

Degeneration of ‘Memory’: the case of Sümi Naga

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Abstract: The Sümi Naga are one among the Naga tribes of the North Eastern part of India, predominantly found in the State of Nagaland. Like other tribal groups, the Sümi Naga depend on oral history preserved in the form of a ‘Collective Memory’ as a source of tracing their culture, traditions and history. Over the years, what used to be recognized as ‘Collective Memory’, as the Sociologist Halbwachs maintains, has undergone a lot of changes due to encounters with other cultures and subsequent change of frames. Sümi Naga, who were animists and who led a simple life contented within their village environment, tilling the land and enjoying the fruits of their labour and restricting themselves to rural lifestyle, got totally transformed by the encounters with the British Administrators during the colonial rule, the American Baptist Christian Missionaries and the Indian Army operations. These encounters, especially the ones with the British and the American Baptist Missionaries, led to waves of change whereby their social and economic life were totally transformed and took a direction towards the better in terms of material living. In spite of the positive aspects of these encounters that brought significant changes in their material existence, when one observes the effects of these interactions over the Sümi memory over the years, the damages and losses incurred are irreparable.

This paper aims to look at how the collective memory of the Sümi has been affected by those encounters and this in turn have deeply influenced the way oral history of the Sümi is being retold in the present time, giving an impression of degeneration and distortion of the Sümi memory and culture.

Key words: Naga, Sümi, Memory, Culture, Oral History