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One of the small joys the election season offers ordinary villagers in Nagaland is the inevitable feasts hosted by politicians. In the Chakhesang Naga village I shall call Phugwumi, and where I was carrying out research when the 2013 State Legislative Elections ensued, election feasts became twice-daily events from roughly two weeks prior to Polling Day. Meals were partaken in five political camps – usually a part of an open compound cordoned off by wood and bamboo, set around an open fire, and decorated with party posters and flags – presided over by three rivaling politicians who supplied the camp(s) of their followers with a steady inflow of rice, vegetables and meat. Of these ingredients meat was the one crucial, and some days an entire pig or buffalo was walloped towards a camp, then cut, cooked and eaten. Supplied too, albeit less openly, was liquor; cans of beer and cheap, and sometimes not so cheap, rums and whiskies. Less openly because Nagaland is designated a ‘dry state’, the outcome of a persistent lobby by the locally influential Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC), which construes the intake of alcohol as an abomination before God. Politicians fear being caught contravening law and church endowed morality, and therefore entrust the task of distributing liquor, which is invariably demanded, to one of their aides. This wining and dining was crucial during the election period, and its historical imprints, intricacies, and its contested moralities today, the subject of this article.

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demanded, to one of their aides.¹ This wining and dining was crucial during the election period, and its historical imprints, intricacies, and its contested moralities today, the subject of this article.

In the run up to the 2013 elections, the standard of generous politicians and feasting villagers came under heightened scrutiny and criticism in Nagaland. The NBCC, in its self-assigned task to morally and spiritually guide the Nagaland populace, launched a state-wide Clean Election Campaign, and, among a host of other things, sought to impress on local electors that accepting food and drinks from politicians amounted to being bribed and deceived. In a booklet the NBCC published and distributed through their many associated churches, they asserted: ‘if somebody makes any offer of alcohol or other intoxicant or give you dinner to vote or not to vote for a particular candidate it is bribery and punishable’ (NBCC 2012: 10). By reasoning thus, the NBCC’s stance only subscribed to the ethics, guidelines, and rules set by India’s Election Commission, which prohibits election feasts for they offer electors undue inducements – or even perceive them as outright attempt by politicians to procure votes – so belying the spirit of free and independent judgments on part of India’s

¹ In local parlance Nagaland is dubbed a Christian state as well over 90% of its populace professes Christianity and because Christian discourse, rituals and symbols often permeate the minute texture of everyday life (see Joshi 2012).

voters. It is despite this proscription that election feasts are reported in places across the Subcontinent, and in an effort to waylay the Election Commission's inspecting gaze some politicians reportedly try to garb election feasts as religious or social functions (see Piliavsky 2014: 161-168). For the state of Karnataka, for instance, this led the Election Commission to remark:

A doubt has been raised with regard to participation of candidates in the community kitchen (langar, bhoj, etc.) organised by religious communities in their religious institutions as a matter of customary practice and the bhoj/feast, etc. offered as a matter of social practice following a ritual ceremony, like marriage, death, etc (Indian Election Commission 2013:26).

The doubt, obviously, was about who paid the food bills, or even stood behind organizing the event. Piliavsky (2014) noted an increasing ingenuity among politicians across North-India to organise the election feasts their supporters expected – and which the politicians themselves saw as the most convincing and effective way to promise and symbolize the largesse voters sought in their political representatives – without attracting attention from the Election Commission, and risking its wrath. They feasted electors, for instance, in events camouflaged as wedding ceremonies or birthday parties, but ones without any brides, grooms, or birthday boys and girls to be found (ibid.: 165-66). In

comparison, most of Nagaland's politicians ostensibly saw no reason to cover-up their election feasts, certainly not in Phugwumi where such feasts took place for everybody to see, and for every supporter to enjoy.

When Bayart captivantly characterized democratic politics across Sub-Saharan Africa as a 'politics of the belly', he qualified that this figurative metaphor did not carry any normative judgments, but that it was informed by a 'system of historic action whose origins must if possible be understood in the Braudelian *longue durée*' (1993: ix; emphasis in original). Pace Bayart, the pages that follow seek to illustrate that rather than the moral abomination and electoral fraud the NBCC and the Election Commission perceive the eating and drinking chapters of elections, in Nagaland such feasts are also informed by a particularistic set of age-old practices and principles that socially elevated those capable to act as 'providers', and in which the throwing of feasts near-mechanically amplified a feast-giver's social status, standing, and sway – a practice known in anthropological annals as the Naga feast of merit. Crucially, then and now, I pose, it was not just a wealthy and ambitious villager's gesture to host a feast, or indeed feasts, but it was morally and socially expected of him to do so, as intrinsic to a wider moral economy and order of social stratification in which the

less prosperous could count on the village rich to now and then showcase their largesse.²

In what follows I will start with a historical perspective and discuss the traditional practice and morals that underlay the Naga feast of merit, common to most – though not all – Naga tribes, that is until Christian missionaries sought and succeeded to abolish it. Then we return to the ethnographic present as it unfolded in Phugwumi and witness how, despite the NBCC and the Election Commission ruling against them, election feasts became regular and lavish displays in the run up to Polling Day. Exploring their inner-logic, significances and complexities, we will hear from those with their bellies stuffed to find out the values, reasoning, and meanings they attached to being fed during the election period. But we will also hear from local criticasters, among them mostly those closely engaged with the church. But besides church-workers alone, some Phugwumi elders are also critical of today's election feasts, albeit for different reasons. What they allege, as I will discuss, is

² The term 'moral economy' is one heavily loaded and my usage of it here builds upon its initial theorizing by Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976) and their assertion – positioned against conventional rational choice and overtly utilitarian perspectives – that economic and political action – of which throwing feasts is one – is governed by patterns of social and moral norms, values and expectations that exist within a historically situated 'moral universe.'

that elections feasts are but a flawed imitation of erstwhile feasts of merit. To be clear, the relationship between traditional feasts of merit and contemporary election feasts may not be deterministic (we cannot know, for instance, whether election feasts would have taken place in Nagaland if there had been no historical antecedent in lavish feasting), yet I do postulate the presence of salient similarities in the inner social and moral logic that guide and inform both types of feasting. Before proceeding, the next section briefly sketches the historical and ethnographic context in which democratic institutions, ideas, and practices unfolded in Nagaland.

The setting

Nagaland's experience with modern, procedural democracy, Chasie (2001: 247) evaluates as 'complex, difficult and painful.' It was complex because it caught Naga society 'in a transition from tradition to modernity' (ibid), difficult because of the 'disparate nature of the [Naga] tribes', and painful because democratic institutions were introduced amidst 'the unresolved Naga political issue, with simultaneous "insurgency" operating during the entire period' (ibid.). It is the still lingering demand for Naga Independence – albeit today often framed (and toned down) to an 'alternative arrangement' of sorts – and the challenge this poses to the authority and legitimacy of the

local state machinery that admittedly makes Nagaland hardly a straightforward place for ventures into the substance of India's democratic life.

It was in its quest for Independence that the Naga National Council (NNC), which under the Presidency of A.Z. Phizo spearheaded the Naga Movement, boycotted the country's general elections of 1952, 1957, 1962.³ In 1963, after nearly a decade of devastating clashes between Naga and Indian Armies, Jawaharlal Nehru changed gear and carved Nagaland out of Assam, as a state within the Indian Union. Although this move was rejected by the NNC, which immediately condemned as 'traitors' and 'reactionaries' any Naga who pledged allegiance to the new state, statehood, and the jobs, schemes and subsidies it brought, was hailed by a section of Naga leaders who turned themselves into a first generation of politicians and bureaucrats. The first state elections were conducted in 1964, after which elections became both regular and gradually also participatory (Amer 2014), even though the NNC and nascent

³ According to Lanunungsang Ao (2002: 49): 'When the first Indian Parliamentary General Election was extended to Nagaland, they [the NNC and the Naga more widely] resorted to civil disobedience and completely boycotted the election on 25, January 1951 [sic]... when the second parliamentary election took place in 1957, the Naga people once again boycotted the election. Not a single Naga candidate fought for election nor voted in that election.'

Naga nationalist groups continue to condemn them as 'Indian elections imposed on Naga soil.' After multiple dissensions, splits, and rivalries within, the Naga cause today is primarily represented by contending factions of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN), which is currently in a long-drawn ceasefire with the Central Government. But even as negotiations are taking place, and have taken place for over fifteen years, this has not led to a permanent solution, keeping Nagaland's political landscape both multi-layered and volatile.⁴

Within Nagaland, my ethnography is drawn from the Chakhesang Naga, one of the state's seventeen state-recognized tribes and the inhabitants of Phek District to the east of Kohima, Nagaland's state capital. The Chakhesang is a new tribe. New in the real sense of first seeing daylight in 1946 when several village clusters hitherto part of other tribes resolved to break-away and fuse into a tribe of their own making, to be called Chakhesang. Among the Chakhesang Naga, Phugwumi constitutes the largest village. Akin to many Naga villages, Phugwumi sits perched high on a hilltop from where it stands guard over its neatly excavated paddy fields

⁴ No account on contemporary democracy in Nagaland may be considered complete without a discussion on what is locally referred to as the 'underground factor', but this will not figure in our discussion, and in any case has little bearing on the wining and dining elements of Nagaland's elections.

below. As Polling Day drew closer electoral politics came to dominate most conversations and actions of the villagers, most of who openly associated themselves with one or another candidate.

State-wise, the Naga Peoples' Front (NPF), which had been the ruling government since 2003 after ousting a nearly two decade rule by the Congress Party, sought a hat-trick, and most opined the Party stood good chances of achieving this. However, with besides the sitting MLA (NPF Party), also two former Ministers and a promising newcomer contesting the election fray, Phugwumi's constituency was thought of as an especially competitive one, and in the wake of the election supporters of all four candidates had reasons to believe they were in the driving seat.

The quest for votes was locally often ferocious, at times tense, and while voters based their decision on whom to give their votes on complex and multiple reasons, the throwing of continuous feasts for supporters was a strategy followed by all four candidates, and is the sole focus of the remainder of this essay.⁵ To start discussing this, the next

⁵ For reasons I will not delve into here, one of the constituency's four candidates had been proscribed by Phugwumi's Village Council from campaigning within the village, and hence no camps and election feasts were organized by him or his aides. Two of the four candidates belonged to Phugwumi itself. Both Phugwumi candidates

section adopts the ethnographic *longue durée* to historically and culturally situate the local principles, merits, and moralities of feasting.

The Morals and Merits of Feasting among the Naga

Election feasts, we noted, are hardly unique to Nagaland but occur in places across the Subcontinent. For Rajasthan, and North-India more widely, Piliavsky (2014) evocatively traced their practice to age-old patron-client relationships and the vintage Jajmani system to which they were intrinsic. If in the past “‘feeding’ and “‘eating” – both the act and the metaphor – was the crucial link between donors and servants’ (2014: 160), a similar logic and cultural idiom, Piliavsky writes, exists between politicians and voters today:

the language of feeding is the key moral idiom in which people evaluate politicians and conceive of the ways in which politicians relate, or ought to relate, to their constituents... [they title of] feeder express the conception of patron as genitor and provider, as a source of both sustenance and personal substance for his clientele (ibid.: 163-164).

But while across North-India the inner-logic of politics as patronage (see Piliavsky 2014) may be informed by long-standing patron-client relationships, expressed through an evocative cultural idiom of feeding and eating, and culminating into a set of values

established two camps, while the sitting MLA nourished the remaining one.

and expectations thence symbolized through politicians' hosting election feasts, no traditional patron-client system, or an otherwise hierarchical and ritual division of labour, ever had much prominence among the Naga. And yet, if anything, election feasts in Nagaland tend not to be the single-day events reported elsewhere, but usually last for days and weeks prior to Polling Day.⁶ Hence if not a remnant or remapping of patron-client relationships and Jajmani structures and sentiments, what, then, might election feasts among the Naga be a 'changing continuity' (Schulte-Nordholt 2005), of? To start exploring this, the writings of Von Fürer-Haimendorf, the first trained anthropologist to study the Naga through prolonged participant observation, appear to provide us with an important clue.

Researching the Naga in the 1930s, Fürer-Haimendorf witnessed 'hundreds and thousands of megalithic monuments' with each of them erected to commemorate the 'fame and generosity' of a particular feast-giver (1976[1939]: 19) in whose name the megalith had been erected. On further inquiry, he found that, among the Naga, one's social status an standing did not rely on the

accumulation of wealth, but that social ascendance could be achieved through a person dispensing his wealth by throwing lavish feast, an elaborate social institution popularized as a feast of merit. Haimendorf had hardly been the first visitor to the (then) Naga Hills to notice this local custom and the moral and social principles it relied on. Half a century earlier, Colonel Woodthorpe, travelling far and wide in the area, put to paper his sheer astonishment about the long rows of monoliths he observed in villages across the Naga Hills. He commented: '[these monoliths] are either monumental or simply commemorative of some big feast given by a rich man.' He also noticed how a great deal of effort and sweat went into pulling and erecting such stones:

These stones are often of great size, and are dragged up into place on wooden sledges shaped like the prow of a boat, the keel curving upwards. On this sledge the stone is levered, and carefully lashed with canes and creepers, and to this the men, sometimes to the number of several hundreds, attached themselves in a long line, and putting rollers beneath the sledge, they pull it along until it has been brought to the spot where the stone is to be erected' (Woodthorpe 1881: 53-4).

The monolith, once erected, came, in a way, to inhabit the virtues and achievements of the feast-giver in whose honour it was erected, and continues to enshrine them today. While joining Athe [a Chokri classificatory term for grandfather] for village walks, as I

⁶ It might be qualified that, among certain Naga tribes, certain clans were traditionally associated with specific ritual functions. However, such ritual acts were first and foremost symbolic and performed sporadically, and not part of an elaborate ritual division of everyday labour.

did often, I noticed how he was able to relate virtually each of Phugwumi's many monoliths to a particular feast-giver, even if the feasts had taken place several generations ago. For an aspirant villager to climb the social ladder, to expand his sway and have his voice heard more loudly, a single feast would hardly do the trick. In the course of his life an ambitious person was expected to provide a series of feasts (locally called *zhotho muza*). Such feasts were ritually sanctioned with each of them allowing the feast-giver a further display that denoted his social ascendancy. In Phugwumi, the symbolic index of social stratification would start with a feast-giver's right to wear a specifically embroidered shawl, followed by the permission to decorate his house with X-shaped boards and carvings, to ultimately large monoliths being erected in his name. Put differently, by performing the feast of merit the feast-giver in a way absolved material wealth, but accumulated material symbols. As a social institution, the feast of merit therefore is both an equalizing force in economic terms, and one fostering a certain social hierarchy.

On a tour through the Eastern Angami area, now Chakhesang, Fürer-Haimendorf stumbled onto a large open compound with houses on two sides:

Cross barge-boards rose from the gables of one of the houses, like the enormous antlers of some proud stag. Proud, too, must have been the owner of these wooden

horns, for they showed that he had given several of those expensive Feasts of Merits whereby the Naga rises in social prestige and in the esteem of his neighbours' (1976 [1939]: 9).

In Phugwumi, a complete series would involve nine feasts, after which a row of nine monoliths would have been erected in the feast-giver's name, a life-long exercise that involved such grandiose expenses that only three villagers are remembered to have ever accomplished this. In fact, most villagers would never find themselves in the position to throw a single feast, and instead relied on the village wealthy to, now and then, enable them to lavish on meat and rice-beer. Fürer-Haimendorf explained:

The wealth of the ambitious was employed to provide food and enjoyment for the less prosperous members of the community, for at a Feast of Merit there was meat, rice and rice-beer for every man, woman and child in the village" (1976 [1939]: 47).

While few villagers were able, everyone aspired to be a feast-giver, and this ambition, the colonial officer J.P. Mills wrote, had a stimulating impact on local agriculture. It is worth quoting him at some length:

the essence of this system [Feast of Merit] is that every male Naga, if he is to acquire merit and status in this world and the next, must give a series of feasts, every detail of which is strictly prescribed... they begin with the sacrifice of a pig and end with that of at least one domestic bison garnished, so to speak, with quantities of cattle and pigs. An immense amount of rice and rice beer is consumed, and more

rice than money goes to the buying of the animals. The Feasts therefore directly simulate agriculture. More important still are the privileges they win for the giver. At stated stages in the series he and his wife gain the right to wear special cloths, which increase in splendour and in the elaborateness of their embroidery the further he advances. He is also entitled to embellish his house with carved posts and beams. It is important to remember that, no matter how rich a man may be, he can win the rights to these cloths and carvings only by giving feasts' (1935: 134).

Seen as a historical social institution, the feast of merit thus seemingly invoked contradictory principles, combining tendencies of economic redistribution and social differentiation, of both socialism and snobbery, but crucially it vested social eminence in a person's ability to act as a provider, not, say, in mere accruing.

Unfortunately, the feast of merit was among the first sacrifices mostly American and Welsh missionaries demanded from new Naga converts, interpreting them as an ostentatious wastage of wealth and its free-flowing rice-beer as inducing immoralities of sorts. Its gradual abolishment had wide ramifications: the same J.P. Mills commented: 'a great number of very fine embroidery patterns and carvings designs owe their existence entirely to this system of Feast of Merit and will continue to exist only as long as the system does' (1935: 134), then lamenting: 'one has only to stroll through a Christian village. There may be many rich

men with granaries bursting with rice, but not a fine cloth or carving you will see' (ibid.).

If Mills lamented the missionaries' abolishment in terms of the fine clothes and carvings no longer embroidered and engraved, for ordinary villagers it also punctured a core aspect of a moral economy that benefitted and entertained them. In Phugwumi some village elders still vividly recall, and sometimes feel nostalgic to, the feasts of merit they witnessed in their youth. A number of houses continue to flaunt the meticulously carved wooden walls and cross barge boards distinctive of the house of a feast-giver, but these decorations are of no recent manufacture. After the majority of villagers took to the new religion from the late 1950s onward, feasts of merit saw a steep decline in Phugwumi, then died out completely.⁷ Except perhaps, somewhat paradoxically, on Christmas Day when a Christianised version – that is a feast of merit without rice-beer – is invariably organised for the congregation by a wealthy villager, usually a politician, contractor, or a high-ranking government officer, and who, in return for his generosity, is offered a shawl, and is collectively prayed for during the church service.

⁷ Compared to surrounding villages Christianity came late to Phugwumi. The first villager converted in 1947 but it was to take several years before Christianity became the dominant, and later only, religion in the village.

But even if now abolished, as a traditional social institution the feast of merit provides a valuable window into values, norms and expectations that informed social differentiations, a moral economy, as well as local notions that surrounded village leadership. To emphasize, the decision to throw a feast was hardly optional on part of the rich and ruling, but morally expected of them. Summing up the pre-state qualities expected of village rulers among the pre-state Naga, Hokishe Sema, a former Nagaland Chief-Minister, reflected in his memoirs:

These [village] rulers have some person distinction acquired by them through their performances of sacrifices and good judgments. They also have a great economic power and their capacity to help the poor and the needy in the village is greatly appreciated. They provide food, shelter, and clothing for the needy in an emergency. It is a great shame for the rulers if their subjects go to other villages for food. It is the duty of these rulers to ensure the security and welfare of their subjects (1986: 168).

While in Phugwumi there existed no mechanical linkage between becoming a feast-giver and becoming a village leader as, then and now, the wealth and wisdom needed to guide the villagers are known to be two different domains altogether, while village elders were invariably ascribed more wisdom than others. However, village leaders were often, though not always, also known as feast-givers, and, in any case, were expected to be

capable to act as providers and guarantors, as Hokishe Sema's quote well captures.⁸ The next sections attempts to show that it is in this traditional feast-of merit, the practices, principles, and morals that lied beneath them, that the inner-logic of today's election feasts is vested, even though, as will become clear, such feasts are no straightforward remapping of the feast of merit and today draw contentious judgments.

The Conflicting moralities of Election Feasts

The first episode of food entering the election domain in Phugwumi was about five months prior to Election Day when a pair of trucks pulled into the village. Both were stacked with fifty-kilogram bags of rice, one for each Phugwumi household. The rice had been arranged and paid for by an aspiring politician. 'In compensation for the year's bad harvest', the generous politician had explained

⁸ The Naga traditional polity, it must be stressed, was far from heterogeneous. Digging through the Naga archive we find accounts about chiefs and democrats (Jacobs et al 1990), nobles and commoners (Fürer-Haimendorf 1973), village councillors (Mills 1926), clan elders (Mills 1922), powerful chiefs (Fürer Haimendorf 1939; Hutton 1921b), and the conspicuous absence of chiefs (Hutton 1921a). Elsewhere I proposed how the structure and ethos of past polities can be linked to present-day voting behaviour among the Naga by distinguishing four electoral models (Angh or Kingship model, village consensus candidate model, clan model, and household model), the presence of which indicates 'how different Naga tribes, instead of adjusting themselves to modern democratic ideals, adjusted democracy to themselves' (Wouters 2014: 59).

as his aides went about distributing the heavy bags. ‘An electoral strategy’, most in the village understood.

But sacks of uncooked paddy is hardly the kind of feeding associated with election feasts, which started in fullness in the weeks and days preceding Polling Day. Three out of the four candidates opened camps in the village (with two of them maintaining two each – a general and a youth camp). It was in these camps that supporters came together and discussed the latest political developments, digested facts and rumours, devised new strategies, but most of all to eat lunches and dinners, and to enjoy a good time with friends and neighbours. The food prepared was always lavish, and never without meat, which for most in the village remained too scarce for everyday use in ordinary times. Such excessive feasting was also part and parcel to elections in the Naga inhabited hills of adjacent Manipur, and in the run up to the 2012 Manipur state elections a piece in a local daily read:

Election fever has gripped the hill district of Manipur in spite of the social impasse triggered by several issues with the latest being the new district creation demand boom. However, these issues are not the common worry for the intending candidates. With speculations doing the round that assembly election in Manipur is likely to be held in five months’ time, election related programmes are underway. However, most of the intending candidates are finding it hard to satiate their followers when [it] comes to feasting. Feasting is the

all-time favourite of all the election-related occasions in the hill districts... With pork being the all-time favourite, the difficulty in finding pigs has become a great headache for the tribal politicians... Knowing the situation, butchers and those farmers are set to do brisk business. A matured pig costs now anything between Rs 25.000 to 30.000 in most parts of hill districts’ (Newmai News Network 08-09-2012)

Securing sufficient meat posed an organisational challenge to politicians in and around Phugwumi, and it was still many months before the elections that rumours spread conveying that a certain politician had approached ‘this or that person’ with the request to fatten his pig(s) with the promise to procure its meat during the election period. To satisfy demand, politicians also imported meat from neighbouring Assam, but electors invariably preferred meat from animals locally reared, and a politician supplying ‘Assam meat’ ran the risk of causing both grouchy bellies and tongues.

Akin to the past feast of merit, this element of provisioning on part of politicians was not just a voluntary gesture. To the contrary, electors expected to be fed during the election season. Throwing feasts was seen as a candidate’s moral obligation, as a bondage that came with his ambitions and aspirations to find acceptance as a leader (and shame on those aspirant leaders stingy in their supplies!). Most ‘eaters’ in Phugwumi testified to this logic; ‘he wants to be our

leader, so he must feast us', or simply 'it is his duty to feed us' Some others, especially youths, appeared to reason less in traditional but more in transactional terms: 'I am helping in his campaign, he must feed me.' But if the moral obligation on part of leaders to feed, and the expectation of ordinary villagers to be feasted, shows clear parallels to practices and principles of past feasts of merit, today's election feasts have also become sites of conflicting judgments and moralities, to which we will now turn.

If election feasts were morally denounced and configured as distorted electoral practice by the NBCC and the Election Commission, in Phugwumi there was a clear moral reasoning to such feasts. We already saw how 'eaters' relied on a pre-existing moral framework, derived from the traditional feasts of merit and perennial notions of good leadership, to explain and justify their eating at the behest of an aspiring leader, but little could draw as vicious moral disapproval than witnessing the same person allowing himself to be feasted in camps belonging to rivalling candidates. In fact, no self-respecting villager would fill his stomach from two camps. Paradoxically, it is in such restrictions that we might find a deeper moral critique. This is so because in a traditional feast of merit all villagers would eat, irrespective of the rivalries and divisions that existed within the village – in fact, not showing up for a feast

could draw instant moral disapproval.

Election feasts, in contrast, do not exhibit such a sense of community and inclusiveness as they are meant for political followers only, and it is this exclusivity in feasting which, some Phugwumi elders tell, only exemplifies the disunity and discord electoral politics has brought to the village.

There were other controversies and convulsions. Election feasts are excessively lavish and certainly a great deal lengthier compared to the nine feasts that closed the traditional cycle of feasts of merit, which moreover an ambitious feast-giver would take his entire life-time to arrange, and even then often hardly managed more than a few. Such excessive feasting is in parts, I pose, because the wealth politicians are thought to accrue during their tenures has become locally thought of excessive too, and feasts continue to serve as a method and expectation for its dispensing, or at least so for those seeking to enter the political realm. A prime (and related) critique is the ambiguous source of today's wealth. If past feasts of merit were thrown as the result of a feast-giver's many years of toil and sweat exerted in cultivating his fields, election feasts today are thought to be (indirectly) financed by state monies, thus not out of his 'real' and hard labour (most villagers assert that only cultivating fields amounts to 'real labour', as opposed to those who 'sit' in government offices). This

difference is crucial, and the notion that election feasts are (indirectly) paid by state monies, rather than through personal drudgery – while not changing villagers’ expectations to be feasted by their leaders – metaphorically changes the taste of the meat, and reduces the veneration and esteem bestowed on today’s feast-givers.

There also exists a growing realisation that politicians, once elected in office, waste little time on reimbursing themselves on past expenses, plus the additional expenses needed for the throwing of feasts during the next election.⁹ ‘The more we eat now’, as one Phugwumi villager explained, ‘the more he [the politician] will eat later.’¹⁰ Such a sequence goes against the grain of the moral economy that stirred feasts of merit, which although created social differentiation, simultaneously worked as an economic equalizer, while, back then, it would take a feast giver many years and hard labour to regain his previous position of wealth (only to be expected to feast it away again). Electors understand this, and if Nagaland politicians

have been accused of abusing democracy to ‘an industry to earn through malpractice’ (Kiewhuo 2002: 61), during election seasons ‘campaign inducements [of which feasts make only one dimension] becomes a sort of industry’ (Amer 2014: 4).¹¹ Voters can however be as cunning as their politicians, and in the run up to Polling Day the youth president of one of the candidates, and whose duties included presiding over, and supplying, the youth camp, complained about the countless troubles and demands he had to face on a daily basis.

‘This is the biggest headache to manage’, he pointed to a half-empty bottle of whiskey that stood between us and then refilled mine and his glass:

They [the party youth] demand to be given drinks every night. First we gave them simple rums and whiskies [the cheapest locally available] but now with Polling Day coming closer they insist on beer [which is more expensive locally]. If we don’t give them what they want, they will become very different to control. They might even shift camps [join another political party]. All the time I need to call my boss [the politician] to ask for more money to be able to satisfy them.¹²

⁹ Pointing to the money play during Nagaland Elections, Ezung (2012: 2) writes: ‘A person who is elected through the use of money will always try to cover up the expenses he/she made during the election and will also try to retain some extra money for the next election.’ See also Nuh (1986), Dev (1988), Misra (1987; 2000), and Kiewhuo (2002).

¹⁰ The politician ‘eating’, in local idiom, referred to him trying to recover his electoral expenses and more by appropriating state resources

¹¹ Such campaign inducements hardly only concern election feasts, but involved a wider assortment of inducements, including monetary ones.

¹² Of course, the very occurrence of such explicit demands is another subversion of past feasts of merits, in which the act of ‘providing’ was seen as self-evident, to be offered by a wealthy villager, not demanded by ordinary villagers.

While rice-beer had long been part of the local diet, and crucial to a successful feast of merit, missionaries had ferociously preached against its intake, and it is therefore perhaps not surprising that it is the free flow of liquor during election periods that especially worried today's church leaders. It was the very abolishment of political camps, in which liquor was often partaken, that was preached by the NBCC, which qualified those camps as 'breeding grounds of all kinds of malpractices such as [the] use of alcohol, drugs, gambling, sexual immoralities, violence... [and other] unfavourable and abominable activities before God' (NBCC 2012: 6-7).

Responding to the NBCC's call, some 'godly' Village Councils in Nagaland prohibited politicians to wine and dine electors, and notified their decision in local dailies, for instance: 'Public Information: the Diphupar Village Council... has unanimously resolved to ban [the] opening of mess for all political parties' (cited in Morung Express 18-2-2013).

Phugwumi's village pastor, too, thought little good came from political camps and election feasts, but the Village Council Chairperson saw no possibility to restrict these practices – 'we can't stop it. It has become part of every election', he explained. He himself however avoided to be seen near any political camp, and so did Phugwumi's church-workers and others who rated NBCC's

divinely-inspired guidelines above the earthly pleasures of eating and drinking.¹³

While the pulpit was the NBCC's chosen platform to counter the wining and dining dimensions of elections, some local (church) organisations went further, and in the wake of Polling Day a local daily reported how in Phek District:

several surveillance groups have been formed and check posts are set up in almost all villages spearheaded by the CPO [Chakhesang Public Organisation] and CBCC [Chakhesang Baptist Church Council]... the frisking of vehicles started from February 9 [Polling Day was scheduled for the 23th that month] and so far 1021 bottles of various brands have been seized and were destroyed in the presence of the administration and the police (cited in Morung Express 13-02-2013).

A handful of those 1021 seized bottles came from the trunk of the vehicle I happened to be traveling in to witness a political rally in the nearby administrative town, to which I had been invited that morning by the party-worker who sat behind the wheel. Nearing the town, our vehicle had been stopped by volunteers of the Women Wing of the Chakhesang Baptist Church Council (CBCC) who duly frisked the vehicle. Little did I know of the whiskies present in the trunk, which were solemnly

¹³ The NBCC election guidelines included a great deal more than a prohibition on feasting and the intake of liquor. Among others they warned against vote-buying, proxy-voting, double entries in the electoral role, and the use of intimidation and undue pressure to win votes.

confiscated and subsequently stalled out on the road-side as a display of the party-workers ‘immorality.’ As we drove on, the party-worker grumbled about his loss. ‘The Church should confine itself to praying and feasting for the election, not checking vehicles.’

To recapture: what was taking place in Phugwumi, and in places across Nagaland, was not a simple exchange of meals and liquor for votes, the obtaining of which required a politician a great deal more effort. Instead, providing meaty feasts and liquor answered time-honoured local practices and principles, informed by a moral economy in which the village rich and ruling were expected to be generous. And yet, if the practices and principles surrounding election feasts show multiple parallels with past feasts of merit, its practice today simultaneously diverges from it in crucial aspects, as this section too has sought to illustrate, and which shroud present-day electoral feasts in an aura of moral ambivalence. This critique, with at its core that election feasts do not showcase the inclusiveness and sense of community central to feast of merits, as well as the morally ambiguous origins of the monies used to finance them, remains however of a different nature from the critique levied by the NBCC and the Election Commission, whose disposition remains short and simple: ‘No feasts!’

Conclusion

If the NBCC and India’s Election Commission look upon election feasts as distorted and dissolute electoral practice unbecoming of India’s deepening (Heller 2009) and flourishing democracy (Guha 2009; Khilnani 2007), when evaluated in the ethnographic *longue durée* election feasts among the Naga acquire a significance of their own. Rather than undue attempts to woo and buy votes, to most in Phugwumi the principle of provisioning – in the very literal sense of being occasionally wined and dined – has always been integral to their understandings of social differentiation and leadership, to the extent that a leader unable to feed others was often no leader at all.

While it must be emphasized that, certainly in Phugwumi, there existed no mechanical linkage between a feast-giver and a village leader given that seniority and wisdom were evaluated in their own right, the jump from a position of social pre-eminence achieved through the throwing of feasts to one of political sway and prominence was invariably easier to accomplish compared to an ambitious villager without the track-record of a feast-giver. It is akin to traditional feasts of merit that during today’s election feasts both feeders and eaters gain, the former in uplifting their local standing, which certainly helps their election bid, and the latter in being able to lavish on meat otherwise scarce, and

for some to drink the liquor they otherwise find hard to obtain or afford. Emphasizing the similarities in inner logic, moral values, and past practices that underlie both feasts of merit and election feasts, however, is far from arguing that election feasts are a direct and uncomplicated recasting of feasts of merit. If anything, as some Phugwumi elders insist, contemporary election feasts – the way they are funded and their exclusivist character – are but a flawed imitation of past feasts of merit.

As noted, election feasts are reported not only in Nagaland but in places across the Indian polity. It would however be wrong to assert that such feasts rely everywhere on a same inner-logic and cultural idiom, and if they have been linked to a resurgence of patron-client relationships, and a cultural idiom derived from Jajmani systems of sorts in Rajasthan and Northern India more widely (Piliavsky 2014), it is in the absence of such pre-existing social patterns that election feasts in Nagaland are not just held, but perhaps well outdo those in most other parts of the Subcontinent.

On a final note; Nagaland's spectrum of political parties has been criticized for its staunchly 'non-ideological character' (Amer 2014: 6), evidence of which commentators find in the frequent cross-carpeting and party hopping on part of politicians. While Nagaland's electoral politics is indeed not a politics of manifestos, party visions, and

public platforms,¹⁴ this might not justify characterizing the substance of Nagaland's democracy as non-ideological. If anything, the cultural transitivity of the concept of party and political ideology is complex, and, among the Naga, as this article has shown, a great deal of ideology was in fact vested in an aspirant politician's ability to throw lavish feasts. 🙏

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¹⁴ Although these do play a role, especially when it comes to the tension between regional and national political parties, these often remain of little help to understand local voting behaviour.

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