

Christian Poske

The Highland Institute, Kohima, India

Sonic Activism: Naga Song Responses to Political Conflict

How have songs aided the efforts of Nagas to establish a nation-state whose intended boundaries conflicted with those left by the British Empire? How have Nagas responded with their songs to colonial and postcolonial conflicts in their lands? As racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities, numerous culturally distinct Naga peoples reside in the Indian states of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and neighbouring northern Myanmar. Since 1832, these Naga homelands have seen profound change through British colonial subjugation, Christian proselytisation, and Westernisation. In 1947, the collapse of the Raj created the nation-states of India and Burma, tearing apart transborder Naga communities. Nagas reacted with a six-decade-long struggle for a sovereign state encompassing Naga-inhabited territories, which failed because of Indian and Burmese military superiority. In India, the army killed Naga civilians and torched villages, making their inhabitants refugees at home and abroad (Iralu 2009; Sanyü 2018), while the administration silenced protests through censorship and oppressive legislation in the form of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958) that persists till today. Naga performing arts responded with stylistically and thematically diverse songs about anti-colonial freedom fighters, army massacres and counterattacks, and the underlying national-cultural self-determination issue defining the Naga question. Drawing on theories of colonial trauma (Mitchell et al. 2019) and internal colonialism (Pinderhughes 2011), I discuss the musical responses of Naga communities to colonial and postcolonial conflict, arguing that prolonged suppression of political dissent has made the ambiguous blending of religious and political themes a frequent characteristic of Naga political songs.

Bio

Christian Poske's research focuses on the performing arts of east and northeast India and Bangladesh, music and conflict, oral history, and community engagement with archival recordings. Having completed his PhD in Music at SOAS and the British Library, he assists the Highland Institute in establishing an audiovisual archive in Nagaland.