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**Spirits in a Material World:  
Mediation and Revitalisation of Woodcarvings in a Naga village**

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***Abstract:***

This article is about woodcarving and the role it plays in religion. It is an attempt to grapple with the idea of heritage as partnership — involving “persons in action,” that is between human and non-human persons — focusing on the work of an artist, Lepten, and the seven themed wooden pillars he and others carved in Mopungchuket village in Nagaland, India. It demonstrates, in this case, how heritage as a process opens up conversations between representing the past and the present in the religious grammar of Baptist Christianity and its relationship with materiality through the medium of wood. It also sheds light on the multiple meanings of heritage that are about openings and pathways for people to discuss how they experience memory and change, renewal and loss. I will consider, first, how woodcarvings in the Naga context represent the uneasy relationship between two different, but intimately connected, worldviews – traditional (pre-Christian) and the more recent Christian present. Second, I ask, how woodcarvings represent a kind of “heritage.” The key to addressing Lepten’s woodcarvings is to approach mediation as a practice that makes immediate the different kinds of agencies, whether divine, human, or the wood itself, to form. This view is fruitful in seeking to revise the concept of heritage not solely as a secular practice that can be viewed and appreciated as representing the cultural essence of a people, but situated dynamically as entangled with “spirits” and “gods” as part of the texture of the social fabric based on experience. Heritage, therefore I suggest, is never fully the ideal representation of a singular idea — either institutional or otherwise — but involves a myriad of partners. This paper seeks to give ethnographic flesh to these partnerships, by suggesting that what is represented as the “past” in heritage is never dormant but perpetually being animated through the relations that revise, form, and re-embed in newer ways. In this sense, the problem of heritage and the different forms of mediation must take into account how carvings are viewed in Ao Naga society, drawing on both Christian and indigenous Naga concepts that continue to push where the boundaries of heritage as an idea and practice begin and where they end.

***Keywords:***

**Woodcarving, heritage, religion, materiality, purification, partnership, Mopungchuket, Nagaland.**

I first met Lepten, an Ao Naga artist, in 2004 when I was visiting the village of Mopungchuket in Nagaland. We struck up a conversation in his workshop over his woodcarving tools, his guitar, semi-composed songs on scattered sheets of article, and six half-completed large wooden carved pillars that told the local story of the village. Over the next few years, we had in-depth discussions about his woodcarvings, and in particular the episodes leading to, and the subsequent completion of, the seven themed pillars that he carved between 2000 and 2005, which now stand in Mopungchuket village. We spoke in the local language, Chungli Ao, and often met in his house in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland. The conversations were eased by an implicit acknowledgement of kin relation — the fact that we both spoke Ao, and that we were from the same village — but there were also palpable differences to our socioeconomic worlds and attitudes that both of us recognized. He did not always appreciate my probing of the events he narrated, nor did Lepten always acknowledge my persistence in seeking evidence, which exasperated him at times. He would sigh, sit in silence, and light a cigarette; during these awkward moments, I could see friction developing between his experience and my desire to find equivalence in the language of sociology. But I was wary not to reduce our worlds to “his belief” and “my knowledge,” an epistemological challenge that tested the limits of our conversations. In challenging the way ethnography is conducted, Marisol de la Cadena helpfully alerts us to the precarity of context and asks us not to dismiss incongruities in an effort to make the stories sound rational. She says, “...to speak conceptually is to speak *with* the empirical, and at times, with what escapes the empirical”<sup>1</sup> (see also de la Cadena 2015: 14-16). De la Cadena reminds me to honor Lepten’s story with all its “empirical” dimensions, without limiting or reducing it simply to analytical categories. And it is only by doing this that we can see the larger events at play.<sup>2</sup>

This article is a conversation about woodcarving and the role it plays in religion. Reflecting on Lepten’s project of carving seven wooden pillars, this article is an attempt to grapple with the idea of heritage as partnership — involving “persons in action,” that is between human and non-human persons — which sheds light on David Berliner’s point to “Leave spirits outside heritage” (2013). Berliner is more nuanced in his essay than the title suggests, where he challenges the (sometimes) all too familiar linking of religion and heritage in the language of religious determinism, grounded in nostalgia for other people’s religions, and the uneven ideas of what constitute preservation, heritage, and religious explanations of heritage sites, often with multiple actors involved in its mediation (Berliner 2013; Karlström 2013).<sup>3</sup> Berliner’s point is useful for this

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<sup>1</sup> <http://natureculture.sakura.ne.jp/an-interview-with-marisol-de-la-cadena/>

<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork for this article was conducted in 2004 (when the carvings were happening) and then again, at various times, between 2011-2014. I interviewed a number of people who worked with Lepten during this period, including the main contractor, Akum, and also the villagers in Mopungchuket who were either involved with Lepten directly, or were present in the village during Lepten’s project. All names, except Lepten’s (as the woodcarvings are associated with him), are anonymised to protect individual identities.

<sup>3</sup> Recent studies on heritage have emphasized a closer empirical and theoretical relationship with religion and how sites, seen as secular heritage, are also arenas where the enactment of the sacred can occur simultaneously (Meyer and De Witte 2013; Brosius and Polit 2011; Adams 2006; Karlström 2005). Referring to the globalization of heritage and its association with heritage-making as elevated to ‘a new sublime or sacred quality’, Meyer and De Witte recognize the two

article in examining the convergence of these different actors in mediating heritage by highlighting the complex role religion — and things related to religion — play in heritage. It demonstrates how heritage as a process opens up conversations between representing the past and the present in the religious grammar of Baptist Christianity and its relationship with materiality through the medium of wood.<sup>4</sup> It also sheds light on the multiple meanings of heritage that are about openings and pathways for people to discuss how they experience memory and change, renewal and loss. Heritage, thus, encompasses these different time frames, and how we understand the evolving dynamic of meaning, power, and identity.

I will consider, first, how woodcarvings in the Naga context represent the uneasy relationship between two different, but intimately connected, worldviews – traditional (pre-Christian) and the more recent Christian present. Second, I ask, how woodcarvings represent a kind of “heritage.” Although Lepten himself does not use the term, I use it to initiate a discussion between how different actors understand Lepten’s project as “heritage.” For example, many local visitors from nearby villages who came to see the woodcarvings suggested to me that these carvings are objects that narrate a story about the past; they are about the preservation of tradition made possible by government institutions, like the Art and Culture department. While “heritage,” through the touristic gaze here, means a particular kind of practice, I will show that it goes against Lepten’s (and others’) understanding of the woodcarvings, and thus we must be alert to the different interpretations at play, which are shaped partly by the two worldviews mentioned above. The key to addressing Lepten’s woodcarvings, as he would see it, is to approach mediation as a practice that makes immediate the different kinds of agencies, whether divine, human, or the wood itself, to form (see De Vries 2001; Gell 1998; Meyer 2006; Strathern 1988). The woodcarving is about experience and experiencing: about relating, bodies, touching, sensing, dreaming, thinking, being, becoming, and materializing in ways that we cannot capture adequately by viewing “heritage” and “religion” simply as a gaze, a discourse, or an institutional practice.<sup>5</sup>

This view is fruitful in seeking to revise the concept of heritage as not solely a secular practice that can be viewed and appreciated as representing the cultural essence of a people, but situated dynamically as entangled with “spirits” and “gods” as part of the texture of the social fabric based on experience (Meyer and De Witte 2013; Brosius and Polit 2011; Adams 2006; Karlström 2005; Eisenlohr 2013). Heritage, therefore I suggest, is never fully the ideal representation of a singular idea — either institutional or otherwise — but involves a myriad of partners (see also

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sides of the relationship with heritage and religion: that of the heritagization of the sacred (the process whereby religious traditions are either recognized, rejected or contested) and the sacralisation of heritage (how certain heritage forms become sacred, imbued with authenticity and power) (Meyer and De Witte 2013: 277).

<sup>4</sup> A caveat here: whereas Christianity has become the dominant religion of the Nagas, I am referring primarily to the Baptists who form the majority Christian denomination. Smaller Christian denominations such as Roman Catholics, Revivalists, and Pentecostals are also present in the state of Nagaland. Groups such as Roman Catholics have embraced aspects of Naga traditions such as woodcarvings as expressing the depths of their Christian faith, while other Naga artists have also embraced woodcarving as an aesthetic articulation of Naga tradition in the secular language of ‘art’. More work needs done to excavate these differences, which in the current article I am unable to do.

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Bjørn Ola Tafjord for this perceptive point.

Clifford 2013, Probst 2011). This article seeks to give ethnographic flesh to these partnerships, drawing on Marilyn Strathern (1991), through what I call “persons in action.” In support of this idea, Strathern says, “Relations are either made to appear or appear in their making; every new relationship displaces a former one” (1991: 594). Likewise, this article suggests that what is represented as the “past” in heritage is never dormant but perpetually being animated through the relations that revise, form, and re-embed in newer ways. In this sense, the problem of heritage and the different forms of mediation must take into account how carvings are viewed in Ao Naga society, drawing on both Christian and indigenous Naga concepts that continue to push where the boundaries of heritage as an idea and practice begin and where they end.

### *The Lives of Wood*

Naga art, particularly the art of woodcarving, was associated with the religious beliefs and practices of the pre-Christian worldview. According to the Naga writer Alemchiba, woodcarvings have diminished in importance under the influence of “modern civilization and [the] introduction of Christianity” (Alemchiba 1968: 58; see also Odyuo 2013; Lotha 1998; Ganguli 1984). In her travel memoirs written in the 1980s, the Czech travel writer, Milada Ganguli, recollects her visit to the Phom Nagas in Eastern Nagaland. She notes how the Phoms, known for their delectable woodcarvings, were losing their practice due to the influence of Christianity from the neighboring Ao region. She comments on how the evangelistic Ao Pastor, Apok, succeeded in persuading many of the villagers of Yaong to give up their old customs and become Christians. She was particularly irked on one occasion when she noticed a group of young men chopping one of the carved pillars “embellished with representations of human heads in high relief” for use as firewood (Ganguli 1984: 218).

In Naga villages, prior to Christianity, there were three important institutions associated with woodcarving: head-taking, *morungs* (a large house), and the log drum. Each was associated with the maintenance of village and individual identity. Woodcarvings often depicted the heads taken during a raid and glorified the status of the individual as warrior. The *morung*, the central social, religious, and political institution in many Naga villages, displayed extravagant carvings that spoke of the valor, wealth, history, and identity of the village. The log drum in particular was the practice *par excellence* of Naga woodcarving. It usually averaged 10 meters long and 4 meters in width and was hewn from a single, carefully selected tree with the front of the drum carved into an animal or human figurine. These drums were placed in strategic areas of the village and used for celebrating victory and the taking of human heads, marking village feasts and funerals of the famous, each occasion having its own special rhythm, beaten “on the gongs by a team of young men using implements like dumb-bells, one in each hand” (Alemchiba 1968: 66). Naga woodcarving was widespread, and despite the rather simple tools of *dao* (hacking knife), axe, chisel, and adze, the carving was exquisite.

Nagaland became the 16<sup>th</sup> state of India on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1963. It consists of 17 official tribes who speak different languages based on the Tibeto-Burman language group. The territorial identity of the Nagas is not limited to the state of Nagaland alone, as there are Nagas who inhabit the Indian states of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as western regions of Burma. Since the British started administering the tribes from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the region, then called the Naga hills, saw the activities of the American Baptists and with it the conversion of the Nagas to Christianity. According to the Census of 2011 Christianity is now the religion of the state, with over 88% of Christians (around 1,739,651 out of 1.9 million) professing affiliation to Protestant denominations such as the Baptists, Pentecostals, Revivalists, and a small Roman Catholic minority alongside even more marginalised non-Christian indigenous religious groups (see Longkumer 2010). Since the 1940s, Naga areas have seen a strong independence movement develop that has sought to question their territorial inclusion within the Indian union. It has continued until the present though in different forms. The first of these movements was known as the Naga National Council (NNC), which in 1980 metamorphosed into the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), which in turn has seen several splinter groups (see Franke 2006; Baruah 2003).

Christianity arrived in the present-day Nagaland via American missionaries in 1871. Primarily influenced by the second Great Awakening (19<sup>th</sup> century), the Baptists were firmly of the mind that missionary and social activity would bring about the uplift of “un-Christianized” regions of the world, combined with Victorian ideas of animism — a derogatory way of dismissing non-Christians as lacking “proper religion” — and a drive to bring the gospel to every corner of the world (Kling 2004). Their first impressions of the Nagas and their practices were not flattering, particularly what the missionaries saw as “heathen practices” where “animism” and “demon worship” were rife (Clark 1907: 10). Christianity for the early missionaries was rooted in the idea of battling “against the heathen rock,” and the need “to press home to the poor deluded natives the truth of Christianity,” so that the “Cross may triumph over idolatry” (Ao 1995: 64).

From around the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to the influence of Christian missions, the growing administration of the Naga villages by the British, the establishment of schools, and the opening up of the region, head-taking, the *morung*, and the use of the log drum started to wane in importance, reducing the significance of the art of carving. The loss of these carvings and the lack of any inclination to continue the art of carving can be further attributed to two other factors. In the first instance, the burning of villages during the Naga conflict in 1956 destroyed a large number of Naga villages that existed at that time (Oppitz et al 2008: 201), primarily as a form of collective punishment by the Indian military for supporting the “Naga rebels.” This series of events resulted in a significant loss of the carvings that were on village gates, *morungs*, and log drums. In the second instance, the advent of Christianity, particularly during the dramatic increase in conversion in the 1950s, gave rise to the purification and discarding of these objects as “pagan.” Therefore, woodcarving, which once was celebrated, was now losing its social and religious function; today it

is a practice largely confined to the few. These traditions are wrapped up in the language of nostalgia and heritage in contemporary times, and an attempt is being made to revive them.

### *Spirits in a Material World*

The power of heritage, as the cultural historian David Lowenthal puts it, is a “new popular faith” (1998: 1). In fact, its growth and popularity reflect the acknowledgement that with loss, through change or traumatic upheaval, an unknown future looms large in the imagination. But heritage is understood differently by diverse sections of cultures. For some, it is the tangible material things like monuments and buildings that are of importance; for others, it is not that these physical objects are unimportant, but that sites of heritage can be understood through, as in China, “a past of words, not of stones” (Lowenthal 1998: 20).

The idea of heritage, according to the art historian of Africa Peter Probst, happened primarily through the advent of modernity in Europe associated with an accelerated growth and development that saw the past quickly disappearing. As a response to this “loss,” memory was materialised in museums and monuments (2011: 4). In a way, this notion of heritage as preserving the past, then, became almost normative. This situation, however, is not so simple, argues the anthropologist James Clifford (2013; also Probst 2011). Embedded within the idea of heritage is the history of colonization and imperialism that has marked large areas of the world. Instead of viewing heritage as a form of reclaiming the past lost through colonial contact, or missionary influence, heritage can also be an “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2003) that is self-consciously practiced by diffident indigenous subjects through the spectacle of tourism (Clifford 2013; Tilley 1997; Longkumer 2015). How can our understandings of heritage move beyond simply the preservation of physical objects? Can it also take into account the trauma of disruption, and the role memory and non-human actors play in reviving the past? One way to frame these questions is presented by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett who suggests that “Heritage is not lost and found, stolen or reclaimed...heritage produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past” (1998: 149). Therefore, heritage, as James Clifford notes, is “ambivalent and hard to circumscribe” (2013: 276).

The idea of heritage has certainly entered the social and political space in present-day Nagaland through the establishment of such institutions as the North East Zone Cultural Centre, which is funded by the central Government of India, to preserve, maintain, and celebrate the folk traditions of the region. Here the state is attempting to “revive” heritage, but largely as a demonstration of the past. However, what it means on the level of popular engagement is rather different. On an institutional level, cultural heritage in the form of “preservation” of material objects in museums, wearing of shawls, and the performativity of songs and dances are generally alluded to in the past tense, stripped of religious meaning. So, celebration of “cultural festivals” is represented as largely free from pre-Christian influences. Not only are cultural festivals popular, but the representation of “Naga culture” as heritage in national events — the visits of dignitaries,

the visualization of “tribal” culture in Republic Day events in the Indian capital — feed into the rhetoric of “unity in diversity,” a motto that found popular articulation in post-Indian independence in an effort to represent the patchwork of different ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups under the idea of “national oneness.”

On an individual and community level, many Christians participate without difficulty in these festivals and express their ethnic pride. However, some fear that the “celebrations” of certain traditions can lure people away from their Christian faith. Mar, an Ao Naga Baptist pastor in Kohima, told me in 2013 that the Hornbill Festival is a good example of this danger.<sup>6</sup>

People who are participating in the dances [at Hornbill] are acting — they are all Christians and they will go to church after the event. There is not belief in this...The only problem is if they use real rice beer, then I would have real objections. Rice beer is an alcoholic drink and brings drunkenness. From a Christian point of view, rice-beer is denounced, so if they use even while acting, then that is bad. Literally, rice-beer is associated with pagan rituals.

For Mar, festivals that originate from pre-Christian pasts are nothing but drama in which props and actors are used to great effect. The ability of these festivals to lure individuals back to a supposedly disposed-of past happens only when the tools required for “pagan rituals” enter the scene (such as rice-beer). It is precisely these moments that can be “dangerous” for Christians (see Longkumer 2016; Bakker 2013; Keane 2007). For people like Mar, the Hornbill is “culture,” a neutral, secular descriptor, a remainder from the past. This can be separated from “belief,” a mark of Christianity. The question, however, becomes whether these — the secular culture and the “belief” — can be so easily distinguished, a point that I return to below, particularly in light of Lepten’s project and the anxiety over materiality in the Naga context.

For artists like Lepten, with his woodcarving, this separation is very much at the forefront of his thoughts. He wants to escape the all too trite representation of “Naga culture” as ethnic pride based on aesthetic form. Instead, he wants to emphasize the essence and substance of this “culture,” where the pre-Christian past remains entangled with present day landscapes, awaiting release, both in the sense that the importance of pre-Christian practices cannot be ignored, and that pre-Christian deities are still present. The issues that Lepten’s view raises have had their fair share of examination in colonial and post-colonial periods. The question becomes: What happens when a new religious system, in this case Christianity, enters the worldview of a people and causes rupture between the present and the past? In the Naga case, we also need to ask what happens when that very change becomes the source or condition of revitalization? How are we to understand the idea that within the woodcarvings the “past” is an active and not passive presence? It is to Lepten’s story that we now turn because the centrality of his woodcarving project brings to the surface the tensions between the different facets of tradition, culture, religion and heritage.

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<sup>6</sup> The Hornbill Festival is held annually with displays of dancing, traditional art, morungs, ethnic food and so on. It was established by the state as a heritage festival – in fact the main venue, Kisama, is called Naga Heritage Village – primarily as a way to attract tourists. But some of the community are cautious towards the festival (Longkumer 2015).



### *Mediating Stories of the Past: Pillars of Mopungchuket*

From a distance, the woodcarvings, set in a patch of ground surrounded by forest, appear neglected. Moving closer, the magnitude of the project becomes apparent. Carved from single blocks of wood, each taken from one tree, the edifices stand tall. Created between 2000 and 2005 and comprising seven themed wooden Pillars — Protector, Love, Promise, Eye, Try, Peace, and Time<sup>7</sup> — these ideas are brought to life through the stories etched onto the sinews and fibers of the wood (see image 1).

[INSERT IMAGE 1 ABOUT HERE]

They tell the bewitching story of the village, Mopungchuket, and a craftsman, Lepten, who fashions stories onto wood. The village is small, and largely unheard of. Stories lurk just beneath the surface, waiting to be teased out with carefully concocted breath into explicit articulations of art and their relationship to village life. Like most villages in Nagaland, Mopungchuket sits on top of a hill. Surrounded on all sides by looming hills, it is a picturesque village, its name translated into English as “the place where a palm carried by the wind landed.” It is in the Mokokchung district, a region in Nagaland dominated by the Ao tribe, and renowned for the story of Jina and Etiben, the Naga equivalent of Romeo and Juliet. The Ao region is delineated by six hill ranges; Mopungchuket is part of the range called Asetkong, comprising five villages, with Kobulung as the headquarters. This range is where the American Baptists established the oldest mission station in Nagaland, Impur. A few hours’ drive either way to the Nagaland capital Kohima, and the nearest town Jorhat in Assam, Mokokchung is centrally located, which made it the center for Christian mission and evangelism from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, spreading all over current day Nagaland (see Thomas 2016).

### *Carving Stories*

When we first met in 2004, Lepten was a famous woodcarver, painter, mystic, storyteller, and much more, renowned in particular for creating woodcarvings from single pieces of wood.<sup>8</sup> Now in his mid-50s, he still gets his strength from carving. He carves almost daily, a relief from his otherwise mundane life as an officer in the Agriculture Department, a job that he keeps to pay for his house and food. His appearance is sage-like: a cultivated beard, a battle worn face, and a depth to his eyes that suggests wisdom. He lives in a small government house in the town of Kohima, the

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<sup>7</sup> Protector and Time I explain in the text. Love – tells the story of two legendary lovers Jina and Etiben and their unfulfilled love. Promise – a traditional story that recounts the idea of promise through the representation of the Hornbill bird who is said never to break any promises. Eye – is a global story about what people’s contributions are today for a better tomorrow. Try – the Hornbill feathers atop signify the ‘Crown of Achievement’ and the hands signify each individual trying to achieve the Crown. Peace – represented through the universal image of the Dove and the children of the world, a message of ‘Peace on Earth’.

<sup>8</sup> Lepten’s specific education and artistic influences eluded me during my interaction with him, as he did not speak about his training. But one can notice indigenous motifs, borrowed perhaps from Maori and Native American cultures, particularly on the Pillar of Time (see image 2). Therefore, the woodcarvings can appear to be a blend of traditional Naga themes, with influences from other indigenous areas, while also creatively introducing elements that are Lepten’s own. I thank the anonymous reviewer for providing information on this particular issue.

capital of Nagaland, and this is where I met him on several occasions. His house is like a museum of his personality: paintings, sketches, craftwork of a bamboo chandelier, contrasted with rather tacky furniture of an outdated era. With cigarette in hand, he tells me his story.

“In 2000, I created a wooden totem pole-like structure, known as the Pillar of Time (*mapang tongshi*) in Mopungchuket village in central Nagaland” (Image 2).

[INSERT IMAGE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Carved in 40 days, it tells the story of the migration and the cultural emergence of the Mopungchuket village. The number 40 for Lepten is not mere mathematical calculation; it is biblical: 40 days relate to the 40 years in the Exodus story in the Old Testament; 40 is related to the years the tree was lying on the land near the village; the pillar is 40 feet tall, and the distance (he thinks) between the pillar and the village is 4 kilometers.<sup>9</sup>

The confluence of these events, like cosmological precision, was felt first in a dream he had for six months before carving the Pillar of Time, the first Pillar to be sculpted. In the dream, he would see himself searching for the headquarters of the Asetkong range, Kobulung; every night he would have the same dream. It was related to his anxiety and uncertainty of not finding the one thing that he needed to start the carving: the spark of inspiration. One day, however, he saw it clearly. Unsure whether it was his own thought or someone speaking to him, the voice simply told him, “traditional art.” Then the whole theme of the Pillar of Time seamlessly appeared before him; it was, he said, as if the blueprints were laid out in front of his eyes. Mimicking someone looking utterly restful, his voice lifts and says that moment of realization was “like taking a hot bath and lying in the sun afterwards; it was so relaxing and comforting. Once I had the blueprints, the whole project was started and completed in 40 days using one piece of metal and a mallet – *toc, toc, toc* – to capture the original and traditional way of doing art like our ancestors.” The carving process was unusual but felt natural, he said. “My helpers would sometimes say, ‘Hoi, I will start carving two inches below here,’ and I would say, ‘Okay, but be careful.’ It was not calculated, it was almost primitive and magical.”

When the Tourism Department of Nagaland, part of the larger Art and Culture Department, saw what he had done in Mopungchuket village with the Pillar of Time, they approached him with a plan to include newer carvings in a competition for artists in Northeast India, Lepten representing Nagaland. However, according to Lepten’s account, he pleaded with the Director of Art and Culture and the Tourism Department to allow him to work on a new project in Mopungchuket instead. Reluctantly, the Director agreed. Lepten contacted a contractor, Akum, to help him with the project of creating six more Pillars, telling the story of the village as well as reflecting on larger issues like love and peace affecting the lives of people globally. With a

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<sup>9</sup> There is symmetry here with the number 4/40 correlating with the 40 years of the Exodus story. Lepten is aware of this story, and it is tempting to speculate whether he is trying to construct a biblical narrative with the woodcarvings as a legitimating tool to make it Christian, at least in inspiration and motivation.

substantial budget of around 50 lakhs (ca. £50, 000), he hired fifteen local youths from the village to assist in the six-month project. It was a form of tutelage, for he not only trained them in woodcarving but also became their life coach and their guardian, Lepten said.

Lepten chose a particular site to start working on his project, in a place called *Süngkotenem* (literally “hill with trees”) close to the *awatsüng* or lake that sits in the Southern part of the village (see image 3).

[INSERT IMAGE 3 ABOUT HERE]

It is also known as *Süngkotenem awatsüng*. The lake has a *tsüngrem* or spirit/god, which is part and parcel of the village history and landscape. In Mopungchuket lore, *Süngkotenem awatsüng* has a special place. According to an official account of the history of the lake, it was said that the villagers believed that a god owned the lake, which it guarded in the form of a large python. The shape and depth of the lake itself is associated with the writhing of a giant python after the villagers, fearing its presence, speared it. According to other accounts, the lake was believed to be “sacred and guarded by an unseen mighty power” (Jamir 1975: 1).

The choice of tense here — guarded — is a deliberate attempt to historicize, by some villagers and writers like Jamir, the narrative in time, as the village now practices Baptist Christianity and rejects past deities. However, things are not so simple, and in talking to Lepten and other villagers it becomes clear that the lake-god is not simply a specter of the past but is very much evoked among the villagers, many of whom are Christian, and by Lepten himself, also a Christian. While Christianity is often presented as purifying the landscape of its pre-Christian past, and the woodcarvings for some are an attempt at representing the pagan past, the story of Lepten’s carvings demonstrate that the division — pre-Christian/Christian — is not always definite. The woodcarvings themselves present a challenge to how this relationship is conceived (see image 4: Lepten working).

[INSERT IMAGE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Even before starting, Lepten felt he needed to find out if this lake-god would be pleased with his project. Although a committed Christian, as a native of the village Lepten is very much aware of the history of the lake-god. For him it is not a case of an either/or choice. He wanted to maintain order and harmony by not disturbing the territory of the lake-god. This was not an attempt to plumb the mysteries of the universe. What this gesture implied was simply an act of courtesy, accorded to the host when a guest arrives. He sought out a person from the village who was a friend of the lake-god. So Lepten asked the friend of the lake-god to mediate on his behalf by asking the lake-god to reveal signs, or at the very least indicate something in his dreams. Nothing was forthcoming from the lake-god, and Lepten continued working in the hope that the lake-god’s

approval would come eventually. But why is the lake-god so important that one must seek its approval?

Lepten told me that the village has been associated with the *awatsüng tsüngrem* since time immemorial; “the god in fact loves Mopungchuket village,” he said. So it is vital that the lake-god is respected and loved in return. Lepten then told me of two incidents during the woodcarving project that happened when people exhibited a lack of respect:

The first was a young man who came to take a photograph of the carvings and I told him, don't, but he said, I am from the village, so it's okay, and I said, well if you want to, then take it. Later that night, he was nowhere to be found. He apparently went home earlier and broke his camera, and at midnight they found him sitting in my workshop looking distraught [affected by taking the photos]. The other example was that of a young guy from the plains [meaning non-Naga]. He was a cement tradesman. We told him that he should not wash his hands or feet in this water, as this is sacred to us as we worship this and this god is still there. But then, one day, he did exactly as we told him not to do. He washed himself and also cleaned his utensils in the water, and then the following night he got so ill we thought he would die.

For Lepten (and others), these stories are meant to evoke a kind of sacred relationship that the village has with the *awatsüng tsüngrem*, with any breach of this resulting in some kind of reprisal. In using these examples Lepten wanted to convey the intimate connection that the woodcarvings have with the lake-god. This relationship was further emphasized when Lepten and his assistant Toshi would be working late into the night. On one occasion, Lepten saw a figure walking past him and he thought it was Toshi. But when he later asked Toshi if it was him, Toshi said that he was in fact sitting in the car waiting for Lepten to finish. Indeed, villagers have said to me that they would often see a fire burning near Lepten's workshop after the artists had finished work for the day. They would see an old man — the lake-god in disguise, they said — sitting and fine-tuning the carvings.

The power of the lake-god was something felt by the artists even when not carving. On one occasion, as Toshi and Lepten were sitting in the car after a day's work, it would not start. Eventually, after Toshi's intervention, it started. In recalling the incident, Toshi told Lepten the next morning:

Uncle [Lepten], the stopping of the car; *obula* [grandfather/lake-god] is very miserly. “What happened” [Lepten asked]? For working in Mopungchuket, I told the lake-god that I am taking a seed that I found near the lake as a souvenir. I asked him and took it with permission. Only after I returned the seed, did the car start. I said to him, if you don't want me to take it, here I'm returning it to you, and I put it beside the lake.

During this period, Lepten told me that his and Toshi's routine was almost monastic, dictated by discipline and routine. They would spend most of the day carving, and work late into the night after the others had left. Once they returned to their accommodation, they would write songs inspired by their work that day, which would form a kind of liturgical incantation sung

during the next day while carving. This creative loop would continue. They also took copious notes of events during the carving and discussed plans for the following day, and they would go to bed late to be woken up early, again to continue the routine. Sleep and wake time appeared blurred, Lepten said, and perhaps that gave rise to these unusual experiences. Sceptics, like Lepten's contractor and friend, Akum, when I interviewed him, pointed to exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and make-believe as the reason for Lepten's ecstatic, abnormal experiences, belittling the power of these events. But Lepten and Toshi's experiences, for them, are meant to suggest the territorial power of the *awatsüng tsüngrem*. These moments should not be explained away but analyzed as stories that evoke the power of the place.

Lepten had his fair share of critics, however. One day, Lepten recounts, the elders from the church came to the workshop site. An unusual irritation in his voice became noticeable as he narrated this episode. "I thought the church had come to encourage us," continued Lepten, "and to see what we were doing." Instead, they came to me and said sarcastically, "Lepten, we see that you are making-up these carvings really well." Lepten's irritation grows as he recalls the sarcastic expression. The church saw these carvings as a form of idolatry and the reviving of a god that should have been abandoned. Lepten was gravely offended. He remembers the event vividly, and his tone rises to an angry demonstration of his feelings. He challenged them to come up with the exact Bible verse where his woodcarvings come into conflict with god's message and how many times it is present in the Bible. Unable to respond to Lepten's direct challenge, Lepten tersely told the church members never to come again to the workshop site until the project was finished. He slowly inhales his cigarette, and his anger recedes. He then explains that part of the anger was that he had been telling the young artists that they had gifts from god [the Christian god] and this work was being done in partnership with this god. Clearly, evoking the Christian god, without ignoring the lake-god in Lepten's rhetoric, makes for a sophisticated theological debate about the relationship of art to cosmology. The church elders, along with the village pastor, returned to the site after two days and apologized over the incident, owing to the intervention of the contractor Akum and other villagers who were sympathetic towards Lepten's project.

What further aggravated Lepten was the fact that people would phone his mother and tell her to "ask her son not to make wooden idols. He is Punayangla's grandson. His grandmother was the first to get baptized in the village and brought the Christian faith here. And for him to go around making wooden idols is very unbecoming and dangerous." The perception that Lepten was making wooden idols — here interpreted as satanic in the Christian language of giving agency to material things — is central to understanding whether this is simply a heritage site with historical carvings or whether the project itself is revitalizing an aspect of the "past" that people are uncomfortable with. Passersby from other villages, particularly the neighboring Khar village, would remark how the Mopungchuket villagers were "creating wooden gods, which may bring problems for the village in the future." This is a tension that remains at the heart of Lepten's project — the tension surrounding what these carvings represent.

Regardless of these criticisms, for Lepten and some villagers the *awatsüng tsüngrem* is central to the identity of the village. “The *tsüngrem* protects us,” said one villager. During the height of Naga nationalism (in the 1960s) the Indian military wanted to establish a camp in the village against the wishes of the villagers. It is said that the Indian soldiers (*jawans*) were so unsettled during the nights because the *tsüngrem* would not let them sleep that the *jawans* eventually left and the military camp was disbanded.

When I asked some of the villagers what they thought of the *awatsüng tsüngrem*, they acknowledged (“And who wouldn’t,” they said) that the lake-god’s presence could be felt often. The god will come — *tic, tac, tic, tac* — or they said, “We know the god’s presence through the behavior of the animals who get agitated.” At other times, the sound of the lake-god coming is quite distinct; it is like the noise that you hear when you scrape the wall. Lepten, too, said that he would often hear noises like *aaaggg, mmmrrrr*, at night after he had finished working. In practical terms, sometimes as moral adjudicator, those the god likes will be rewarded when they catch fish in the lake, but the god will always ask for a fair share — either coming in the form of a human person or in a dream, and one has to share the fish. Recognizing the double allegiances to two gods, the villagers affirm that

even though we are a Christian village, we know that god is there in the lake and there is no clash at all. Even the trees and the stones that we worshipped in the past are present all around us — sometimes we will have to ask the spirits of nature to leave to protect us from injuries. Not all can do that: only those people who have the gift of talking to the tree spirits can ask them to leave.

What missionaries, colonial administrators, and scholars have called “animism,”<sup>10</sup> where the world is “animated” with spirits, persists in people’s behavior in present day Nagaland from spirits roaming the forest, or causing harm to individuals through illnesses, to the fact that daily Christian living engages with the “spirits.” This suggests that even though, on the surface, it appears that Christianity brought a rupture from traditional practices, on closer examination, pre-Christian traditions continue to pervade the landscape. For Lepten and his coterie of artists, this is precisely what they encountered when they decided to carve the image of the *awatsüng tsüngrem* on wood, the Pillar of Protector.

They found a large piece of wood near the workshop site in a neighboring village called Impur. Lepten said that they were all anxious due to the magnitude of the project, so they prayed regularly to make it work. They asked an old man from the village to model as the physical image

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<sup>10</sup> I use “animism” here prompted by the descriptive account by the villagers, which would often be labelled as such, but also as a way to relate to the analytical and evaluative category used by scholars, missionaries, and administrators – foreign, national and local – in Nagaland and Naga inhabited areas (Longkumer 2016; Clark 1907). It is still used pejoratively in certain church circles, which is related to colonial and missionary views. More generally, there has been a number of studies on ‘animism’ that navigate the way it has been used during imperialism (Chidester 1996; Cox 2007), study of ‘primitive religion’ (Tylor 1871; Stringer 1999), pre-Christian practices, denigrated as ‘superstitious’ and ‘false’ (Keane 2007; Pietz 1985), to a renewed interest in how ‘animism’ can be reconceptualized to evoke a positive relationship between people and nature (Bird-David 1999; Harvey 2005; Ingold 2006).

of the god, so that they could anthropomorphize the *awatsüng tsüngrem* (see image 5: Lepten carving the *awatsüng tsüngrem*).

[INSERT IMAGE 5 ABOUT HERE]

This carving, called the Pillar of Protector tells the story of how the deity of *Süngkotenem awatsüng* saved the village in 1832 from the invading Ahom army from the plains of Assam. Stinging nettles, the appearance of a large snake, and the figure of the *tsüngrem* reaching the sky, frightened the Ahom army and caused them to run, and thus saved the village from invasion (see also Jamir 1975). On the back of this Pillar are humans and a snake, representing the mythological account of how the lake was created. The human figures on the top of the Pillar signify unity amongst the villagers under one village administration (image 6: Pillar of Protector).

[INSERT IMAGE 6 ABOUT HERE]

The wood they used for the Pillar of Protector was particularly hard. A young apprentice of Lepten's wanted to have the first go at hammering the wood. Standing on the wood, he began. Due to the hardness of the wood, the chisel ricocheted and cut the young man's heel. He tried again and again and each time his heel would be cut to the point that they had to take him to the hospital nearby to get stitches. With Lepten's voice rising in tone, he explained that "out of anger, all of us got on top of the wood and hammered our chisels but to no avail. Some were bleeding from hammering so hard. For seven days we tried carving the image of *awatsüng tsüngrem* but without success."

Lepten did not know what was causing this difficulty with the wood. Amidst the chaotic scene in the village, Lepten was suddenly called to Kohima by the Governor for a different project and thus had to leave. On this occasion, he was asked to make the Nagaland state logo. The next morning, as he was getting ready to go to the office in Kohima, he looked into his long mirror to adjust his hair. Suddenly, the mirror cracked and fell into pieces, like dust: "I then thought about the *awatsüng* carving [the Pillar Protector] and wondered if the god was angry, and I instinctively knew that this was not right."

Perplexed, he decided to contact a friend in Mangkolemba village, in the same region as Mopungchuket, and tell him the story of what happened. This friend, according to Lepten, was very knowledgeable about the 'old ways', and he told Lepten that he would have a look at the wood. Upon arriving, he realised that it was not the lake-god that was causing the problem but the spirit of the wood.

"The tree has an owner; it belonged to someone else when you bought it," said this friend. "In the hole there is a male spirit residing and he has been protecting his children. People banging on it made him upset. So last night, I stayed up fighting with the tree and it's all right now, but I want you to do something for me. I want you to combine ash and oil and make a human face on the wood." So I [Lepten]

made 3–4 of them [faces], and that’s how I started on the Pillar of Protector without any problem.

Lepten’s woodcarvings and the stories, both in the texturing of them on wood and his recounting of them to me, remind us of the precarious yet intimate relationship between carving, village life, and divine presence. If one were to take this project simply as constructed heritage, of something that is related to a past tradition as a “cultural artefact” captured in visual and material form for public consumption, it loses something. It is not just that the divine is present and active but, for Lepten, art has a way of refocusing the human gaze and reminding us of the connections between land, people, wood and spirits.

*Christianity, Materiality and Woodcarving: Matter and Form*

So what are the key themes emerging from Lepten’s account? First, it tells a story of the woodcarvings. Second, there is the questioning of Christianity’s break with the pre-Christian past, particularly due to the agency of the lake-god and the fact that its association with the village continues. It is here that we can begin to see how Lepten’s woodcarvings began as a project to create a tourist village but turned into a dialogue and mediation between different cultural and religious worldviews. Therefore, the idea of heritage as a secular narrative of the past (the tourism angle) and the Christian understanding of the woodcarvings as inflected with a religious grammar of idolatry help us to situate Lepten’s story within the larger historical and contemporary role of Christianity in Nagaland.

The coming of Christianity and its relative success in the early years in the Naga Hills meant that social and traditional practices began to undergo dramatic changes. Of particular importance for the missionaries was how to convert the Nagas from those of their traditional customs that came into conflict with Christian ideas of civilisation, religiosity, and habits while preserving aspects of indigenous cultures. Here, interestingly, was the conundrum for the missionaries and their indigenous subjects, especially the tension over local customs and what they meant. Therefore, it is important to delineate two aspects of Christianity.

Drawing on the French philosopher Roger Bastide’s work on Africa, John Bialecki and Girish Daswani explain that according to Bastide the problem of the Christian convert in Africa (and elsewhere) had to do with the converts’ separation from other bodies — that she discovers her body as marked and distinct. This, Bastide says, is “individuation by matter” (Bialecki and Daswani 2015: 276). The second aspect is that Christianity provides a universal set of ideas that transcends the convert, in that one is included in the global fellowship of Christianity through Christ. This is the notion of being “reborn” by changing “form,” i.e., giving up the “old self” for the “new.” This, according to Bastide, is “individuation by form” (Bialecki and Daswani 2015: 276). Likewise, Webb Keane (2007) offers his idea of the Protestant Christian subject in Indonesia, shaped by a moral framework of modernity that places attention on the individual as the site for struggle over agency, precisely over questions of matter and form. Although it is not always self-evident which Christian



denomination Bastide is referring to, at least in this case Bastide's analysis relates to the Baptist revivals.<sup>11</sup> In the Naga areas, it was the revivals that occurred from the 1950s onwards, after the American missionaries left, that really confirmed the idea that artifacts should be separated from individuals, and that there could be no tolerance of local practices around deities and nature.<sup>12</sup>

### *Revivals and the Zeal of Converts*

During the two Christian revivals, there was an explicit attack on material objects that were understood to impede the message of the revival. There are many stories of people throwing away their traditional artifacts. For some, it was seen as a way to cleanse the past, by attacking certain objects that deified the bad spirits, for example log drums, human heads kept as trophies, or ornaments that were used for pre-Christian rituals. These were either buried or burnt. While some of these were obvious symbols of fertility and utilized for ritual purposes, others were ordinary and everyday. Here, Bastide's notion of matter and form becomes relevant to think through how material artifacts were seen to clash with Christian belief that asked individual bodies to be distinct and discontinuous from the past. The site where these struggles were articulated was precisely through material artifacts, highlighting the problem of its enduring presence. For example, a person I interviewed, Imkong, recalls how upon returning from Kohima town to his village in Chungliyimsen in the mid-1950s, he asked his family if some of the traditional clothes and ornaments — brass cups, shells, and thigh anklets, and necklaces — were kept for him. His father replied that these had been buried, because people said that they were evil. Symbols of head-taking obviously perturbed many Christians, because they were seen as the sign of pre-Christian Naga religion. Lanu Longchar, a renowned evangelist, recalled to me that in the 1970s during the revival in Tuensang, eastern Nagaland, he conducted a revival service where 876 human heads were wrapped in a white cloth by village elders and buried as a sign of burying the past.

Sometimes little things would also be attacked. Alemla remembers how during the 1976 revival her sister, Asenla, received a small bracelet from a friend made with betel vines bought from the nearby town of Tuli, near Mokokchung. But the visionary called out and said, "Asenla is wearing an 'evil thing' made of vine on her wrist while she has been asking for forgiveness and praying. Ask for forgiveness immediately for wearing this vine." Asenla panicked and said to her

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<sup>11</sup> There are a growing number of studies related to the anthropology of Christianity, drawn from earlier studies on personhood, that examine the question of matter and form and its plural interactions with different forces – human and non-human. Dividual is a term that Marriott (1976) and latterly Strathern (1988) developed to indicate the plural nature of human interaction and who 'cause[s] the agent to act' (Strathern 1991: 594; also Wagner 1991), in contrast to the individual, who can be imagined as a 'social microcosm' who is bounded and singular (Strathern 1988: 13). Extending this debate with regard to Christianity in Melanesia, see Mosko (2010), Robbins (2010), who suggest, respectively, that Christianity was attractive to the Melanesian primarily due to its dividual nature, while the latter argues that with Christianity a new individualism was inaugurated that was not simply a feature of the old. These theoretical debates are beyond the scope of the article as they bring to light specific issues surrounding the nature of worldviews and how broader change was negotiated over the *longue durée*. In this article, the focus is primarily on teasing out the ethnographic fragments related to heritage based on the idea of partnerships.

<sup>12</sup> Revivals are a form of renewal that seeks to purify Christians by pointing out their sins. The role holy spirits, dreams, visions, and prophecy play in correcting behaviour is thus vital. Revivals in the Naga context then are where converts are asked to re-evaluate their lives in light of what the holy spirit, visions, and dreams have directed.

sister, “what am I to do?” Alemla asked her, “Who did you get it from?” “Go and return it,” Alemla told her; “you have desired that bracelet, therefore it’s a sin.”

Purification of material things, during the revivals, is an attempt to rid things that impede human freedom and their relationship with god. Humans and god, not things, are those with agency. This, according to Bruno Latour, is the “modern constitution” (1993: 13) whereby purification — that which separates the human from the non-human, subject from object — is a modern fallacy. Although modernism attempts to mark these differences and stabilise them, the proliferation of hybrids that are both cultural and natural, subject and object, continue to mix, rendering the process of purification incomplete, yet at the same time persistent (Latour 1993: 10–12). In these revival accounts, the notion of purification certainly marked objects that could be vilified as “demonic”. They attacked the very symbols that marked pre-Christianity, which relates to Bastide’s notion of matter and form.

Quoting 1 Corinthians 6.19–20, Rev. Sünup, an experienced Ao evangelist who worked in eastern Nagaland for decades, said, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.” This biblical passage clashes with the Naga concept of culture, continues Rev. Sünup, because Naga culture is all about honour. Ao shawls, for example, depict elephants, lions, and even human heads. This means that some aspects of Naga culture cannot be accommodated within local understandings of Christianity, because now honor must belong to god and not the cultural symbols. A major cultural symbol that was attacked during the revival was the log drum, or in Ao, *sengkong*. According to Ao tradition, the log drum has a voice; it has a spirit of its own. So the issue is that once material things like the log-drum continue to have meaning; this clashes with Christianity, as there is a danger of reviving ancestral customs.

In the Tuensang area, after a revival prayer in the 1970s, according to Sünup, the log drum flew off the cliff and fell into the river by itself. Thinking that this was a miraculous sign from the Holy Spirit, many log-drums were thrown away. For example, Sünup told me that one man, Koni, resisted the destruction of the log-drum. So he carved one in the forest and wanted to pull it into the village, amid the wave of resistance and disagreement. A construction of a log-drum is often accompanied by animal sacrifices. The priest would examine the tree and ascertain whether it is male or female, how the birds live in it, how it should be cut, and where it should fall. During the cutting of the tree, a fire is lit regularly every week, and the log-drum is usually inaugurated when fresh enemy heads have been taken. “Is this not like idol worship?” remarked Sünup. Koni disagreed with the village, and before he left, Sünup thought, “Let’s see whose god wins.” When Sünup visited him again, he found out that Koni had a pain in his throat, it was as if a needle had gone inside, and he could not speak. Sünup told him that this is what happens when you do not listen to god. After this incident, in Tuensang itself, it is estimated that they threw away around 80 log drums.

Today, anxiety over the making of log-drums persists, especially if their purpose is to fulfill a ritual function. The specter of the past still haunts, according to Sünup, regardless of how people see it: many people do not realize that once they start acting like ancestors, then they begin to participate in the kind of life that ancestors promulgated. This kind of “reenactment” (Connerton 2004: 67) that combines the verbal, the gestural, and the bodily is quite pervasive in many societies, especially when the idea of representation can be viewed as literal “re-presenting.” This can be seen, as Paul Connerton points out, through commemoration, i.e., “causing to reappear that which has disappeared” (2004: 69). The point Connerton is making is that these prototypical actions — performative and often ritualized — that are representative of an earlier time, play an important role in the formation of social memories and, by extension, society. Here, however, the reverse can also be argued: that some social memories are not always celebratory but can be suppressed the moment they rise to the surface. Not only do they lead to friction, but they cause anxiety, too. In their own ways, both Mar (earlier) and Sünup affirm the view that the revival of the log-drum traditions leads to the revival of rice-beer and pouring libations to ancestors, which presents a “danger” of leading to “pagan ritual.”

The literal “re-presenting” of actions from the past is fraught with moral sanctions in the local Christian context. Remembering and forgetting are not passive entities (Connerton 2004, 2009); they activate certain ideas and practices that speak to the context in which there is considerable investment in how people articulate their sense of identity. In this sense, it is clear to see from the above analysis that the Christian community still continues some pre-Christian practices and is “torn” between the two. The notion of heritage, if applied to these discussions, presents us with certain ambiguities, as noted by James Clifford (2013). On the one hand, the collective memory of Naga society, some argue, has been disrupted by the coming of Christianity, and such a loss must be revived through the process of performance and preservation — for example in festivals, museums and cultural festivals — but, on the other hand, inherent in this relation we find anxiety regarding the kind of role the “past” plays. This leads us back to Lepten, because he is, in part, trying to make sense of this.

In examining Lepten’s case, it is clear that alongside Christianity there exist other persons (the lake-god, wood, villagers) that at least some Christians denounce as “pagan.” While local Christianity has definitely accentuated and even demonized the pagan past as something to be feared and reviled, it has simultaneously asserted that this is a choice that individuals need to make. Lepten’s case demonstrates that this is not always the case. For him and the villagers, Christianity does not foreclose the individual as “standing alone,” discontinuous from the past. Rather, the individual continues to be in relation with a myriad of partners despite attempts to circumscribe them (Strathern 1991). Therefore, Lepten’s actions are related to other persons (Gell 1998) and take into account the wood, the village, and the lake-god’s actions. They are partners, and in that sense “persons in action.” Who has more control is not determined by this partnership; it is shared.

### *Conclusion*

By way of conclusion, I wish to reflect on the content and the particular theoretical and conceptual problems that have been explored and what they say about contemporary discussions of heritage.

I have suggested throughout this article that notions of heritage when taken to mean a solely secular practice generate difficulties when applied to the Naga context. This logic of heritage is certainly not lost on the local institutions wishing to preserve a past, revive present identities, and project future possibilities in secular terms, such as museums, festivals, and government organisations like the North East Zone Cultural Centre, Art and Culture, and the Tourism Department. Even the very fact that Lepten's project was commissioned speaks to this issue of heritage, which to an extent even Lepten himself is aware of. Yet, as this article has shown, when heritage is practiced and applied to particular instances, it manifests in specific intersections between Christianity, woodcarving, artistic endeavor, a village, and the presence of a lake-god. This means that heritage is transformed from simply a "thing" that can be consumed by institutions and tourists and memorialized through material traces, into a set of complex relations and negotiations over meaning, power, and identity. In this sense, the power of heritage can be seen as activating "persons in action."

Gods, the economic resources, ideas, inspiration, manpower, and the physical tools that go into envisioning and constructing heritage sites and their representations, become literal "representing," not simply of the past but of a mosaic of live forces that are entangled because, as Connerton argues, remembering and forgetting in themselves say something about society's effort to revive or suppress traditions. In appreciating these relations, heritage, I suggest, is about partnerships. For our purposes at least, it is important to highlight what happens to relations when Christianity brings about a form of social disruption, to how this disruption is negotiated on the level of local relations. If Strathern's observation that new relationships displace former ones is valid, then what continuities can we imagine that give rise to newer relations? Indeed, to recognize the continuum that exists between Christianity, the pre-Christian past, and a national future, also raises important questions about "collective propriety and the collective dangers of various modes of personhood" (Bialecki and Daswani 2015: 284). While Lepten's project initiates these different persons into action through the very process of carving, it is also interesting to note how the Baptist revivals in particular resisted, and suppressed, the material forms that gave rise to agency outside of the individual as a "danger" to their new identity. It further gave rise to purification of material objects that were seen to impede the message of the new Christian religion in the language and practice of immediacy, without mediation. But this impossible "modern constitution," as Latour reminds us, is never pure, and persists by mixing and creating new hybrids and forms such as the woodcarvings, precisely because these are not isolatable, but are in partnership.

The woodcarvings created by Lepten, and the manner in which relations between human and non-human persons are distributed across time and place, even extending beyond the alleged rupture caused by Christianity, is thus significant for contemporary approaches to 'heritage'. In

this sense, I think it is unhelpful to separate the four categories of persons here — *awatsüng*, Lepten, villagers, and the wood — as discrete entities but more apt to acknowledge that the analytical distinction between person and thing cannot be so easily upheld, especially in terms of how the informants cited in the article construct these categories. At the same time, however, there are those who do actively attempt to separate these entities and make distinctions: e.g., things and *awatsüng* as idolatrous, Lepten’s art itself as a form of “secular heritage,” and so on.

Lepten’s and the villagers’ views of the place of the lake-god in their world reveal a particular relativism that is challenged by the universal set of ideas brought about by Christianity, related to the debate regarding “matter” and “form.” As the history of the Christian revivals show, questions of what must be preserved and destroyed were crucial. The Christian targeting of material objects which included carvings, log drums, personal aesthetics like shawls, earrings and necklaces, increased the desire for purification. What this did to the cultural landscape was for some obviously detrimental to the customary identity of the Nagas, while for others it complemented a refashioning of belonging with the new ethos of Christianity. In the words of a Naga Christian, Allem Longkumer, “when they [the Nagas] converted to Christianity, literally, they gave up everything — the heathenish ways...How can a stone have somebody guarding it?!...Due to intuition we believed certain gods manifested in trees, mountains and what not — the actual God is the Christian God!” (quoted in Oppitz et al 2008: 93-94). Yet, in the same interview, Allem Longkumer goes on to suggest that this discontinuity is not so definite as it appears on the surface. He says, “But still I have retained certain elements of animism [like the] spirit of a tiger” (quoted in Oppitz et al 2008: 94).

On the surface, it appears as if there is a clash between the worldviews brought about by Christianity and those of the traditions that existed before Christianity. This clash is seemingly well exemplified through revivalist activities between the 1950s and 1980s. The purification of the material landscape and the anxiety caused by the presence of material artifacts only suggest that the mediatory power of these objects continues to threaten the boundaries between nature and culture and person and thing (de la Cadena 2015; Chua and Elliot 2013; Leach 2007; Gell 1998). There is no easy answer to this problem, though the value of woodcarvings in Naga society has definitely lost the ritual context in which they were carved and celebrated. But that is not the issue. If we hark back to an original past in an effort to seek “authenticity,” we miss the point, because like most practices, the changes in context reflect the innovation; in any relation, newer relations are being formed, a point made earlier, too, by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) with regard to the flux of heritage. The celebration of the Hornbill Festival and other cultural events are also a way of remaking and reconstituting the fragments of the past for present spectacle, not only through tourism, but also as a source of ethnic pride, presentation of identities, that can be instructive for the future. And this is precisely why Lepten’s project is an interesting intervention. The Tourism Department’s agreement to support the Seven Pillars Project as an example of “heritage” is transformed into a case in which the spirit of material objects continues to be visible in the

everyday setting of Mopungchuket, the artist who carved them, and the god who refuses to subside.

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