



Cultural Entrepreneurship And Branding: Exploring Business Potential Of Symbolic Motif In Angami Woodcarving

¹ Hovikunu Natso,

Research Scholar, Department of Management, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland,
India

² Petekhrienuo Kreditsu,

Research Scholar, Department of Management, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland,
India

³ Dr. Ditalak Mpanme

Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema,
Nagaland, India

Abstract : This study aims to record the symbolic meaning of the traditional artistic works carved in Angami Kharu. Rooted in the rich cultural heritage of the Angami Naga community, the motifs carved in the Angami Kharu carry deep symbolic meanings which has been passed down across generations. In the study, the cultural and symbolic meaning of these motifs and their applicability in the branding of cultural products is highlighted. By studying how the motifs express identity, authenticity, and heritage, the paper shows how these traditional designs can help create strong brands in cultural tourism. Through qualitative methods and cultural analysis, this study adds to the knowledge about using heritage in business and shows how indigenous art can create value in today's markets. The findings highlight the need to record cultural identity while encouraging innovative, locally grounded entrepreneurial ventures.

Keywords: Cultural Entrepreneurship, Branding, Symbolic Motifs, Angami Woodcarving, Cultural Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Among the myriad traditional art forms practiced by the Naga communities, the most visually striking or culturally expressive is the art of wood carving (Stirn & Ham, 2003). Embedded in the socio-cultural foundation of the Nagas, wood carving has historically served both decorative and symbolic purposes. This artistic practice is most prominently displayed on Kharu¹ or village gate, Morungs (bachelors' dormitories or community halls), and the façades of homes belonging to affluent individuals and warriors. Apart from being decorative, woodcarving represents a combination of craftsmanship, spiritual beliefs, and cultural narratives. The intricately carved motifs function as visual languages that can convey the social status, clan identity, ancestral homage and communal values.

Naga woodcarvings not only demonstrate artistic craftsmanship but also symbolise indigenous wisdom and storytelling. Each motif carved into wood bears deep semiotic and symbolic meaning, reflecting the community's history, and values. However, with globalization and technological advancement, there is a growing disinterest in preserving such heritage crafts as the younger generations are more oriented towards modern lifestyles and economic opportunities. As a consequence, master carvers are unable to pass on their

¹ Wooden gate which is used in the past as a barricade in the village.

knowledge, resulting in a significant cultural discontinuity. The once meaningful symbols are now reduced to decorative motifs, severed from their historical and ritual contexts.

Singh (2021) aptly observed that long before the terms “logo” and “branding” emerged, the Nagas were branding their territory with carved symbols of population. Through the carved images denoting fertility, strength, population, and social power, they marked their territorial boundaries and as a way to honour their forefathers. These carvings functioned as early visual markers of identity and community cohesion.

Geographically, the Naga people inhabit the northeastern frontier of India. The Angami tribe, in particular, is one of the major tribe of Nagaland and predominantly resides in the central and northern parts of Kohima district, the capital of Nagaland (Zetsuvi, 2014). This study was conducted in Kohima, Khonoma and Jakhama village within the Kohima district. Kohima is a hilly region that shares its borders with Assam state and Dimapur district to the west, Phek district to the east, Manipur state and Peren district to the south, and Wokha district to the north. According to the 2011 Census of India, Kohima district has a population of 270,063, comprising 140,118 males and 129,945 females.

The present study seeks to document and interpret the symbolic meanings of traditional motifs carved into the Kharu, particularly in the villages of the Angami tribe. These wooden gates serve not merely as entry points into the village but as cultural signifiers inscribed with values and beliefs. The carvings found on the Kharu are deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the Angami community, bearing meanings that have been preserved and transmitted through oral and material traditions across generations. These motifs articulate a strong sense of identity, authenticity, and heritage for the Nagas, each contributing to a unique visual display that holds considerable potential for cultural preservation and contemporary adaptation.

In the context of a growing global market for indigenous and sustainable cultural expressions, these traditional designs offer an untapped resource for cultural branding and tourism development. The increasing interest in indigenous art forms can create significant socio-economic opportunities for the communities by generating value through the revival and promotion of heritage-based creative industries. When aligned respectfully with contemporary business practices, Naga woodcarving can contribute to both cultural sustainability and local entrepreneurship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Entrepreneurship

Cultural entrepreneurship refers to the process of creating and developing cultural enterprises that offer cultural and creative products or services. These ventures not only embody cultural significance but also aim to generate financial returns (Dobрева & Ivanov, 2020). Cultural entrepreneurship has emerged as a relatively recent field within management and cultural studies. The concept was first introduced by Paul DiMaggio in 1982, who described it as “the creation of an organisational form that members of the elite could control and govern” (DiMaggio, 1982, p. 35). His analysis focused on the development of high culture institutions in 19th-century Boston. However, for the next two decades, the specific entrepreneurial practices within the realms of culture and the arts received limited scholarly attention. Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing scholarly and practical interest in the field of cultural entrepreneurship. The term “cultural entrepreneurship” has gained increasing usage in the new millennium, reflecting the rising significance of the quaternary sector of the economy, which encompasses knowledge-based industries such as culture. It is most commonly associated with “the cultural industries,” a term that refers to the production and services linked to both commercial mass culture and the fine arts (Albinsson, S. 2017). Oakley (2019) argues that the notion of the ‘culturepreneur’ emerged at a specific historical moment, combining the rise of high-tech small enterprises, the pursuit of self-expression, and the growing significance of cultural practices alongside broader shifts within the cultural industries into a concept that was inherently unstable and has since disintegrated. According to Gehman and Soublière (2017), the focus of cultural entrepreneurship research has evolved from the mere creation of culture to the strategic deployment of culture. Reviewing cultural entrepreneurship is essential for uncovering new research directions. According to Ratten and Ferreira (2017), the relationship between cultural entrepreneurship and regional innovation remains underexplored, offering promising avenues for future research. Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) highlight that entrepreneurs must become adept cultural operatives, capable of crafting compelling narratives about their identity and the value their ideas bring, noting that the role of culture and symbolic activities like storytelling has been largely overlooked in entrepreneurship and strategy research. Toghraee and Monjezi (2017) point out that the promotion, branding, distribution, and ownership of cultural productions often suffer from weak frameworks, largely due to poor integration and limited awareness among artists. They argue that cultural and creative industry entrepreneurship merges two distinct trends: art as a source of intangible value and entrepreneurship as its enabler.

Branding

From the historical inspections, it is evident that the term 'brand' has had multiple meanings (Bastos & Levy, 2012; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). A brand is associated with the images, meanings, associations and experiences in the minds of people. Aaker (1996) defined a brand as "a multidimensional assortment of functional, emotional, relational and strategic elements that collectively generate a unique set of associations in the public mind". Brand may expand coverage, provide protection, extend an image or fulfil a variety of other roles (Kotler et al., 2009). Sign and symbol are essential ingredients of the branding phenomenon (Bastos & Levy, 2012) and branding can be found to be attached for example to food, places, people, military, schools, and religion. Holt (2004) showed that iconic brands can create "identity myths" through powerful symbolism and as a result of the cultural intuition of the artists. All brands are cultural, however there are different ways in which one can talk about 'cultural brands', thus cultural branding is a discipline that aims to solve this challenge by pinpointing ideological opportunities emerging in society and building brand strategies which leverage these opportunities (Holt, 2016). From a Culturalist, symbolic point of view, brands can be read as cultural texts which are culturally produced and consumed, and as symbolic articulators of production and consumption (O'Reilly, D., 2005). According to Taha & Abdelfattah (2023), the idea of branding is to establish a long-term relation with the potential community users by integrating various resources of local and regionally designed social, economic, and cultural initiatives connected to their character. Thus, in order to maintain a brand, community can highlight specific features of their culture to strengthen their local identity.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

By studying the traditional designs carved into wood by the Angami Nagas, the researchers intend to learn the deep meanings behind the motifs and analyse how those designs could be used to brand and market cultural products or businesses. In doing so, it seeks to explore the cultural symbolism of motifs in Angami Kharu woodcarving and assess their applicability in cultural branding and also examine the entrepreneurial potential of these motifs within the cultural tourism sector.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining ethnographic methods and content analysis to explore the cultural symbolism embedded in Angami Kharu woodcarving motifs. Primary data is collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with local artisans and entrepreneurs from the Angami community. Additionally, visual analysis of woodcarving motifs is conducted to interpret their symbolic meanings. Secondary data sources include literature reviews on cultural entrepreneurship, branding, and indigenous art practices. The data is analyzed thematically to assess how these motifs can be applied strategically in cultural branding and entrepreneurial ventures within the cultural tourism sector. This research adopts a qualitative, exploratory design to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural symbolism of motifs in Angami Kharu woodcarving and their applicability in branding cultural products.

Data Collection:

1. **Ethnographic Fieldwork:** Engaged with the Angami community to observe woodcarving practices and understand cultural contexts.
2. **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local artisans, cultural custodians, entrepreneurs to capture diverse perspectives on the motifs' meanings and business potential.
3. **Visual Analysis:** The woodcarving motifs were systematically examined to identify symbolic elements and their variations.

Data Analysis:

1. **Thematic Analysis:** Coded the interview transcripts and visual data to identify the recurring themes related to symbolism, cultural values, and branding potential.
2. **Interpretive Approach:** Interpreted the findings within the broader context of cultural entrepreneurship by drawing on the concept of culture and branding.

Ethical Considerations:

1. All participants were informed about the study and their consent taken.
2. Ensured cultural sensitivity and respectful representation the indigenous knowledge.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Creation of Kharu

The Angamis, attach great importance to the carvings and induction of the great solid wooden doors that defend the entrances of their villages (Hutton, 1921). The Kharu or village gate, which are placed at strategic points, acts as the access point to the village and is crucial for the village. The gates are sacred and decorated with high relief carvings, usually painted in black, white and brick-red colours. Depending on the population, a village is divided into *khels*² and a Kharu is erected in each khel.

The Kharu symbolises pride and prestige for the Angamis. The Angamis were a deeply spiritual people and render utmost reverence to their belief that the making of a new Kharu heralds an abundance of blessings in all aspects of their lives. The making of the Kharu signifies good fortune and the blessing to multiply their population, victory in warfare and protection from wild animals and evil spirits. The process of making the Kharu is carried out with utmost respect, care and precision and it was believed that the bigger and more imposing the structure, the better it was as far as its functionality is concerned besides its symbolical representation of the strength or status of the village or Khel (Sorhie, 2023). “Traditionally the Kharu in size measures to 8 or 9 feet in height and 5 to 6 feet in breadth” (Mechülho et al., 2024). According to Zhale (2022), the Kharu is made for two reasons. Firstly, it was erected for protection during the war. When the villagers return from their field, they close the gate in the evening to protect the villagers from their enemies. Secondly, it was erected in order to ask for fruitful, bountiful harvest when misfortune arises and there are set-backs in the growth of village people, their livestock and harvest.

Kharus are hewn out of a huge single tree trunk (Zetsuvi, 2014). When the village decide to make Kharu, there are many rituals. For constructing the gate, a ritual is performed where a heavy trunked tree, untouched by tools, free from cuts and infestation by insects is selected by a group of *Rünakrü* (elders), *Miathomia* (righteous people) and *Phousemia* (celibate boys) (Marwah, I.S. & Srivastava, V.K., 1987).

In the presence of ritual specialists, the celibates touch the tree or make the first cut, which is then felled and motifs are carved out by males of the Khel. A date is set to organise a gate-pulling ceremony, which can be on completion of the carving, or even if the carving is not completed. The carved gate is tied with indigenous jungle ropes and pulled by all the male members of the village dressed in their best traditional attire. The selected celibate boys initiate the pulling of the rope and the rest will start pulling the rope to the village. All male member of the village is expected to pull the rope and infants are carried by the elder male members, ensuring that babies also touch the rope and are part of the pulling ceremony. All the respective Khel leaders are assigned to make sure that the boys who are going to pull the rope are cleaned and ensure that anyone who looks suspicious are not allowed. On reaching the village, the carved wood is laid at the backyard near the entrance of the village and covered with thorned bushes to ensure that animals are kept away. As per traditional rituals, it is forbidden for animals to climb over the carved wood, and if it climbs over it, it is considered as misfortune. During the Kharu pulling ceremony, the neighbouring villages and leaders are also invited to come and help them in the pulling ceremony and share their feast. During this time; all the Khels come together for a feast and a piece of meat is distributed to all the villagers, rice beer is brewed and served to welcome their guests. The Kharu is erected on ‘Zhangou’ or the evening of the fifth day, where the rituals are performed with gun-fire and war-cry by village leaders, priest (Zhale, 2022). Witnessing the dragging-in of a new gate in 1947 in one of the khels of the Angami village in Kohima, W.G. Archer, accounts his experience as “in its communal display, its dazzling brilliance of colour, its devoted service, the ceremony was a complete expression of religions joy.” (Jacobs, 2012).

² Khel is the local unit of the village in which a village is divided .

The researchers explicitly collected and chose Kharu in Kohima districts. The Kharus consisted of woodcarving motifs while maintaining the traditional design of village gates. The selection of the gates for data collection, some of which is shown in Figure 1, illustrating the front view of the traditional Kharu. They align with the objective of the research, which is to interpret the meanings of the woodcarving motifs. The stylised mithun, human heads, sun, moon, breasts, horns, rice stalk, spear, depicts various motifs carved in the gates.

Figure 2 illustrates the front view of the modern and contemporary gates keeping the centuries-old Naga tradition alive.

Table 1, shows the descriptions of the meanings of the woodcarving motifs identified on Kharu with the application of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics. The detailed descriptions of the meanings were referred from published sources such as books and journals, and information obtained from the interviews to support the findings of meanings. The woodcarving motifs were decoded using the physical form that signifies. With the implementation of Saussure's theory of semiotics, the meanings of each motif were decoded for the findings based on the objective of this study.



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

Figure 1 : Kharu (Village Gates)

Image 1. Kharu with warriors, stylised mithun and human heads erected by the Viyema Khel, Jakhama Village in 1920.

Image 2. Carved village gate at Khonoma Village in the early 1900s

Image 3. Painted village gate at Tsituonuomia Khel, Kohima Village, 1947.



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

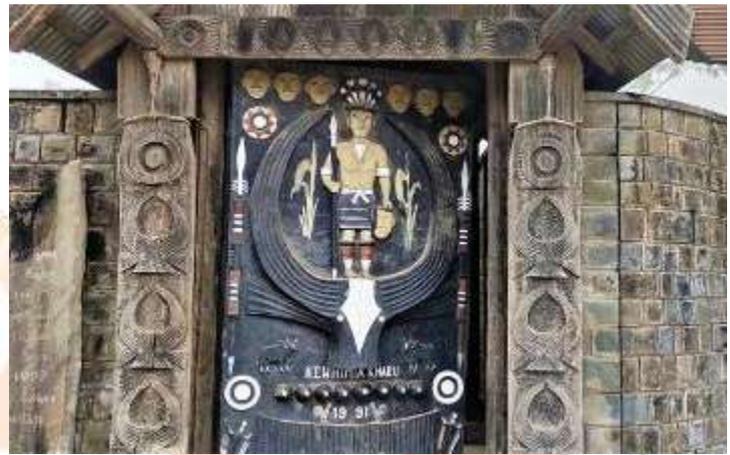


Image 7

Figure 2 : Modern Kharu

Image 4. Wood Carving erected at the Heritage Village, Kisama. 2023.

Image 5. Nousi Kharu at Tsütuonuomia Khel, Kohima Village erected in 2015.

Image 6. Carved gate in a park in Kohima Town. 2021. *Image source:* <https://www.villagesquare.in/carved-gates-illustrate-naga-tribal-culture>.

Image 7. Traditional gate at the Art and Cultural Department, Kohima. 2021. *Image source:* <https://www.villagesquare.in/carved-gates-illustrate-naga-tribal-culture>

Table 1: Motifs

S.No.	Signifier	Signified
1	Man	Growth, prosperity
2	Man with Spear	Warrior
3	Shield and Spear	Success in War
4	Mithun Head (Indian Bison)	Wealth, prosperity
5	Cow / Rooster	Abundant livestock , Health of the livestock
6	Rice Stalk	Good crop, bountiful harvest
7	Sun & Moon	Prayer for the village to exist as long as moon and star remain
8	Heads lined up at the top	Many inhabitants, Copious population
9	Breast	Fertility

Nagas are known for their creative nature and with globalization and higher literacy rate, the artistic skills are also increasing. This is evident based on the comparison between the craftsmanship and details of the old kharu designs and the new contemporary gates. There is also popularity and demand for traditional and culturally unique crafts of the ‘Naga’ brand which can be seen in the home of celebrities and online products as seen in images 8 and 9.



Image 8

Trio of vintage hand-carved Naga tribal panels in the living room of Sonam Kapoor.

Source: *Architectural Digest*, April 2024



Image 9

“Exotic Naga Gamari Wood Panel” being sold at Northeast Handicraft.

Source: northeasthandicrafts.com

FINDINGS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA:

With the advent of Christianity, the traditional practices and faith of our Naga forefathers who believed in the existence of spiritual beings inhabiting the natural world has slowly faded away. Despite the changes, the Village or Khel gates or Kharu of the Angamis, tell the stories of the Naga traditions and rich heritage, and need to be preserved. Through the Hornbill Festival, the State attracts many travelers both national and international with its rich history, colorful culture, and traditional practices of the different tribes of Nagaland. Some of the current trends of wood carving includes a shift to modern art and decorative pieces. The cultural shift introduced monetary culture that paved the way for the inception of the Western culture of materialism and consumerism (Thong, T., 2012). With the growing interest of cultural tourism, with proper cultural branding strategy, the motifs can be leveraged and promoted, which in turn can generate entrepreneurial opportunities. The scope of the present research was limited to motifs of the Kharu. Expanding the study on other wood carvings of Nagas and their use in branding can offer valuable insights into the potential for cultural entrepreneurship and tourism.

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