



# the south asianist

**The construction and institutionalisation of ethnicity: anthropology,  
photography and the Nagas**

Debojyoti Das

Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 28–49 | ISSN 2050-487X | [www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk](http://www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk)

# The construction and institutionalisation of ethnicity: anthropology, photography and the Nagas

Debojyoti Das

Birkbeck, University of London, [d.das@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:d.das@bbk.ac.uk)

The indigenous world of Naga tribes has come to the attention through colonial ethnographies, census documentation and itineraries developed by early travel writers, botanists, foot soldiers, surveyors, tea planters and later hill administrators. Anthropological knowledge in this part of colonial India grew out of the need to control the “savage other” through imposition of “house tax” and “forced labour” that restricted their “autonomy”. This mechanism of political control was not strictly obligatory for the Nagas. Instead the hill administration worked hand in hand with the village headmen and local go between (*dobashis*) to establish patronage and rule of law. As Bernard Cohen (1996) has attentively argued, the administrative-ethnographic discourse was a crucial cultural technology of ruler. For the administrator-ethnographers the natives of the Naga Hills represented primitive societies almost untouched by (Western, Buddhist or Hindu) Civilizations. *Jhum* cultivation or slash and burn farming, head hunting rituals and slave trade practices became a key part of the colonial strategy to caricature the Nagas as savage and hedonistic. The imperial project of administering the frontier was thus justified. Textual and visual documentation of the Naga tribes gave literal and symbolic meaning to these portrayals. It led to ethnic classification – ‘ethnic involution’ or ‘ethno genesis’ (Van Schendel 1992, Sumit Guha 1999) of the Nagas – social differentiation of hill people from the plains.

---

### Introduction

The indignity of the Nagas, who are spread over Northeast India and Myanmar, has come to global attention through colonial ethnographies, census reports, monographs and travelogues composed by imperial travel writers, botanists, surveyors, tea planters and later hill administrators in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Anthropological knowledge developed out of the need to control the raiding Naga's through imposition of "house tax" and "forced labour" that controlled their independence. These contraptions of political control were not strictly obligatory for the Naga chiefs. In its place the political agents and later Deputy Commissioners exercised personal influence over the village headmen and local go-betweens by building patronage and establishing rule of law. Historian Bernard Cohn (1996) has attentively argued that the administrative-ethnographic discourse was a crucial cultural technology of ruler in British India. For the administrator-ethnographers, the natives of the Naga Hills represented primitive societies almost untouched by western civilizations. *Jhum* cultivation or slash and burn farming, head hunting rituals, and slave trade became a key part of the colonial strategy to caricature the Nagas as savage and riotous like their predecessors the Ahom kings who maintained diplomatic relations with the

foothill chiefs (Barpujari 2003, Kikon 2008). Written and visual illustrations of the Naga tribes gave literal and symbolic meaning to these portrayals. Colonial ethnographies on the Nagas helped aid administration in its ethnic classification – 'ethnic involution' or 'ethno genesis' (Van Schendel 1992, Sumit Guha 1999) of the Naga hill tribes as opposed to the plains.

Ethnography in the Naga Hills progressed in parallel to colonial administration (Lotha 2007, 2009, West 1994). Colonial attempts to find a way to the Manipur valley and to protect the interests of tea planters, rubber speculators and coal syndicates in Assam proper brought them in skirmish with the Nagas. During this period early 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries too made numerous endeavours to spread the message of the Gospel. The missionary intervention was significant and it too stereotyped the Nagas, though this is beyond the scope of this paper. We will focus on the British pacification campaign and the ultimate phase of administration that evolved with the expansion on British Indian territory in the Naga Hills and the simultaneous construction and classification of the Nagas by colonial administrator-anthropologists. Also this paper converses how photographs, artefacts and images have played a crucial role in casting Naga ethnicity as a primitive, backward, anti-modern people of the other time. The portrayal

further helped in institutionalizing the image of the Naga's through photographs published in coffee table books, tour guides, government publications and reports composed in the postcolonial period.

### *Colonialism and ethnography*

Colonialism was a critical dimension in the development of Naga anthropology. From the military reports during the initial years of contact, to the ethnographic articles and monographs during the administrative years, ethnography on the Nagas developed parallel to the expansion of the British Empire in the Naga Hills. Thus the history of Naga anthropology is a history of intimate relationship between anthropology and colonial administration. Out of this intercourse that was one-sided, Nagas were categorised as “primitive”, “savage”, and “archaic” and on the verge of extinction. Nagas needed to be rescued and recorded as would a rare fossil (e.g. Hutton 1921a, 1921b).

The colonial hill administrators interested in Naga material culture began authoring monographs and journal papers that brought out the cultural, social and economic life of the Naga society. This in return contributed to the vast knowledge production on tribes in India. The documentation of knowledge about the Nagas picked up through morphometric measurements, photography-visuals, documentation of their folklore, oral history

and cultural artefacts that were send for museums display in England and Europe (Germany, Austria and Switzerland). While the dissemination took shape through official monograph publication, tour diaries, survey and military reports, much of the public knowledge of the Naga tribes was constructed through photographs published in metropolitan British newspapers, journals, illustrated dailies and fortnightlies.

The Naga tribe became one of the most popular ‘ethnic groups’ in the Indian sub-continent from the last part of the nineteenth century because they actively resisted colonial expansion over their territories and were regularly reported in the British press. This was complimented by the exotics of their rich material culture and the practice of headhunting and slave trafficking on the Burmese side of British frontier. This evoked anthropological romanticism and they popularly came to be known in the western imagination as “head hunters of Assam” and “slave traders of Upper Burma” (Hodson 1909. Hutton 1930, Butler 1928). British newspapers featured the Naga's more regularly during the slave release campaign carried out by the Burmese Governor Harcourt Butler (1921-25) and the Second World War Japanese invasion of Upper Burma.

## *Construction of Naga Identity: Genres of Ethnography*

Naga ethnography is grounded in the ethnographic genres of South Asia yet it is distinctive because of the absence of revenue literature as (Morrison 1984) suggested in the South Asian context. It was based on information gathering; morphometric-scientific enquiry and visual illustration of racial ‘other’ designed to subjugate the feuding Nagas with a civilizing discourse and rule of law. Naga ethnographic genre may be broadly divided into the following phases; Military phase (1832-1866), Political Control phase (1866-1877) and Administrative Phase (1878-1947). During these three phases a variety of information were collected through first hand encounter with the Naga’s who defied colonial subjugation. The description of the Nagas entered the public sphere through writings in the form of monographs and journal publications particularly the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and other little magazines and expedition reports that were outlets for official and public knowledge. Besides the printed literature that caught academic attention of scholars, visuals, sketches and photographs played a critical role in objectifying the Nagas as “primitive” and “uncivilised”. Morphometric measurements were photographed and systematically recorded to link the Nagas with the primitive races. In particular the Pitt Rivers Museum in

Oxford became the centre of Naga artefact collection. Colonel Pitt Rivers, the founder of the Pitt Rivers Museum, for example, wished to create a display of artefacts that would show the social evolution of technology from primitive culture to modern western civilization (Constance and David 2006). Henry Balfour, the first curator of the museum, collaborated with J.P. Mills and J.H. Hutton in establishing the Naga section of the collection. It laid the ideological and aesthetical foundation of Naga culture through display of Naga artefacts and material culture in metropolitan museum collection. In the *Pangsha letters*, J.P. Mills writes that the expedition to punish headhunting villages in the trans-frontier was also envisioned to collect Naga artefacts for Balfour’s museum in Oxford (Mills 1995).

## *Reports and articles of Military Phase (1832-1866)*

The earliest military reports gave first-hand knowledge of Naga society. The ethnographic literature, such as reports and articles published by touring military officials; show knowledge of the country and terrain. Captain Francis Jenkins reports published in the notes section of Pemberton’s *Reports on the Eastern Frontier of British India* (1835) and Moffat Mills’s *Report on the Province of Assam* (1854) had brief descriptions about the habitat, physic, dress, warfare, crime and punishment,

marriage, funerals, weapons, oath and omens of the Nagas. Similarly, Butler's *Travels and Adventures* (1855) contains information of Angami warfare and brief description about their manners and customs, religion, funerals and modes of tillage. The ethnographic reports and articles by the military officials on the Nagas was essentially a descriptive ethnography. The chief outlet for publication was the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. The reports were also published locally by the government to be made available to colleagues in the field (West 1994: 65). These reports open to the colonial administration general idea on the Nagas that would soon become the mechanism for further control.

### *Surveys during political control (1866-1877)*

The period between 1866 and 1877 saw a phase of political control in the hills. Naga raids on British settlements and foothill tea plantations did not stop with the adoption of the non-interference policy by the British in 1851. Between 1854 and 1865, there were nineteen Angami raids in the Assam plains particularly on tea garden *coolies* (indentured labourers) and British officials in which 232 British subjects were killed, wounded and carried off (Mackenzie 1979: 118). It was feared by the colonial officials that if these raids were not stopped soon Assam would be divided up between the different warring "wild" tribes and the British would find

themselves driven out of the province. Hence the Government of India proposed a policy of expanding the territorial frontier of the British Empire in Assam.

During this period topographical and ethnographic survey reports played a very important role in describing the life, culture and customs of the Nagas. It was suggested that the Nagas would no longer be enemy of the empire but subjects to be 'civilized'. The survey enterprise provided an opportunity to gather first hand ethnographic information. This information was relevant to control the Nagas who were soon to be administered once the surveys and topographical reports were completed to map the 'blank spaces' (Leach 1960) of the Empire. As Nicholas B. Dirks, the American anthropologist and historian, observes 'Marking land and marking bodies were related activities, not only did land seem to determine much of a putatively biological nature, bodies themselves became markers of foreign lands. Before places and people could be colonised, they had to be marked as "foreign", as "other", as "colonisable"' (Dirks 1992:6).

The survey reports contained rich descriptive ethnography of the Naga Hills, occupation and people. Most of these reports were published in *General Report of the Topographical Survey* (Godwin–Austin 1873, Woodthorpe 1881). Badgley (1873) described the defence system, habitat, warfare, etc., of

the Rengma Nagas. R. Brown's diary (1874) described the habitat, cultivation, dress, burial and customs of the Lotha Nagas and Woodthorpe's 1874-75 and 1875-76 survey reports describe the topography, dress and ornaments of the Lotha and Ao Nagas. Another report of the 1875-76 tours describes the morungs, tattoos, cultivation, dress, etc. of the Northeastern Nagas bordering the Ao. Based on the experiences of the topographical survey, Butler published an article "Rough Notes on Nagas" in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1875). Based on first hand knowledge, Butler's report has extensive ethnographic description of the geography and history, habitat, defence system, physical traits, marriage customs, dress, and religion of the Angamis. The article was one of the most authoritative writing about the Angamis at that time and was used extensively by later administrator anthropologists.

The topographic survey not only described the different tribes but also, for the first time, sketches of Naga heads were published that appeared in the JASB journal publications. Besides ethnicising the Nagas as 'warring tribes' the Nagas were characterized as 'savage' and fearless 'head hunters'. In terms of style the survey reports were not much different from the military reports. But even more significant than the ethnographic description of cultural traits of the Naga tribes, the topographical surveys provided a definitive

demarcation of the 'tribes' –Angami, Lotha, Rengma, Ao, Zemi, Sema Naga- and their boundaries as an 'other' to be colonized and administered. A distinctive feature of Naga ethnography during this phase was the introduction of visuals through sketches of Naga head, which later gave way to photography and museum display in diorama collection. It gave the colonial officials and the western audience back home, in what way the Nagas looked like and assisted western imagination of the "native other", classified as cultures occupying the bottom of the civilization ladder.

### *Administrative Phase (1878-1947)*

The administrative phase began with the fall of Khonoma village - located in the Kohima district, capital of Nagaland- in the hands of the British administration pushing for pacification of the Angami Naga resistance. On 14<sup>th</sup> November 1878, Kohima was occupied and soon it was established as the headquarters of the Naga Hills. The government approved Col. Keetings forward policy of extending the British authority, village by village, over the whole tract as specified by the topographical surveys, so that light administration can be established over the Naga tribes. This project of extending the frontiers of British India in Naga Hills thus provided closer contact with the Nagas. From the 1870s onwards, there were

numerous publications of travel articles about the Nagas by soldiers and later by administrators turned ethnographers. S. E. Peal's article, "The Nagas and Neighbouring Tribes" (1874), was one of the earliest about the Nagas to be published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (JRAI). In subsequent articles submitted to JRAI, Peal described the practice of headhunting, agricultural implements, religion of the northern Naga tribes, the Morungs, and compared Dayak customs with those of the people around Assam. Woodthorpe, who accompanied Butler on the surveys, gave two lectures about the Nagas at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London in 1881. Woodthorpe's lectures summarised almost all that was known about the Nagas at that time.

We visited the Royal Anthropological Institute archives in 2011 to study their Naga collection. We were delighted to find a large collection of photographs and lithographs containing sketches of Woodthorpe on the Nagas. We also saw a number of photographs taken by Hodson in Manipur. These photographs capture in large and small canvas the Naga tribes of Manipur hills. It would not be untrue to claim that a new dimension was added to Naga ethnography during this period, "visual representation" that became prominent in the later years in the monographs produced by J.P Mills, J.H. Hutton, H.E. Kauffmann, Christopher Von Furer-Haimendorf and Ursala

Graham Bower. Photography added a new scale and genre to the process of ethnicising the Nagas. For example the Angami, Ao, Thankgul and Rengmas were mostly captured wearing a loincloth. Also T.C. Hodson showed their Manipuri neighbours as wearing dhoti at times and a chaddar (woollen shawl). These photographs created a scene that represented people in different stages of civilization, power, authority and control.

The purpose of ethnography during this period was primarily information gathering in which both surveys and photographs played leading role in making the administration and the British audience back home acquire knowledge of tribes that were earlier unknown. The ethnographic genre reflected the late 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropological concerns about the articulation of race and racial differences, the origin and migration of people, and the connection between the "great families of mankind". Notes and Queries became the prime "investigative modality" to promote accurate anthropological observations on the part of travellers, and to enable those who are not anthropologists themselves to supply the information which is wanted for the scientific study of anthropology at home. Naga ethnographic genre during this period contributed to the ethnographic data gathering process and constructed their ethnicity. The Naga nationalist under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo (1903-1990) used it in

re-articulating their past under colonialism and in shaping colonial construction of Naga identity as “fearful head-hunters” and “slave traders”.

In addition, Lean Fox promoted the ethnic classification of Nagas as people who had migrated from South East Asia or China through his cultural diffusion model of population mobility. In his later articles S.E. Peals cites the Nagas as prime example of migration and cultural diffusion (1874, 1882). During different periods Naga identity was invoked with different names. The precolonial intercourse of the Nagas with the Ahom Kingdom constructed many local and place based Naga names that were later standardised by survey parties and tours. During the military phase, the various Naga tribes in general were categorised as *Boree*, those near the frontier, and *Abors*, those inhabiting the interior of the Naga Hills or simply as Sibsaugor Nagas, Patkoi Nagas, or the *Pukka* Nagas and *Kachha* Nagas as they were known in the south of the Patkoi range. The Naga tribes soon began to be categorised in terms of difference in language, cultural practices, and physical traits (Oppitz et al., 2008, Von Stockhausen 2009).

Woodthorpe lectures classified Nagas into “Kilted” and “non kilted”, the “Kilted” being the Angami and the “non-Kilted”, the rest of the Naga ‘tribes’ (Woodthorpe 1881).

During this phase the knowledge of the Nagas, their oral history, trends of migration,

language and aspects of material culture, kinship and family life was rescued and recorded in a series of monographs written by administrator turned anthropologist who were posted to the Naga Hills as Deputy Commissioners. Their objective was to fulfil the empire’s mission to colonize the frontiers of Assam and Upper Burma then part of British India. While the administrators on their part entrusted themselves with the official as well as personal interest to explore the culture, customs and material life of the Naga tribes in order to produce knowledge of the society that were unknown to the empire’s audience in Britain. The ethnographies helped in building the great genealogy tree of humankind. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford where Henry Balfour worked as the first curator became the depository of Naga artefacts collected by Mills and Hutton during their tours in the unadministered Naga Hills. Balfour arranged artefacts and costumes in the museums collection where the Nagas were fixed as the most ancient tribes. Relatedly other objects of material culture entered Anthropology Department collections in Cambridge, Oxford University and the British Museum for public display and research during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Hill administration and Naga monographs*

The ethnographic monographs gave the most detailed description of particular Naga tribes.

In 1901 the Government of India on the suggestion of British Association for the Advancement of Sciences started funding the Ethnological Survey of India in connection with the Census operations. The scope of the survey was two-fold: 1. Ethnography and 2. Anthropometry. The outcome of the ethnographic survey was the publication of various monographs on the Nagas – T.C. Hodson, *Naga Tribes in Manipur* (1911), J.H. Hutton, *Angami Nagas* (1921), *Sema Nagas* (1921), J.P. Mills, *The Lotha Nagas* (1922), *The Ao Nagas* (1926), and the *Rengma Nagas* (1937), among others.

A careful reading of Naga ethnographic literature shows that many of the Naga monographs were steeped in Taylor's Comparative Method and Diffusions, which held that a particular cultural feature came through transmission and diffusion through migration of people or trade routes. The comparative method of investigation was employed to find answers to the problem of race and racial differences. For the ethnographic survey of India, "uniformity of procedure" was an essential condition for "the proper application of the comparative method". (Risley 1911). The ethnographic survey was used to classify the Nagas "tribes" and assign places to them within the Mongoloid racial type.

Although J.H. Hutton and J.P. Mills were partially successful in their monographs in

their endeavours to draw racial links with their South East Asian neighbours, their aim to distinguish the Nagas as accomplished head-hunters largely succeeded. This link to the very aspect of this primitiveness is highlighted later by Fürer-Haimendorf in his study of the Konyaks whom he labelled the 'Naked Nagas' as he viewed them as uncivilised and barbaric in relation to their administered neighbours the Aos, Angamas, Lothas and Rengmas. In his monograph on the Konyaks Fürer-Haimendorf used a distinctive personal narrative style based on his tour sojourn with J.P. Mills in 1936-37. But more important than his writings, Fürer-Haimendorf through his brilliant photography on the Nagas capitalized on the nakedness of the Konyak Nagas and assigned them the most primitive status. The Kodak magazine captures this well. It reports that,

Moving rapidly through unknown and partly hostile country, one has little opportunity to write down a full record of one's experiences and impressions. Photography then proves an invaluable help. For the photographs form a reliable record of people, places and situations and it was only with their help that I could recall all the details of what I had seen. On such expedition conditions are very different from those under which the amateur photographer works in this country. Questions of scientific interest rather than favourable light conditions determine the choice of subject.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Extracts from the *Kodak Magazine*, Nov 1937, added to the file on 16.12. 1937 as collected in Slavery in the Naga Hills, Selection Burma Office 503/37. British Library. India Office Records (IOR).

The subjects that Furer-Haimendorf chose for his publication range from the Naga Log drum, the Naga head gear, head-hunter's collection, war dance, a burning village, a naked beauty that appear regularly in most of the publications. In all his Pangsha publications we see no slaves or slave capturers as they appear in Harcourt Butler's Burma collection. Furer-Haimendorf adopts a different trope of pacification by introduces images of burning villages and Gurkha British soldiers capturing hostile villages that appear in the *Illustrated London News*, *Kodak Magazine*, and the *Weekly Illustrated*.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1.** The burning Pangsha village that appeared in the *Geographical Journal* 1938 and *Illustrated Weekly* 1939 taken by Furer-Haimendorf. (Source: SOAS Furer-Haimendorf JICS Digital Archives)

---

Only a single photograph of the rescued slaves appears tucked in the bottom of a collection of photographs that appear in the news item titled 'British Troops Fire a Slave

---

<sup>2</sup>See Extract from the *Kodak Magazine*, November 1937, P. 281. *The Illustrated London News*, 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1937, P. 1232, *Weekly Illustrated*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1937. P. 17.

Traders' Village'.<sup>3</sup> His German contemporary H.E. Kauffman who entered the Naga Hills during that period developed a similar narrative through photographic illustrations and publications most of which were written in German (Kauffmann 1939). Interestingly, Kauffmann's photo collection was lost after the Second World War but has been rescued in the last decade by the German scholar Alban Von Stockhausen who accidentally discovered them during his PhD fieldwork. Out on his thesis he has published a well-researched book based on Christopher Von Furer-Haimendorf and Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann historical photographs on the Nagas. The book attempts, by means of a detailed 'pictorial ethnography', to reconstruct the aesthetic and cultural reality of the Nagas in the 1930s, through the ethnographer's lens (Von Stockhausen 2014).

Although photography was kept aside as an investigative tool from the Ethnographic Survey of Assam citing financial austerity and its obstacle towards the duties of Superintendent. Deputy Commissioner, J.P Mills took special and personal interest in capturing the Nagas in his camera much before Furer-Haimendorf came in the scene. We discovered a catalogue of Mills photographic collection kept at the School of Oriental and African Studies, Christopher Von Furer-Haimendorf archival collection. His interest in

---

<sup>3</sup>See the *Weekly Illustrated*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1937, P. 17.

photography and visuals grew during his service in Chittagong Hill Tracts where he captured the Mru and other tribes. The representation was crucial in constructing the identity of the Nagas whom he later studied while in service as the Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills.

While photographs played a restricted role in the Naga Hills of Assam until the arrival of Fürer-Haimendorf, it had a huge impact in Burma where ethnographic monographs were not commissioned due to financial constraints and late entry of the colonial administration in Upper Burma. The Governor of Burma, Sir Harcourt Butler's slave release campaign during 1923-25 was a major occasion of contact with the remote Naga, Kachin and Shan tribes that helped in fashioning their distinctiveness as hill tribes. In Britain Harcourt Butler was greeted as the 'Great White Chief' on the successful completion of the slave release campaign (*Tattler* 1927). Butler's campaign led to the release of more than five thousand slaves at the cost of fifteen thousand pounds. British public at home saw the release operation as emancipatory. Slave release photographs appeared regularly in leading London newspaper and magazines like the *Times*, *Birmingham Post*, *Statement* and *Illustrated London News* among others. The metropolitan newspaper illustration of the Nagas as 'slave traders' and as tribes who practices human sacrifice fitted well with the

British public imagination of the savage natives. The Rangpang Nagas were branded as 'slave capturers' while other Nagas were declared as slave traders. Together the campaign of Harcourt Butler (1925-28) and J.P Mills (1936-39) produced powerful visual spectacles of historical events that established colonial benevolence as a trope for administration and extended its civilizing mission over the hill tribes (Mills 1995, Furer-Haimendorf 1939).

While the Kachins and Shans kept slaves, the Nagas in the Burma administration, particularly the Rangpang, practiced human sacrifice. According to Butler's account, which also gained widespread publicity in the British press in the 1920s, the Nagas performed sacrifice to please the mystic spirits, or *nats*. They needed to be constantly fulfilled by sacrifices to ensure good health, good crops and to avoid famines. These observations made the main headlines not only in Butler's tour reports, but also more explicitly in the metropolitan press that set the prose of violence and barbarity of an ancient custom, practiced in a modern age. However, the severity of slavery varied from tribe to tribe and in different areas. On this, J.H Hutton (1921) who served the deputy commission of the Naga Hills and authored the monographs on the Sema Nagas writes:

That two forms of slavery existed in the Naga Hills Tribal Area-domestic servitude

and slave proper. Domestic servitude was a milder form of slavery and was so integral to certain Nagas like Semas that it could not and need not be relinquished. A more serious form was slave captured from British protected villages. Slave is referred as a chattel that can be bought and sold. Though there were instances where he was kept in servitude for work in the household his usual fate is to be sold into Burma for the purpose of human sacrifice. This kind of slavery was pandemic over a small area (referring to Pangsha and other unadministered villages in Burma) [emphasis added].

In the Victorian press the abolition of slavery became a matter of hot debate in the 1920 as the Anti-Slavery International was pushing the British government at home to end slavery in the colonies. The effort of Sir Harcourt Butler, the Governor in Burma and J.P. Mills the Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills to banish slavery was seen as emancipatory in Britain. In contemporary literature historians and anthropologist working on the Northeast India have contested the prevalence of slavery in colonial Assam and Burma. They have described it as obligatory barter labour that the colonial official misunderstood as slavery (Chatterjee 2008, Nag 2012). Although the definition of slavery remains contested, these writing shed new light on the colonial project of using slavery as a ploy to extend control over unadministered British territories. Further, the new literature show how anti-slavery and slave rescue operation created more deprivation and violence

in the frontier that did not find space in British press that was flooded with the propaganda of slave release and rescue operation, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain (Means 2000; Das 2014 forthcoming).

### *Naga photography*

Photography that developed parallel with Anthropology in British India made a late entry in Assam with the topographical surveys and military expeditions. One of the earliest photograph in Assam Hills presents a classic example how colonial administrators represented the native elites by collaborating in the establishment of rule and order as well as acknowledging the dignity of the princely states. Colonial James Johnstone's photograph with the prince of Manipur, Thangal Major along with Europeans officers posted in Kohima presents a classic case of how native elites collaborated with imperial powers to subordinate the 'savage other'. The photography brings to light the participation of elites in the colonial counter insurgency complex. The Manipuri elites share the same platform with Colonel Johnstone. The photograph exemplifies that the hegemony and dominance of the colonial empire over the natives was established through collaboration between the colonizers and colonized. The prince and his nobles are shown displaying their sword posing before the camera. While the

British military officials pose wearing their expedition robe and military hat, with the Manipuri foot soldiers standing behind (Johnstone 1896: 156-157).

The pioneering and most extensive work on Naga photography was done by Fürer-Haimendorf among the Konyaks, Ao, Angami, Sema, Yimchunger, Kheimungen, Chang, Lotha, Sangtham, Rengma and Phom Nagas. His Pangsha expedition photographs and its revelation by Victorian press and academic journals during the later 1930s produced a rhetorical match with Anti-Slavery International calls to end slavery in British colonies (Fürer-Haimendorf 1938, *Illustrated London News* 1938). He captured hundreds of photographs among the Naga's typifying nakedness and spirit of the Nagas as head takers. The body politics were matched with the aesthetics of their material culture (head gears, tattooed face and chest, ear ornaments, hair dress-bun-comb and other artefacts of everyday use made of bamboo, wood, ivory and teeth of pig, hornbill feathers, deer horn etc.). These pictures presented perfect resources for coffee table glossy photo books and as objects for museum gaze among western audiences. Images of women in jewellery but with exposed breasts; as well as men posing as warriors but also nude are iconic images of colonial photography, according to scholars such as Willem Van Schendel, constitute ethno-pornography (See Figures 2 and 3).



**Figure 2.** Kalyou-Kengyo Woman photographed nude displaying her unique hair bun during the Pangsha Expedition tour. (Source: SOAS Fürer-Haimendorf JICS Digital Archives)



**Figure 3.** Kalyou Kengyo warrior photographed facing his back displaying his hair comb, waist cane rings and buttocks during the Pangsha expedition tour. (Source: SOAS Fürer-Haimendorf JICS Digital Archives).

The display of material culture with ethnopornography produced a unique symbol of domination and colonial gaze that appealed the metropolitan readers as they were treated with the visual images of ‘exotic wildness’. The most spectacular photographs that perhaps captured the maximum readership in the colony were that of the young *Henlak* (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Helnak, the Young Girl of Wakching captured wearing her beautiful necklaces, ornaments and armlets (Source: SOAS Fürer-Haimendorf JICS Digital Archives)

The photograph of *Henlak* appears in frames as she is undressed and posed to reveal her body and display Naga ornaments. Fürer-Haimendorf plots the photograph to give visual

meaning to his discourse on ‘Naked Nagas’. *Henlak* pre-pose photographs do not present her to be as confident as it does in the photograph. She is exposed frame by frame to Fürer-Haimendorf to produce the utopia of the ‘naked-innocent-exotic Naga’. As Van Schendel et al., observes, ‘creating a aesthetic pleasing photograph required manipulation and often refractory reality... In this genre, anonymous individuals [man and women] look into the lens, or more frequently away from the camera with suspicion, embarrassment or obedience awkwardness. These images present a power struggle between controlling photographer and resisting subjects’ (2001: 14-15). The innocence and material culture of the Konyak Nagas had to be produced through these photographs that displayed scantily clad bodies. The photographic display of native body set the context of the Kalyo-Kengyo Naga as ‘people without history’, that fixed their identity, dignified their savagery, wildness and innocence. The ‘savage slot’ to which Fürer-Haimendorf ascribes his subjects presents a utopian reality of the ethnic ‘other’ through photographic imageries. *Henlak* image presents all three attributes ascribed to the ‘other’ that Trouillot (1991) defines as, ‘order-utopia-savagery’.

Fürer-Haimendorf photographic images of the Eastern Naga were not the only source of imperial photography in the Naga Hills. There were many before him. In fact, the parallel

history of Naga anthropology and photography can be traced back to Woodthorpe choropleth images prepared during the topographical surveys of 1870s in the Naga Hills. These images soon appeared in the *Royal Asiatic Society Journal*<sup>4</sup> as parts of Butler's rough Notes on the Naga (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** R.G. Woodthorpe drawing of the British Survey Party in Naga Hills (Source File No. MS 422/2, (Royal Anthropological Institute archives), 6 drawings by R.G Woodthorpe, 1874-75. Photozincographed at the Surveyor General's office, Calcutta. Published as Black and White Plates in Rough Notes on the Angami Nagas and their Language; by Captain John Butler in Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol XLIV, PT. I, 1875, PP. 307)

With the commissioning of the Ethnographic Survey of Assam more photographs of the Naga (Ao, Angami, Chang, Sema and Manipur Naga) emerged in the ethnographic monographs produced by colonial civil servants to ethnically represent the Naga as hill tribe. Photography thus had a

---

<sup>4</sup>File No. MS 422/2, (Royal Anthropological Institute archives); 6 drawings by R.G Woodthorpe, 1874-75. Photozincographed at the Surveyor General's office, Calcutta. Published as Black and White Plates in Rough Notes on the Angami Nagas and their Language; by Captain John Butler in Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol XLIV, PT. I, 1875, PP. 307-46.

parallel history with written ethnography and complicates the simplistic division of genre between revenue (mainland Indian ethnography) and non-revenue (Naga) ethnography. According to Lotha (2007) and West (1994) the revenue ethnography in the plains of mainland India was primarily designed for resource colonization while non-revenue ethnography was based on the idea of domination through counterinsurgency and administration of the frontier. The racial types created through photographic images providing raw materials for the 'ethno-genesis' of the Nagas, like their neighbouring hill brothers (Van Schendel 1992). Fürer-Haimendorf photographs thus became one of the last in the series of colonial photography established by the great visual tradition that began after the revolt of 1857.

### *Post-Independence*

Soon after India's independence Verrier Elwin and Nari Rustomji were selected as the Tribal Development Officer for the Northeaster frontier region of India. Verrier Elwin along with Nari Rustomji worked tirelessly among the Nagas and established the idea of cultural relativism while discarding the right wing agenda of assimilation proposed by G.S Ghurey, professor of Anthropology at Bombay University. His philosophy for NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency) further established the post-colonial paternalistic control within the

Tribal Research Institute. On similar lines, The Department of Art and Culture started publishing a series of texts - books and souvenirs – in which they present the Nagas as people of primitive races. The Department also established a Naga museum that contains artefacts of Naga culture and all major Naga tribes placed in diorama with their distinctive dress code, sphere, ornaments and the Naga shawl. While doing field research in Nagaland during (2008-09) we investigated the content of these post-independence published literatures and they took us back to the colonial times. The narratives and illustrations matched the colonial representation of the Nagas as ‘barbaric, wild, primitive and ignorant’. Verrier Elwin’s tribal policy and his new deal for the northeastern frontier was instrumental in promoting Nehruvian paternalism based on five principles (*panchsheel*) that was rooted in the idea of a nation-state where the Nagas would be integrated to the idea of India- its plurality and diversity maintaining their culture and traditional institutions. The Nagas on their part resisted their subjugation under the leadership of their underground leader Phizo.

The ethno-nationalistic struggle between the Nagas and the Indian establishment recreated the colonial stereotypes within the military and civil administration. We learned these from the records kept in the Arunachal State Archives in Itanagar. The North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) files gives interesting

insights into the postcolonial construction of the Nagas as ‘gang stars, militia, anti-establishments, communist’ that resonates with their colonial representation as head hunters, raiders and non law abiding colonial subjects. Man Bahadur Rai who served as the Assistant Commissioner of Naga Hills Tuensang Area (NHTA), in his tour diary shares invaluable insights into a different picture, one focused on Naga practices of farming, rituals, customs and village administration. However, the chase was now to disarm the resisting Nagas through political patronage and forced military combat. The tours also shed light on the attitude of postcolonial state officials as they produced their reports for the government.

Rai’s tour report presents fascinating insights into postcolonial state incorporation which re-embodied slave traders and head-hunters as ‘anti-nationals and insurgents’. His tour notes, like those of his colonial predecessors, present who were friends and foe among the Nagas thus continuing the strategy of colonial territorial incorporation through producing bifurcated classes of people within Naga community: the trusted natives and the wild savage, the more exotic, and ‘barbaric’ Nagas, ‘untouched by civilization’, who occupied the untamed frontier on the Patkoi Range along the Burma border and the more ‘civilised’ Nagas living within the administered tracts of the Naga Hills (Rai 1956) . The colonial ‘need’ to bring order had now become

a question of national security. The post-independence government forces used national security and territorial integrity as justification to pacify Naga resistance.

The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary souvenir of the Village Guard published by the Government of Nagaland, presents compelling evidence of the ethnic construction of the Naga society based on their time immemorial social institution appropriated by the state to justify the creation of village guards to defend the loyal Nags from the insurgent Naga nation workers.

It was in the womb of the traditional “Naga Morung” that the most admired voluntary force of Nagaland-the Village Guards- was born. Nagas traditional live in Morung and guarded their villages against enemies from time immemorial. Young people who lived in Morung were trained various arts and techniques of war metamorphosing them into powerful warriors against all kinds of marauders who not only sought to overrun their territory but even their culture. The Village Guards were and are the “watch dogs” of the villages against invaders and intruders...The idea of raising the Village Guard was conceived within the preview of the social and cultural life of the Nagas to protect the villages against the insurgents’ ravage -Naga nationalist led by Angami Zapu Phizo who were waging a guerrilla war with the state. [Emphasis added] (Village Guard 2007, Pp. 21-22).

The photographs that were taken during this period by Political Officers and military generals of the Assam Rifles constabulary present the administrations achievement in disarming the recalcitrant Nagas (Figure 6)



**Figure 6.** Major R Kathing the architect of the Village Guards and his wife with some of the early Village Guards in Nagaland (Source: Village Guards Nagaland Souvenir {1957-2007}, 2007, p. 23.

and their patronage with the local chiefs who were obligated to participate in the anti-insurgency operations (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Military officials with Village Guards returning after a Successful Anti Insurgency operation in Nagaland 1964 (Source: Village Guards Nagaland Souvenir {1957-2007}, 2007, p. 28.

The Anthropological Survey of India played a crucial role in taking over the role

previously played by pioneering administrator anthropologist in the Naga Hills. Retired anthropologist Naval Kishore Das disclosed that the survey team under his tenure had taken thousands of photographs on the Nagas that are now gathering dust in the Indian Museum ASI laboratory in Kolkata. He estimates that the institute has more than one hundred thousand negatives of Naga photographs that were taken in the post-independence period. The purpose of these photographs was to extend the ideas proposed by the colonial anthropologist in the Naga Hills- to produce the 'exotic other'. Unfortunately these photographs are not catalogued and are inaccessible for investigation. The Alkazi art gallery in the national capital has an extraordinary Naga collection that sets the embryo of colonial and postcolonial depiction of the Naga's. The colonial anthropological knowledge of the Nagas has been christened in this collection developed over a time scale of two hundred years when these photos were published in leading oriental and British journal and illustrated dailies now kept in libraries, record rooms and in private and missionary collection. Likewise, Verrier Elwin and Major R Kathing who formed the Village Scouts later Village Guards in Nagaland have private collection of photographs preserved by their families and by the North Eastern Hill University, Anthropology Department in Shillong. The private collection offers quintessential insights

into the postcolonial representation of the Nagas as the ethnic other. Outside the Naga Hills, in Europe a number of museum collections and exhibitions displaying the colonial collection of Naga artefacts have in the past decades heightened European travel writers, backpackers, anthropologist and photo journalist interest on the Nagas and indignity debates (Oppitz et al, 2008, Van Ham et al., 2008, Stirn et al., 2003, Von Stockhausen 2014). It has assisted in Naga claims for indignity and has strengthened foreigner's recreation of the Nagas as the 'exotic other' as tribes with unique cultural and historical past in South Asia.

Ethnography among the Nagas was a project for political control and it was realised exquisitely through photographs that captures the native body - half naked man with tattooed chest and exposed women and children's seized by the white man's camera. Besides understanding the colonial context and the influences by anthropological concerns of the nineteenth century such as understanding differences, the origin and migration of peoples and cultural diffusion, it is important to understand Naga ethnography as institutionalised by British administration. Historian Ajay Skaria (1999) in his book *Hybrid History* points out that most of the communities that were formerly regarded as *jangli* (wild) were called tribes by the colonials. Wildness was now associated with

primitiveness and positioned in relation to civilisation. Measured against the evolutionary timeline of civilization, the tribes were at a stage before castes. The wild tribes were at a stage before the 'more civilized'. Colonial

photographs created visual indices to the timelessness of Naga culture as people without history. Regrettably such representations continue to shape Naga identity in postcolonial discourse. 📷

---

## References Cited

- Barpujari, S.K. 2003. *The Nagas: The Evolution of their History and Administration 1832-1939*, Delhi: Spectrum Publication.
- Butler, Harcourt. 1928. 'Fighting Slavery and Human Sacrifice: How We suppressed the trafficking in Skulls and Serfs in Upper Burma,' June 2<sup>nd</sup>. P. 101. Butler Collection, British Library, IOR/MSS EUR F116/84.
- Chatterjee, Indrani, 2009: *Slavery, Souls and Subjects in a Borderland* cis.yale.edu. Accessed on 07.05.2014.
- Das, Debojyoti (2014 in press), 'The Rhetoric of Slave Emancipation and Photography in Assam (India)-Burma Frontier', in Myriam Cottias and Marie-Jeanne Rossignol (eds.) *Distant Ripples of the British Abolition Wave: Africa, the Americas and Asia*, African World Press: N.J Trenton, Harriet Tubman Series.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. 1992. Colonialism and Culture, Colonialism and Culture, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, P. 1-25.
- Fürer-Haimendorf, Christopher Von. 1939. *The Naked Nagas*, London: Methuen and Co.
- Fürer-Haimendorf, Christopher Von. 1938. 'Through the Unexplored Mountains of India and Burma', *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 3. Pp. 201-216.
- Kauffmann. H.E. 1939. 'Kurze Ethnographie der Nordlichen Sangtam-Naga (Lophomi), Assam', *Anthropos*, Bd 34, H 1, Pp. 207-245.
- Means, Gordon P. 2000. "Human Sacrifice and Slavery in the Unadministered Areas of Upper Burma During the Colonial Era." *Sajourn*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Pp. 184-221.
- Classen, Constance and Howes, David. 2006. 'The Museum as Sensescape: Western sensibilities and indigenous artifacts', in Elizabeth Edwards, Ruth Phillips and Chris Gosden (eds.) *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, Berg, Oxford and New York. P. 209.
- Hodson, T.C. 1909. 'Headhunting among the hill tribes of Assam', *Folklore*, Vol. XX.131-143.
- Hodson, T.C. 1911. *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*, Delhi: R.B Publications.
- Hutton, J.H. 1921a. *The Angami Nagas*, London: Macmillan.
- Hutton, J.H. 1921b. *The Sema Nagas*, London: Macmillan.
- Hutton, J.H. 1930. 'Head-hunting', *Man in India*, v. 10.
- Johnstone, James. 1896, *My Experience in Manipur and Naga Hills*, London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company.
- Kikon, Dolly. 2008. 'Borders, Bagaans and Bazaars: Locating the Foothills Along the Naga Hills in Northeast India. An essay', *Biblio*, 5-6.
- Mills, J.P. 1922. *The Lotha Nagas*, London: Macmillan and Co.
- Mills, J.P. 1926. *Ao Nagas*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Mills, J.P. 1995. *The Pangsha Letters: An Expedition to Rescue Slaves in the Naga Hills*, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum.
- Morrison, Charles. 1984. 'Three styles on Imperial Ethnography'. *Knowledge and Society*. Vol. 5. Pp.141-169.
- Nag, Sajal. 2012. 'Rescuing Imagined Slaves: Colonial State, Missionary and Slavery Debate in Northeast India (1908-1920)', *Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1, Pp. 57-71.
- Risley, H.H. The Methods of Ethnography. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, Vol.41.Pp. 8-19.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1991. 'Anthropology and the Savage Slot,' in Richard G. Fox (ed.) *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Santa Fe: SAR press.

- Tattler*, 30 March 1927. Butlers Collection, British Library, IOR/Mss Eur F 116/84.
- Van Schendel, Willem. 1992. *The Bengal Borderlands: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London: Anthem Press.
- Van Schendel, W., Wolfgang, M., and Aditya, K. D. 2001. *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Living in a Borderland*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited.
- Van Ham, Peter and Jamie Soul. 2008. *Expedition Naga: Diaries from the Hills of Northeast India 1921-1937; 2002-2006*. Suffolk: The Antique Collection Club.
- 'Village Guard Nagaland Souvenir (1957-2007)'. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary publication, Kohima: Government of Nagaland.
- Guha, Sumit. 1999. *Environment and Ethnicity in India: 1200-1991*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohn, Bernard. S. 1996. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Illustrated London News. 1938. 'Headhunters Never Before Visited by Europeans', June 26. P. 1234.
- Leach, Edmund. 1960. 'The Frontiers of Burma', *Comparative Study in Society and History*, Vol. 3, No. 1: 49-68.
- Lotha, Abraham. 2007. *A History of Naga Anthropology (1832-1947)*, Dimapur: Chimpumuseum Press.
- Lotha, Abraham. 2009. 'Rearticulating Naga Nationalism', thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the PhD thesis in anthropology submitted at the New York University, Anthropology Department.
- Oppitz Michael, Thomas Kaiser, Alban von Stockhausen and Marion Wettstein (eds.). 2008. *Naga Identities: Changing Local Cultures in the Northeast of India*. Gent: Snoeck Publishers.
- Pels, S.E. 1874. 'The Naga and Neighboring Tribes', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, Vol 3, No 3. Pp. 476-481.
- Pels, S.E. 1882. 'Notes on the Wild Tribes Inhabiting the so-called Naga Hills, on our North East Frontier of India. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, Vol xi, pp. 56-183. 196-214.
- Rai, Man Bahdur. 1956. 'Tour Report of the Tuensang Frontier Division', Record Cell, NHTA files, Arunachal State Secretariat Archives.
- Skaria, Ajay. 1999, *Hybrid History: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Stirn, Aglaja and Peter Van Ham. 2003. *The hidden world of the Naga: living traditions in Northeast India and Burma*, Munich and New York: Prestel.
- Von Stockhausen, Alban. 2009. 'Naga: Lineage of a Term'. Paper presented at the Writing the North East conference, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Centre for Historical Studies (CHS), New Delhi, 14-16<sup>th</sup> January 2009.
- Von Stockhausen, Alban. 2014. *Imag(in)ing the Nagas: The pictorial Ethnography of Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche.
- West, Andrew. 1994. 'Writing the Nagas: A British officers' ethnographic tradition', Vol 8, No 1- 4, pp. 55-88