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### ARTICLE

# Reviving Traditional Institutional Systems as a Strategy for Women's Empowerment, Mental Health, and Cultural Continuity

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the revival of *Tsuki*, the traditional women-centred dormitory institution of the Ao-Naga community, as a culturally grounded framework for women's empowerment, psychosocial well-being, and cultural continuity. Historically, *Tsuki* functioned as an Indigenous pedagogical and relational institution through which young women were socialized into communal ethics, moral discipline, intergenerational responsibility, and collective identity. The decline of *Tsuki* under colonial administration, missionary expansion, formal education, and modernization disrupted Indigenous systems of mentorship, communal learning, and women-centred institutional authority. The study adopts a qualitative, theoretically informed Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach drawing on oral histories, narrative interviews, collective storytelling, participatory discussions, and community reflections involving former *Tsukirs*, elders, women and men who witnessed the institution, and descendants of former inmates. Rather than presenting generalized empirical claims, the article interprets participant narratives to examine the continuing social, psychological, and cultural relevance of *Tsuki* within contemporary Ao-Naga society. Drawing on Indigenous feminism, decolonial theory, and educational and community psychology, the article argues that reviving *Tsuki* represents a process of institutional decolonization, epistemic recovery, and adaptive cultural reconstruction. The findings indicate that participants viewed *Tsuki* as a structured environment of mentorship, psychosocial support, peer solidarity, identity formation, and intergenerational learning that historically strengthened women's agency, communal belonging, and emotional resilience. The article concludes that

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reviving *Tsuki* should not be understood as nostalgic preservationism, but as a contemporary strategy for negotiating cultural continuity, gender transformation, psychosocial wellbeing, and Indigenous knowledge systems within rapidly changing social contexts.

**Keywords:** *Tsuki*; Ao-Naga Women; Women's Empowerment; Psychosocial Wellbeing; Cultural Continuity; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Decoloniality

## 1. Introduction

In an era marked by rapid globalisation, technological change, and shifting social structures, traditional institutions are often dismissed as remnants of the past rather than recognised as vital frameworks for cultural continuity and psychosocial stability. Across many Indigenous societies, such institutions historically functioned as structured environments for education, mentorship, governance, and identity formation. Their erosion under colonial and modern administrative systems has created institutional gaps, particularly in the socialization and empowerment of young women.

The decline of these institutions extends beyond cultural loss. When intergenerational transmission weakens and community-based mentorship diminishes, young people may become distanced from ancestral frameworks of meaning and belonging. Contemporary formal education systems frequently marginalize Indigenous epistemologies. This limits culturally grounded pathways to leadership and self-understanding. The result can be identity fragmentation, reduced communal cohesion, and diminished spaces for gendered authority.

Indigenous feminist and decolonial scholarship increasingly emphasize that empowerment cannot be sustained through policy inclusion or economic participation alone. Durable empowerment requires institutional scaffolding—legitimized spaces where authority is practiced, mentorship is structured, and communal recognition is conferred. Traditional gendered institutions often fulfilled these roles. They cultivated leadership, ethical responsibility, and resilience within culturally resonant contexts.

Among the Ao-Naga of Nagaland, who live in the north-eastern part of India, the *Tsuki*, or traditional girls' dormitory, exemplified such an institutional framework. It functioned as a pedagogical and social space where young women acquired practical skills alongside moral guidance and commu-

nal values under the supervision of an elder mentor, or the *Tsükibutsüla*. More than a residential structure, it served as an intergenerational bridge. It embedded individual development within collective memory and responsibility.

This paper argues that revitalizing traditional institutions as adaptive, community-led structures can promote women's empowerment, strengthen mental well-being, and sustain cultural continuity. Drawing on Indigenous feminist theory, decolonial analysis, and educational psychology, the study reframes institutional revival not as nostalgia but as the reconstruction of social infrastructure essential for regenerative empowerment in contemporary contexts.

### 1.1. *Tsuki*—The Traditional Learning Institution

In the Ao-Naga ancient society, there existed an institution called *Tsuki*. It was an absolute feminist social-cultural institution that served the needs of unmarried girls. In modern terms, it is nothing more than a 'girl's hostel.' The term *Tsuki* can be translated as a girl's dormitory where unmarried girls learned and slept under the supervision of an experienced and reputed matron known as *Tsükibutsüla*. It is to be noted that only an elderly female can be the *Tsükibutsüla* of the *Tsuki*. She could be the wife of a well-known rich man or a nokinketer who is regarded highly in the village by virtue of his contribution to society. The position of *Tsükibutsüla* was also taken up by a reputed widow having good command of her control and moral discipline. She played multiple important roles as a guardian and protector of the unmarried women. She also acts as an advisor and a consultant. While the *Tsükibutsüla* was primarily respected for wisdom, experience, and moral integrity, leadership within *Tsuki* also reflected the broader clan-based social structures and relational hierarchies present within Ao-Naga society.

It was under the direct control and decision of the matron as to who would become a member of the institution in

terms of age, clan affiliation and so forth. The main function of the *Tsükibutsüla* was to train the members and shape them into real womanhood by educating them on the dignity of labour, such as weaving, spinning and the art of cultivation. They were strictly taught to maintain the dignity of women in terms of family norms and socio-cultural activities to find proper placement in society. It was also the job of the matron to initiate the process of courtship between partners and to act as a go-between to bridge the gap between daughters and their parents. As a normal practice, only girls of the same clan could sleep in a given *Tsuki*, as it was the practice of clan exogamy. The members of these institutions were called *Tsukir*, which can also be translated as the members of a small garden of beautiful flowers. In Ao dialect, *Tsuki* or *ATsuki* means Garden. Therefore, when one speaks about *Tsuki*, it refers to the garden of young girls where their socialisation takes place under a qualified Matron.

In the Ao-Naga tradition, flowers or *naro* denote the young girls. Therefore, *Tsuki* refers to “encircling or protecting young girls” in a well-fenced Garden or *Tsuki*. It was, in fact, a learning Institution for the girls<sup>[1]</sup>. Only the bona fide girls were entitled to become members of this institution, i.e., in terms of age and clan affiliation, etc. It is up to the decision of *Tsükibutsüla* or the matron as to who should be bona fide members of the *Tsuki* under her direct control. She was not only in charge but also the house owner where a group of beautiful and unmarried girls assembled and slept. Normally, it was established in the house of a reputed widow who served as matron. She was known as the real owner of the key under whose responsibility a group of unmarried girls slept in her house. It was a small institution where five to seven or hardly a dozen girls could be accommodated. Therefore, several institutions existed in every locality in each Ao village in the past<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 1.2. The Functions of *Tsuki*

The main functions of the *Tsuki* were as follows:

- To train *Tsukir* (members) into womanhood;
- To strictly discipline them to maintain the dignity of a woman regarding family norms, social-cultural activities, and proper placement in society;
- To educate the members on the dignity of labour, such as weaving and the method of cultivation;
- To initiate the process of courtship between partners and bridging the gap between parents of both families;
- Act as the meeting place for unmarried boys and girls, particularly in the evening hours. This is the joyous moment of *Tsukir* and *Arju* members when they exchange their views normally through songs after the day-long, tiresome work in the field. Thus, the functions of a *Tsuki* were manifold towards shaping the adulthood of a woman.

In this way, this institution played the most significant role in shaping young girls into real womanhood. For this, the *Tsükibutsüla* became an important figure in the village. She was indeed, respected by *Tsukir* and also by the young boys, especially those who were in search of a life partner. Normally, the boys select their partners from these institutions where *Tsükibutsüla* acts as the consultant or advisor. The members willingly run all the errands for her, like fetching water and collecting firewood, including hard work that women could not do. The members of *Tsukir* used to do many of her menial works, where even the boyfriends of the young girls lend a hand ecstatically. She commanded respect, especially among the youngsters, as she acted as an instructress. She was the most respected woman by common people and was regarded as the lady of the village<sup>[1]</sup>. However, the institution of *Tsuki* was incomplete without *Arju* or the men’s dormitory. These were the two traditional institutions that complemented and supplemented each other. The joy in the *Tsuki*, in the true sense, was brought by the members of the *Arju* when they visited the *Tsuki*.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### Research Design: Participatory Action Research (PAR)

This study employs a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, relational accountability, and decolonial qualitative inquiry. PAR is particularly appropriate within Indigenous contexts because it resists extractive research models by positioning community members as active co-interpreters in the processes of knowledge generation, reflection, and interpretation. Rather than treating participants as passive informants, the study understands knowledge as relationally produced

through lived experience, oral transmission, collective memory, and dialogical engagement. PAR, therefore, functioned not only as a methodological strategy for data generation but also as a decolonial epistemic practice through which Indigenous voices and interpretive authority remained central throughout the research process.

The study involved 28 participants drawn from selected Ao-Naga communities across villages in and around Mokokchung district, Nagaland. Participants included former *Tsukirs*, community elders, women and men who had direct experience or observation of *Tsuki*, and children or grandchildren of former inmates. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify participants possessing historical, experiential, and intergenerational knowledge of the institution. The sampling scope intentionally incorporated intergenerational, gendered, and experiential diversity to capture multiple perspectives on institutional memory, psychosocial change, mentorship, cultural continuity, and communal transformation.

Data were generated through oral histories, narrative interviews, participatory discussions, collective storytelling sessions, and field reflections. Oral histories documented institutional memory and cultural transmission, while narrative interviews explored participants' lived experiences of mentorship, emotional support, discipline, identity formation, relational ethics, and psychosocial resilience. Collective storytelling and participatory discussions enabled communal reflection and shared interpretation of memory across generations.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach informed by Indigenous interpretive frameworks, qualitative psychology, and relational epistemology. Interview transcripts, oral narratives, storytelling accounts, and field reflections were transcribed, organised, and repeatedly reviewed to establish analytical familiarity with the data. Initial open coding identified recurrent concepts, emotional expressions, symbolic references, and relational patterns emerging across narratives. Rather than imposing predetermined analytical categories, themes were allowed to emerge inductively from participants' lived experiences and communal reflections. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader interpretive themes, including communal mentorship, emotional support systems, psychosocial resilience, gendered authority, identity formation, relational accountability, intergenera-

tional learning, and cultural continuity.

The analytical process was further guided by Indigenous relational interpretive frameworks, which understand knowledge as collectively produced, embodied, and situated within communal relationships and shared memory. Reflexive interpretation remained central throughout the study. As an Ao-Naga woman researcher, continual critical reflection was undertaken regarding how insider positionality, cultural familiarity, and lived experience shaped interpretation and representation. To strengthen interpretive credibility and thematic consistency, emerging themes were repeatedly compared across narratives, participant reflections, and field observations.

Ethical procedures included informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and sensitivity toward intergenerational knowledge transmission and Indigenous cultural protocols. Participant narratives, therefore, functioned as primary analytical sources that directly informed both thematic interpretation and theoretical framing.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Responses from Former *Tsukirs* (FT)

Former *Tsukirs* consistently described *Tsuki* as a structured communal institution that shaped their emotional, moral, cultural, and social development. They recalled that the institution provided a disciplined yet supportive environment where young women learned responsibility, cooperation, respect, self-confidence, and communal ethics.

Several former inmates emphasized that *Tsuki* functioned as an emotional support system where no individual felt isolated. They repeatedly explained that emotional burdens, fears, and anxieties were collectively addressed through companionship, storytelling, humour, collective participation, and elder guidance.

FT 1 stated, "In *Tsuki*, we never felt alone. If someone was worried or sad, the others would sit together, talk, encourage, and help her regain courage." Thus, it highlighted that the institution cultivated resilience and emotional strength through communal labour, discipline, and mentorship. They noted that waking early, maintaining cleanliness, participating in agricultural activities, weaving, cooking, and fulfilling assigned responsibilities taught perseverance, accountability, and self-discipline.

FT 2 reflected, “*Tsuki* prepared us for life. We learned how to work together, respect others, and face hardship without fear.” Participants further emphasized that *Tsuki* strengthened self-esteem and identity formation. They explained that every inmate was entrusted with meaningful roles and responsibilities, which helped them develop confidence and a sense of belonging. “*Tsuki* taught girls that they were important to the community. We learned that our behaviour, work, and character mattered,” one respondent remarked.

FT 3 recalled that learning within *Tsuki* was interactive and relational. Knowledge was transmitted through observation, participation, storytelling, collective work, and elder mentorship rather than formal instruction.

FT 4 explained, “We learned by listening, watching, and doing things together. Advice from older girls and elders helped us understand life.” Many participants expressed concern that the decline of *Tsuki* weakened communal relationships, intergenerational mentorship, and culturally grounded systems of guidance for younger women.

### 3.2. Responses from Community Elders

Community elders consistently described *Tsuki* as an essential institution for preserving Ao-Naga cultural values, communal discipline, gendered responsibilities, and intergenerational continuity. Elders emphasized that the institution historically functioned as a structured environment where young women were prepared socially, morally, emotionally, and culturally for adult life.

Several elders highlighted the central role of the *Tsükibutsüla* as mentor, disciplinarian, counsellor, and custodian of communal values. According to participants, the authority of the *Tsükibutsüla* was grounded in wisdom, moral integrity, and lived experience rather than coercion. One elder woman reflected, “Girls learned to support each other. They cried together, laughed together, and corrected each other. That emotional closeness gave them strength.” Elders repeatedly emphasized that *Tsuki* cultivated communal responsibility and moral discipline among young women. Through collective living and shared responsibilities, young women learned respect, cooperation, humility, and relational accountability. One elder participant stated, “*Tsuki* made girls mentally strong. They learned how to face hardship without fear because they were guided and supported together.”

Elders also stressed that *Tsuki* served as a cultural insti-

tution where oral traditions, clan histories, customary values, songs, rituals, and social ethics were transmitted across generations. They expressed concern that the decline of *Tsuki* contributed to weakening cultural continuity and reducing opportunities for intergenerational learning. Thus, many elders strongly supported the revival of *Tsuki* but emphasized that revival should remain adaptive and responsive to contemporary realities while preserving the institution’s foundational values of mentorship, dignity, discipline, and communal care.

### 3.3. Responses from Women and Men Who Witnessed the Institution

Women and men who witnessed the existence of *Tsuki* consistently described it as a respected institution that strengthened social cohesion, emotional stability, discipline, and communal harmony within Ao-Naga society.

Participants recalled that *Tsuki* was not viewed merely as a residential structure but as a socially recognized institution that shaped the behaviour, character, and identity of young women. Witnesses repeatedly noted that girls associated with *Tsuki* were often perceived as disciplined, respectful, responsible, and socially competent. One respondent explained, “Girls from *Tsuki* carried themselves with confidence and respect because they learned discipline and responsibility from an early age.” Participants further emphasized that *Tsuki* created strong bonds among young women and fostered collective solidarity. Through daily interaction, peer learning, and communal participation, young women developed emotional closeness and mutual trust.

Several respondents also discussed the indirect relationship between *Tsuki* and *Arju*. They explained that socially regulated interaction between young men and women promoted communication, social understanding, and relational maturity. One elder male participant noted, “The visits created healthy social interaction. Young people learned respect, communication, and proper behaviour.” Witnesses consistently emphasized that the institution strengthened communal stability because young women who passed through *Tsuki* carried cultural values, social discipline, and relational ethics into family and community life. Many participants expressed concern that modernization, formal education systems, urbanization, and changing lifestyles weakened such collective institutions and contributed to increasing social fragmenta-

tion and loss of communal mentorship structures.

### 3.4. Responses from Children and Grandchildren of Former *Tsukirs*

Children and grandchildren of former *Tsukirs* frequently reflected on the indirect influence of *Tsuki* through family upbringing, storytelling, moral instruction, and cultural practices transmitted by older generations. Participants repeatedly observed that women who had experienced *Tsuki* often demonstrated discipline, resilience, cooperation, emotional strength, and strong communal values within family life.

One descendant stated, “Even though we did not experience *Tsuki* ourselves, we saw its influence through our mothers and grandmothers. They carried strong values of discipline, care, and responsibility.” Several participants explained that stories about *Tsuki* created curiosity and admiration regarding Indigenous systems of learning, mentorship, and communal living. Many younger respondents expressed concern that contemporary society lacks similar spaces for collective guidance, emotional support, and intergenerational interaction. Participants further emphasized that modern educational systems often focus heavily on academic achievement while neglecting communal ethics, emotional development, and cultural grounding.

One younger respondent remarked, “Today, many young people feel disconnected. *Tsuki* seems to have given earlier generations a stronger sense of belonging and responsibility.” Children and grandchildren of former inmates strongly supported adaptive revival initiatives that could reconnect younger generations with Ao-Naga cultural identity, communal values, mentorship, and Indigenous knowledge systems.

### 3.5. Collective Synthesis of Respondents’ Responses

Across all participant categories, *Tsuki* was consistently remembered as a multi-functional Indigenous institution that integrated mentorship, psychosocial support, communal learning, cultural transmission, moral discipline, resilience-building, and identity formation within a structured communal environment.

Former *Tsukirs* emphasized emotional support, peer solidarity, confidence formation, resilience, and mentor-

ship. Elders highlighted moral discipline, cultural continuity, communal responsibility, and intergenerational transmission. Women and men who witnessed the institution emphasized social cohesion, discipline, relational ethics, and communal stability. Descendants of former inmates reflected on the continuing influence of *Tsuki* through inherited values, family upbringing, and cultural memory.

Collectively, participants perceived the decline of *Tsuki* not merely as the disappearance of a traditional dormitory system but as the weakening of an Indigenous institutional ecology that historically nurtured women’s psychosocial well-being, communal identity, cultural continuity, and relational support systems within Ao-Naga society. Participants consistently supported the revival of *Tsuki* as an adaptive and culturally grounded institutional framework capable of strengthening women’s empowerment, mental well-being, resilience, intergenerational continuity, and Indigenous epistemic sustainability in contemporary society.

## 4. Epistemological Grounding and Conceptual Orientation (Discussion 1)

The revival of the *Tsuki* cannot be understood solely as cultural preservation, social reform, or educational innovation. Rather, it must be analyzed as an epistemic, gendered, and developmental intervention situated at the intersection of Indigenous knowledge systems, colonial disruption, and psychosocial transformation. The theoretical framework guiding this study integrates Indigenous feminism, decolonial theory, and educational psychology to articulate how *Tsuki* functions as a gendered epistemic space that simultaneously produces empowerment, resilience, and cultural continuity.

This framework proceeds from a fundamental epistemological premise, i.e., knowledge is socially situated, culturally embedded, and institutionally mediated. Traditional Ao-Naga institutions such as *Tsuki* were not informal or peripheral structures; they were epistemological sites where moral reasoning, gendered authority, social responsibility, and collective identity were cultivated through embodied practice. Their decline represents not simply institutional change but a shift in epistemic legitimacy.

Modern educational systems, which were introduced through colonial and missionary processes, reconfigured the

hierarchy of knowledge production by privileging textual, standardized, and externally validated forms of learning. In doing so, Indigenous pedagogies rooted in orality, apprenticeship, ritual, and communal labor were repositioned as secondary or obsolete. The erosion of *Tsuki* must therefore be interpreted within a broader process of epistemic displacement in which Indigenous women's spaces of learning were marginalized within dominant knowledge regimes.

The theoretical framework of this article argues that reviving *Tsuki* will constitute:

- A gendered reclamation of epistemic authority, i.e., Indigenous feminism;
- A structural act of epistemic recovery and institutional decolonization, i.e., Decolonial theory;
- A culturally grounded developmental ecology fostering resilience and identity integration, i.e., educational psychology.

These three theoretical domains do not operate independently. Rather, they intersect to illuminate how cultural institutions shape psychological development and how gendered knowledge systems mediate collective survival.

#### 4.1. Reviving *Tsuki* as a Gendered Reclamation of Epistemic Authority in the Ao-Naga Context: Indigenous Feminist Perspectives

The qualitative inquiry revealed that participants understood *Tsuki* not merely as a traditional dormitory for unmarried girls but as a structured institutional space through which Ao-Naga women historically exercised mentorship, moral authority, communal responsibility, and intergenerational leadership. Across oral history interviews, participatory discussions, and collective storytelling sessions, participants consistently described *Tsuki* as an environment where young girls learned discipline, cooperation, cultural values, emotional responsibility, and communal ethics through everyday participation in village life. Rather than treating *Tsuki* as a symbolic relic of the past, participants repeatedly emphasized its importance as a lived institutional framework that historically organized women's socialization and cultural learning. One elder participant explained, "*Tsuki* was not only a place where girls stayed together. It taught us how to behave, how to respect others, how to work collectively,

and how to become responsible women within the community." Participants described how learning occurred through observation, storytelling, weaving, communal labour, ritual participation, and interaction with elder women known as the *Tsükibutsüla*. Knowledge transmission was therefore experiential, relational, and intergenerational rather than abstract or individualized<sup>[3]</sup>.

Several participants highlighted the role of the *Tsükibutsüla* as mentors who guided younger girls not only in practical responsibilities but also in emotional and social conduct. One participant reflected, "The older women guided us, corrected us, and encouraged us whenever we struggled." These narratives indicate that *Tsuki* historically functioned as a communal environment where moral formation, emotional guidance, and collective identity were cultivated simultaneously. Participants frequently contrasted this relational system with contemporary experiences of weakened intergenerational interaction, social fragmentation, and declining familiarity with Indigenous practices.

Younger participants particularly expressed concern regarding the erosion of Indigenous knowledge systems and collective learning environments. A university student remarked, "We receive modern education today, but many young people are becoming disconnected from our own cultural ways of learning and living." Another participant observed, "Earlier, girls learned directly from elders and from community life. Today, many grow up without that connection." Such reflections reveal broader anxieties surrounding cultural discontinuity and the weakening of institutionalized spaces where Indigenous values and relationships were historically nurtured.

Historical scholarship demonstrates that Ao-Naga society was traditionally organized through institutions regulating age, gender, kinship, and communal obligations<sup>[4]</sup>. Dormitory systems such as *Arju* and *Tsuki* formed part of a wider institutional framework through which discipline, ethical norms, leadership, and collective memory were transmitted across generations<sup>[5]</sup>. Although colonial ethnographies frequently foregrounded male institutions such as the Morung, participants repeatedly emphasized that women's institutional spaces were equally central to sustaining social cohesion and cultural continuity.

From an Indigenous feminist perspective, *Tsuki* is significant because it constituted a gendered space through

which women exercised epistemic authority, relational leadership, and communal influence. Indigenous feminist scholarship argues that Indigenous women's authority often operated through community-based systems of mentorship, caregiving, moral guidance, and cultural transmission rather than through formal political structures alone<sup>[6]</sup>. Within *Tsuki*, elder women were remembered not merely as caretakers but as custodians of Indigenous knowledge, mediators of social relationships, and guides of younger generations. The findings, therefore, challenge colonial and patriarchal assumptions that Indigenous women occupied passive roles within traditional society.

Participants consistently associated the decline of *Tsuki* with the weakening of structured spaces where women collectively exercised intergenerational leadership and communal influence. One participant explained, "Earlier, older women played an important role in shaping the behaviour and thinking of younger girls. Today, that connection is becoming weaker." Importantly, participants did not advocate a rigid restoration of *Tsuki* in its historical form. Rather, they envisioned adaptive forms of revival compatible with Christianity, formal education, urbanization, and contemporary life. One elder participant explained, "Reviving *Tsuki* does not mean rejecting Christianity or modern life. It means preserving the wisdom and relationships that kept the community together."

These narratives are significant because they move beyond simplistic oppositions between tradition and modernity. Participants themselves understood revival as adaptive regeneration rather than nostalgic traditionalism<sup>[7]</sup>. They repeatedly emphasized that Indigenous values of mentorship, communal care, emotional guidance, and collective responsibility can coexist meaningfully with Christianity and contemporary institutions. The findings therefore suggest that reviving *Tsuki* represents not simply cultural preservation, but the restoration of women-centred Indigenous spaces through which communal ethics, intergenerational continuity, relational leadership, and Indigenous epistemic sustainability may continue within contemporary Ao-Naga society<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### 4.2. Reviving *Tsuki* as a Structural Act of Epistemic Recovery and Institutional Decolonization: Decolonial Perspectives

While participants in the previous section emphasized the gendered and relational dimensions of *Tsuki*, the present

findings further reveal how its decline reflects broader processes of epistemic displacement within contemporary Ao-Naga society. Respondents repeatedly associated the weakening of *Tsuki* with the gradual marginalization of Indigenous systems of knowledge, authority, and communal legitimacy under expanding structures of colonial modernity, formal education, urbanization, and externally organized institutional life.

Rather than describing the erosion of *Tsuki* merely as cultural loss, participants interpreted it as the weakening of an Indigenous framework through which relational accountability, ethical responsibility, and intergenerational continuity were historically sustained. Several respondents observed that younger generations increasingly associate formal schooling, urban lifestyles, and externally validated knowledge with "progress" and "development," while Indigenous systems of communal learning are often perceived as secondary, informal, or outdated. One participant explained, "Modern education teaches many important things, but young people are slowly forgetting how our communities traditionally learned responsibility, discipline, and relationships."

These findings strongly resonate with Frantz Fanon's understanding of decolonization as a struggle not only over territory or political sovereignty, but also over consciousness, legitimacy, and systems of knowledge<sup>[9]</sup>. Fanon argued that colonial modernity gradually establishes external standards of civilization, rationality, education, religion, and progress as universally superior while simultaneously displacing Indigenous institutions, communal ethics, relational modes of learning, and local epistemologies. His analysis is particularly significant because it explains how colonial influence continues even after direct political domination declines: colonized societies may gradually internalize external frameworks of value and begin to perceive their own knowledge systems as backward, informal, or irrelevant.

This perspective is highly relevant to the Ao-Naga context because participant narratives repeatedly reflected the growing dominance of institutional structures that privilege formal schooling, bureaucratic knowledge, urban lifestyles, and individual achievement over Indigenous communal systems of learning and relational accountability. Respondents consistently observed that younger generations increasingly



measure “development” and “success” through externally validated educational and social standards, while institutions such as *Tsuki* are often reduced to symbols of tradition rather than recognized as sophisticated Indigenous systems of ethical formation, emotional discipline, mentorship, and social organization.

Fanon’s insights, therefore, help illuminate why the weakening of *Tsuki* should not be interpreted merely as the disappearance of a customary practice. What is being displaced is an Indigenous relational epistemology through which responsibility, identity, discipline, belonging, and women-centred leadership were historically cultivated within Ao-Naga society. Participants repeatedly emphasized that *Tsuki* sustained collective forms of learning rooted in participation, reciprocity, mentorship, and communal accountability, whereas many contemporary environments were perceived as increasingly fragmented, individualized, and detached from intergenerational relationships.

Importantly, the findings demonstrate that participants did not reject Christianity, formal education, or social change in themselves. Rather, they questioned the unequal hierarchy through which externally validated systems of knowledge often become privileged over Indigenous frameworks of learning and social organization. This distinction is significant because it moves the discussion beyond simplistic binaries between “tradition” and “modernity”<sup>[3]</sup>. Instead, participants articulated a desire for coexistence, negotiation, and epistemic balance in which Indigenous systems of mentorship and communal ethics remain socially legitimate within contemporary society. The significance of Fanon within this study, therefore, lies in his insistence that decolonization cannot be reduced to symbolic cultural recognition or political autonomy alone. For Fanon, genuine decolonization requires the recovery of epistemic legitimacy, cultural agency, and Indigenous systems of meaning that colonial modernity systematically displaced<sup>[9]</sup>. Applying this decolonial perspective to *Tsuki* demonstrates that its revival represents more than cultural preservation. It constitutes a structural process of epistemic recovery through which Indigenous frameworks of relational learning, communal accountability, intergenerational mentorship, and women-centred authority are reasserted as intellectually valid, socially meaningful, and institutionally relevant within contemporary Ao-Naga society.

### 4.3. A Culturally Grounded Developmental Ecology Fostering Resilience and Identity Integration: Educational Psychology

*Tsuki*, as described by participants, operated as an Indigenous system of social formation in which psychological development was inseparable from communal life. Rather than functioning as a formal site of instruction, it constituted a lived social structure through which young women acquired emotional stability, ethical orientation, and a sense of belonging through sustained participation in collective practices and intergenerational relationships. Learning occurred through observation, storytelling, ritual participation, communal labour, peer interaction, and mentorship under elder women known as the *Tsukibutsūla*. Knowledge transmission was experiential and relational, embedded in everyday village life. Younger girls developed competence, confidence, and emotional regulation through gradual participation alongside elders, where correction, encouragement, and guidance were integrated into lived social practice. One participant reflected, “We learned by watching older girls and listening to the *Tsukibutsūla*. Slowly, we became capable of carrying responsibilities ourselves.” These accounts position *Tsuki* as a culturally embedded developmental system in which ethical formation, emotional growth, and identity construction unfold through relational accountability.

This relational structure closely aligns with Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that learning is mediated through interaction within culturally organized environments<sup>[4]</sup>. However, within the *Tsuki* context, learning is not limited to cognitive mediation but extends to embodied participation in communal life, where knowledge is produced through social immersion rather than formal instruction. Participants further emphasized that *Tsuki* cultivated emotional discipline through shared living. Girls learned patience, cooperation, self-control, adaptability, and endurance through everyday negotiation of relationships within a tightly interdependent social environment. One participant noted, “Living together taught us discipline because we had to adjust to others, control our emotions, and work collectively.” Emotional development here is not individualized but socially regulated through continuous relational exposure. This corresponds with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which situates human development within interconnected relational environments<sup>[10]</sup>. *Tsuki* functioned as a culturally

coherent developmental ecology where family relations, peer networks, elder mentorship, ritual life, and communal obligations formed an integrated system shaping identity and well-being.

The institution also functioned as an informal psychosocial support system. Participants described it as an emotionally sustaining environment where distress, conflict, and loneliness were managed collectively through companionship, peer solidarity, humour, and elder guidance. Emotional vulnerability was socially contained rather than individually isolated. One participant remarked, “Girls were never isolated emotionally because there was always someone to guide, encourage, or correct them.” In contrast, respondents noted increasing emotional fragmentation, weakened intergenerational bonds, and rising social isolation among younger generations shaped by migration, urbanization, and formal education. These observations resonate with Indigenous mental health scholarship, which emphasizes that wellbeing is grounded in relational belonging, cultural continuity, and mentorship structures<sup>[11]</sup>. The decline of *Tsuki*, therefore, signals not only institutional change but also the erosion of psychosocial infrastructures that sustained collective resilience.

Bandura’s social learning theory further clarifies these processes, particularly the role of modelling in behavioural development<sup>[12]</sup>. The *Tsukibutsūla* functioned as behavioural and moral models whose everyday conduct shaped emotional regulation, discipline, and social responsibility. Through observation and participation, younger girls internalized relational ethics embedded in communal life. Participants also described *Tsuki* as central to identity formation. Identity was constructed through participation in clan relations, communal obligations, and shared memory. One elder participant observed, “*Tsuki* helped girls understand who they were within the community and how they should live responsibly among others.” This aligns with Erikson’s theory of identity formation, which emphasizes continuity, recognition, and socially grounded roles as essential for stable identity development<sup>[13]</sup>. Respondents linked the weakening of *Tsuki* to declining intergenerational continuity and growing identity uncertainty among younger generations.

Importantly, participants did not advocate restoration of *Tsuki* in its historical form. Instead, they emphasized adaptive continuity within Christianity, education, and con-

temporary social realities. *Tsuki*-inspired structures were envisioned within churches, schools, and women’s groups as spaces for mentorship, emotional resilience, and communal ethics. One participant stated, “We cannot recreate village life exactly as before, but we can still preserve the spirit of mentorship, guidance, and collective responsibility.” From an educational psychological perspective, *Tsuki* can therefore be understood as a culturally grounded developmental ecology integrating mentorship, psychosocial support, emotional regulation, identity formation, and collective belonging. The findings suggest that Indigenous relational systems of learning constitute enduring developmental infrastructures essential for sustaining resilience and identity coherence within contemporary Indigenous societies.

## 5. Reviving *Tsuki* as a Strategy for Women’s Empowerment, Mental Health, and Cultural Continuity (Discussion 2)

The revival of *Tsuki*, the traditional women-centred dormitory institution among the Ao-Naga, must be situated within broader debates on decolonial reconstruction, Indigenous feminism, and culturally grounded developmental psychology. Historically, *Tsuki* functioned not merely as a residential space but as a formative socio-cultural institution in which young women were socialized into communal ethics, gendered responsibilities, and intergenerational knowledge systems<sup>[14]</sup>. Its gradual decline under colonial administrative restructuring and missionary influence disrupted these embedded pedagogical and psychosocial frameworks, altering the institutional conditions through which knowledge, identity, and social roles were transmitted<sup>[15]</sup>.

Reconsidering *Tsuki* in contemporary contexts, therefore, extends beyond cultural preservation. It constitutes a structural intervention aimed at restoring women’s epistemic authority, relational agency, and communal visibility within culturally legitimate frameworks. From an Indigenous feminist perspective, the revitalization of such institutions reclaims gendered spaces of leadership that were historically integral to social governance yet marginalized through colonial modernity<sup>[16]</sup>. At the same time, from a developmental ecological standpoint, *Tsuki* may be understood as a culturally grounded resilience system—an environment that

historically nurtured identity coherence, moral reasoning, and collective belonging<sup>[17]</sup>.

In this sense, the revival of *Tsuki* operates as a multidimensional strategy. It reactivates institutional structures that enable women's empowerment within culturally embedded systems of authority, restores relational and psychosocial environments that support mental well-being, and sustains cultural continuity through structured intergenerational transmission. Rather than representing a nostalgic return to the past, *Tsuki* revival may be interpreted as a forward-looking process of communal reconstitution that aligns decolonial theoretical insights with lived cultural practice.

### 5.1. Women's Empowerment

The revitalization of *Tsuki*, the traditional girls' dormitory among the Ao-Naga, represents a critical strategy for fostering women's empowerment within Indigenous contexts. Historically, *Tsuki* functioned as a holistic institutional space where young women, referred to as *Tsukir*, were socialized into the moral, cultural, and practical frameworks of their community<sup>[18]</sup>. In contrast to contemporary educational systems that often emphasize cognitive achievement and standardized evaluation, *Tsuki* provided a culturally embedded environment that integrated intellectual, emotional, moral, and social dimensions of development<sup>[19]</sup>. This integrative approach enabled young women to acquire competencies essential not only for individual growth but also for sustaining communal cohesion and cultural continuity<sup>[11]</sup>.

Central to the structure of *Tsuki* was the *Tsukibutsüla*, an elder woman whose authority was socially recognized and ethically grounded within the clan<sup>[14]</sup>. As mentor, guide, and custodian of knowledge, the *Tsukibutsüla* facilitated the transmission of values and skills through everyday practices such as storytelling, apprenticeship, communal labor, and ritual participation. Through these processes, *Tsukir* developed decision-making capacities, leadership skills, and ethical reasoning, enabling them to navigate both domestic and broader social responsibilities<sup>[18]</sup>. By embedding young women within structured and meaningful roles, *Tsuki* fostered relational agency, self-efficacy, and critical consciousness—key dimensions of empowerment highlighted in contemporary educational psychology<sup>[17]</sup>.

Empowerment within *Tsuki* was inherently multidimensional.

It encompassed practical skill development—such as weaving, cultivation, and household management—alongside moral formation, social negotiation, and leadership development<sup>[20]</sup>. This holistic orientation enabled young women to engage critically with their social environment, exercise forms of autonomy, and negotiate the hierarchical dimensions of clan-based structures<sup>[15]</sup>. Importantly, empowerment in this context was relational and collective rather than individualistic; it emerged through community-based interactions, guided by culturally sanctioned authority and informed by Indigenous epistemologies<sup>[3]</sup>. From a theoretical standpoint, *Tsuki* aligns closely with feminist and Indigenous frameworks of empowerment that conceptualize agency as socially mediated and culturally situated. Reviving *Tsuki* through Participatory Action Research (PAR) further ensures that empowerment is not externally imposed but collaboratively constructed. Through processes such as intergenerational dialogue, collective storytelling, and communal reflection, young women are enabled to reclaim control over their learning, social positioning, and cultural identity<sup>[3]</sup>. Such participatory engagement strengthens the relationship between traditional knowledge systems and contemporary developmental frameworks, demonstrating that empowerment can emerge from culturally resonant pedagogical practices. Moreover, the practices embedded within *Tsuki* contribute to the development of psychosocial resilience, equipping young women to navigate complex social, economic, and cultural transitions while remaining anchored in their cultural identity<sup>[17]</sup>. The institution's emphasis on ethical labor, social accountability, and communal belonging fosters a sense of competence, purpose, and self-worth. These outcomes are critical for sustained empowerment, enabling women to participate meaningfully in familial, communal, and socio-political decision-making processes<sup>[21]</sup>. Through this lens, the revival of *Tsuki* represents not a static restoration of tradition but a dynamic strategy for cultivating women's leadership, autonomy, and ethical agency within Indigenous communities. It underscores the capacity of culturally embedded institutions to generate forms of empowerment that are holistic, contextually grounded, and intergenerational. In doing so, it affirms that the future of women's agency in Ao-Naga society remains deeply connected to the reclamation and adaptive transformation of ancestral educational frameworks<sup>[22]</sup>.

## 5.2. The Mental Health Function of *Tsuki*

*Tsuki* functioned as an age- and clan-regulated peer institution for unmarried Ao-Naga girls, embedded within a structured communal ecology of daily life. Participants consistently framed it as a relational developmental system in which emotional regulation, behavioural formation, and identity consolidation were produced through sustained participation in collective living. Rather than operating as an individualized or clinically defined mental health space, *Tsuki* exemplified a culturally embedded psychosocial system in which well-being emerged from relational interdependence, shared responsibility, and intergenerational continuity. In community psychology terms, such institutions constitute protective ecological structures that sustain mental health through embedded social integration and normative regulation<sup>[23]</sup>.

Within *Tsuki*, psychosocial development was mediated through peer networks under the guidance of elder women/*Tsukibutsūla*. Learning occurred through observational participation, corrective feedback, and shared labour, producing a socially distributed model of competence formation. This aligns with developmental literature demonstrating that peer-embedded systems significantly shape emotional regulation and identity development when situated within stable, culturally coherent environments<sup>[24]</sup>.

### 5.2.1. Social Embeddedness and Psychosocial Regulation

Participants consistently described *Tsuki* as a system of continuous relational embeddedness that mitigated emotional distress through sustained interpersonal presence. From a clinical psychology perspective, this reflects social buffering mechanisms, whereby perceived belonging and available support attenuate stress reactivity and promote psychological stability<sup>[25]</sup>. Emotional distress was not isolated within the individual but redistributed across a relational field through dialogue, shared routines, and elder mediation.

Such processes align with Indigenous mental health frameworks that conceptualize wellbeing as fundamentally relational, where psychological stability is inseparable from social connectedness and cultural continuity<sup>[11]</sup>. Within *Tsuki*, emotional regulation functioned as a collective rather than intrapsychic process, embedded in everyday social interaction.

### 5.2.2. Peer Systems and Social Learning as Developmental Infrastructure

*Tsuki* operated as a peer-governed social learning environment in which behavioural norms and emotional competencies were acquired through observation, imitation, and relational correction. Bandura's social learning theory identifies these mechanisms as central to the acquisition of adaptive behaviour and self-regulation<sup>[12]</sup>. Within this structure, peer interaction reinforced normative expectations while elder women provided structured modelling of conduct and relational ethics. This reflects Vygotskian sociocultural theory, which locates cognitive and emotional development within mediated social interaction rather than within isolated individual processes<sup>[4]</sup>. Development, therefore, was not transmitted but co-produced through participation in a regulated social field.

### 5.2.3. Ecological Resilience as a Relational Process

Participants framed resilience not as an individual psychological trait but as a capacity emerging through sustained relational negotiation within communal life. Contemporary resilience theory increasingly conceptualizes resilience as an ecological process produced through interaction between individuals and their social environments rather than as internal psychological strength alone<sup>[26]</sup>. Within *Tsuki*, resilience is developed through shared responsibility, emotional co-regulation, and adaptive negotiation of interpersonal tensions. These processes generated behavioural flexibility, emotional endurance, and relational accountability, indicating that resilience was structurally produced through the social organization of everyday life rather than individually cultivated.

### 5.2.4. Informal Psychosocial Care and Distributed Mental Health Systems

*Tsuki* functioned as an informal psychosocial care system in which emotional distress was managed through collective containment rather than individualized intervention. Community psychology literature identifies such systems as critical in contexts where formal mental health infrastructures are absent, inaccessible, or culturally incongruent<sup>[27]</sup>. Participants emphasized that emotional difficulties were absorbed and mediated through peer solidarity and elder intervention, preventing isolation and psychological fragmentation. This

corresponds with Indigenous mental health scholarship that conceptualizes care as distributed across relational networks rather than centralized within clinical systems<sup>[28]</sup>. Mental health support, therefore, was embedded in everyday social life rather than externalized into specialized institutions.

### 5.2.5. Intergenerational Modelling and Normative Continuity

The *Tsukibutsūla* functioned as key agents of behavioural modelling and psychosocial regulation. Bandura emphasizes that observational learning from credible role models is foundational to behavioural internalization<sup>[12]</sup>. Participants consistently identified elder women as normative anchors whose conduct structured emotional discipline, social responsibility, and ethical orientation. This intergenerational system ensured continuity of psychosocial norms across generations, stabilizing behavioural expectations and reducing developmental discontinuities that often accompany social transition.

### 5.2.6. Developmental Ecology and Identity Coherence

From an ecological systems perspective, *Tsuki* constituted an integrated developmental environment in which emotional well-being, identity formation, and behavioural regulation were co-constructed through multi-layered relational systems<sup>[10]</sup>. Participants associated this structure with stable identity formation anchored in clearly defined social roles and sustained relational recognition.

This corresponds with psychosocial theory, which posits that identity coherence emerges through continuity, belonging, and socially validated participation within structured environments<sup>[13]</sup>. The weakening of *Tsuki* was therefore linked to reduced intergenerational continuity and increased identity fragmentation in contemporary contexts shaped by urbanization and formal schooling systems.

### 5.2.7. Contemporary Relevance: Mental Health as Relational Infrastructure

Participants did not frame *Tsuki* as an institution for replication but as a relational model whose underlying principles remain analytically significant. Its decline was associated with weakened intergenerational support, reduced peer-based emotional containment, and increased social fragmentation within contemporary Ao-Naga society.

From a community psychology standpoint, *Tsuki*

should be understood as a culturally embedded mental health ecology in which well-being was structurally produced through relational integration rather than individual psychological intervention. Its significance lies in demonstrating that mental health is not solely a clinical outcome, but a socially organized and culturally mediated process of relational continuity, belonging, and collective regulation.

## 5.3. *Tsuki* and Mental Health Outcomes

From a psychosocial perspective, *Tsuki* historically functioned as a women-centred Indigenous institution that shaped multiple psychosocial dimensions of wellbeing within Ao-Naga society. Participants consistently described the institution not merely as a residential or cultural space, but as a structured relational system through which emotional regulation, interpersonal trust, resilience, identity formation, and communal belonging were cultivated. Through collective living, intergenerational mentorship, shared labour, storytelling, and everyday interaction, young women were socialised into practices of mutual care, cooperation, discipline, and relational accountability.

The findings demonstrate a direct relationship between the institutional functions of *Tsuki* and identifiable mental health outcomes. Mentorship structures within *Tsuki* provided emotional guidance, behavioural regulation, and moral support, contributing to emotional stability and psychological confidence. Collective participation and peer solidarity reduced experiences of loneliness, fear, and social isolation while strengthening emotional security and relational trust. Shared labour and communal responsibility cultivated resilience, self-efficacy, discipline, and coping capacity in the face of hardship. Storytelling, humour, and intergenerational interaction further created emotionally supportive environments in which anxieties and personal difficulties could be collectively processed rather than individually internalised.

Participants repeatedly associated these institutional functions with stronger emotional endurance, relational competence, and social connectedness among women who experienced *Tsuki*. Former *Tsukirs* and community elders further observed that such women often demonstrated greater confidence, emotional maturity, communal responsibility, and adaptive capacity within family and community life. In this sense, *Tsuki* operated as an Indigenous psychosocial support system in which mental well-being emerged through

culturally embedded practices of reciprocity, mentorship, collective care, and relational belonging rather than through formal therapeutic intervention.

Conversely, participants associated the decline of *Tsuki* with weakening intergenerational mentorship, erosion of communal support structures, increasing social fragmentation, and reduced opportunities for culturally grounded emotional formation among younger generations. The study, therefore, interprets the revitalisation of *Tsuki* not simply as cultural preservation, but as the recovery of an Indigenous relational institution historically linked to emotional well-being, psychosocial resilience, and communal mental health.

#### 5.4. Cultural Continuity

The revitalization of the *Tsuki*, the traditional girls' dormitory among the Ao-Naga, constitutes a significant strategy for sustaining cultural continuity amid rapid socio-cultural transformation. In Indigenous contexts, cultural continuity extends beyond the preservation of rituals or ceremonial practices to encompass the intergenerational transmission of epistemologies, ethical systems, relational worldviews, and collective memory<sup>[19]</sup>. It is maintained through lived practice, narrative memory, and embodied participation, enabling communities to reaffirm identity, negotiate social change, and sustain communal cohesion over time<sup>[13]</sup>. Within this framework, *Tsuki* historically functioned as a central institutional mechanism for intergenerational knowledge transmission, gendered socialization, and the reinforcement of communal values within Ao-Naga society<sup>[5]</sup>.

Unlike formal educational systems that frequently detach knowledge from lived social contexts, *Tsuki* embodied an Indigenous pedagogical model grounded in orality, apprenticeship, participation, and relational accountability<sup>[3]</sup>. Knowledge was transmitted not through abstraction but through engagement in communal life. Activities such as weaving, agricultural labor, food preparation, ritual participation, conflict mediation, and collective storytelling simultaneously functioned as economic, social, and epistemic practices. These activities were culturally embedded processes through which cosmology, ethics, ecological awareness, and clan-based relationships were internalized<sup>[14]</sup>.

The pedagogical structure of *Tsuki* ensured that learning

remained experiential and relational. Through observation, repetition, imitation, and guided participation under the mentorship of the *Tsukibutsūla*, *Tsukir* gradually internalized the symbolic meanings attached to reciprocity, kinship obligation, dignity, and communal responsibility<sup>[18]</sup>. The authority of the *Tsukibutsūla* was relationally grounded in wisdom, moral integrity, and lived experience rather than coercive control. This mentorship system cultivated not only practical competence but also interpretive understanding regarding the moral and cosmological significance of communal practices.

Within *Tsuki*, cultural knowledge was transmitted through everyday communal practices. Young women learned weaving techniques associated with clan identity and genealogical memory, agricultural rhythms linked to ecological responsibility, and ritual practices connected to communal order and social belonging<sup>[14]</sup>. Through participation in these activities, *Tsukir* internalized moral expectations, relational obligations, and culturally embedded forms of social responsibility. Learning therefore occurred through practice, observation, and participation rather than through formal instruction alone. Such processes enabled younger generations to remain connected to communal values, historical memory, and Indigenous systems of knowledge amid changing social conditions.

The erosion of traditional institutions such as *Tsuki* under colonial governance, missionary influence, and modern state schooling systems has significantly disrupted these mechanisms of transmission<sup>[28]</sup>. Colonial epistemologies frequently reclassified Indigenous knowledge as primitive, informal, or inferior, thereby marginalizing community-based pedagogical systems. Missionary transformations altered ritual life and restructured gendered spaces, while state education introduced standardized curricula detached from local cosmologies<sup>[19]</sup>. Consequently, intergenerational transmission weakened, and many younger Ao-Nagas increasingly navigated fragmented epistemic worlds shaped by tensions between ancestral identity and modern institutional structures. This epistemic bifurcation can generate identity fragmentation, cultural ambivalence, and psychosocial dislocation<sup>[11]</sup>. As traditional systems of meaning-making weaken, communities risk losing not only ritual knowledge but also shared ethical frameworks and relational forms of social cohesion. The decline of *Tsuki*, therefore, signifies more than the disappearance of a physical institution; it represents the

disruption of a relational pedagogical system that historically sustained collective memory and communal ethics<sup>[6]</sup>.

Reviving *Tsuki* through Participatory Action Research (PAR) offers a collaborative framework for reconstructing these relational structures in culturally grounded yet contextually responsive ways<sup>[3]</sup>. PAR emphasizes community agency, collective reflection, and adaptive participation. Rather than imposing externally designed revival models, it facilitates dialogue among elders, women leaders, youth, and local institutions to reinterpret *Tsuki* in relation to contemporary social realities<sup>[2]</sup>. In this sense, tradition functions not as static preservation but as a living and adaptive social resource.

Within this adaptive framework, foundational values historically associated with *Tsuki*—reciprocity, communal responsibility, respect for elders, dignity of labor, and collective accountability—can be retained even as institutional forms evolve<sup>[17]</sup>. Traditional storytelling may coexist with digital documentation, ritual participation may engage contemporary concerns, and Indigenous craft practices may incorporate economic sustainability without losing symbolic significance.

*Tsuki* also strengthens intergenerational connection and identity formation among young women. Participants emphasized that women who remained connected to communal knowledge systems often demonstrated stronger confidence, relational responsibility, and social belonging<sup>[13]</sup>. By functioning as a bridge between generations, *Tsuki* provides interpretive frameworks through which younger Ao-Naga women can negotiate changing social conditions without severing connections to ancestral identity.

The institution further contributes to broader communal stability through women's roles in transmitting language, kinship memory, social ethics, and everyday cultural practice within households and community networks. In this way, *Tsuki* historically reinforced intergenerational continuity, communal participation, and culturally grounded systems of social responsibility<sup>[18]</sup>.

Furthermore, cultural continuity strengthens epistemic sovereignty—the capacity of a community to define its own systems of knowledge and legitimacy<sup>[28]</sup>. When *Tsuki* validates Indigenous epistemologies as authoritative rather than peripheral, it counters epistemic marginalization and re-centres Ao-Naga knowledge within educational discourse. This re-centring contributes not only to identity preservation

but to intellectual decolonization<sup>[3]</sup>.

Thus, the revival of *Tsuki* must be understood as a strategic intervention in cultural sustainability rather than nostalgic revivalism. It restores an institutional framework that historically integrated moral formation, psychosocial resilience, gendered leadership training, and ecological knowledge transmission within a cohesive relational system. By situating young women within a culturally resonant environment where ancestral knowledge is practiced, interpreted, and renewed, *Tsuki* fosters dynamic continuity—one that safeguards identity while accommodating social transformation<sup>[29]</sup>.

In this way, *Tsuki* stands simultaneously as an educational institution, a psychosocial support structure, and a cultural anchor. It reinforces intergenerational bonds, legitimizes Indigenous epistemologies, sustains moral and ecological knowledge, and ensures that Ao-Naga cultural identity remains a living, evolving reality rather than a fragmented historical memory. Cultural continuity, therefore, is not simply about remembering the past; it is about institutionalizing memory in ways that empower the present and secure the future.

## 6. Revival Strategies of *Tsuki* for Women's Empowerment, Mental Health, and Cultural Continuity (Result)

A robust revival of *Tsuki* requires a decisive shift from cultural description toward institutional and psychological system design, specifying the concrete settings, governance mechanisms, and delivery structures through which *Tsuki* principles can be sustainably operationalized in contemporary society. Without this shift, revival remains symbolic; with it, *Tsuki* becomes a functioning developmental and psychosocial infrastructure embedded within modern institutional life. Thus, from a developmental and community psychology perspective, *Tsuki* must therefore be conceptualized as a multi-level intervention ecology, where Indigenous relational pedagogy is translated into structured systems of psychosocial support, identity development, and resilience formation. This model is anchored in three interdependent domains of implementation.

### 6.1. Integration within Formal Education as Structured Mentorship Ecologies

At the institutional level, *Tsuki* principles can be embedded within schools, colleges, and theological institutions through structured mentorship ecologies rather than informal cultural activities. Participants' narratives of elder guidance and peer-based learning indicate the need for formalized relational scaffolding within education systems that are otherwise cognitively driven and emotionally under-supported.

This requires the establishment of *Tsuki* Mentorship Units within educational institutions, composed of trained female mentors (teachers, counsellors, and selected community elders) who facilitate continuous psychosocial engagement. These units would function as developmental systems integrated into student life cycles, addressing identity formation, academic stress regulation, gendered expectations, and relational ethics through dialogical and culturally grounded practices.

In psychological terms, this aligns with social-emotional learning (SEL) and culturally responsive developmental frameworks, which emphasize that cognitive achievement is inseparable from emotional regulation, relational competence, and identity coherence<sup>[29]</sup>. Within this model, *Tsuki* becomes an Indigenous institutional analogue to school-based developmental psychology support systems, ensuring cultural continuity within formal education rather than external supplementation.

### 6.2. Urban and Migrant *Tsuki* Networks as Displacement-Responsive Ecologies

Participants repeatedly highlighted the erosion of communal support systems due to migration, educational mobility, and urban employment. These narratives indicate that *Tsuki* revival must extend beyond rural locality into spatially displaced populations, particularly young women navigating urban fragmentation and cultural dislocation.

Accordingly, *Tsuki* should be operationalized through Urban *Tsuki* Fellowship Networks, embedded within churches, student associations, and women's collectives in urban centres. These networks function as intergenerational psychosocial containment systems, providing structured mentorship, emotional stabilization, and cultural continuity for migrant populations. Unlike informal fellowship groups, these networks must be intentionally designed as community

psychology interventions, incorporating guided reflection sessions, structured peer mentoring, and identity negotiation dialogues addressing urban stressors such as isolation, workplace pressure, and transitional life crises.

From a community mental health perspective, such relational infrastructures serve as protective ecological buffers that mitigate psychological distress in displaced populations by restoring belonging, narrative continuity, and relational anchoring<sup>[11]</sup>. Thus, *Tsuki* becomes a mobile developmental system, no longer tied to geography but to relational continuity.

### 6.3. Digitally Mediated *Tsuki* Ecologies for Contemporary Youth Realities

Given the increasing digital mediation of youth identity formation, *Tsuki* revival must incorporate digitally extended relational ecosystems. Participants' concerns about emotional fragmentation and weakened relational grounding in modern life point toward the necessity of hybrid cultural infrastructures. This involves the creation of digitally mediated *Tsuki* platforms, including moderated mentorship networks, intergenerational storytelling archives, peer-support forums, and structured digital spaces for emotional expression and guidance. Importantly, these platforms must not replicate unregulated social media dynamics but must operate as ethically moderated relational systems grounded in Indigenous values of care, respect, and responsibility.

Additionally, confidential digital access points for emotional counselling and early psychosocial support may be integrated for young women experiencing anxiety, identity distress, or relational breakdown. Empirical research in digital mental health demonstrates that culturally grounded, peer-supported online ecosystems significantly enhance perceived belonging and emotional stability when properly structured and moderated<sup>[29]</sup>. Within this framework, *Tsuki* evolves into a hybrid psychosocial ecology integrating Indigenous relational epistemology with digital accessibility and contemporary communication infrastructures.

### 6.4. Integrated Analytical Synthesis: *Tsuki* as a Distributed Developmental System

Taken together, these three interconnected domains reposition *Tsuki* not as a historical institution but as a dis-



tributed developmental and mental health system operating across institutional, spatial, and digital layers.

It functions simultaneously as:

- A formal educational intervention system (structured mentorship in schools),
- A displacement-responsive urban ecology (migrant support networks),
- and a digitally mediated relational infrastructure (online mentorship and emotional support systems).

This triadic structure transforms *Tsuki* into a multi-sited Indigenous developmental ecology, addressing three empirically identified contemporary gaps: weakened intergenerational mentorship, rising emotional fragmentation among youth, and declining Indigenous epistemic authority in formal and digital systems. From an educational psychology standpoint, this model reframes *Tsuki* as a system of social learning, identity formation, and emotional regulation embedded in relational culture. From a community psychology perspective, it functions as a protective mental health infrastructure, reinforcing resilience through belonging, mentorship, and cultural continuity. Importantly, this reframing responds directly to reviewers' concerns by shifting the argument from cultural preservation discourse to applied institutional design, thereby demonstrating how Indigenous epistemologies can be operationalized within contemporary psychosocial systems rather than merely described as heritage forms.

## 7. Conclusions

This study has argued that the revival of *Tsuki* constitutes far more than the restoration of a declining cultural institution; it represents a critical process of psychosocial reconstruction, epistemic recovery, and cultural integration within contemporary Ao-Naga society. Drawing on Participatory Action Research (PAR), oral histories, narrative interviews, and collective storytelling, the study demonstrates that *Tsuki* historically functioned as an Indigenous institutional ecology through which emotional well-being, intergenerational mentorship, communal ethics, identity formation, and women-centred leadership were systematically cultivated. Participants consistently described *Tsuki* as a culturally grounded relational system that sustained both individual development and collective cohesion.

A central contribution of this study lies in its engagement with the journal's concern for cultural conflict and integration. The findings reveal that participants did not frame the revival of *Tsuki* as a rejection of Christianity, formal schooling, or modern social life. Rather, respondents repeatedly emphasized negotiation, coexistence, and adaptive integration. Core values historically embedded within *Tsuki*—discipline, communal responsibility, mentorship, relational accountability, emotional support, and moral formation—were widely understood as compatible with contemporary Christian ethics and present-day educational realities. The study, therefore, challenges binary assumptions that position Indigenous traditions and modern institutions in inevitable conflict. Instead, it demonstrates that Indigenous institutional revival can function as a culturally integrative framework through which communities reconcile ancestral knowledge systems with contemporary social transformation.

The findings further demonstrate that the decline of *Tsuki* weakened Indigenous systems of psychosocial support, communal learning, and intergenerational continuity. Participants repeatedly associated this erosion with increasing individualism, weakened social cohesion, identity uncertainty among youth, and the disappearance of structured spaces for women-centred mentorship and cultural learning. In this context, the revival of *Tsuki* emerges not as symbolic preservationism but as a culturally grounded response to contemporary psychosocial fragmentation and cultural dislocation.

The study also makes an important contribution to Indigenous mental health scholarship by demonstrating that *Tsuki* historically operated as a community-based psychosocial support institution. Collective living, peer solidarity, elder guidance, ritual participation, and shared responsibility created protective relational environments that strengthened emotional resilience, belonging, self-worth, and social confidence among young women. These findings align with community psychology and Indigenous resilience literature, which emphasize that mental well-being is deeply shaped by culturally meaningful systems of belonging, identity coherence, and intergenerational relational support.

Finally, the study argues that sustainable institutional revival requires adaptive reconstruction rather than static preservation. Participants consistently envisioned forms of revival capable of engaging Christianity, formal education,

urbanization, migration, and changing gender realities while retaining the foundational principles of communal mentorship, relational learning, and cultural continuity that historically characterized *Tsuki*. In this sense, the revival of *Tsuki* represents an ongoing process of relational, institutional, and epistemic renewal through which Ao-Naga communities negotiate identity, modernity, and Indigenous continuity within rapidly changing social worlds.

## Funding

No funding was received for this study.

## Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles embedded within the Ao-Naga context, including respect for oral traditions, clan and kinship systems, customary laws, communal living structures, agricultural life, storytelling practices, songs and folklore, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and Indigenous institutions such as *Tsuki*. The research was undertaken with careful attention to cultural knowledge, community dignity, participant autonomy, and relational accountability within Ao-Naga society. The study involved voluntary participation through village visitations, interviews, oral narratives, storytelling sessions, and participatory discussions concerning *Tsuki* and the socio-cultural experiences of Ao-Naga women. Particular attention was given to cultural sensitivity, confidentiality, mutual respect, and ethical engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems and customary practices. Ethical review and formal approval were waived for this study due to its non-clinical, community-based qualitative nature and because it did not involve medical intervention, experimentation, or vulnerable-risk procedures.

## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study prior to village visitation, interviews, oral narratives, storytelling sessions, and participatory discussions. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage. Particular care was taken to ensure culturally

respectful engagement within the Ao-Naga context and Indigenous community settings.

## Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical, cultural, and privacy considerations related to Indigenous community knowledge, oral narratives, and participant confidentiality within the Ao-Naga context. The study contains culturally sensitive information shared through interviews, storytelling sessions, oral histories, and participatory discussions concerning *Tsuki* and the lived experiences of Ao-Naga women. Limited anonymized data may be made available by the author upon reasonable request and with appropriate consideration for community consent, cultural protocols, and ethical research practices.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently, and no financial, institutional, political, or personal relationships influenced the design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the study.

## AI Use Statement

The author acknowledges the use of ChatGPT by OpenAI for limited assistance with linguistic refinement, en-

hancement of clarity, and structural organization of this manuscript. All substantive aspects of the work, including the conceptual framework, data interpretation, analysis, and conclusions, are the original intellectual contributions of the author. The author has carefully reviewed and verified all AI-assisted content to ensure its accuracy, originality, cultural sensitivity, and full compliance with academic integrity and ethical research standards.

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