MONUMENTS, TEMPORALITY, AND THE AESTHETICS OF INDIGENOUS PRESENCE IN POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Despite their increasing visibility on highways and in prominent spaces in cities and villages across Nagaland and Naga-inhabited regions in northeast India since the early 1990s, monuments to the history of Naga nationalism have failed to garner significant scholarly attention. On the one hand, they are dismissed by urban Nagas as passive illustrations of the ideologically motivated "agendas" of Naga nationalist organizations. On the other, their continuities with the Naga stone monolith form remain unaddressed, rooted in the longstanding assumption that the influx of Christianity and literacy has meant that "tribal culture" is ruptured from the present. If the former approach suffers from a limiting historicism that imprisons the monument within a preconceived sense of historical and chronological time, the latter reproduces the problem of essentialism, which denies the Naga stone monolith any time. In this article, I challenge the dismissal of these monuments on both historicist and essentialist grounds. I demonstrate that their formal, scalar, and spatial particularities materialize a monumental form that constantly slips across the border between the secular domain of the war monument and the ritual domain of the Naga stone monolith. This movement across these supposedly separate and opposed domains of practice enacts a plural and layered temporality, which foregrounds monumentality as the ground to engage the lived realities and histories of a borderland region. It also illuminates the political significance of the aesthetic in the Indigenously inhabited and politically contested region amidst its marginalization by the state in postcolonial South Asia.

KEYWORDS

Monuments; Art; Visual culture; Indigeneity; Nagaland; South Asia; Postcolonial; Decolonial; Borderlands; Temporality; Aesthetics and Politics.

I. Introduction

Two large stone columns, approximately 30 feet high and erected on the valley-facing side of National Highway 29 (hereafter, NH 29) greet the passing motorist as they approach Khonoma village from Kohima in Nagaland [Fig. 1 and Fig. 2]. Nagaland is a state in India's northeast where 87 percent of the approximately two million strong population is Indigenous – self-identifying as Tribal – and 95 percent Christian. Khonoma is about an hour's drive west of Kohima, the capital of Nagaland and one of the most prosperous villages in the state. Both columns stand on landscaped and manicured terraces constructed just off the thoroughfare, overlooking a picturesque valley dotted with tin-roofed and thatched houses, agricultural fields, and forests. Surrounded by ample car-park space, benches, and perches from which to admire the breathtaking views of the valley below, the terraces are a welcome distraction for travelers negotiating the pot-holed highway. A Flower Islet and restroom constructed roughly halfway between them add to their appeal as pit-stops [Fig. 3]. But the sense of welcome created by these built elements is disrupted by the messages that the monuments carry. Inscribed on the most prominent thoroughfare-facing plaque of one of the two monuments are the words: "Nagas are not Indians; their territory is not a part of the Indian Union. We shall uphold and defend this unique truth at all costs and always."

Similarly, the second monument proclaims that Khonoma "defends the right of their people as a nation". The statements point to the fact that until a little over two decades ago, Nagaland was home to a longstanding transregional and transnational armed movement for political autonomy from the Indian state for an independent Naga nation, waged by Naga groups across northeast India and northwestern Myanmar. The armed movement for Greater Nagalim or Nagaland lasted from approximately 1953 to 1997, when Naga nationalist organizations and the Indian armed forces signed a ceasefire agreement, which remains the basis of a tenuous stability until today. Erected in 2007 and 2011 respectively, the monuments have appeared at a time when the Indian state is promoting Nagaland as a tourist destination by publicizing it as the "land of tribal culture". Although this process has been ongoing since India's economic reforms of 1991–1992, it strengthened considerably in the post-ceasefire period.[1] This is best illustrated by the Hornbill Festival, an annual commercial fair, based on the festivals that its many Tribal communities celebrate annually, that the Nagaland State Government started in 2000. But it also extends to multiple eco-tourism ventures that have sprouted up all over

[1] Akhil Gupta and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan (eds.), *The State in India after Liberalization. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, New York 2011.

[Fig. 1]
Monument to the memory of Khrisanisa Seyie, 2007, stone and mixed media, approx. 914.5 × 189 × 30.5 cm, Khonoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 2]
Monument to the memory of General Mowu Gwizantsu, 2011, stone and mixed media, approx. 914.5 × 189 × 189 cm, Khonoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 3]
Flower Islet on National Highway 29, Khonoma, c. 2011, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

Nagaland, created to bring tourists and economic opportunities to villages such as Khonoma.[2]

The monuments enact a challenge to the Indian state's ongoing practices of enclosure through the messages they proclaim, and the scalar and spatial prominence accorded to them on the highway. One of the monumental forms the pillars draw on is the modern war monument associated with the commemoration of the Battle of Kohima of 1944, which marked a significant chapter in the history of World War II. But when I inquired after the political significance of their installation in the post-ceasefire period, a Naga nationalist activist responded by stating that "These memorials cannot be called a political project, just a post-death family practice to keep their memory alive, what they did, what they died for".

It was their primary function as memorials to the deceased individuals, he added, that happened to signal the history of the Naga nationalist struggle to the current generation of Nagas and outsiders alike. Instead of the secular form of the modern war monument, his statement emphasized their ties to the Naga stone monolith. This is a monumental form erected in remembrance of deceased male figures who are celebrated by their kin and the village community as "warriors". Historically, stone monoliths carry little or no embellishment and are typically erected outside the boundary of the village or ward in which the deceased lived. In Tenyidie, the language spoken in the district of Kohima, the monolith is called "Tsiese" or "planted stone".[3] Stone has an animate quality in this monumental form, based on the belief that the spirit of the male warrior resides in the monolith and protects the village from other malevolent spirits. The warrior spirit also permeates the land where the monolith is 'planted', enriching it, and thereby offering respite to weary travelers or people returning to the village. These are qualities shared by the monuments on the highway, which are erected outside the Khonoma village gateway and double up as resting spots for passing motorists.

But despite their increasing visibility on highways and in prominent spaces in cities and villages since the early 1990s, monuments to the history of the Naga nationalist movement have failed to garner significant scholarly attention. On the one hand, they are dismissed by urban Nagas as passive illustrations of the ideologically motivated "agendas" of Naga nationalist organizations. On the other, their continuities with the Naga stone monolith form remain unaddressed. Both approaches reflect the force of the modernist idea of temporality as chronology that is "ruptured" from the past. They are characterized by a limiting historicism that imprisons the monument within a preconceived sense of historical and chrono-

2 For example, Amarjyoti Borah, India 'Green Village' Turns Tables on Hunters, in: *Al-Jazeera*, June 5, 2014 (June 10, 2022).

3 Asanuo Savino Yhome-Heneise, personal communication with the author, January 2020.

logical time that only considers the immediate human actors who created them, which reflects the primacy accorded to the immediate moment and time of the creation of modern monuments privileged in art historical analyses.[4] They also reproduce the problem of essentialism, which denies the Naga stone monolith any time, rooted in the longstanding assumption that the influx of Christianity and literacy has meant that "stories are no longer told by stones".[5]

In this article, I challenge the way the monument to Naga nationalism is rendered invisible on both historicist and essentialist grounds by highlighting how its expanding visibility across Nagaland and Naga-inhabited regions in northeast India enacts a plural and layered temporality. In *Anachronic Renaissance*, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood argue that the artwork's ability to "anachronize" challenges the historicism of European art history, demonstrating that art functions as "a token of power, in its time, precisely by complicating time, by reactivating prestigious forebears, by comparing events across time, by fabricating memories".[6] But in South Asia and the study of Indigenous art and visual culture at large, historicism is less of a problem than essentialism. Nagel and Wood's concept of "plural temporality" is just as useful in countering an essentialist image of the Naga stone monolith as it is in opposing the historicism that underlies the absence of scholarship on the monuments on NH 29. But, as Prathama Banerjee argues, a lack of historical thinking is still a problem in South Asian studies of Indigeneity, in which Tribal communities are typically not "recognized as embodiments of past histories".[7] The complex temporality of Naga Indigeneity and Naga nationalism constituted by the highway monuments is best understood as a "layered temporality", as discussed by Kajri Jain in *Gods in the Time of Democracy*. Jain argues that monumental statues of religious and political figures in post-reform India do "not follow an either/or, then/now logic of linear succession", but are instead "a matter of additive layering and interaction".[8] Following Jain, I undertake a processual analysis of the monuments on NH 29 as an assemblage, a bundle of multiple processes or "object-events that belong both to the moment and space of these processes' convergence and to multiple other

4
James E. Young, Memory/Monument, in: Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago 2003, 234–247.

5
Stuart Blackburn, The Stories Stones Tell. Naga Oral Stories and Culture, in: Michael Oppitz, Thomas Kaiser, Alban von Stockhausen, and Marion Wettstein (eds.), *Naga Identities. Changing Local Cultures in the Northeast of India*, Gent 2008, 259–270, here 262.

6
Alexander Nagel and Christopher S Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York 2012, 13; 18.

7
Prathama Banerjee, Writing the Adivasi. Some Historiographical Notes, in: *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 53/1, 2016, 131–153, here 146–147.

8
Kajri Jain, Gods in the Time of Automobility, in: *Current Anthropology*, 58, supp. 15, 2017, S13–S26, here S22.

space-times", which also helps explain their public dismissal today as merely "agendas".[9] Their formal, scalar, and spatial particularities materialize a monumental form that constantly slips across the discursive border that separates the secular domain of the war monument from the ritual domain of the Naga stone monolith. This movement across these supposedly separate and opposed domains of practice exemplifies the plural and layered temporality of Indigenous presence amidst its marginalization by the state in postcolonial South Asia.[10]

II. India and Indigeneity

Much like the tensions that surround how to identify the monuments on NH 29, the term Indigenous remains deeply contested in India. Nagas self-identify as Tribal, though the term Indigenous has gained traction in the work of Naga scholars.[11] I do not use the term Indigenous in an identitarian capacity. As a non-Naga art historian, I use it to highlight the nature of presence that the memorial monuments perform as they slip across the ritually constituted domain of the Naga stone monolith and the secular domain of the war monument. This slippage does not simply challenge salvage and historicist terms of recognition. It also constitutes a presence that defies the colonial forms of relationality that characterize the Indian state's co-option and disavowal of Adivasi and Tribal struggles "into a more singular narrative of 'tribal' belonging".[12] This defiant presence resonates with what Indigenous scholars in the set-

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Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy*, Durham, NC 2021, 10.

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Although Nagel and Wood's model of "plural temporality" and Kajri Jain's model of "layered temporality" arise from profoundly different materials, they illuminate proximate though distinct ideas about the temporality of the monuments at the center of this study. "Plural temporality" explains how cultural practitioners draw upon religious and secular understandings of creation as resources to make new monuments, in the process recalling/anticipating multiple pasts/futures. For Nagel and Wood, it is the period of the Renaissance when the co-existence of the idea of the image (or, the model of substitution) and of authorship (or, the model of art) becomes significant, which reveals a linear understanding of the temporality of art and its gradual secularization. Distinct from this idea, "layered temporality" explains the continuing interactions between religious/ritual and secular frames of reference in the Naga monuments from the mid-twentieth century onwards, such that each discussed instance enacts the ever-layering contemporaneity of the ritual frame of the stone monolith and the secular frame of the war monument. In drawing on both these models of temporality, I highlight the presence of the linear idea of transition from a religious to secular frame of reference in the emergence of the Naga monuments without relegating the religious/ritual frame to the past, by accounting for the continuing – and continually changing – relevance of religious/ritual forms as well. For a fuller discussion of the co-presence of these temporalities, see Kajri Jain, Gods in the Time of Democracy, 13–18.

11
Arkotong Longkumer and Dolly Kikon, The Unfinished Business of Colonialism. Naga Ancestral Remains and the Healing of the Land, in: *Morung Express*, June 1, 2022 (October 20, 2022).

12
Daniel J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta, Indigenous Pasts and the Politics of Belonging, in: eid. (eds.), *Politics of Belonging in India. Becoming Adivasi*, London 2011, 1–13, here 8.

tler-colonial context of Indigeneity in North America have articulated as survivance and resurgence. The Anishnaabe writer Gerald Vizenor identifies survivance as the persistence of Indigeneity as "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response" and as a mode of presence rather than "mere simulation in a museum".[13] Relatedly, the Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Simpson highlights "resurgence" as a form of recollecting histories of loss and dispossession "not as a mourning of loss but as a way of living" in an Indigenous "present that collapses both the past and the future".[14] By studying what the highway monuments tell us about the nature of Indigenous presence amidst the conditions of dispossession faced by India's Tribal and Adivasi communities, I supplement the work of scholars who have tracked the identitarian significance of terms such as Adivasi and/or Tribal. Among others, Virginius Xaxa has highlighted their worth as tools that empower approximately "104.3 million" people who fall outside India's dominant socio-cultural and religious formations such as Hinduism, which remain "key pillars of Indian national identity", against marginalization and exclusion from rights, resources, and aspirations.[15]

Ultimately, I show that the significance of the monuments on NH 29 is first aesthetic and then ideological. Rather than dismiss their association with the war monument form, I demonstrate how the efficacy of the stone monolith form gives the contemporary Naga monuments greater symbolic purchase as icons of the Naga nationalist struggle. Similarly, the stone monolith's ties to embodied conceptions of land intensifies the Naga memorial monuments' performance of claims to land as territory. In doing so, my research builds on Kajri Jain, Richard Davis, and Finbarr Barry Flood's scholarship on the modern and contemporary image cultures of religious and/or ritual practice. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's seminal text, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Jain, Davis, and Flood variously demonstrate through their studies that modernity or the age of mass reproducibility does not render religion obsolete. Rather, they show that the contemporaneity of images and objects shaped by religious and/or ritual practice is informed by the "oscillation" and interaction between its religious/ritual and exhibitionary "modes of reception".[16] Similarly, I

13
Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses. Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*, Lincoln, NE/London 1998, 15; Gerald Vizenor, Manifest Manners. The Long Gaze of Christopher Columbus, in: *boundary 2* 19/3, 1992, 223–235, here 230.

14
Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done. Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Minneapolis 2017, 2.

15
Virginius Xaxa, Tribes and Indian National Identity. Location of Exclusion and Marginality, in: *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23/1, 2016, 223–237, here 224–225.

16
Jain, Gods in the Time of Democracy, 175; also, Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, Princeton, NJ 1997, 14–50; Finbarr Barry Flood, Between Cult and Culture. Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum, in: *The Art Bulletin* 84/4, 2002, 641–659.

show that the Naga monument's slippage or "oscillation" between the stone monolith and war monument forms renders them politically efficacious within the secular terms of history, territoriality, identity, and Indigenous rights today.

There are three object-centric events spread across the mid to late twentieth century that animate the emergence of the Naga monuments on NH 29. These moments are tied to major chapters in Naga history, associated with World War II, the regional ascendance of evangelical Christian ideas of a Naga Christian theology and Catholic ideas of inculturation and liberation theology, and India's economic reforms of 1991–1992.

III. War and the Sensory Fabric of Public Memory

The first monument one sees on the approach to Khonoma from Kohima is dedicated to the memory of Khrisanisa Seyie. Seyie was the first President of the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN), constituted in 1953 by the Naga National Council (NNC) after the armed Naga nationalist movement had begun [Fig. 4].[17] Although erected in 2007, the roughly cut edges and unpolished surface of the monument made from a single slab of stone suggests that it has been made to look aged like a conventional stone monolith. A granite roundel above the main plaque carries the words "Ura Uvie" or "our land is ours", a nationalist slogan made famous by members of the NNC in the 1950s. Roughly 200 meters ahead and made from a more precisely cut slab of stone, the second monument is dedicated to "General" Mowu Gwizantsu, who served as the "Commander-in-Chief" of the Naga Federal Army (NFA), which is the armed military wing of the FGN [Fig. 5]. A column with four equally sized sides, this monument is embellished with several plaques that carry inscriptions in English that celebrate Gwizantsu's many achievements. For instance, they mention that he "walked with other Naga fighters to Bangladesh, Burma and People's Republic of China" and "visited 13 other nations in Asia, Europe & North America on special missions".

References to the deceased figure's military pursuits highlight the monument's ties to the constitutive object-event of the Kohima War Cemetery [Fig. 6]. This cemetery was established in the aftermath of the historic Battle of Kohima of 1944, when the Allied Forces wrested back control of the erstwhile Naga Hills District from the Japanese military that had invaded and briefly occupied it. Constructed in 1946 by the British War Graves Commission, the cemetery sits across multiple terraces of a hill that today overlooks a bustling hub of the city. It is also plugged into a circuit of tourism animated by the fact that the war of 1944 was pronounced one of the most consequential British battles in a vote conducted by Britain's

17 The NNC spearheaded the Naga nationalist movement.

[Fig. 4]
A closer view of the monument to the memory of Khrisanisa Seyie, 2007, stone and mixed media, approx. 914.5 × 189 × 30.5 cm, Khonoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 5]
A closer view of the monument to the memory of Gen. Mowu Gwizantsu, 2011, stone and mixed media, approx. 914.5 × 189 × 189 cm, Khonoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 6]
Kohima War Cemetery, 1946, Kohima, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

National Army Museum in 2013.[18] But the site's celebration within the globally circulated idea of heritage does not mention that it constitutes the first large-scale and concentrated accumulation of Christian tombstones within the secular frame of exhibition – to draw on a term from Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* – in the erstwhile Naga Hills District. Existing accounts also largely overlook the fact that the cemetery includes a Naga stone monolith, mounted on a rectangular stone brick plinth on its lowest terrace [Fig. 7]. According to the Worcestershire Regiment's records, the monolith was brought from its sequestered location outside Maram village to the cemetery "with the assistance of the Naga Hillsmen". This claim is supported by the roughly cut nature of the stone, which resembles stone monoliths erected outside Naga villages.[19] The inclusion of a Christian cross on the pillar, alongside the inscription, "When you go home, tell them of us and say for your tomorrow we gave our today",[20] collectively demonstrate that the monolith was re-purposed into a war monument.

The impact of the cemetery as a technology of commensuration becomes vividly apparent in Jotsoma village, approximately 11 kilometers west of Kohima. Just outside the entrance to the village gate stands a modest courtyard housing nine tombstones to male figures who played a role in the Naga nationalist movement. The tombstones date to between the 1940s and the early 2000s. Among these stands one that was erected in 1953, shortly after the construction of the Kohima War Cemetery [Fig. 8]. It bears the inscription "Zasibituo Naga, Zotshuma [Jotsoma] village, a national leader, died in the freedom struggle of the Naga independence, murdered by Indian, on Saturday 18th October 1952, at 10:30 AM".

Confirmed by the historian and priest Rev. Savito Nagi, this tombstone was erected to remember Zasibituo Nagi, a resident of Jotsoma who died when the local police fired upon a public gathering that was rallying around the cause of Naga autonomy a year before the movement became an armed struggle.[21] About four and a half feet high, it is larger than a conventional tombstone. The detailed account of the moment of passing it records resembles inscriptions found on war monuments. Much like a Naga stone monolith, it is erected outside the boundary of Jotsoma. These features collectively suggest that it emerges through a process of

18
Jasper Copping, Second World War Clashes Named as 'Greatest British Battle', in: *The Telegraph*, April 20, 2013 (March 12, 2024).

19
Burma 1944–1945, in: *Worcestershire Regiment* (May 15, 2022).

20
The epitaph was composed by John Maxwell Edmonds, a Cambridge classicist and inspired by the ancient Greek "poet Simonides of Ceos". See Bob Cook, *Kohima Epitaph*, November 23, 2013 (May 15, 2022).

21
Rev. Savito Nagi, personal communication with the author, February 2017.

[Fig. 7]
The Naga stone monolith in the Kohima War Cemetery, c. 1946, stone and mixed media, approx. 762 × 213 × 61 cm, Kohima, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 8]
The monolith erected in the memory of Zasibituo Nagi, c. 1953, stone, approx. 123 × 61 × 20 cm, Jotsoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

commensuration, effected by the cemetery, between the exhibitionary value of the war monument and the ritually significant – what Walter Benjamin might call the "cultic" – value of the Naga stone monolith. Nagi is also recalled as "Naga" in the inscription on the stone, which revises the deceased's ethnically particular name to the by then politically constitutive term "Naga". This speaks to the expanded political address of the novel monolith-war monument assemblage, supported by the fact that Nagi is remembered by villagers as the first "martyr" to the cause of Naga sovereignty.[22] The appearance of this monument thus marks an aesthetic event, constituting a new sensory fabric to Naga public memory associated with the struggle for political autonomy. Henceforth, it also becomes available for further reconfigurations in monumentalized forms.

IV. To Be "Christian within Our Own Traditional Structure"[23]

Unlike the conventional Naga stone monolith, both monuments on NH 29 incorporate new material in addition to stone such as concrete and granite. They also incorporate elements associated with the iconography of the tombstone. For instance, Seyie's monument bears a large Christian cross and the inscription on it mentions that it was unveiled with a dedication prayer conducted by a Baptist priest. The monuments carry icons drawn from Naga cultural forms other than the stone monolith as well. In Gwizantsu's monument, the top of the pillar recreates the iconic high roof and cross-horn motif associated with the Naga *morung* or "house of many", which refers to the regional cultural form of the Tribal dormitory. Historically, these gender specific dormitories, mostly for men, were politically significant institutions where the youth of the village resided away from their parental home to learn the shared traditions of their community. It is also where the adults of the village, recognized as "warriors", lived during periods of strife, rituals, and festivals. Today, *morungs* occupy a largely ceremonial presence in Nagaland, although they continue to be preserved, renovated, and sometimes decorated during festivals. They are also harnessed as an image of Naga*ness*, for instance, as a brand logo by Nagaland Tourism and as part of the name of the Naga newspaper, the *Morung Express*.

Until the late twentieth century, the fluid incorporation of icons and motifs associated with Naga Tribal practices alongside Christian forms of remembrance was unprecedented, and in fact strongly discouraged by the Baptist Church in Nagaland. So, what informs this shift in the monumental assemblages on NH 29, which is not accounted for by the object-event of the Kohima War Cemetery? Two quite disparate sites in Kohima's built environment collectively offer an answer to this question. The first of these is the Mary

22 Ibid.

23 V. K. Nuh, *Nagaland Church and Politics*, Kohima 1986, 49.

Help of Christians Church or Cathedral of Kohima. Located on a hillside in the northern part of Kohima city, it is the first prominent Naga church to draw on vernacular forms of architecture [Fig. 9]. Designed by the architects Revathi and Vasant Kamath and conceptualized by Rev. Abraham Alangimattathil, the cathedral is a modernist reinterpretation of the *morung*.[24] Its raised roofs emulate the *morung*'s iconic sloping roof while the bare metal scaffolding resembles the imposing wooden pillars that support it. Erected at the entrance to the main prayer hall, the over-sized sculpture of the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus painted in a metallic silver similarly offers a Christian reinterpretation of the wood-carved *morung* house-front. At the time that it was built over 1986–1989, the cathedral represented the most emphatic articulation of Christianity through Naga cultural icons, reiterating Christianity to be a part of Naga Indigeneity. As such, it constituted another significant object-event in the history of the monuments on NH 29, enabling the emergence of Naga cultural icons from their conventionally sequestered site associated with the village *morung* into public spaces and as part of a wider cross-denominational visual culture of Naga Christianity and Naga nationalism.

The impact of the cathedral became apparent in 1990, when a monument was erected in honor of Angami Zaphu Phizo [Fig. 10]. Phizo was the longest serving president of the NNC and remains the most celebrated icon of the Naga nationalist movement. Constructed on a landscaped terrace outside the Nagaland Secretariat, Phizo's monument shares characteristics with the Christian tombstone and the war monument. This is apparent in the large Christian cross it bears, the landscaped terrace on which it is constructed, and the lengthy inscription it carries, which states "A.Z. Phizo Father of the Nation Here Rests the man Who Gave His All For His People 16.05.1904–30.4.1990".

The presence of flower wreaths at the base of the monument demonstrates its incorporation into the cyclical temporality of Christian remembrance not associated with the Naga stone monolith. But the roughly cut nature of the stone and the spears that flank the entrance to the site highlight its proximity to the visual culture of the male "warrior" associated with the stone monolith, showcased in *morung* carvings, and as part of their ceremonial attire. Significantly, the fact that the monument is erected outside the entrance to the Nagaland Secretariat suggests that much like the monolith guards the village, Phizo's column is meant to guard the political constituency of Nagaland itself.

The creative reinterpretations of the stone monolith and war monument forms unfolded over the late 1980s and early 1990s, when evangelical Christian ideas of a Naga Christian theology and Catholic ideas of inculturation and liberation theology gained widespread and cross-denominational purchase in Nagaland. This was in

[24] Fr. George Punnolil, personal communication with the author, July 2022.

[Fig. 9]
The Mary Help of Christians Church or Cathedral of Kohima, c. 1986–1989, stone, metal, and mixed media, Kohima, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 10]
The Angami Zaphu Phizo Memorial, 1990, stone, approx. 1066 × 244 × 31 cm, Kohima, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

marked contrast to the mid to late twentieth century, when American and Naga Baptists regarded Naga Tribal practices as contrary to Christian faith, stemming from the Baptist Christian moral imperative to separate human subjects from material things in order to affirm the belief that agency resides in humans and god.[25] But from the late 1980s onwards, Naga Christian leaders began to advocate for a wider embrace of the region's Tribal culture as the ground for an Indigenous Christian theology. For instance, in *Nagaland Church and Politics* (1986), the former Naga nationalist soldier and later Baptist priest and Naga nationalist activist, V. K. Nuh called Naga culture "heritage that embodies inter-generational wisdom", proclaiming that it was possible for people to be "Christian within our own traditional structure".[26] Nuh also advocated for the Church to be more responsive to the suffering the Nagas faced at the hands of the Indian Army and as a fallout of inter-factional violence between competing Naga nationalist organizations. Nuh's writings reflect that he embraced these ideas at a time when Hindu nationalism was in ascendance across India. Nuh was also the priest who unveiled the monument in [Fig. 1] with a dedication prayer. At the time, he was the General Secretary of the Council of Naga Baptist Churches (CNBC), an organization that was established in 1987 to encourage Nagas to actively participate in "national life" as a matter of Christian faith.[27] The 1990s was also a time when, spurred by the global spread of ideas of inculturation shaped by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Naga Christian leaders began to advocate for a wider embrace of the region's Tribal culture as the ground for an inculturated understanding of Naga Christianity.[28] For instance, the Roman Catholic priest and anthropologist Abraham Lotha, writing in an essay titled *In Search of the God of the Nagas* (1992), states that "if Christianity is to contribute to the preservation of Naga culture and, more important, if it is to become meaningful, personal and relevant to the Nagas, it must be inculturated".[29] Against this backdrop, the Cathedral of Kohima, and the memorial to Phizo render the theological and political commensuration articulated by Nuh and Lotha visible in aesthetic ways. Viewed in the light of this history, the object-event of the Cathedral of Kohima enables

25
Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, Berkeley, CA 2007.

26
Nuh, Nagaland Church and Politics, 49.

27
John Thomas, *Evangelising the Nation. Religion and the Formation of Naga Political Identity*, Abingdon/New York 2016, 197.

28
On the impact of the Second Vatican Council on other sites of cultural practice, see David Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit. Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America*, Cambridge, MA 1996.

29
Abraham Lotha, *The Raging Mithun. Challenges of Naga Nationalism*, Kohima 2013, 76.

Tribal cultural icons to emerge out of their conventionally sequestered locations in the village *morung* and/or along the village boundary, animating the exhibitionary value of the monument-monolith assemblage anew, while also reconfiguring their publics along ethnic, religious, and political understandings of identity. That is, the object-event of the cathedral is what makes subsequent mobilizations of Naga cultural icons as part of material articulations of Naga Christianity "banal" – to draw on the work of Elayne Oliphant.[30]

V. The Technology of the Highway

The sheer scale, spread, and location of the monuments on NH 29 make them unlike the historical precedents discussed so far. They share these characteristics with another site constructed just off the highway in Nagaland, the Hornbill Festival. Located approximately 12 kilometers south of Kohima in a rural region accessible via NH 2, the festival ground is a rare instance of a site that seeks to attract visitors in high numbers that is not situated in a Naga town or village. Kajri Jain's idea of automobility is helpful to understand this phenomenon of locating sites of public culture outside major urban or rural centers. Jain identifies "automobility" as a technological condition shaped by India's economic reforms of 1991–1992 that informs this phenomenon, when the influx of global private capital led to a boom in the market for cars and, subsequently, new forms of visual culture along state and national highways.[31] In the case of Nagaland, a post-reform visual culture of connectivity across the rural and the urban appeared after 1997, following a cessation of armed conflict between the Indian Army and armed Naga nationalists. Started in 2000, the Hornbill Festival exemplifies the regional effect of automobility. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the name of the festival site, "Naga Heritage Village", is prominently displayed on a scaffolding high up on the hillside. The signage emulates the famous "Hollywood" sign that sits atop the Santa Monica mountain range in California, which is globally recognized as an iconic instance of the visual culture of automobility [Fig. 11].

As such, the Hornbill Festival constitutes the third and final object-event in the history that informs the monuments on NH 29. Significantly, the technological condition of automobility is still unfolding in Nagaland and Naga-inhabited regions. So, the monuments are part of a wider inventory of sites that have appeared outside prominent urban centers and villages since 2000, including eco-tourism lodges, nature conservation parks, and other retreats. The NH 29 monuments' ties to the visual culture of automobility is most pronounced in the case of Gen. Gwizantsu's monument.

30 Elayne Oliphant, *The Privilege of Being Banal. Art, Secularism, and Catholicism in Paris*, Chicago 2021.

31 Jain, Gods in the Time of Automobility, S22.

[Fig. 11]
Performers and attendees at the 2013 Hornbill Festival, with the signage for Naga Heritage Village in the distant background © Akshaya Tankha.

Constructed on a two-tier terrace, it is designed to allow vehicles to be driven around the pillar on a ramp that loops around it and rejoins the thoroughfare. Moreover, the NH 29 monuments are among the earliest post-ceasefire examples of the way the moment of automobility has been harnessed by Naga actors to contest the state endorsed image of the festive Tribal subject, reproduced in spectacles like the Hornbill Festival.

VI. Territoriality and the Sentience of the Land

The monuments on NH 29 contest the Indian state's practices of enclosure by proclaiming that "their territory is not a part of the Indian Union". Their meaning as symbols of this inscribed claim is continuous with the efficacious aspects of the Naga stone monolith. Adhering to the practice of erecting stone monoliths, they are constructed on land belonging to the kin of the deceased and with stone quarried from specific sites associated with their kin networks. A small inscription on the monument to Gen. Gwizantsu states that it is constructed on land donated by the Seyie clan. According to Rev. Savito Nagi, stone for the monument to Khrisanisa Seyie was quarried from a site in Jotsoma village associated with the deceased's kin ties. Based on the idea that the spirit of the warrior imbues the stone and guards the village from malevolent spirits, the monuments are erected outside the village gate. The cultivated greenery around the built terraces, including the Flower Islet managed by the Western Angami Women's Organization, also resonates with the idea that the spirit of the male warrior enlivens the land to offer respite to weary travelers. Located roughly halfway between the phallic monuments, the garden's management by a women's organization also materializes a gendered division of space, highlighting the predominantly masculinist nature of public space in Nagaland. These spatial features of the monuments demonstrate that they conform to a ritually constituted sense of space and the environment animated by the spirit of the male "warrior" and populated by human and non-human entities in addition to the secular frame of memory associated with the war monument form. As such, the monuments on NH 29 enact a claim to land within the secular terms of territoriality and nationalist identity that is tied to, rather than ruptured from, the ritually constituted Naga conception of the land as sentient.

VII. Conclusion

Driven by multiple organizations with conflicting objectives, the politics of Naga nationalism is far from a site of consensus in contemporary Nagaland and Naga-inhabited regions. This accounts for why many urban elites dismiss the monuments on NH 29 as the vested interests of particular actors. But differences over how best to represent Naga nationalism has not stopped multiple constituencies from mobilizing the form of the memorial monument to

make claims in the name of the cause. For instance, on November 29, 2018, a new stone monument was unveiled in Jotsoma village [Fig. 12]. Perched on a hill, it carries an inscription that states,

> "Leave us Alone To Determine For Ourselves"
> When You Withdraw from Our Naga Country

The monument was erected to celebrate the centenary of the Naga Club, which was founded in 1918 by Naga subjects who had been part of Britain's Labour Corps that served in World War I. Over the years since its inception, the Naga Club became a "political force" that was central to the emergence of the Naga nationalist movement.[32] The statement the monument carries is drawn from a memorandum that the Club submitted in 1929 to the Simon Commission, a statutory body set up by the colonial state to institute partial forms of representative administration in India. Given the political significance of the memorandum in the history of the movement, the new monument echoes the claim to history, territory, and identity enacted by the older ones on NH 29. Similarly, efforts are also currently underway to build a bigger monument to the memory of Zasibituo Nagi in Jotsoma village.

These instances demonstrate that the currency that the monument to Naga nationalism has acquired in post-ceasefire Nagaland cuts across ideological divides. This underscores what I have sought to highlight in this article: that meaning cannot be thought apart from efficacy in grasping its political significance. Their proliferation across state and national highways and varied mobilization by actors across ideological divides signals that their primary significance is aesthetic. It lies in the formal, scalar, and spatial ways that they materialize a monumental form that constantly slips across the war monument and stone monolith forms. This slippage across these discursively opposed domains of practice highlights the plural temporality of the monument to Naga nationalism, which simultaneously participates in the time of memorialization associated with the stone monolith and the war monument. Relatedly, the formal, scalar, and spatial ties of the Naga monument to object-events across the mid to late twentieth century showcases its layered temporality. It is the oscillation between their exhibitionary and ritual qualities rather than either/or which lends the monumental assemblage its identitarian purchase today. Viewed another way, the ritually constituted values of the contemporary Naga monument lend new political force or efficacy to their performance as claims to land within the secular terms of territoriality, history, heritage, and identity.

However, Naga actors are not alone in making claims to land in monumental forms. In February 2020, the Assam Rifles Regiment of the Indian Army unveiled "Veer Smriti" or the "Heroes' Memo-

32 Marcus Franke, *War and Nationalism in South Asia. The Indian State and the Nagas*, Abingdon/New York 2012, 60.

[Fig. 12]
The Naga Club Centenary monument, 2018, stone and mixed media, approx. 915 × 152 × 31 cm, Jotsoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 13]
Veer Smriti, 2020, granite, approx. 1220 × 305 × 150 cm, Mokokchung, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

rial" on land it controls in Mokokchung town [Fig. 13]. According to Arunabh Saikia, the memorial was erected "to honour the lives of 357 personnel who had been killed in counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland".[33] Saikia notes that Nagas received the news of the monument's unveiling with opposition. They viewed it as a calculated insult to the Naga nationalist struggle and Naga activists' efforts to seek justice for the human rights abuses they have accused the Indian Army of committing since the 1950s.[34] This disregard for regional sentiment is echoed in the design adopted for the monument commissioned by the Assam Rifles Regiment. Veer Smriti reproduces many elements associated with the Naga stone monolith inside the Kohima War Cemetery. Although the column constructed in Mokokchung is distinct in material and design, the built space of the site appropriates the circular design of the base and the semi-circular wall that frames the monument inside the cemetery. Like its counterpart inside the cemetery, the wall behind Veer Smriti is inscribed with the names of Indian Army personnel who died in counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland. Additionally, the entrance to the gated site in Mokokchung is inscribed with the same quote that the monolith inside the cemetery carries [see Fig. 7], albeit to pay homage to members of the Indian Army and assert India's territorial sovereignty over Nagaland.

A brief glimpse into the new monuments to Naga nationalism being erected in Nagaland demonstrate that the monolith-monument assemblage is not isolated to two examples on NH 29. Rather, the highway monuments are part of an expanding visual terrain shaped by a broader sensible field of ritual and secular forms of memorialization and public remembrance. Collectively, they highlight the ever-changing lived realities of regional Indigenous life-worlds and ways of belonging to land, including as territory. On the other hand, the formal, scalar, and spatial characteristics of Veer Smriti show that the Indian state's marginalization of Tribal/Adivasi struggles through a longstanding practice of dispossession via appropriation remains ongoing. The construction of Veer Smriti also indicates that their disavowal of Indigeneity has now acquired a new aesthetic register that signals a veritable contestation via public forms of memorialization and commemoration. In the face of it, the contemporary monument to Naga nationalism enacts an aesthetics of endurance and emergence that not only militates against essentialist and historicist understandings of Naga Indigeneity but also exemplifies an aesthetics of Indigenous presence amidst its experience of dispossession by the state in postcolonial South Asia.

33
Arunabh Saikia, 'They are saying they defeated us': In Nagaland, a war memorial for Indian soldiers faces backlash, in: *Scroll.in*, February 14, 2020 (May 20, 2022).

34
Luingam Luithui and Nandita Haksar, *Nagaland File. A Question of Human Rights*, New Delhi 1984.

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