. Additionally, community-based participatory research (CBPR hereafter) involves local people as active research participants as opposed to their involvement simply as manual labour for research purposes. This approach is one of the dimensions inherent in decolonizing research programmes, which aim to involve and empower Indigenous communities explicitly. Such a collaborative practice of involving Indigenous and other worldviews in archaeology thus marks a process of decolonization of the discipline (Atalay 2007; Atalay 2012).

Protection of archaeological sites and monuments in India: Need for community-inclusive initiatives

By and large, archaeology in India is mostly characterized by research that fails to consult and engage local communities in research programmes. In this regard, it is worth noting that there has been a gradual shift in power dynamics over time as archaeological legislation has moved from local to central authority, indicating a trend towards complete centralization of powers resting with the central/national institutions. Conflicts between state institutions and local communities arose due to the archaeological sites and monuments protection provided by the former (for a detailed critique, see Menon/Varma 2019). A community-inclusive heritage policy in the various areas of archaeological practice underscores that local communities living amidst archaeological sites must be involved in research and protection programmes, but this is not always the case in practice.

It is here that a brief historical background seems nec-
The cultural renaissance of the early nineteenth century witnessed the enactment of the first ever antiquarian legislation in India known as the Bengal Regulation XIX of 1810, aimed at intervening whenever any public edifice was exposed to the risk of misuse by private individuals (Roy 1953, 7). This regulation was soon followed by another legislation known as Madras Regulation VII of 1817, which also vested the Government with the power to intervene whenever public buildings were under threat of misuse. However, both Acts were silent on the buildings under private ownership (Rezavi 2022).

In 1861, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was set up under General Alexander Cunningham – with a brief hiatus from 1866 to 1870 – for the survey and description of monuments (Menon/Varma 2019, 144). It was an important event, as previously, the preservation of monuments was left outside the scope of systematic survey and exploration programmes, because the Government had no desire to commit itself to any future or unforeseen expense. But the establishment of the ASI and passing of Act XX of 1863 empowered the Government the momentous step to invest itself with the authority ‘to prevent injury to and preserve buildings remarkable for their antiquity or for their historical or architectural value,’ thus marking the birth of a new conscience in the country (cited in Roy 1953, 10).

At first, matters of conservation were kept outside the purview of the Director-General of the ASI. However, on the 13th of February 1873, the Central Government issued a circular assigning Local Governments the duty of caring for the preservation of all buildings and monuments of historical and architectural interest (also see Allchin 1978; Circular no. 9, P.W.D., 13 Feb. 1873, cited in Roy 1953, 15). Another important step in heritage protection was undertaken by Lord Edward Robert Lytton, the then Viceroy, who implemented the Indian Treasure Trove Act of 1878 to prevent the despoiling of archaeological remains by treasure hunters (Roy 1953, 15). In particular, the Act refers to any treasure found exceeding in amount or value of ten rupees. In this case, the finder shall give written notice to the Collector, Revenue Officer in independent charge of a District (Imperial Legislative Council 1878, 2).

Monument conservation and repair policy underwent a significant transformation when Lord George Nathaniel Curzon became Viceroy in 1899. In Curzon’s observation, the capricious ways in which Local Governments were shouldering their responsibilities highlighted the need for a central and qualified advisory authority. The decision to enact the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904 was considered bold, as the Government’s long-term policies were usually uncertain and lacked guidance. This left the monuments in a perilous position. However, the Local Governments’ indecisiveness eventually led to this act, which aimed to preserve ancient monuments (Allchin 1978, 751). This Act allowed agreements to arrive between the Central Government and the owners of privately owned properties for the preservation of any protected monument in a District. The Act restricted the owner’s right to destroy, remove, alter or deface the monument or to build on or near the monument. The new policy also required landlords to provide access to the public and to persons deputed by the owner or Collector to inspect or maintain the monument. In doing so, the Act of 1904 also gave wide powers to the District Collectors to enforce the

2 The Director-General is the Head of the Archaeological Survey of India who is primarily engaged in archaeological research and various activities, including archaeological excavations and explorations, protection of monuments or sites of national importance and formulation of archaeological policy in the country (Archaeological Survey of India 2015).

3 The Government during that time was under British India. The Government of India Act of 1858 was an Act of the British Parliament that transferred the government and territories of the East India Company to the British Crown. The Company’s rule over British territories in India came to an end and was passed directly to the British Government. The actual control over the Government of India remained in the hands of British Viceroys.

4 District Administration in India is a legacy of the British Raj. The Office of the District Collector was introduced by Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of British India. The District Collector or Deputy Commissioner, also known as the District Magistrate, is a bureaucrat who serves as the Executive Head of a District Administration in India. District Collectors were members of the Indian Civil Service and were charged with supervising general administration in a District. The Office of a Collector during the British Raj held wide powers – as a collector, he was the head of the revenue organization, charged with registration, alteration, and partition of holdings; the settlement of disputes; the management of indebted estates; loans to agriculturists and famine relief. As District Magistrate, he exercised general supervision over the inferior courts and, in particular, directed the police. The Office was meant to achieve the purpose of collecting revenue and keeping peace. The superintendent of police (SP), inspector general of jails, the surgeon general, the divisional forest officer (DFO) and the chief engineer (CE) had to inform the Collector of every activity in their departments (see Singh 1994).
Central Government’s position (Menon/Varma 2019, 145).

With India’s Independence in 1947, modifications to the monument preservation policies were made not only as a result of the constitutional changes but also as a response to growing demands for conservation. The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958 gave the Government the authority to prohibit the construction of buildings within or near protected areas and intervene in cases where the monument owner refused to cooperate with the Government (Allchin 1978, 752). In general, the Act continued to impose restrictions on private owners of ancient monuments and enforce provisions for the maintenance of those, but it also proposed to transfer some of the restrictive functions from the District Collectors to the Director-General of Archaeology, in other words, the Centre, except for the village property, where the management remained in the hands of the headman or other village officer (Menon/Varma 2019, 145; see Government of India 1958, 7.2). Nevertheless, the 1958 Act was later amended with the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) (AMASR) Act of 2010, which got rid of local powers of the headman or other village officer, with all powers devolving now to the Centre. Attempts of the State to marginalize the protection of monuments and archaeological sites and, in effect, to undermine its own laws can be seen in the recently proposed amendment to the 1958 and 2010 Acts. Although the Acts of 1958 and 2010 explicitly prohibit construction within a demarcated area of 100 meters surrounding protected monuments, even for public purposes, the AMASR Bill of 2017 introduces a significant departure from this norm by allowing the Government to undertake infrastructure projects within the previously prohibited areas around protected monuments.

Moreover, according to the new guidelines proposed in the Amendment Bill, the request for public works in prohibited areas is referred first to the National Monuments Authority and then forwarded to the Central Government. The final discretion and decision rests with the Central Government, with the latter giving reasons when differing from the National Monuments Authority. Therefore, if the Central Government determines “public works” to be necessary, the development projects can proceed even in prohibited areas.

In addition to this, till recently, together with the new Act of 2013, the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 continued to be enforced to take over monuments and sites even in post-colonial times (Menon/Varma 2019, 146). The Act was enforced either when land is declared to be needed for a public purpose or when a company, administration or some officer authorized by the appropriate government directs the District Collector to take the necessary steps for the acquisition of the land. This Act mandated the acquisition of land and monuments under private ownership for their maintenance. Today, the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Reclamation and Resettlement Act of 2013 has replaced the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. The new Act was brought in due to the absence of a cohesive law for compensation and fair rehabilitation to the affected people in India. At the moment it is the main law that regulates land acquisition and establishes rules and regulations for granting compensation, rehabilitation and resettlement to people, whose property was expropriated under the Land Acquisition Act.

We can, thus, view a complete centralization of powers and the marginalization of even national institutions that had been created in the first place to deal with issues of protection (Menon/Varma 2019, 146–147).

Besides, it becomes apparent that there is almost no mention of “people” in the Acts formulated for the preservation of monuments and archaeological sites. People are only considered in these Acts if they are owners of monuments or live within them. The onus of looking after the monuments is then put upon them in the form of agreements between them and the Central Government. At the same time, they face the very real possibility of losing ownership of the structure if they fail to protect it (Menon/Varma 2019, 146–147).

A closer reading of the aforementioned legislations reveals their lack of inclusivity regarding Indigenous communities and the need for inclusive cultural resource management. This is interesting to note considering also the long colonial legacy that India continues to adopt, particu-

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5 The AMASR Bill of 2017 defines “public works” as “construction works related to infrastructure financed and carried out by any department or office of the Central Government for public purposes which is necessary for the safety or security of the public at large and emergent necessity is based on specific instance of danger to the safety or security of the public at large and there is no reasonable possibility of any other viable alternative to such construction beyond the limits of the prohibited area” (Sharma 2017, 1).
larly, concerning heritage legislation. Moreover, such legislations are in contradiction with the First Code of Ethics of the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), which explicitly articulates reciprocal responsibilities in Section 6: ‘To acknowledge and recognize Indigenous methodologies for interpreting, curating, managing and protecting indigenous cultural heritage,’ followed by Section 7: ‘To establish equitable partnerships and relationships between Members and indigenous peoples whose cultural heritage is being investigated’ (World Archaeological Congress 1990).

It is also worth mentioning that the colonial mechanisms of knowledge production, situated in the ‘historical modality’ and ‘survey modality’ (Cohn 1996), were later perfected by institutions such as the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in their study of India’s past. This took the colonial project of ‘civilizing the native’ to its logical conclusion, where the colonial machinery was not only involved in a process of controlling the native bodies but was involved in colonizing minds (for an explicit critique, see Chadha 2002; Avikunthak 2021). To decolonize archaeological practice in the Indian context, it is therefore essential to engage more deeply with Indigenous peoples and to incorporate Indigenous perspectives on their past, rather than simply seeing them as ‘study subjects,’ ‘chai time buddies’ or routine labourers employed for archaeological digs. Elsewhere in India, there is a gradual awareness of inclusive research undertaken generally under the banner of ‘public archaeology.’ However, the areas of interaction between the general public, local communities and archaeology remain marginal, despite their enormous potential.

From colonialism to heritage education, repatriation and community engagements: Decolonizing practices in the Naga context

In the Naga context, British colonialism is often considered a story of double domination: political and scientific (Lotha 2007). The British occupation of the Naga Hills advanced with the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 after Assam and the neighbouring kingdoms such as Cachar, Jaintia and Manipur passed into British hands from the King of Ava of Burma (Barpujari 1977, 7). To prevent further Burmese invasion of Assam and make administration more efficient, the British decided to build a road to provide direct communication between Assam and Manipur through the Naga Hills. In other words, the British occupation of the Indigenous territories bordering Assam was a strategic move (Kikon 2006, 141).

It was during this time that a survey team led by Captain Francis Jenkins and Robert Boileau Pemberton first made contact with the Nagas who put up stiff resistance (Zetsuvi 2015, 55). However, the expression of colonial power in the Naga Hills exhibited a relatively low reliance on the use of coercive force, therefore prolonged and direct personal influence rather than forceful subjugation was advocated as the dominant policy (Misra 1998, 3276). Consequently, such military expeditions and administrative tours not only helped to control and contain the frequent raids and village feuds at bay but also to accumulate a vast collection of Naga cultural objects gathered through looting, confiscation or gift-giving by Naga communities.

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6 From time to time, amendments are made to the Acts that have been in effect since colonial times. In post-colonial times, these legislations have become even more stringent. Section 20B of the AMASR Act of 2010 increases the regulated area for protection from 100 to 200m which could further be extended by the Central Government on the recommendation of the National Monuments Authority. The amendment of the AMASR Act of 2010 also increases the penalties for violation of the AMASR Act of 1958 wherein the punishment for its violation includes imprisonment not exceeding two years and/or a fine up to one lakh rupees.

7 For Bernard S. Cohn, in British India, the ‘historiographic modality’ comprises the use of historical knowledge to shape assumptions about the social and natural worlds, emphasizing the history of Indian states, ideological construction of Indian civilizations and popular histories of the British presence (Cohn 1996, 5).

8 The ‘survey modality,’ as an investigative modality, encompassed a broad range of practices, including mapping, specimen collection and detailed documentation, extending beyond territorial mapping to comprehensively describe and classify aspects such as zoology, geology, botany, ethnography, economic products, history and sociology when acquiring new territories (Cohn 1996, 7).

9 ‘Chai-time’ is a catchphrase that generally refers to short recesses at workplaces where people can share the day’s events, discuss hobbies or gossip over a cup of tea.

10 Here, in this context, I am referring to groups of individuals who remain outside the purview of any historical ties to a particular heritage under study.

11 The kingdoms of Assam, Jaintia, Cachar, Tripura and Manipur emerged as sovereign states in medieval times and survived till the early 19th century. During the Ahom reign in Assam (1228–1826), its ties with the neighbouring kingdoms were characterized by conciliation and diplomacy. Except for the kingdom of Jaintia, where the Ahom rule was short-lived, Ahom ties with the Kacharis, Khasis, Garos and Nagas were relatively amicable. During the rule of the Ahom, they had a matrimonial alliance with the kingdom of Manipur, which led to friendly relations between the two, but they had no contact with Tripura until 1710 (Kalita 2019, 74). The time of Ahom control in Assam was characterized by a general stability that was favourable to forging trade and commercial links with the peoples and its neighbouring kingdoms. This was when silver coins were introduced by the Ahoms during the reign of Jayadhwaj Simha from 1648 AD onwards (Kalisi 2016, 1146).
In this respect, the Naga context illustrates very well how anthropology could aid colonial administration, as research into local history and traditions, as well as topographical surveys, were undertaken with the aim of better controlling the colonized – in other words, evoking a ‘survey modality’ (Cohn 1996; see also Lotha 2007). This was also eloquently stated by Henry Balfour, the first curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, in his Presidential Address to the Folklore Society in 1923 encouraging the government to emphasize native culture and mentality with the sole purpose that ‘...if we aim at equitable administration of subject races, the chief essential is close investigation of their indigenous culture’ (Balfour 1923, 23).

The British portrayal of the Nagas as ‘wild,’ ‘barbaric,’ ‘uncivilized,’ ‘savage,’ ‘primitive’ and ‘backward’ further encouraged American missionaries to ‘civilize’ the Nagas living in the Naga Hills – a region christened the ‘paradise of head-hunters’ (Bowers 1929) – to reduce the potent threat of resistance and raiding (see Kikon 2006; Thomas 2008). In fact, it was the British colonial administration that invited American Baptist missionaries to missionize the ‘savage’ Nagas and other native inhabitants of Northeast India (Thong 2012, 894).

The colonial past’s influence is still present in the language used in modern books and legal documents. For instance, initially, the terms ‘wild’ and ‘others’ were used in an archaeological context to describe local prehistoric communities. However, eventually, such a view of Indigenous communities in India spread to other contexts. Contemporary textbooks, government documents and policies often use terms like ‘primitive’ or relate Nagas to certain racial phenotypes (see Rizvi 2013, 148–154).

As a result, such a long-standing legacy of misrepresentation of the community’s culture keeps affecting modern research in the area. This is evident from the following example. Naga customary laws, traditional land rights, ownership and resources are still closely linked to the local communities due to a special provision laid out in Article 371(A) of the Indian Constitution when Nagaland joined the Union of India. As a result of this status, all archaeological research must first proceed to obtain the necessary permission from the village authorities in whose traditional territory the research is being carried out. However, even when Indigenous archaeologists research Naga ancestral sites, each new encounter in a village is met with suspicion because of the long-standing legacy of colonial collections and misrepresentation of the community’s culture in official monographs of colonial administrators since the 1920s (e.g., Mills 1926; for a critique, see Tiasunep 2021). Another reason for the local community’s mistrust towards researchers could be related to the fact that, until recently, most research in the region was carried out by non-Nagas.

This is when meetings with the community to discuss the objectives and outcomes of the research become crucial as one way of changing this perception. Until recently, community consultation and engagements have never been a part of the archaeological research agenda in India. Unfortunately, even today, archaeology in South Asia continues to demonstrate a lack of collaborative archaeological practice and instead continues to replicate colonial models of interaction with local communities (Rizvi 2008, 127). I, however, view the expansion of community engagements in archaeological research as a starting point for decolonizing archaeological fieldwork in Northeast India, particularly Nagaland.

In our archaeological research at Naga ancestral sites (Chungliyimti, Changsang Mongko, Hutsü and its adjoining sites) from 2007 to 2019 (Fig. 2), meetings with the communities allowed us to better understand the local dimensions of social realities, thus increasing participation of local people in community archaeology research. Approaches of community-based archaeology helped local communities realize the importance of the early history of the Nagas and the protection of their culture and ancestral heritage from vandalism and looting.

In each case during our research, community-based collaborative archaeology also worked well in village surveys. Local communities were involved to assist the team in identifying the presence/absence of ancestral sites and the oral histories associated with such sites. The community’s understanding of time, derived from folklore and oral history and their connection to ancestral sites was also explored to provide alternative chronologies for these sites.

As a result of ongoing engagement and open dialogue with local communities, we received an overwhelming response and support from them in a recent rescue archaeology initiative by the State Museum, Government of Nagaland, to set up a gallery Archaeology of Nagaland. Besides permitting us to rescue what remains of the rare log coffins (Fig. 1) and funerary jars from further loss, the communities also generously donated wood and ceramic artefacts, a significant number of pottery vessels and other traditional household items to the State Museum. Initiatives such as these are only possible as a result of an active
participatory engagement which in the process allows us to decolonize and dismantle the power structures between the bureaucratic machinery that runs the museum, the archaeologists involved and the local communities (on a similar work among the Kalash of Pakistan, see Kalash 2022). Therefore, ‘decolonization should not be something, we only do for “locals” but, rather, also for ourselves: to activate, provide agency, and make meaningful our own work and our own words’ (Rizvi 2008, 126).

Returning to the consequences of prolonged colonial influence on Naga culture, another area of concern is heritage education in schools across Nagaland. Traditional Naga society had no formal education. The introduction of education by missionaries was poised to transform permanently the way of life that the Nagas had previously known (Thong 2012, 900). Such a need to teach school children about Naga history and culture has become crucial due to the rapid pace of the westernization process exerted by modern media, technology and other trends of globalization that are further alienating the Nagas from their own community and culture (see Thong 2012). In this regard, the Nagaland Heritage Studies in the school curriculum (Grades 5 to 8) introduced by the State Council of Educational Research & Training (SCERT) in 2018 is a remarkable initiative. First published in English, the series is being translated into local languages with the primary aim of highlighting mother tongues as alternatives to English. The preface to this series states:

“The youth’s knowledge about our culture has become frightfully deficient, made worse by the onslaughts of Western and other cultures. Hence, Nagaland Heritage Studies is deemed a timely intervention, which will enrich our students to gain deeper insights about their identity as Nagas; the cultural legacy that has come down to them and that which, they must come, conserve and take forward” (State Council of Educational Research & Training 2018, ii).

Another example of decolonization and restoration of Naga cultural heritage is a recent initiative by the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford to repatriate the human remains of Naga ancestors to Nagaland. This is seen by the museum as part of their major reform of decolonization, aiming to be ‘part of a process of redress, social healing, and the mending of historically difficult relationships’ (cited in Longkumer/Kikon 2022, 2). Such a deep commitment to Naga human remains is seen as the beginning of a quest to heal the wounds of the violent history of colonialism and imperialism displayed in overseas museums (Kikon 2022). This ongoing project was also initiated by a team of Naga researchers, Recover, Restore and Decolonise (RRaD),

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12 Apast from the inclusion of the Naga cultural component in the curriculum, a small section entitled The Contributions of A. Z. Phizo (Cl-8) is also dedicated to the Naga political cause.
formed by the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) in 2021 to study and network with Indigenous experts, conduct participatory action research and raise public awareness. Thus, this project is an example of repatriation that is taking place in the context of decoloniality (Forum for Naga Reconciliation 2023).¹³

Community engagements in archaeological practice: Some case examples

In Nagaland, at least three CBPR programmes integrated into archaeological projects witness the high relevance of community-based archaeology to the Indigenous heritage in the Northeast region. Of the three projects conducted by our team, one of the research projects, at Chungliyimti (2007-2008), was undertaken as part of a state government-funded project, while the other two, at Changsang Mongko (2019) and Hutsi and adjoining sites (2014), were community-driven research, funded and supported entirely by the community (Fig. 2).

All three projects were conducted at Naga ancestral sites. Such ancestral sites are places of a pre-colonial Indigenous occupation associated with a wealth of traditional accounts; they are sites of memory within a given landscape associated with the collective memory of a particular Naga community and are linked to their migration. However, the Naga oral tradition is centred on ancestral sites not only because of their connection to their historical past but also due to the link of the sites to the mythology, which continues to play a cultural and political role for descent communities. Many traditional songs mention places of memory such as ancient settlements or monuments, that are perceived as places of origin, or the beginning of village institutions. These places are deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the people, linking the present and the past with the land and the ancestors (also see Aier 2018).

It is here that community-based participatory research such as community archaeology, an approach central to decolonizing archaeological practice, is gaining considerable momentum. Based on the case studies conducted at Naga ancestral sites, this paper demonstrates the application of community-based research. We hope that our example of advocacy of collaborative archaeology with local communities in Northeast India will generate academic interest in such peripheral archaeological programmes to raise relevant issues of Northeast regional identities, the politics of archaeology in the region, conservation and museum studies and archaeological heritage management initiatives for sustainable development in rural villages across Northeast India.

Chungliyimti

Our effort to adopt community-inclusive archaeology at Chungliyimti (2007-2008) not only facilitated more involvement of local communities but also helped us gain an alternative perspective to our conventional archaeological practice. Stories of life in ancient settlements and subsequent migrations are still part of a community’s narrative, even to the extent of providing accurate accounts of the settlement of particular clans in old village sites. Oral tradition links Chungliyimti to the former ancestral homeland of the Aos, including some parts of the Changs, Phoms and Northern Sangtams.¹⁴ Such a shared past of an ancestral connection is revealed in a popular origin myth of the first ancestors from Longtrok [tr. Six stones] who founded the ancestral village known as Chungliyimti. Part of the research objectives for the Chungliyimti community archaeology project was to address the lack of integration and collaboration between local people and Indigenous archaeologists working in the region, particularly in relation to ancestral sites. Local communities rely on oral history accounts to establish historical continuities, and the project sought to bridge the gap between narratives shared by archaeologists and communities of descent by involving local people in archaeological research.

Archaeological surveys combined with associated oral histories have helped to map the local community’s memory of the landscape, which is central to the oral tradition of Chungliyimti. What emerged from the initiative was not only a detailed map of the sites under excavation but a much deeper understanding of the intangible values of sites of deep-time memory.

Other significant contributions from this collaborative research included the community’s involvement in experimental archaeology and the reconstruction of a timber/bamboo dwelling structure (see Jamir 2014; Fig. 3, 4). Excavations have revealed evidence of dwellings, large

¹³ Nevertheless, there are also recent voices to the ongoing FNR repatriation initiative that see the need to contextualize the historical narratives of the Nagas and a more relevant approach to the Naga repatriation process (see Zhimomi 2023).

¹⁴ These are a few Naga tribes located in North and Northeast Nagaland that share past historical ties with each other.
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Figure 2: Location of study sites, Nagaland. Figure: T. Jamir.

Figure 3: Some of the village elders engaged in traditional house construction. Photo: T. Jamir.

Figure 4: A timber-bamboo house structure built over one of the excavated house features with the efforts of the local community, Chungliyinti. Photo: T. Jamir.
underground pits, hand and wheel-made pottery, numerous ground stone tools such as pestles, querns, ‘nutting-stones,’ a few edge ground tools, iron tools, glass and carnelian beads and spindle whorls made from stone pebbles. Evidence of archaeobotanical remains, such as wild and cultivated rice, millet and introduced cereals such as wheat and barley have also been reported. Radiocarbon dating revealed that the site was occupied from 776-1217 cal AD (1020±80 BP; BS-2978; charcoal) to as recent as 1656 cal AD (150±70 BP; BS-2975; charcoal) (Jamir et al. 2014, 424). The sample derives from charcoal scatters retrieved from stratigraphic profiles (Locality-3/TR-2/Layer 9) in the case of the former, while the latter was collected from a post-hole feature in the residential area (Locality-3/TR-5).

**Hutsü and adjoining sites**

In 2014, our community archaeology research also extended to Hutsü village and the adjoining sites of Yisi and Troghri (Phek District, Meluri sub-Division) in the Pochury area. The initiative to undertake an archaeological investigation stemmed from the interest of the local community of Hutsü under the aegis of the Hutsü Village Council. Here, concerns about ascertaining the antiquity of human occupation in the region and the need for an effective heritage management site plan were the main research objectives raised by the community. To realize such objectives that mainly focused on enhancing knowledge about the early history and culture of the Pochury Naga, the research was exclusively funded by the community, among others, covering fieldwork and radiocarbon dating. Given the short time frame of two weeks within which the research was conducted, the compelling need for a more in-depth programme similar to the one at Chungliyimti could not be met. As part of the joint research efforts, the community also provided details of the oral tradition associated with the sites. Settlement data supported by the site’s oral history were integrated into the site map.

The village of Hutsü and its adjoining sites were considered important to the local community for understanding their settlement history and later dispersals. Before excavation, community meetings were held to discuss the research objectives and the interest that the local community has in their pre-colonial past to mark the jubilee celebration of the village and also define the areas to be chosen for excavation based on the village oral history (Fig. 5, 6). The presence of a precolonial past from the three sites became clear from the content of excavated materials represented by fragments of smoking pipes, chalcedony flakes, pottery anvil, fragments of sharpening stones, clay mugs, unfinished ground stone tool, manuports, glass beads,

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15 Here and further calibrated with Oxcal 4.4.
animal remains, lid knobs, fragments of perforated slates, pottery lids, spindle whorls, iron tools, etc. The sites of Hutsü, Troghrü and Yisi dated to 416–545 cal AD (1600±30 BP; Beta-396366; charcoal), 1042–1219 cal AD (900±30 BP; Beta-396367; charcoal) and 1667–1903 cal AD (150±30 BP; Beta-396368; charcoal) respectively (Jamir 2021, 182), the oral history on the early formation of village emerged as a result of the community-inclusive project corroborated by the radiocarbon dates.

**Changsang Mongko**

Changsang Mongko, an ancestral site excavated in 2019, is also a place that links several adjoining sites in the cultural landscape within close proximities. Access to the oral tradition would not have been possible without the active involvement of the local community comprising the clans descended from the site, including the clans of Hakchang village (Fig. 7-9). Three samples from various stratigraphic layers of the excavation yielded dates ranging from 1028–1162 cal AD (950±30 BP; Beta-524670; charcoal) to 1480–1640 cal AD (330±30 BP; Beta-524668; charcoal) (Jamir 2021, 181), suggesting a deep history of events recorded in the oral tradition of Changsang Mongko. The post-exavcation exhibition of finds, organized by the Changsang Shensinge [tr. Heritage] Committee at Hakchang village (Fig. 10), not only helped to evoke a deep connection with the materiality of the past but also for the first time provided descent communities with a unique opportunity to engage with their ancestral past through traditional knowledge sharing, realize a sense of ownership, control and offer multiple views of their ancestral past that enriched archaeological interpretations.

**Discussion**

The general perception of Northeast India during the colonial era as a region of unprogressive cultural backwardness or *cul de sac* [tr. dead end], a region incapable of bringing about change through its own innovation. Any changes observed were attributed to diffusional impulses or external influences from a ‘higher civilization.’ To the British, the Nagas were perceived as ‘wild,’ ‘savage,’ ‘primitive,’ and ‘uncivilized’, and if Nagas were to be of any use to the British, they had to be ‘civilized’ first (Lotha 2007, 46). This further led to the mission to evangelize the Nagas as a strategy for colonial pacification and civilization (Thong 2012, 899). To a visiting European, the Naga Hills were a ‘museum piece,’ and cultural objects, both archaeological and ethnographic, were collected from the colonies and displayed in the West as a way of authenticating the primitive stages of human development. Coming from a
Figure 8: Members of Changsang Shensinge Committee and Hakchang Village Council along with the archaeologists at the Changsang community morung (bachelors' dormitory) site before excavation. Photo: T. Jamir.

Figure 9: View of the morung site under excavation, Changsang Mongko. Photo: T. Jamir.

Figure 10: Temporary display of finds organized by the Changsang Shensinge Committee, Hakchang village. Photo: T. Jamir.
region with a long colonial past and an under-representation of the region’s local histories, community archaeology has helped Naga communities to realize the richness of Naga culture and to listen to diverse voices while sharing and experiencing their oral histories.

In this paper, the three examples of community archaeology research represent our attempt to decolonize archaeological practice in Northeast India. From the description of these projects, it is evident that they are different in their ways and degree of community involvement.

Archaeological research at Chungliyimti was a government-sponsored programme where community archaeology was featured as one of the components of the archaeological project. In the case of Chungliyimti, not all of the residents were descent communities, yet regardless of this difference, the communities still formed a sense of place, therefore the mutual cooperative research with the non-descent locals was equally as engaging as in the case of the latter. However, the community control over the research agenda was quite marginal due to specific research aims set by the state government. However, in all three cases, the research was discussed with the local people at each stage and moved forward with strong community support.

On the contrary, in the case of Hutsü and Changsang Mongko, the initiatives were exclusively community-driven and consisted solely of descent groups who either continue to reside at the site (in the case of Hutsü) or – as in the case of Changsang Mongko – continue to live in surrounding villages, not far from the abandoned ancestral site. The degree of control over the research influenced the interest of the local people, mutual trust and the level of engagement. In particular, the commitment and involvement were more intense in the projects where the research was initially built around the community’s goals, needs and priorities.

Another important observation is the view of positioning ourselves, as Indigenous archaeologists, within a macro and micro context in Nagaland. Even within Naga communities, which generally comprise various cultural groups, there is a binary notion of who is an ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ when researching the local history and culture of a particular tribe. Although we position ourselves as Indigenous archaeologists, there are still concerns about the misrepresentation of the community’s history and culture when a local anthropologist, historian or archaeologist attempts to study another tribe. Such entrenched attitudes continue to persist as a result of past colonial representations of the Nagas and past colonial experiences, where Naga cultural objects were taken away during colonial expeditions,\(^{16}\) hence there are still stereotypic and particularistic thought patterns, suspicions and prejudices of the archaeologists in the community (Jamir 2021).

Experience in such situations has helped us to reorganize our thinking and gain a better theoretical understanding that should underlie such community archaeology programmes. In a macro context, we are ‘Naga’ and not an ‘outsider,’ but at the same time, in a micro context, we are not an ‘insider’ – conversely, in the sense that we are neither a Chang nor a Pochury, nor are we Sangtam Naga. There is also the issue of the language barrier, where interactions outside the community are entirely communicated in Nagamese, a *lingua franca* of the Naga Hills. So, also in regard to the spoken language, we are both a local and an outsider, but at the same time, neither are we an outsider nor an insider (in the context of the Paharis of Bangladesh, see Uddin 2011). This binary is contextually situated depending on one’s ethnic affiliation. This challenge to position ourselves within a dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them’ helped us to better understand the social dynamics and how they play out within such oppositions and led to the realization that our positionality as ‘the self’ is crucial for establishing mutual trust.

Moreover, in such community participation and collaborative relationships, there is also a need to invoke an ‘archaeology of listening’ that privileges local voices, not to the exclusion of professional views, but accepting the idea that we have much to learn from those closest to the cultures we study (Schmidt 2017, 397). This was an alternative way of seeing and knowing the past from the voices of the local elders, who valued oral tradition and its connection to places inscribed in local memory. Preserving the historical values of the oral tradition and working closely with the elders of the community helped to identify most of the sites under investigation, which were further substantiated by material evidence.

Contemporary archaeological practice is shifting from object-based to people-based research, requiring and creating new methodological approaches to the study of the past (Rizvi 2006, 394). In light of these developments, attempts to actively involve local communities in archaeological research programmes within the framework of Indigenous archaeology have gained momentum in Na-

\(^{16}\) It is an activity that, in the form of the trade in antiquities, still resonates in Naga villages in the post-colonial era.
galand in recent years. Due to the deep-rooted colonial practice of archaeology in India, the involvement of local communities in archaeological research, to date, has been largely peripheral, limited to routine labour without further engagement. However, public/community-centred research is gradually gaining momentum, as demonstrated by the work in Kerala (Selvakumar 2006), Karnataka (Raczek/Sugandhi 2020), Gujarat (Khandwalla 2004), Rajasthan (Rizvi 2006; Raczek/Sugandhi 2020; Rizvi 2020), Rakhigarhi, Indor Khera (Menon/Varma 2019) and Nagaland (Jamir/Vasa 2008; Jamir 2014).

Community archaeology at Chungliyimti, Changsang Mongko and Hutsü is an example of how Indigenous archaeologists can involve local residents or descent communities as part of any heritage management programme to understand the diversity of the pasts, memories and traditions associated with heritage sites and deriving from the community history. This is only possible, in the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, ‘when indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, [which is] when the activity of research is transformed’ (Smith 1999, 193, parentheses added). One interesting notion in this regard is how different types of communities (non-Indigenous communities of local residents/Indigenous communities) resonate with community-based participatory research. It is best drawn from the work at Indor Khera (Menon/Varma 2019) and Chungliyimti (Jamir 2014; Jamir 2016), which interestingly parallels the observations of Sonya Atalay (2007) during her work in Catalhöyük, Turkey and her comparison with Native American indigenous sites.

However, whether in other parts of India or the Northeast, a decolonizing approach such as CBPR involving descendant and non-descendant communities living within the vicinity of archaeological sites should be considered important in bringing new dialogue and potential to the disciplinary practice in the Northeast region. Such decolonizing collaborative efforts may also have enormous potential at pre-colonial rock art and ancestral sites in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, sites in the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong district of Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, to name a few.

**Conclusion**

The idea of community participation in government-initiated projects and policies is not new to Northeast India. Numerous biodiversity projects involving local communities to ensure conservation, sustainable use and equitable sharing of benefits have been successfully implemented and managed in Nagaland and elsewhere in Northeast India (Jeeva et al. 2006; Chase/Singh 2012). The need for such projects is also obvious in the success of a much-discussed initiative such as the communication of public services in primary education, healthcare, utilities (electricity and water) and sanitation sectors in Nagaland, which aimed to decentralize authority from the government to the community (see Pandey 2010).17

Like any other research, the present one is not without its limitations. However, to promote such a practice in the region, it is important to focus on its positive implications, while at the same time making an effort to identify its flaws and seek solutions to them in the future. What should also be implicit is the view that our community-based archaeological initiatives in no way offer a ‘cookbook’ for the practice of this type of research in the region. As Rasmi Shoocongdej (2009) has observed in her community archaeology projects in Thailand, there is no one way of doing community archaeology and it is bound to be inherently different depending on the historical and cultural contexts of the region in which the work is undertaken. At the same time, this also provides us with an opportunity to improve our methodological and conceptual tools for understanding how to approach and actively engage with such communities of origin in the contemporary world.

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17 This programme run by the Government of Nagaland won the coveted United Nations Award for Public Service from Asia and the Pacific region for ‘fostering participation in policy-making through innovative mechanism’ (The Economic Times 2008).
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