



Youth and Cultural Identity in Grassroots Peacebuilding: Reflections from Naga Community Contexts

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Abstract: In culturally diverse and conflict-affected societies, sustainable peace extends beyond formal political settlements and depends on community-driven efforts that rebuild trust and strengthen social cohesion. Naga communities, with a long history of distinct socio-cultural traditions, indigenous institutions, and village-based governance systems, offer an important context for examining grassroots approaches to peacebuilding. Historical processes of identity formation, collective memory, and socio-political transformation continue to shape contemporary community relationships. Within this context, youth occupy a central position in shaping narratives of belonging, cultural continuity, and reconciliation. This conceptual and policy-oriented paper explores the relationship between youth engagement, cultural identity, and grassroots peacebuilding in Naga community contexts. It argues that youth participation in cultural practices, customary institutions, and community dialogue initiatives can contribute meaningfully to reconciliation processes at the local level. Drawing from Empowerment Theory and Community Development perspectives, the paper positions youth not merely as beneficiaries of peace initiatives but as active agents capable of strengthening inclusive and resilient community spaces. The paper further highlights the role of indigenous institutions and community actors in sustaining peace and proposes culturally grounded, youth-centered policy directions that support local peace initiatives and participatory community development. By

situating cultural identity within grassroots peacebuilding, this study contributes to broader discussions on sustainable peace in indigenous and conflict-affected societies.

Keywords: *Youth Engagement; Cultural Identity; Grassroots Peacebuilding; Community Reconciliation; Naga Communities.*

1. Introduction

The historical experience of Naga communities reflects a complex interplay between conflict, resilience, and collective coexistence. Traditionally organized into autonomous village republics, Naga societies developed systems of governance rooted in customary laws, clan structures, and participatory decision-making (Nshoga, 2009; Hutton, 1965). Villages, often situated on hilltops, were shaped not only by defensive needs but also by a cultural orientation toward maintaining internal harmony and collective identity.

Despite a history often associated with conflict, Naga communities evolved indigenous mechanisms that promoted peace and cooperation. Cultural practices such as agricultural festivals fostered unity and reinforced shared identity. Peace treaties and alliances among villages were also common, reflecting culturally embedded systems of conflict resolution.

Institutions such as the morung played a significant role in socializing youth, transmitting cultural values, and preparing them for community responsibilities (Goswami, 2022; Mao, 2024). Similarly, practices such as aksü emphasized relational harmony and friendship, strengthening social cohesion (Lemtur, 2025).

However, colonial intervention, modernization, and prolonged political conflict have transformed these systems. The Naga peace process involves complex negotiations that extend beyond formal agreements (Das, 2011). In response, institutions such as churches (Jamir, 2024) and women's groups (Majumder, 2024; McDuie-Ra, 2014) have played important roles in sustaining grassroots peace.

Within this changing context, youth occupy a crucial position. This paper explores how youth engagement, grounded in cultural identity, contributes to grassroots peacebuilding in Naga community contexts.

1.1 Conceptual and Theoretical Orientation

This study draws upon Empowerment Theory and Community Development perspectives. Empowerment Theory emphasizes participation and agency, positioning youth as active contributors to social change. Community Development Theory highlights collective action and local participation, aligning with traditional Naga village systems.

Alongside these, the study incorporates culturally grounded concepts such as the morung and collective festivals. While theory explains processes of change, these cultural practices provide context-specific insights into how peace and cohesion are sustained.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a systematic and narrative literature review methodology to examine the relationship between youth engagement, cultural identity, and grassroots peacebuilding in Naga community contexts. The approach is designed to synthesize existing knowledge, identify key themes, and develop culturally grounded policy insights relevant to conflict-affected societies.

2.1 Research Design

The research design is qualitative and exploratory, relying on secondary data sources. A systematic review approach was used to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature, while a narrative method enabled contextual interpretation of findings within the socio-cultural and political landscape of Naga communities.

The study draws upon a wide range of academic and policy-oriented literature, integrating both classical anthropological works and contemporary research. This combination allows for a historically grounded as well as contextually relevant understanding of grassroots peacebuilding processes.

2.2 Data Sources

The study is based entirely on secondary data derived from credible academic and institutional sources. These include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters, theses, and policy-oriented publications relevant to Naga society, cultural identity, and peacebuilding.

Key sources include anthropological studies, sociological analyses, and contemporary research on indigenous institutions such as the morung, cultural practices like aksü, and community-based peace initiatives. The use of diverse yet relevant sources ensures a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria: The study includes scholarly and credible sources that are directly relevant to Naga society, cultural identity, indigenous institutions, and peacebuilding processes. This comprises peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters, theses, and policy-oriented publications. Literature focusing on key themes such as the morung system, customary laws, youth engagement, community participation, and grassroots peacebuilding has

been prioritized. Both classical and contemporary studies are included to provide a comprehensive and historically grounded perspective.

Exclusion Criteria: The study excludes sources that are not directly related to the Naga context or do not address themes of cultural identity and peacebuilding. Unverified online content, non-academic materials, and sources lacking credibility or proper authorship have been omitted. Additionally, studies focusing solely on macro-level political analysis without relevance to community-level processes have been excluded, as the focus of this research is on grassroots and culturally embedded approaches.

2.4 Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture the lived experiences and evolving perspectives of Naga communities, particularly at the grassroots level. The absence of primary data collection restricts the ability to validate findings through direct engagement with youth, community members, and other stakeholders.

Additionally, the availability of literature specifically addressing the intersection of youth, cultural identity, and grassroots peacebuilding in Naga contexts is relatively limited. As a result, the study draws upon interdisciplinary sources, which may affect the depth of context-specific analysis.

Another limitation lies in the diversity of Naga communities, where variations in cultural practices and socio-political experiences may not be uniformly represented in the selected literature. This may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a meaningful and contextually grounded analysis by synthesizing credible academic sources and offering policy-oriented insights relevant to grassroots peacebuilding.

3. Review of Literature and Discussion

Cultural Identity and Traditional Social Organization

Literature on Naga society highlights the centrality of cultural identity, indigenous traditions, and community-based living. Early works by J. H. Hutton (1965) and J. P. Mills (1926) emphasize the role of customs, traditions, and village systems in shaping social cohesion. A. Nshoga (2009) further underscores the importance of customary governance, collective decision-making, and the village as a self-sustaining socio-political unit. These studies collectively establish that Naga identity is deeply rooted in shared cultural practices and community structures.

Indigenous Institutions and Cultural Transmission

Indigenous institutions play a crucial role in sustaining cultural continuity and social order. The morung, as discussed by R. Goswami (2022) and A. K. Mao (2024), functioned as a traditional space for youth education, discipline, and transmission of cultural values. These institutions not only shaped individual identity but also fostered collective responsibility and unity.

In addition, Z. Lemtur (2025) highlights the practice of aksü as a relational system based on friendship, reciprocity, and mutual respect. Such practices demonstrate how indigenous knowledge systems contribute to social harmony and act as informal mechanisms of peacebuilding.

Conflict, Peace Processes, and Community Participation

The Naga conflict and subsequent peace processes have been widely discussed in the literature. N. K. Das (2011) emphasizes the need for inclusive, pragmatic, and community-oriented approaches to peace negotiations. The study highlights that peacebuilding cannot be limited to formal political agreements but must engage with the lived realities of communities.

This perspective reinforces the understanding that sustainable peace emerges through community participation, dialogue, and culturally grounded practices rather than solely through top-down interventions.

Role of Community Institutions in Peacebuilding

Recent studies highlight the importance of institutional spaces in fostering reconciliation and social healing. C. Jamir (2024) emphasizes the role of churches as platforms for dialogue, restorative justice, and reconciliation within Naga society. These institutions provide moral guidance and create spaces for addressing conflict through forgiveness, trust-building, and collective healing.

Such findings suggest that grassroots peacebuilding in Naga communities is deeply embedded within everyday social and institutional practices.

Role of Women in Grassroots Peacebuilding

Women's contributions to peacebuilding have been significant in Naga contexts. S. S. Majumder (2024) highlights the role of women as peacebuilders, mediators, and community mobilizers. Similarly, Duncan McDuie-Ra (2014) discusses women's active participation in both supporting and influencing peace processes.

These studies indicate that women play a crucial role in sustaining grassroots peace efforts, often working beyond formal political structures.

Youth, Cultural Continuity, and Emerging Gaps

While existing literature extensively explores cultural systems and peace processes, there is relatively limited focus on youth as central actors in peacebuilding. However, studies on institutions such as the morung (Goswami, 2022; Mao, 2024) implicitly highlight the role of youth in cultural transmission and community participation.

Current scholarship suggests that youth, through cultural engagement and active participation, have the potential to strengthen social cohesion and contribute meaningfully to grassroots peacebuilding. This highlights a critical gap in the literature, particularly in understanding youth as key agents linking cultural identity with peace processes.

4. Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes grassroots peacebuilding as a dynamic process emerging from the interaction between cultural identity, youth engagement, and community-based practices within Naga societies. Cultural identity, rooted in indigenous institutions and practices such as the morung, and collective festivals, forms the foundation of social values, norms, and community cohesion (Goswami, 2022; Lemtur, 2025).

Within this cultural context, youth engagement acts as a critical driving force. Through participation in cultural practices, community activities, and informal institutions, youth develop a sense of belonging, responsibility, and leadership. Drawing from Empowerment Theory, youth are understood not merely as passive recipients but as active agents capable of contributing to social transformation.

This engagement facilitates community-level processes such as dialogue, trust-building, collective decision-making, and reconciliation. These processes align with Community Development perspectives that emphasize participation, inclusivity, and local ownership.

The interaction of these elements ultimately contributes to grassroots peacebuilding outcomes, including social cohesion, conflict resolution, and sustainable peace. Thus, the framework highlights a relational flow in which cultural identity shapes youth engagement, youth engagement strengthens community processes, and these processes lead to peacebuilding outcomes.

Conceptual Framework Flow

Cultural Identity (Morung, peace-treaty, Festivals)



Youth Engagement (Participation, Leadership)



Community Processes (Dialogue, Trust-building)



Grassroots Peacebuilding (Reconciliation, Social Cohesion)

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the need for culturally grounded, community-driven, and youth-centered approaches to peacebuilding in Naga contexts. Sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through formal political processes; rather, it must be rooted in everyday social practices, indigenous knowledge systems, and inclusive participation. The following recommendations offer practical pathways for strengthening grassroots peace and resolving conflict:

Revitalizing Indigenous Institutions for Peace Education

Reviving traditional institutions such as the morung can serve as a powerful strategy for peace education and cultural transmission. These spaces can be reimagined as community learning centers where youth are trained in conflict resolution, leadership, and cultural values (Goswami, 2022; Mao, 2024).

Solution:

- Establish community-based learning hubs modeled on the morung
- Encourage elder–youth mentorship for knowledge transmission

Integrating Cultural Knowledge into Formal Education

Formal education systems often lack indigenous perspectives, creating a disconnect between youth and their cultural roots. Integrating Naga history, oral traditions, and customary laws can strengthen identity and promote values of coexistence (Nshoga, 2009; Hutton, 1965).

Solution:

- Include local history and peace practices in school curricula
- Promote experiential learning through festivals and community participation

Promoting Youth as Agents of Peace

Youth occupy a strategic position between tradition and modernity and can act as facilitators of dialogue and innovation. Their engagement is essential for sustaining long-term peace.

Solution:

- Create youth peace forums and leadership platforms
- Support youth-led dialogue initiatives across tribes and villages

Strengthening Community-Based Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Traditional systems of dispute resolution rooted in customary laws and village councils remain relevant for managing conflicts at the grassroots level.

Solution:

- Institutionalize village-level peace committees combining elders and youth
- Encourage inter-village dialogue mechanisms for dispute settlement

Leveraging Faith-Based Institutions for Reconciliation

Churches and faith-based organizations play a crucial role in shaping moral values and facilitating reconciliation processes in Naga society (Jamir, 2024).

Solution:

- Promote restorative justice approaches (forgiveness, reconciliation)
- Organize community peace dialogues led by faith leaders

Strengthening Women's Role in Peacebuilding

Women have historically contributed to peace movements and community mediation efforts (Majumder, 2024; McDuie-Ra, 2014).

- Ensure women's representation in peace committees and decision-making bodies
- Support women-led community initiatives and advocacy groups
- Recognize women as key mediators in conflict situations

Encouraging Inter-Community Dialogue through Cultural Practices

Cultural practices such as aksü emphasize relational harmony and mutual respect, offering indigenous models for peacebuilding (Lemtur, 2025).

Solution:

- Organize inter-tribal cultural exchange programs
- Promote shared festivals as spaces for reconciliation

Bridging Generational Gaps for Sustainable Peace

A growing disconnect between elders and youth threatens the continuity of cultural knowledge and peace practices.

Solution:

- Facilitate storytelling sessions, oral history programs, and mentorship
- Create platforms for intergenerational dialogue
- Document and digitize indigenous knowledge for wider access

Integrating Modern Tools with Traditional Practices

While rooted in tradition, peacebuilding efforts must also adapt to contemporary realities.

Solution:

- Use digital platforms and social media for peace awareness
- Encourage youth to document and promote cultural practices

5. Conclusion

Peacebuilding in Naga communities is not merely a political process but a deeply embedded social and cultural practice sustained through shared values, indigenous institutions, and collective participation. The study demonstrates that cultural identity and community-based systems continue to play a vital role in fostering trust, reconciliation, and social cohesion.

In this context, youth emerge as crucial agents of continuity and change, bridging traditional knowledge with contemporary realities. Their active engagement in cultural practices and community initiatives strengthens grassroots peace processes and enhances the sustainability of conflict resolution efforts.

Ultimately, the Naga experience highlights that enduring peace must be locally rooted, culturally informed, and participatory in nature. Integrating indigenous knowledge systems with youth-driven initiatives offers a meaningful pathway for addressing conflict and building resilient, inclusive communities in similar conflict-affected contexts.

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