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Visualising National Life: The *Hornbill Festival* as Culture and Politics

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Introduction

The global circulation of images has become a powerful tool in representing the visual richness of cultures around the world. It has made the annual *Hornbill Festival* in North-east India a product that acts as a brand. The plethora of visual images – tribal people in their traditional clothes, scenic representation of landscapes, and tourist information on how to reach Nagaland to attend the festival – have fixed the identities of the Nagas of India in such a compelling and exotic manner that it resembles a kind of modern primitivism, a getaway from the decadent and uncultured world, to a place that still preserves these pristine habitats for cultural and tourist voyeurs.

This chapter will suggest that in order to appreciate the festival one has to take into account the different levels of what I shall call the ‘performance of identity’. First, the festival celebrates the creation of Nagaland in 1963 as a state in India after years of civil and military unrest in the region. Second, while the political situation remains unresolved, the festival is an attempt to project a distinct Naga identity that correlates with notions of indigenous peoples’ rhetoric of ‘preservation of culture’ and ‘self-determination’ as the cornerstone of national identity. While these different forces are at play in the global arena of indigeneity, the *Hornbill Festival* also functions as a contested site of culture. On the one hand, it plays on representations of exoticism from colonial ethnography found in glossy coffee-table books and adventure tourism materials. On the other hand, the festival itself is struggling to articulate a Naga culture that represents the lived reality of present day Nagas. Tension arises from displaying a manufactured, but nonetheless real, culture that is dependent on the political economy of global markets. It is in these tensions that we can come to understand the evolving nature of culture and all its manifest contradictions.

I highlight three categories of performance articulated by Askew (2002,) drawn from various cultural theorists to underscore the focus on performance. First, performance is an active engagement of all in attendance and not a product that