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Who is a Naga village? The Naga 'village republic' through the ages

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This article engages historically and ethnographically the idea and idiom of the prototypical Naga 'village republic.' Even as the popular imagination of Naga villages as 'republics' traces back to colonial writings, and while much has changed since, I illustrate the remarkable resilience of the 'Naga village' as a political, partisan, self-protective and affective unit. I perceive the Naga village as encompassing a moral community characterized by its temporal and spatial rootedness, and whose inhabitants define themselves through the conduit of historical memory - a nexus locally between history, locality, ancestral genealogy, and identity - and which orients their relations with neighbouring and nearby villages and villagers. More specifically, I discuss the contemporary form and substance of the 'Naga village' in relation to (1) identity and identification, (2) local governance, particularly Nagaland's policy of communitisation, and (3) democracy and elections.

'Nothing much happens these days. We are just fulfilling our duty being here', Chuba, a village defence guard in the Chang Naga hilltop village of Noksen, said while brewing 'pica', or black tea, to taste on a smouldering fire. Firewood was stacked close by. Lunch was to be prepared next. The place is Noksen's village defence post, a makeshift fortification, erected a few steps above the village's towering, newly built, neatly whitewashed Baptist church, but nonetheless complete with an underground escape route, a weapon and ammunition storage stocked with rifles and ammunition, and gun emplacements all around.

Once upon a time this part of present-day Nagaland was not known as Tuensang District, as it is called today, but as 'the land of the free Nagas', or 'Freeland', in reference to its location outside the immediate pale of colonial offices and officers. Of the Chang Naga specifically, Hutton (1987[1929]: iii) wrote, in the 1920s, that they are 'one of those Naga tribes which occupy the hinterland, as it were, of the Naga Hills District stretching

back to the high range, which divides Assam from Burma... the bulk of the tribe being situated in the area of loose political control...' But despite being called 'Freeland' during the colonial era, many of its inhabitants did not consider themselves 'free' by the mid-1950s and joined the A.Z. Phizo-led Naga National Council (NNC) in its armed struggle for Naga Independence. Amongst them were several Noksen villagers.

Besides Chuba, four other men were on duty in the defence post, sitting clustered around the fire-place and wrapped into shawls to keep out the January cold. Their assigned duty: to 'protect' the village against Naga undergrounds of rivaling factions and with whose cadres, called 'national workers', the Noksen villagers shared complex and fluctuating relationships of kinship and resentment, sympathy and dislike, love and hate. Over the past decades, the political theory of the long running Naga Movement fragmented into a kaleidoscope of underground groups identified by often near identical initials – NSCN-IM, NSCN-K, NSCN-KK, NSCN-U, NSCN-R, NNC-NA, NNC-A, GPRN, FGN-NA, FGN-A – and which, to the eyes of villagers, seemed to be endlessly engaged in warring over historical legitimacy, ideological differences, territorial domination, and the collection of taxes and donations. In Noksen, it came to Chuba and his men to protect the villagers from the occasional lawlessness unleashed by one, or multiple, underground factions.

While thus a militia of sorts, Noksen's village guards wore sandals, casual sweaters and simple pants rather than sturdy army boots and neatly ironed uniforms embroidered with insignias and medals, and instead of busying themselves with daily patrols, routine roll-calls, and regimented training exercises, they spend most of their time playing Carrom board, cooking meals, and chewing betel-nut. But then, the salaries paid to them by the government were low; 'next to nothing', as Chuba complained. However, with duties few (only a handful of 12-hour shifts a month) and with agriculture the prime mainstay, any cash at the end of the month was always welcomed.

The necessity of guarding one's village against invaders and foes has long been intrinsic to Nagas' political history, and in days now bygone Noksen villagers variously assumed the role of perpetuator and recipient of raids and retaliations. Before British pacification (a colonial euphemism for the slaying and subduing of recalcitrant populations), it was customarily for each Naga village to guard its village gates against intrusions, ever looming. In Noksen, it was traditionally and ritually the Houngang clan that was associated with the manufacture and maintenance of elaborate village defence walls, even as the task of actually guarding and protecting the village befell on every able-bodied man.

Noksen was hardly exceptional in barricading its surroundings. When Mofatt-Mills toured the Angami Hills in 1854, he found most villages enclosed by 'stiff stockades, deep ditches, bristling with panjies, and massive stone walls' (Mofatt-Mills in Elwin 1969: 229). In times of war, Mofatt-Mills explained:

The hill sides are scraped and thickly studded with panjies. These panjies vary in length from 6 inches to 3 or 4 feet, and give very nasty wounds. Deep pit-falls, artfully concealed by a light layer of earth and leaves, line the path by which the enemy is expected. The entrances to the villagers are through long narrow tortuous lanes, with high banks of stone and earth on either side... admitting only of the passage of one man at a time. These lanes lead up to gates, or rather doorways closed by strong, thick, and heavy wooden doors made out of one piece of wood... When an attack is imminent the roads are often planted thickly with tall strong pegs, which are easily threaded when walking quietly, but are an effectual protection against a sudden rush (ibid: 229-230).

While such elaborate defence works already impeded the entrance of unwelcome guests, in Noksen, akin to most Naga villages, the additional act of 'watching' over the village was a duty vested in *morungs*, or bachelor sleeping-houses, and of which each of Noksen's four *khels* (also known as village wards or sectors) had one. 'To guard the whole village was one of the most important duties of the members of the morung', Mar Pongener (2011: 24) explains. Its members were deployed as 'sentries at the village gates' where they 'kept vigil in turn throughout the day and night' and 'signal the possible intrusion of an enemy.' But if such village and morung-wise defense strategies would frame Noksen's current village guards in a continuous past, in their present form its concrete origins trace back to the late 1950s and to a controversial counter-insurgency strategy adopted by Indian military and paramilitary troops to counteract the then surging sway of the NNC. The NNC's Naga Army relied on villages for food, shelter, monies, intelligence, and, of course, recruits, and it was in a classic attempt to separate 'insurgents' from 'civilians' that Indian Army officers sought to establish village militias. To persuade Naga villages into accepting this military scheme, special development packages were offered to consenting villages and monthly salaries, weaponry, and basic military training to those villagers who enlisted themselves as guards. A former Indian Army general recounted thus: 'We supplied them [village defence guards] with smooth bore muskets and established camps to train them in musketry and simple field-craft. This force proved effective because I gave them the task of guarding only their own village' (Thorat 1986: 83-4). Though most Naga villages swore fidelity to the NNC and could not be won over by the Indian Army, some villages heeded and accepted the enactment of a village defence post on its soil. In its effects, this policy was divisive, pitching certain Naga villages against the Naga Army. The NNC, on its part, labelled any village agreeing to a defence post as 'pro-Indian' and 'reactionary', and promised them a revenge that was lethal.

For long, much longer compared to several neighbouring and nearby villages, Noksen withstood army pressures and resisted the enactment of a village defence post. 'Some of our own boys were part of the Naga Army', Chuba explained. 'They were our fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. How could we possibly accept weapons and training from the Indian Army to shoot at them?' It was only after the gradual decline of the NNC from the mid-1970s onward, the rise of the NSCN in the 1980s, its subsequent

split into warring factions, and when earlier forms of annual 'house-tax' and 'army-ration tax' to the Naga Movement increasingly appeared like 'extortion' that Noksen gave in. A village defence post was built, paid for by the Indian Army, while a couple of dozen villagers were trained as guards. 'Still then', Chuba continued:

We had an understanding with the Naga undergrounds. We told them that we would not attack them if they come to our village, but that they should inform us ahead of their coming. Although there exists a lot of division in the underground, they are our own people struggling for our future. We are not against them. Even taxes they can come and collect. We are ready to contribute. But no force and no extortion. That we told them clearly. We also told them that we would not allow factionalism on our soil. And that if such would happen our guns would not stay quiet.

The guns owned by Chuba and his men indeed did not stay silent when, in 1997, cadres of two rivalling underground groups clashed head-on at the edge of the village, leaving one morung charred and bullet-holes in several houses. 'We chased them away that day', Chuba recalled. 'We emptied our guns at both the factions. We did not care who was who. We had warned them.'

This (rather lengthy) opening vignette introduces us not just to a controversial chapter in Nagaland's perverse theatre of insurgency and counter-insurgency, but it is also illustrative of the remarkable salience of the prototypical 'Naga village' as a political, partisan, and self-protective unit. It is this, the telos and temporalities of the Naga 'village republic', that I wish to trace and place both historically and ethnographically in this essay.

In a way, devoting an article to the 'Naga village' runs the risk of descending into clichés, as the idea of Naga villages as 'republics', somewhat akin to Greek city states (Singh 2004: 13), is an old one, and one endlessly invoked in both scholarly and popular writings of Naga histories and lifeworlds. Its rhetoric also figures prominently in the political discourses circulated by Naga underground groups. The NSCN manifesto tells thus:

From time immemorial, Nagas maintained in their villages a type of self-government which could be called a little republic or a city state... This self-governing system worked excellently and people enjoyed peace and justice... the basis of the Naga system is the village organization.

So pervasive is the image of the Naga village as a self-governing unit that villagers themselves speak about their village as a republic. 'Our village is an independent republic', a villager told me as I started my fieldwork. 'We have our own customary laws and court, and nobody has the right to interfere with our village matters, not the government, not the police.'

Highlighting that Naga society is strongly oriented around the affective unit of ‘the village’, thence, is nothing new, and in itself amounts to no scholarly contribution. What makes me nevertheless write this essay is that this ubiquity of the Naga ‘village republic’, both in writing and popular imagination, usually remains devoid of ethnographic explorations that seek to establish its contemporary form, substance, and continuing analytical relevance. As elsewhere, much has changed among Nagas in the past 150 years or so – changes that can be captured along a number of axes; from a non-state to a state society, ‘animism’ to Christianity, tradition to modernity and ‘developmentalism’, from powerful chiefs and village elders to participatory democracy, or from a social landscape inhabited by disparate clans, villages, and tribes to a political projection of a Naga nation. It is amidst these changes that I explore the resilience of the prototypical Naga village as a foundational, affective, and structuring device of Naga society. I will do so ethnographically by discussing the role of ‘the village’ in relation to (1) identity and identification, (2) local governance, particularly Nagaland’s policy of communitisation, and (3) democracy and elections.

The next section, however, first takes a step back to discuss the Naga ‘village republic’ as it was encountered and written about by colonial administrators and early anthropologists.

The Naga village republic in colonial times

While colonial offices and officers, in their administrative and ethnological structuring and restructuring of the Naga uplands, sought to establish ‘the tribe’ as the pillar of Naga society (Wouters 2017), British administrators were nevertheless acutely aware that it was in the village, not the tribe, that the locus and ethos of everyday life was vested. In a version of Evans-Pritchard’s (1940) classic segmentary lineage system, levels of tribal consciousness, cohesion, and cooperation always came second to the immediacies of the kinship and social bonds of clan and village. For the Sema, now Sumi, Naga, ‘the tribe’, Hutton (1921b: 121) wrote, ‘is not an organized community at all’, rather ‘the basis of Sema society is the village, or part of a village.’ For the Lotha Naga, Mills (1922: 96) similarly observed: ‘Every village is an independent unit in the tribe. Leagues of villages were formed for the purposes of war, and in these cases the advice of the most powerful village would naturally carry much weight... But except for war, no village ever acknowledged the authority of any other village.’ For the neighbouring Ao Nagas, the missionary Smith (1925: 1) noted how ‘theoretically the village acts as a unit in all things.’ Mills (1926: 176), in his monograph *The Ao Nagas*, could only agree: ‘As with all Nagas, the real political unit of the tribe is the village.’ As a definite and characterizing concept, the Naga village republic was born.

While the Naga village republic is variously accounted for in folktales, ritual arrangements, and origin and migration stories, its historical centrality – as a conduit of social life, a political actor, and a moral community – was also the cumulative outcome

of two landscapes. First, a geography that was rugged and difficult to traverse and which long impeded communication and regular relations between villages. Secondly, a human landscape stained by frequent inter-village rivalries, raids, and retaliations that nourished an air, an atmosphere, that bristled with mutual suspicion, distrusts, and danger. Hutton (1965: 32) wrote thus:

At the time of the British acquaintance with them, many villages were still isolated from their neighbours by thickly forested hills and by rivers unfordable for several months in the year, and they tended to be on terms of head-hunting warfare with their nearest neighbours, or at best of an armed and ever suspect truce, almost every village being an independent political entity.

The act of 'head-hunting warfare', long held to be a Naga trait of sorts, itself was informed by parochial convictions directed towards 'ritually fertilizing' the village, or so Elwin (1961: 11) postulated:

The practice of headhunting is probably based on a belief in a soul-matter or vital essence of great power which resides in the human head. By taking a head from another village, therefore, it was believed that a new injection of vital and creative energy would come to the aggressor's village when he brought the head home. This was valuable for human and animal fertility.

Distinct village identities were further reproduced by linguistic fragmentation, and this linguistic diversity did not usually align with wider tribal boundaries. In fact, for most Nagas the idea that a tribe should speak a single language is a strange idea indeed. This can be read in the following pun Hutton (1921b: 266-7) found in vogue among the Sema Naga.

Seven men of different villages happened to meet by the road one evening. They asked one another what they had with them to eat with their rice. Each mentioned a different thing – atusheh, gwomishi, mngishi, amusa, akelho, etc. including, as some understood it, dried fish, meat, and various kinds of vegetables. They agreed to pool their good things and share alike and sat down prepared for a feast, each one thinking how he had scored by agreeing to share with his neighbours. When they opened their loads, they all produced chillies.

The Naga village also manifested itself as a ritual unit. Among the Angami Naga, for instance, the Tevo, or village priest, who operated as 'the mediator between the [village] community as a whole and the supernatural world' (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976: 13) was to be kept 'safe' from the polluting touch of other villages. Fürer-Haimendorf wrote: 'During the first three and a half years of his office he [the Tevo] may not visit any other village, and even later on he may never partake a meal in a strange village but must always carry his food with him' (ibid.: 13). Consider the following instance:

A woman from a neighbouring village came to see the Tevo's wife, and during a friendly chat obliged her by picking a few lice out of her hair. Later it became known that the treacherous friend had abstracted one hair from the head of the Tevo's wife and taken it back to her own village. The Tevo and his wife were immediately deprived of their dignity and exiled, for a part of one of them, and therefore a part of the 'virtue' of the whole [village] community, had been carried off to a foreign village (ibid.: 14).

'Virtue', clearly, had geographical boundaries and these broadly aligned with the village gates. Summarizing it all, Elwin (1961: 9) wrote how 'the basic interest of every Naga is in his family, the clan, the khel, the village. This is what he regards as his culture which must not be interfered with.'

Much, of course, changed since these colonial portrayals of the prototypical Naga 'village republic.' And while the Naga village was probably never fully self-enclosed, sealed, and self-sufficient (more on this below) its gates have been (forced) open more widely in recent decades. Many also have passed through these gates to more or less permanently settle in urban centres both inside and outside Nagaland, while many more currently growing up in the village aspire to study and pursue careers outside of it. Amidst this changing context, the sections that follow draw on ethnography to show how the Naga village nevertheless remains situated at the very heart of Naga social imagination and society.

A dangerous village?

Can a village, akin to an individual, have an identity, a behavioural profile and temperament characteristic only of itself, and which its inhabitants are expected to exhibit both individually and collectively? Are inhabitants of each Naga village conditioned socially to act and think differently from neighbouring villages, even if they may broadly share the same language and cultural practices? Do the collective experiences of village ancestors and forefathers down to the present-day generation impel particularistic attitudes, ideas, and values, even nourish a distinct habitus? The timely demise of national character studies notwithstanding (Mead 1946; Gorer 1949), in the animated world of social perceptions Naga villages are more than geographical places containing peoples, more than the background décor on which lives are lived, but they are also seen in the vernacular – and herein lies this section's main argument – as social personas with distinctive traits, attitudes, and outlooks.

A Naga village is seen to encompass a moral community characterized by its temporal and spatial rootedness, and whose inhabitants define themselves through the conduit of historical memory – a nexus, then, between history, locality, ancestral genealogy, and identity – and which orients their relations with neighbouring and nearby villages and villagers. Of course, identities, both of persons and places, are always as

much ascribed as avowed, and during my fieldwork I heard my Naga friends and interlocutors variously typify certain villages as 'aggressive', 'greedy', 'weak', 'boisterous', 'aloof', 'drunkards', 'well-built', and so on, in the process collating territory and peoples in terms of character and behaviour. These, of course, are stereotypes, which, anthropologists know, are usually constitutive of social reality as much as they are a reflection thereof. Yet, such stereotypes nevertheless work to orient the social landscape, and, in the upshot, produce a social imagination across the Naga uplands in which an individual's genealogical tracing to a particular village is held to be indicative of his or her temperament and ways of 'thinking.' I will illustrate this for a Chakhesang Naga village I shall call Phugwumi.

'In the past Phugwumi behaved very aggressively to its neighbours', a Chakhesang government officer told me in his Kohima office. 'My own village often partnered with Phugwumi, and when a village attacked us Phugwumi warriors would come to our rescue. Also, my forefathers sometimes joined them in their raids on other villages.' Such levels of mutual cooperation and understanding were rare, however. The officer narrated:

In the past, Phugwumi villagers were boisterous and proud. Many villages they attacked. In fact, it was because of their pride that Christianity and education took a long time to come to that village. Christianity preached peace, but Phugwumi villagers did not want to hear about peace. Being peace-loving was simply not in their blood. Even in Chakhesang villages much more remote than Phugwumi Christianity arrived decades earlier. That tells you something about the character of Phugwumi.

'Phugwumi is a very peculiar village', I was told on another occasion, also in Kohima. 'Forget about them attacking other villages. When they fought amongst themselves they would bite off their opponent's nose and earlobes. It is a dangerous village.' Such and similar remarks were made to me with some regularity when I spoke about my fieldwork to people outside the village. Important here is that my friends' views of Phugwumi were usually not based on any first-hand knowledge of the Phugwumi villagers but was based on the stories that circulated about them. In broad terms, albeit in strikingly different ways, the one-thousand odd villages dotted across Nagaland are similarly constructed by descriptions and depictions produced and reproduced about them.

But even as depictions of Phugwumi as dangerous were no doubt simplistic and stereotypical, the village's reputation had not emerged out of thin air, but was informed by a history that stretches back far beyond British colonialism. In those days, Phugwumi was a monopolistic protection racket, an overwhelming powerhouse known and feared from afar, and which levied widespread tribute. The biting of noses and ears, too, was more than just a 'saying' or a 'metaphor' but invoked a fighting technique remembered – and now joked about – by Phugwumi elders who spoke of this 'custom' as unique to the Phugwumi of not so long ago. They, however, did not see it as reflective of their hot-headed, aggressive nature the way people outside the village spoke about it. Phugwumi

elders reasoned that 'biting' was a sign of restraint reserved for fights and scuffles with fellow-villagers, as while certainly painful, and disfiguring in its effects, it was nevertheless non-lethal. This was contrary to fights with non-villagers when the intention, in the past, was often to kill. At the time of my fieldwork, two Phugwumi elders particularly remembered the force teeth can have as both had a portion of an earlobe missing. Bitten off, indeed, in a dispute several decades ago.

It was long before British officers first climbed the Naga uplands that Phugwumi established itself as a powerful 'warrior village', uncompromising in its raids and unforgiving towards any village, or anyone, who tried to undermine its local status, standing, and sway. Among other factors, Phugwumi's location, perched high on a difficult to access hilltop, contributed to its ascend to local supremacy as enemies could be spotted from afar while the steep, rocky slope made for a natural defence wall. When British-led forces first surveyed the Naga uplands they recognized Phugwumi's might and repute, and an administrative report, published midway the 19th century, estimated the village to consist of '1000 houses' inhabited by no less than '5000 villagers.' The same report detailed that Phugwumi villagers 'were dreaded by all around as a bloodthirsty people, who think nothing of murder for the sake of plunder. They boasted of having a man in their village who had killed seventy men' (Butler 1855: 208).

Phugwumi's supremacy received a blow in 1851 when it was attacked, and subdued, by a British-led force, although only after Phugwumi villagers had openly challenged them to a fight (Wouters 2015). Many died, and those who survived were made to swear allegiance to colonial rule. But even as Phugwumi never fought the British again, many of its villagers did not think twice about defying colonial orders. Note the following fragment of an administrative report written in 1880:

On the 5th December the detachment marched to [Phugwumi], a powerful village. The march was a very difficult one... Next morning the village showed contumacy by not furnishing the coolies required. A few rockets and a shell were accordingly fired by Lieutenant Mansel, at the request of the political officer, over, and a little below, the village. This had the desired effect, and the coolies were speedily produced... During the march the [Phugwumi] coolies, though previously warned, threw down their loads and bolted. Some fifty actually got away, and the remainder were only stopped by being fired on.¹

Till today, narratives of past battles, including the clash with the British-led forces, heroic deeds, fearless warriors, and the subduing of other villages remain an essential and proud part of Phugwumi's repertoire of oral history, even though village pastors and church leaders now argue that this part of the village's history is best forgotten.

¹ See: 'Detailed report on the Naga Hills Expedition of 1878-80' accessed via Naga Video-disc. Url: <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga/record/r87665.html>

Whilst the British pacification of the Naga inhabited hills meant the discontinuation of inter-village raids and retaliations (or at least stopped their most violent expressions), inter-village antagonisms and rivalries occasionally continued, and Phugwumi's recent history, too, remains peppered with instances in which the village assembled in a protective and punitive force, determined to protect the village's honour or to exert revenge in the name of a Phugwumi villager wronged at the hands of a non-villager.

Amongst the many incidents that were narrated to me, there was the episode, recalled with gusto by those who participated in it, in which *dao* (broadsword) wielding villagers broke into a police station in the nearby administrative town to try and take a revenge of their own on a person incarcerated there for assaulting a Phugwumi villager. Fortunately, for the accused, he had been transferred to the state capital earlier that day. In another incident, a group of villagers invaded a wrestling tournament in Kohima and trashed, in public view, one of its contestants. They had recognized him as having manhandled a Phugwumi villager in Phek town, the administrative headquarters of the district Phugwumi is part of. For weeks, the villagers had stopped every bus and vehicle that had passed along the Phek-Kohima road, which bypasses Phugwumi, to search for the assaulter, but to no avail. Now seeing him participating in a wrestling tournament, they did not lose time in taking the revenge they had been waiting for. More recently, during the 2013 state elections, Phugwumi's youth was instructed to prevent supporters of a particular (non-village) candidate from campaigning inside the village, exerting force if needed. And when, after the closing of the polls, rumour spread that a few Phugwumi youths residing in a nearby administrative hub had been attacked with stones, village youth – transcending party lines – acted promptly, organized vehicles, and set off in large numbers to provide protection and exert revenge.

Phugwumi's youth today seem to have internalized the particularistic reputation 'earned' by their forefathers, and some may use this to their advantage. 'When I tell people I am from Phugwumi, no-one dares to do or say anything bad to me', as one college-going youth remarked. Another narrated the following incident: 'Once I found myself in a fight in Kohima. It was two of us against five of them. They stood around us in a half-circle, ready to attack. Then we dared them, saying: 'We are from Phugwumi. Come and beat us. We are not afraid of you.' They could have easily beaten us that night, but in the end they did nothing. They knew about our village. They knew that if they would hit us, our villagers would come and search for them.'

Several points emerge from this section. First, among Nagas, a village is more than a physical entity as villagers are socially imagined to either 'inherit' or be 'conditioned' to parade behavioural traits, attitudes, and outlooks deemed characteristic of that village. As such, one's genealogical tracing to a particular village operates as a core component of both identity and identification locally. Secondly, a Naga village community is defined by its temporal and spatial rootedness to a place with its identity being framed through historical memory. Thirdly, this historical memory socially orients villagers' perception

and relations vis-à-vis neighbouring and nearby villages, as well as shape the ways others perceive and engage with the village and its inhabitants.

The kinship of communitisation

Besides a continuing marker of identity and identification, in the post-colonial, post-statehood era the 'Naga village' also remapped itself as both the centre and channel of governance. Through Nagaland's 'Village Council Act, 1978' and Village Development Boards extraordinary executive and judicial powers were delegated to village levels. As a general principle, moreover, Naga customary institutions and laws supersede India's codes and courts through a special Amendment (Article 371A) to the Constitution specifically designed for Nagaland. Such levels of village autonomy became expanded further with the passing of Nagaland's unique 'Communitisation of Public Institutions and Services Act, 2001', which sanctioned the transfer of selected government functions and assets – among them fields of education, health, electricity, and water supply – down to village-level committees in an attempt to improve the delivery of public utilities.

This section illustrates, first, how the idea of the Naga 'village republic', as an enduring political and moral community, inspired Nagaland's communitisation policy. I then proceed by showing ethnographically how, in actual practice, communitisation may fail to achieve its set objectives. It fails not because modern phenomena of, say, exaggerated individualism, greed and capitalism, and electoral democracy have rendered obsolete the moral commensality, social cohesion, and corporate character of the Naga village, but communitisation fails, I argue, precisely because of the cross-cutting kinship relations and strong social bonds at village levels. For Phugwumi, I will show how the maintenance and nurturing of social bonds within the village community readily assume precedence over the stringent, detached, and rational monitoring village committees are expected to perform as part of the communitisation policy. I will illustrate this in the context of Phugwumi's health centre. But first I trace the genesis of Nagaland's communitisation policy. I do so through the writings and reflections of its maker, R.S. Pandey, who, for inventing communitisation in Nagaland, was bequeathed both national and internal awards, including the UN Public Service Award in 2008.

It did not take R.S. Pandey (2010: 1) long, after his deputation to Nagaland to serve as its chief secretary, to recognize how 'a sense of despondency in the society and the governance system was clearly evident.' He observed thus:

'Nothing can happen here'; 'things will never improve' were some of the general feelings amongst the people. Although the feeling was most intensely associated with the common people, it was not exclusive to them. Even the civil society leadership and the government officers were in its grip. A deep sense of cynicism was evident. The option was to drift along with the current or to think of a change [of] process (ibid.: 2).

The problem was a pervasive malfunctioning of the government, whose record of delivering public service, Pandey wrote, was 'pitiful' and 'abysmally poor' (ibid.: 3). Things had to change, and drastically at that. While ruling out complete privatization of government institutions – given that 'profit motive would take precedence over social service' (ibid.: 12) – what Pandey proposed was the delegation of government services and assets down to village levels, a paradigmatic shift with the 'user community [Naga villagers], the real stakeholders, taking charge of the institutions and services set up by the Government and turning them around' (ibid.: ix).

In practice, communitisation meant that each Nagaland village was to constitute a number of committees staffed by villagers. Each community would subsequently adjudicate over a set of government services, i.e. village health and education. This delegation of duties also included the control over the payment of salaries for teachers, nurses, electricians, and the like, and in a drive against absenteeism village committees were empowered to deduct percentages of the salary of any employee found guilty of unauthorized leaves or other forms of misconduct. As Naga villages would certainly benefit from government employees carrying out their duties regularly and sincerely, and with village committees now empowered to enforce this, the problem of rampant absenteeism, as diagnosed by Pandey, was expected to reduce.

In proposing communitisation as particularly suitable to Nagaland, Pandey drew heavily on the concept of the Naga 'village republic.' 'The state of Nagaland', he wrote, 'is blessed with admirable community bonds reflecting dense and rich social capital, available in amazing abundance in the villages' (2010: 22). Traditionally, these villages functioned 'like a republic in themselves', were typically 'self-contained', and while 'inter-village clashes were common', 'intra-village ones', according to Pandey, took place 'rarely so.' He continued:

The cohesion, or, in other words, the rich density of the social capital, within the villages is of ancient vintage, continuing through generations. Connections and bonds among the people belong to a tribe which covers several villages also exist, but the cohesiveness is stronger in a village than in a tribe as a whole... The manner in which the village community conducts its affairs in times of sorrow or mirth, adversity or merriment, is reflective of its genius and to an observer from the outside is remarkably fascinating.

It was this density of social capital, the cohesiveness, and the overall social genius of the Naga village that Pandey envisaged as an organic solution to Nagaland's crisis of governance. The remainder of this section discusses an example of this communitisation policy in practice.

Phugwumi's health centre is housed in a spacious and neatly plastered building situated a little off the main village. In its vicinity, a handful of quarters were built for doctors and nurses to reside during their tenures in Phugwumi. At the time of my fieldwork, however, all quarters were locked with sturdy padlocks, its walls overgrown

with moulds and shrubs, its wood decaying, and most of the windows broken. None of them, I learned, had ever been occupied. In the case of the nurses this was because nearly all of them hailed from Phugwumi itself. While most of them had initially been posted to other parts of the state, through various means – including the pulling of ‘political strings’ – they had over time managed to secure a transfer to Phugwumi, whose comforts and close social bonds they preferred over postings away. In the village, they had their own ancestral houses to live in, or had joined the extended families of their husbands as social norms prescribed.

Despite the nurses’ close proximity to the health centre, both in terms of the minimal distance they had to travel, and in terms of social bonds as their patients were simultaneously family, clan, and village members, most nurses were irregular in attending to their duties. Many days no nurses were to be found around the clinic, while those who did report for duty usually stayed in the clinic only briefly. Villagers knew this, and anticipated on the nurses’ absence by calling, in cases of sickness or injury, not on the clinic but on the private residence of one of the nurses (who, it must be said, were ever ready to diagnose and treat patients in their homes). Most nurses kept a small stock of medicines at home, as well as basic instruments to diagnose a patient. When a villager nevertheless needed to visit the clinic, for instance to have him or herself examined more thoroughly or to receive an injection, the patient would make sure to first call around to find out if any of the nurses meant to attend that day. Going to the clinic unannounced was seen as foolhardy.

Some villagers voiced their disappointment with the post-communitisation absenteeism in the health centre, and were critical about the health committee for not taking action against it. They, after all, now had the authority to enforce regular office hours, reducing the salaries of absentee nurses if they must. Most in Phugwumi, however, offered a more nuanced understanding of this predicament. ‘The problem with communitisation is that most government employees are also our fellow villagers’, Vezo explained.²

They have many other duties besides their jobs. They need to tend to their fields, or do household chores. Most of our nurses are also mothers, and need to look after their children. They are our own family and clan-members; how can we tell them to forsake their duties as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law, and be regular in the clinic? That would be quite wrong on our part.

This cross-cutting of kinship bonds and loyalties not only complicated the functioning of Phugwumi’s health centre, it also prevented the village’s education committee from ‘punishing’ absentee teachers, most of whom were also fellow villagers. ‘The government tells us to deduct salary from those teachers who are irregular’, a

² Vezo, as well as other names that figure in this article, is a pseudonym.

member of the village education committee told me. 'But how can we deduct salary from a neighbour, a clan-member or fellow-villager? That would be shameful on our part to do. We can ask them indirectly to be serious in their work. But nothing more than that.'³ At times such cross-cutting of social bonds assumed more complex forms. Vezo explained:

Look, the members of the village health committee too have families and relatives, and some of them work in government departments. Now, if the health committee decides to deduct the salary of a nurse, surely the nurse's family but also her relatives and clan members will feed bad. Then, if they know that a relative of a health committee member works in a local government office, they will take revenge by forcing the concerned committee to deduct his or her salary. In this way, communitisation, if we enforce it, will only cause conflict and resentment. In the end, we are all related in the village. The Government can't expect us to control and punish one another.

For Phugwumi villagers the maintenance and nurturing of social bonds clearly superseded the imperative of 'good governance', as communitisation was meant to foster. What this section illustrated is that while social capital and close affective bonds are indeed characteristic of the prototypical Naga village, this – rather than an 'indigenous solution' to mal-governance, the way envisaged by Pandey – provided village-level government employees with the social leverage to *not* attend their offices dutifully. It also prevented village committees from taking punitive action against absentee employees, given that doing so would upset social relations and invite divisions and disagreements into the village community. Analysed thus, it is precisely the social cohesion and cooperation – or the 'rich density of the social capital' (Pandey 2010: 22) – within Naga villages that complicated communitisation.

A village based democracy

From identity and governance, this third ethnographic section turns to the frenzied world of electoral politics, and the role of the Naga village therein.

At a political rally in the constituency's small administrative town – not far from Phugwumi – in the wake of the 2013 Nagaland state elections, party workers busied themselves in distributing party-manifestos, printed on colourful, glossy paper, to all and sundry. In a systematic and specific manner, the manifesto spelled out the party's political position on a host of state issues as well as offered details on the policies and projects it wished to implement if elected into political office. All there was to know about the party's vision, in short, was there in the booklet. Those who attended the rally indeed gladly received these party manifestos but then used them to sit on in order to prevent

³ In parts because of absenteeism among teachers, many in Phugwumi preferred to send their children to the village's private school, which had earned a better reputation in terms of the quality of education offered in comparison to the school funded by the government.

their clothes from dirtying, to wrap betel-nut or snacks in, or to hold it above their face as a protective screen against the sun. No sooner had the rally ended and most booklets were discarded, leaving the area littered with hundreds of party manifestos. The reason why but few bothered to read the booklet was not because Naga voters are mostly illiterate – which they are not – but because party manifestos, ideologies, or this or that political vision was not the core ‘political stuff’ of Nagaland elections.

‘Nagaland’s elections are fought in its villages. It is based on village politics’, a former Nagaland politician explained me in an interview. He continued:

To attract voters a politician must first find out about the history and contemporary issues of the individual villages in his constituency. A politician needs to know about each village’s relations with its neighbours, and whether there are any land disputes or other outstanding issues. He also needs to understand the clan-relations inside the village. And to know who the clan and village leaders are, and what can be done to win those over. In the end, each village needs its own electoral strategy and campaign.

To capture a constituency, then, a political party required more than a state-wide political manifesto and the public articulation of its vision. It required multiple and detailed electoral strategies tailored at the village-level.

Phugwumi’s constituency was made up of nine villages and an administrative hub, and in the run-up to the 2013 elections party-workers indeed articulated their political strategies, analyses, and predictions separately for each village. Comments and remarks, for instance, were: ‘In this village the political wave favours us’; ‘if we get 250 votes from this village, we must get no less than 400 from that one’; ‘those villagers don’t want to support a candidate from Phugwumi’; ‘leaders of that village are against us’, and so on. After the counting of the votes (whose tallies were declared village-wise) the political leaning of each village transformed from an area of speculation to that of fact, and thenceforward each village was talked about as, for instance, an ‘NPF [Naga People’s Front] village’, a ‘Congress village’, or an ‘Independent [candidate] village’, as a ‘ruling’ or an ‘opposition’ village, and this tag became part of the village’s political identity and standing, at least until the next election could reshuffle the cards.

For Phugwumi itself the 2013 election proved to be of a different kind. It was for the first time that two villagers decided to contest the same election, causing a village predicament whose inner-logic and intricacies I have sought to explain elsewhere (Wouters 2015). What I want to reiterate here was the common and colloquial distinction that was made in the run up to Polling Day between ‘home’ and ‘away votes.’ With constituencies in Nagaland comparatively small – miniscule compared to most parts of the country – it was widely held that without solid ‘home-votes’, or the number of votes a politician accrued from his natal village, it was difficult, if not impossible, to win the constituency. ‘If you can’t get the majority support of your own village, how can you expect other villages to favour you’, as it was explained to me. ‘Escape votes’, in contrast,

referred to those votes villagers polled for a non-village candidate when a fellow-villager also contested the election. While ‘escape votes’ were not unusual – and often the outcome of strained relations between a voter and a candidate, or perhaps vis-à-vis the clan he belonged to – they nevertheless carried a dubious moral quality as the act of ‘giving away’ one’s vote to a politician of another village was seen as undermining the ideal of inter-village cohesion and cooperation (Wouters 2015: 136).

Moreover, for a village to ‘produce’ a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) meant an immediate increase in its overall status and standing in the area. But village status was not the only reason explaining the distinction between ‘home’ and ‘away votes.’ There also existed a more instrumental hinge to this logic, but which I will invoke only briefly here. In the wake of Polling Day, a Phugwumi villager publicly criticized the gifts and monies fellow-villagers expected from the two village candidates in return for their electoral support. His criticism, however, was not founded on the ideal of ‘clean elections’ but was geared towards securing the long-term material benefits Phugwumi as a whole would accrue if a fellow-villager was elected as MLA. His reasoning went thus:

We, as a village, should not demand money from a candidate who himself belongs to our village. Instead, we should give him money, rice, and meat, as much as he needs, so he can use that in convincing voters in other villages to support him on Polling Day. Then, once he get elected, he should serve our village, bringing more development funds and appointing our youth into government service.

Across Nagaland, any politician, once elected into office, was expected to privilege his clan and natal village in the allocation of government jobs, development resources, and other state benefits. This moral expectation, of an elected politician, rather than basing his decisions on detached, impersonal and rational-legal reasoning, privileging his natal village in the allocation of state resources also runs through the following statement by a Phugwumi elder. ‘I don’t care about this or that political party, this or that candidate’, he responded as I inquired about his political leanings. ‘I just want a candidate from our village to become MLA. Then our village can really come up.’ That the political parochialism of the village prevailed over broader notions of Naga citizenship is also evident from the following evaluation a Phugwumi villager made about his recent visit to the village of the (then) Chief Minister:

All houses are made of concrete and there is plenty of development. After he became Chief Minister he has made not less than twenty-five of his villagers first-class contractors, putting them in charge of big contracts. The others he provided government jobs. And not just small jobs, but with the rank of officer. He has really been a good politician for his villagers.

For obvious reasons, none of the above colloquial expressions, moral expectations, and village-centred politicking found its way into the party manifesto distributed during

the rally. However, it is in these domains, the ways people talk and think about politics and elections and evaluate their politicians – and not in the pages of political manifestos – that we find clues towards better understanding the inner-logic and intricacies of Nagaland’s democracy, and the crucial role of ‘the village’ in it.

An antithesis

Lest I be blamed for reproducing colonial views, or of perpetuating stereotypes, isolationist perspectives, and romanticized images, this section discusses some features and observations that work to eviscerate essentialist interpretations of the prototypical Naga village as an independent, necessarily cohesive, and self-enclosed republic.

To start with, it would be rather mistaken to portray any Naga village as historically self-enclosed and sealed. Among other things, this would fail to account for the historical relations (fluctuating between trade, tribute, and raids) certain Naga villages, or village clusters, cultivated with dynasties and peoples in the adjacent Brahmaputra, Barak, and Imphal Valleys (Devi 1968; Wouters 2011). It would also underestimate the frequent inter-village struggles over local standing and dominance fought out between villages, the tributary relations that thence emerged, and the rise of local hegemony of especially powerful villages, as the historical case of Phugwumi also illustrated.

Excessive focus on the locus of ‘the political’, as vested in the village, would also conceal the diversity of political structures and sentiments that existed, and in different forms persist, *within* the ‘Naga village republic’, none of which is quite like another. In fact, any approximation of the politico-historical form and substance of the prototypical Naga village must first acknowledge its heterogeneity. When reading colonial accounts, we find descriptions of Naga chiefs and democrats (Jacobs et al. 1990), nobles and commoners (Fürer-Haimendorf 1973), authoritative village councillors (Mills 1926), powerful clan elders (Mills 1922), sacrosanct chiefs and aristocrats (Fürer-Haimendorf 1939; Hutton 1921b), as well as the conspicuous absence of any permanent positions of leadership (Hutton 1921a). Naga village polities, thence, represented a continuum with hereditary autocracy, if not near dictatorship, and radical democracy at its opposite ends, with (a section of) Konyak Nagas associated with the former and Angami and Chakhesang Nagas perhaps best representative of the latter (Wouters 2014).

In addition to the fallacy of seeing the Naga village in isolation and as politically operative in broadly similar ways, it also remains problematic to characterize its social life primarily in terms of cohesion and cooperation, which, while certainly cherished ideals, often failed to materialize in practice. ‘The Naga Hills was peaceful’, an administrative report in 1890 reads, ‘except for one serious riot at the Angami village of [Phugwumi], in which one man was killed and several wounded.’⁴ Such ‘riots’ could be

⁴ Assam Administrative Report. Naga Videodisc. See *The Naga Database*, accessed September

the result of interpersonal disagreements, but often manifested themselves along the lines of clan and/or khel. During a visit to Tuensang village in the 1920s, Hutton, for instance, observed that:

between the Bilaeshi and the Chongpho khels there is a deep ditch digged, formerly filled with 'panjis' most of which were pulled by Ongli Ngaku's [a Dobashi] orders last time he came here, when he tried to settle the long stranding feuding between the Chongpho and Bilaeshi khels. For the present it is abated, but I saw in Chongpho khel a long row of hide shields set out as they are put when trouble with the Bilaeshi is toward' (1929: 49).

Among the Angami Nagas inter-clan struggles were also frequent: 'Although the village may be regarded as the unit of the political and religious sides of Angami life', Hutton wrote (1921a: 109), 'the real unit of the social side is the clan... the rivalry or antagonism of clan with clan within the village has coloured the whole of Angami life.' Hutton explained further:

In war, even though the village were united, the jealousy and suspicion of one clan for another would inevitably be a source of weakness; in peace the village would from time to time break out into riot, while it is incessantly troubled by internal bickering. In almost every dispute between two men of different clans the clansmen on each side appear as partisans and foment the discord.

Such intra-village conflicts and contestations, while certainly less violent today, have not evaporated, however. The new domain of state-led development, for instance, injected new fault-lines, divisions, and desires in the village community and caused villagers to compete over access and control of state resources. This is to the extent that a large number of court cases in Nagaland today are being fought over competing claims to village development boards and village council membership. Community development, as purported by the idea of village development boards, if anything, has often seemed to end up dividing Naga village communities rather than developing them in unison.

Democracy and elections, too, regularly result in the (temporary) break-down of village communities. Phugwumi, for one, had earned itself a peculiar reputation in 'doing elections' as during two previous elections electronic voting machines in the village had been destroyed by angry party-workers, leading to re-polling. Partly because such antecedents, and partly because of the rivalries that emerged as the result of two villagers contesting the election fray, the Nagaland Government, in the wake of the 2013

9, 2015. <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga/record/r88456.html>. It must be qualified here that before the making of the Chakhesang tribe in 1946, Phugwumi was classified as an Angami Naga village (Wouters 2017).

elections, declared Phugwumi as 'hypersensitive', resulting in the presence of large numbers of soldiers to oversee the peaceful conduct of polling.

But while such historical and contemporary insights complicate the thesis of the Naga village republic, as outlined in this essay, it does not negate it, as 'some [I would say 'all'] Naga communities are recognized very strongly around the principle of the village as a unit' (Jacobs et al. 1990: 71), and from this it remains that 'the village rather than a group of villages or a tribe is the natural unit of organization and hence the correct basis of investigation' (Horam 1992: 60).

Concluding remarks

Barely a few decades ago the Dimapur plains were abhorred by upland villagers as a dangerous place stricken by heat, malaria, and malevolent spirits. At the most, it served as hunting grounds or as a doorway for occasional visits of Naga villagers to the Assam plains for reasons of trade. It was not considered a place worth living in. Today, Dimapur is a sprawling and bustling urban settlement where opportunities for business, employment, and education attract more and more Nagas away from their hilltop villages. The state capital of Kohima, in turn, has reportedly already exceeded its carrying capacity in terms of buildings, infrastructure, and available water supply. Akin to trends across the Subcontinent, Nagaland is urbanizing. What this will mean for the future of the Naga 'village republic' is hard to predict. As it stands, however, urbanization, while coming at cultural costs, does not obliterate the significance and character of the prototypical Naga village. Those who have left the village often remain deeply connected to it; they make sure to have their ancestral homes to return to, may lease out their land rather than selling it, return to the village to celebrate Christmas and traditional festivals, retain their local church memberships, and always respond with the name of their ancestral village when asked 'who they are' (even if they were not born there).

In reviewing the condition of South Asian Anthropology in the 1980s, Fuller and Spencer (1990: 86) diagnosed the demise of the once coveted 'village studies', plainly because anthropologists got 'bored' with them. A decade on, Gupta (2005) announced the withering of the traditional diacritics of Indian village life. Anthropologists, it was suggested, would better move away from villages and study mobility, migration, and urban spaces. Mines and Yazgi (2010: 13) recently offered a much-needed corrective to this conception, arguing how, despite rapid urbanization, villages persist as 'ontological existents, key aspects of experience, reservoirs of discourse or projections, units for collective actions, elements of consciousness of self or otherness.' This certainly applies to most Nagas, for whom – as I have variously sought to illustrate – the village remains firmly etched at the centre of social consciousness. Or as it was once explained to me:

Those who leave their villages to settle in Kohima or Dimapur are often those with a salaried job. They therefore do not need to sell their land in the village. Nagas always want to keep

some land in the village, even if they hardly come there and don't cultivate it. Without land it is difficult to claim that you belong to a village. And without belonging to a village, it is difficult to claim that you are a Naga. 🙄

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