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The headhunting culture of the Nagas: reinterpreting the self

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'Headhunting', as a term, was essentialised as the defining identity of the Nagas during the colonial period. Without rejecting the term *per se*, I endeavor to present an understanding of what headhunting culture means to Nagas and from the viewpoint of a native. In part I do so by analyzing the term 'headhunting' in the Chokri language of the Chakhesang tribe. Next I discuss this term in relation to the elitist culture of trophy hunting popular during the colonial period. I then proceed to explain head-hunting in relation to some core traditional values and beliefs of the Nagas, namely, equality, freedom and justice. Understanding the culture of headhunting from the perspective I tried to present here is likely to affect the way contemporary Naga groups perceive each other in a more positive manner. But not only that, it may also provide readers with insights as to why Nagas not only constantly question the superiority of others and the right of others to subjugate them but also struggle passionately to reclaim their fundamental rights to live as a free and equal people.

Introduction

It is a fact of history that Nagas practiced headhunting. What is unfortunate about this fact, however, is that it has come to be essentialised as the defining identity of the Nagas.¹

¹ The use of the terms 'headhunters' and 'headhunting' without *italics* in this paper is deliberate. Throughout this paper, I will use them interchangeably with warrior. Just as the term 'Nagas' has been accepted by us, as our ethnic identity though popularized by the colonizers, Nagas have by and large accepted this description of former headhunters. In this regard, I agree with Longkumer (2015: 60) who observes 'that viable continuities exist between the colonial and postcolonial situation, and one must appreciate the way images [referring to headhunters and primitive], once deployed for colonialism's purpose, continue to shape the current landscape as an attractive medium for tourism and identity in the global arena.'. He goes on to argue that such exotic images enables Nagas to forge a distinct national culture.

Nagas believed and practiced many other things but for reasons of their own, many colonial writers choose to overlook these and selected the headhunting culture as the essential representation of Naga identity.² In this article, I will endeavor to present an understanding of what headhunting culture means to Nagas themselves, and from the view point of a native³. I then proceed to explain this culture in relation to some core traditional values and beliefs of Nagas. The discussion in this paper is expected to give some native insights from a contemporary Naga perspective about why we were the kind of people we were in the premodern time and also, to some extent, why we are the kind of people we are today.

Analyzing the term 'headhunting' vis-à-vis 'trophy hunting'

Let me begin with what is familiar to me. 'Headhunter', as a term, was not a self-referential expression and its equivalent meaning is difficult to find in the context of the Chakhesang Nagas. Similarly, Tezenlo Thong opines that Nagas never called or thought of themselves as headhunters (Thong, 2012b). However, there are some notable linguistic similarities between the use of the terms headhunting and animal hunting. The first is related to the use of the syllable 'ga' (kill) in the *Chokri* language spoken among the Chakhesang tribe.⁴ 'Ga', a suffix, is used to describe and qualify the act of killing animals (*thi-ga*) during animal hunting and the killing of 'other people' (*mi-ga*) during raids or wars.⁵ 'Ga' has no moral connotation or implication unlike '*dothri*' (kill or murder) which usually comes with a moral judgment. There is yet another significant parallel between the two in *Chokri*: *thiri-hu* and *thi-hu*. While the former literally means 'war-chase', the latter means 'animal-chase'. The common suffix for both the terms is '*hu*', meaning chase. In this sense, the term '*thiri-hu*' can be used very loosely to mean headhunting and '*thi-hu*' to mean animal hunting. Derivatively, *thirimi* or *thirimavemi* may be seen as a translation of 'headhunters'. While *thirimi* generally refers to a group of people armed for war, *thirimavemi* is very specific; only those warriors who succeeded in taking a head from another village are called '*thirimavemi*'.

² Among others, the two important reasons worth noting in the context of this paper are (1) the urge of colonial writers to construct the notion of the 'exotic others' to satisfy the imagination of their readers in their home-countries and (2) the necessity of maintaining and justifying their colonial notion of power relations based on civilizational superiority. For a detailed criticism of stereotyping Nagas as headhunters, see Thong (2012b).

³ In general, views expressed in this paper reflect a local view from the perspective of the Chakhesang tribe, the tribal community I belong to. However, care has been taken throughout the paper to ensure that the context of discussion will make it clear if I am writing from the perspective of a Naga in general or from the perspective of a Chakhesang, in particular. It may be noted that the Chakhesang tribe is one of the recognized tribes in Nagaland state. It is constituted by three main linguistic groups, namely, Chokri, Khuza/Kheza and Zamai. Some Chakhesang villages also contain Sema/Sumi speaking people.

⁴ *Chokri* is my mother tongue and the spoken language at home.

⁵ It is important to note that no Naga tribe has the practice of taking heads from within the same village. So, headhunting was expected only on people belonging to other villages or to non-Nagas.

Having discussed the meanings in *Chokri*, I however doubt that the colonial writers were aware of these linguistic connotations and accordingly decided to use the term 'headhunting' for the custom of cutting heads during raids and wars. On the contrary, it is highly possible that the employment of these terms by them was influenced, at least partially, by an elitist component of popular, colonial culture back then, that of trophy hunting.⁶ Trophy hunting in Africa and the Indian subcontinents – then colonies of European powers - had become a fashionable recreational and sportive activity variously engaged in by colonial officers during their spare time. To cite just one instance; it is being recorded that King George V, after being enthroned in 1911, bagged 39 tigers, 18 rhinoceros and 4 bears in Nepal in one of his hunting trips along with his retinue in 1911.⁷ The general practice of trophy hunting was to kill wild animals, not for their meat, but for pleasure and prestige and to keep selected parts of killed animals such as heads, teeth, tusks and horns as souvenirs. The selected parts of animals were generally displayed as trophies in a special room called 'trophy room' or 'game room' in which the weaponry of the hunters were also normally displayed. Animal trophies also of course served to represent the courage, skill and success of the hunters.

With this colonial European culture of trophy hunting at the back of our mind, it is not difficult to understand why colonial writers described the Naga custom of head-taking in wars and raids as headhunting. For instance, one colonial writer stated, 'When the enemy is caught unprepared, they rushed upon them with great ferocity, and tearing off the scalps of all those who fall victims to their rage, they carry home those strange trophies of their triumph.' (Robinson 1969: 538: emphasis mine). A. W. Davis reported in the *Census of India (1891)*, 'In the front verandah are collected all the trophies of war and of the chase, from a man's skull down to a monkey's, most of them black with the smoke and dust of years' (Davis 1969: 399: emphasis mine).⁸ It is interesting to note that Davis used the term 'chase' here, a term I have used earlier in the context of giving literal

⁶ According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission (IUCN SSC), the term 'trophy hunting' is used to refer [animal] hunting that is ... 'usually (but not necessarily) undertaken by hunters from outside the local area (often from countries other than where the hunt occurs)'; see IUCN SSC Guiding principles on Trophy Hunting as a Tool for Creating Conservation Incentives. Ver. 1.0. IUCN, Gland. P.2.

(https://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/iucn_ssc_guiding_principles_on_trophy_hunting_ver1_09aug2012.pdf: accessed on 24/04/2017). Synonymously, trophy hunters are also referred to as sport hunters or safari hunters in the contemporary time. Trophy hunting was practiced by kings and great hunters on the Indian soil since at least the medieval time, much before the advent of colonial raj.

⁷ The details of this event was recorded by Baron Hardinge, who was the then Governor-General of India (1910-1916), in the *Historical record of the Imperial visit to India, 1911*, (pp.231-233) and the same was published by John Murray for the Government of India in London, 1914.

⁸ In the same book, edited by Elwin, few others also freely used the term trophies to describe the heads/skulls preserved by the Nagas in their writing of the Nagas; they are, Lieutenant-Colonel R. G. Woodthorpe (63-83); Capt. Vetch (92-96); E. T. Dalton (440-442); W. Robinson (530-540). J.H. Hutton, one of the well-known authors on the Nagas has used the term 'trophies' to title his paper, 'Divided and Decorated Heads as Trophies' which was published in *Man*, Vol. XXII, No. 67 (1922).

interpretations for the *Chokri* expressions, viz., 'thiri-hu' and 'thi-hu' respectively as 'war-chase' and 'animal-chase'. T.C. Hudson commented along similar lines, 'A raid in order to get a head is a religious business, and not lightly undertaken, whatever its motive. They may think killing 'fine sport', but they prepare themselves for the *sport* with solemn rites.' (Hudson 1991: 122: emphasis mine). Going by their language use, it is quite possible that colonial officers, at least some of them, perceived our ancestral custom of head taking in wars and raids as some kind of sporting activity or trophy hunting. Perhaps due to the influence of colonial writings of Nagas, even contemporary Naga writers in general seem to portray no qualms in describing the heads taken in past wars and raids as trophies.⁹

It may be pointed out that Nagas were not the only people who practiced headhunting and that it may be too quick to generalize from the foregoing account that the then usage of the term 'headhunting' was influenced by the colonial practice of trophy hunting.¹⁰ However I posit that, as a term, 'headhunting' or 'headhunter' was not commonly used as an identity term or descriptive term with reference to the Nagas by the colonial writers in question until the later part of the colonial era. For instance, the seminal work on the Nagas by Verrier Elwin – '*The Nagas in the Nineteen Century*' – which is a compilation of a large number of articles/reports has actually *used* the term 'head-hunters' only once by A. W. Davis in the report mentioned above although Elwin himself used it a few times for structuring the book. Many authors, it must be qualified, alluded to the headhunting culture of the Nagas but without using the word explicitly. It became a common referential term mainly in the twentieth century. This seems to suggest that either the colonial writers then were not very familiar with the discourse on headhunting culture of other people, or that the term was not commonly used as a referential term for the Nagas as indicated above. In any case, the language of describing the headhunting culture during the initial encounters with the Nagas shows that the colonial writers interpreted headhunting from the perspective of their own culture, certainly not from a Naga point of view.

If headhunting was understood primarily as a form of trophy hunting from a colonial perspective, then it is not difficult to understand why they employed negative images to construct Naga identity.¹¹ It is certainly savage and immoral from the perspective of any

⁹ Despite Nagas' use of this term in their writings, I highly suspect that they would be using this term in the same sense as the colonial writers would. I have been asking lately if there is any equivalent term for 'trophy' in the Naga languages but to my surprise, none of my Naga correspondents could provide me with an adequate one. I assume therefore that Naga writers, at least some, have been using the term 'trophy' for want of a better term.

¹⁰ Temsula Ao cites the work of Robert Heine-Gelden which claims that headhunting culture was prevalent in vast regions of Europe, Central Asia, Egypt and Near East, not forgetting the recent ones in Africa, South East Asia and Oceania (Ao 2014: 14-15).

¹¹ Whether or not their more sympathetic accounts are acceptable and justifiable is left to the readers to decide at the end of this paper. I for one do not think highly of their positive interpretations though their views are neither implausible nor inconsistent.

modern civilizational sense to kill another human being just to collect his or her head as a trophy, as an item of display. But the question is this: Did our Naga ancestors who practiced headhunting actually prized human heads as mere trophies? My answer is that they did not. It may be noted that not all colonial writers gave a negative portrayal of the Nagas on account of this practice. Some like J.P. Mills, J.H. Hutton, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, etc., have provided a more sympathetic account of headhunting by trying to give religious or mystical interpretations of its practice. As far as the oral narratives of my tribe are concerned, our ancestors did not 'hunt' people to collect their heads for the sole of purpose of display, even though it is certainly true that they would return with the heads of the enemies after killing them. But the taking of enemy heads was not the primary reason for killing others, unlike trophy hunters or hunters for whom taking specific parts of animals or the meat of the animal for food constituted the very reason for hunting. Nagas, however, went to war or executed raids primarily in order to settle scores or to assert the power and supremacy of their village. Though some went to war for reasons of fame and honor, their personal ventures served the interest of the village. So unlike trophy hunting, which basically serves the interest of only some in the society without any direct connection to established customs and traditions, the practice of headhunting was deeply rooted in core values and beliefs of the people, and which were vested in the village. Headhunting in this sense was institutionalized,¹² an integral part of the social structure.

Although, it cannot be denied outright that the taking of heads has something in common with trophy hunting, such as the desire to display the heads as 'trophies' to symbolize the courage and prowess of the warriors, the desire to prove oneself as worthy warriors would hardly constitute the main explanation for displaying heads in the case of Nagas. In other words, a human head is not prized for its own sake like an animal trophy. Rather it has some other purpose to serve, the end purpose of which does not require a human head as a necessary condition. Let me cite a couple of reasons from the context of my tribe, the Chakhesang Naga. If a warrior is unable to bring the head of the slain enemy (because he was not in a position to outrun the enemy warriors with the head or heads taken by him, or for any other reason), he is allowed to bring the right ear as a proof of his kill. This apparently was an acceptable custom even among the Semas/Sumis. Inato Yekhetto Shiku writes:

It is deplorable and yet titillating to learn from my father, Yekhetto Shiku, that my grandfather, Shokiye Shiku, was one of the headhunters who brought home the hacked ears of the enemy. He could not bring home the enemy's head because he had to trek a far distance from home and also had to escape his enemy (Shiku 2007: p.21).

¹² Ao observes that because headhunting was an 'institutionalized' way of Naga life, it was surrounded by elaborate rituals and ceremonies (Ao 2014: 22)

Besides, the head of the slain can be taken back from the warrior by the villagers of the slain on request through recognized mediatory channels. For instance, legend has it that when the most well-known headhunter from my village (Kikruma) by the name Niho (famed for taking above 70 heads, some even say 100) was killed by warriors from neighbouring Phesachodu village, his head was given back to my village on request after necessary rituals had been conducted. The fact that there were such exceptions offers evidence that a human head is not prized as a trophy for its own sake. It is interesting and worthwhile to note that unlike some other Naga tribes, my tribe would not generally display heads in *morungs*,¹³ on war drums or on sacred poles or trees or rocks;¹⁴ heads would be hidden behind the village gates and entry to specific village gates, whose passage would be restricted to outsiders or travelers for some fixed period of time when fresh heads had been put in those gates.¹⁵

From a different trajectory, Thong has aggressively argued that colonial writers misrepresented Nagas as headhunters in a derogatory and abusive manner. He writes:

The term 'headhunting' is a colonial construct, which has become synonymous with the word Nagas. Headhunting refers to the practice of decapitation in warfare, which has been often understood and described out of context. This misconstrued stereotype implies that the Nagas had and have an innate and bloodthirsty nature. As a consequence, they are often referred to in colonial texts as 'wild' Nagas, 'bloodthirsty savages', etc. (Thong 2012b: 608).

The point Thong is trying to drive home perhaps can be framed like this: 'Colonizers are guilty of making us look like barbarians by misrepresenting us as headhunters; don't you see that we are as normal as any other human being?' Thong basically analyses the practice of headhunting in relation to war and then goes on to argue that war is not a part of the normal life of the Nagas, rather unlike the exaggerated versions of the colonial writers. He aptly discusses the customary rules related to wars in the context of the Nagas and provides a very non-savagery and non-barbaric picture of traditional Naga warfare. Reading Thong's essay gives an impression that war and headhunting incidents were so minimal that they remain better seen as stray cases. However, he does not explain why our ancestors practiced headhunting as part of warfare in the first place, even as he seems

¹³ The dormitory for grown up boys/young adults is called *morung*. It is in the *morung* that the boys would generally get all their traditional schooling for life's lessons.

¹⁴ For more details on the sacred locations of keeping the heads by different Naga tribes, see (Mills 1935: 418-428).

¹⁵ I owe this information to Mr. Veswuhu Vero, a respectable elder from my tribe. He further explains to me that this was done for security reason.

to disagree with different views on the explanation of headhunting.¹⁶ As such the reader is left with little clue as to how one ought to make sense of the headhunting culture of our ancestors. Moreover, due to his attempt to associate headhunting only with wars, Thong does not discuss the practice of raids.¹⁷ It may be pointed out, however, that raids were actually more common than wars in the context of the Nagas and that many legendary warriors made names for themselves through raids and not necessarily through war. As consistent as his articulated views appear to be with his devastating attack on colonial accounts of headhunting culture of the Nagas, I hold a different view. I argue that the headhunting culture is deeply rooted in our ethos and values whether or not we approve of it today, and that it is almost indissoluble for our identity construction. The task is to reinterpret it and, if necessary, reinterpret it in a way that the contemporary world would understand as well.

Though headhunting was part of warring practices, it is not to be misinterpreted as the reason or the cause of wars originally or generally. In other words, wars were not fought just for the sake of human heads. Heads were collected in wars and raids for a more fundamental reason, a point which will be explored in more detail below. A common myth on the origin of headhunting culture echoes the point I am making here:

One day, a warrior was resting by the road on his way home. He noticed that the spot where he was sitting was swarmed with ants and they seemed to be engaged in a frantic affair. He watched them keenly and discovered that in fact the ant groups were having a fight. After some time, the activities of the ants became less frantic and he could see only a few of them. As he continued watching these few, he discovered, to his amazement, that these few were engaged in a peculiar activity. They were beheading the slain ants and were carrying off their heads! (Ao 2012: 101-2).

Having noted the above points, it is still not clear as to how one ought to make sense of the culture of headhunting in the context of the Nagas. Just assuming that headhunting culture was widespread in different parts of the world in the pre-modern time is hardly sufficient. As suggestive as the above myth is, it leaves many things unexplained, especially from a modern rational perspective. However to claim a single reason that can be considered as the correct or absolute explanation is unlikely to be possible for the simple reason that there is no objective or commonly acceptable criterion to settle on for the diverse Naga tribal groups. As such, the next best thing would be to ask the purpose it had served and its significance to our ancestors. Through a consideration of its

¹⁶ He has identified and briefly discussed all the popular colonial views, 10 in all, on the explanatory account of headhunting. See p. 385. Similar accounts have also been mentioned by J.P. Mills in his article (Mills 1935: 418-428).

¹⁷ In his book, Shimray classifies and describes 5 different forms of Naga war, including raids (Shimray 1985: 79-93)

significance, one can perhaps try to retrospectively deduce the most plausible explanation. It is this direction that I will try to develop in the pages that follow.

Locating the practice of headhunting within the normative structure of Naga society

As pointed out earlier, headhunting was not outside the normative structure of Naga society. In other words, its origin cannot be explained in terms of a culture of lawlessness as in 'every man becomes a law unto himself.' It was not the result of political anarchy as has been believed by some colonial writers, shown for instance in the following quote: 'A quarrel, however, between two villages, or even between two families of the same village, leads to miserable results – blood for blood, treacherous surprises, cruel punishments.' (Latham 1969: 97). Our ancestors strongly believed in the primacy of norms and customs over the interests of individuals or groups within the society. Unwarranted disturbances or violence in the community was seriously dealt with. Headhunting took place between warring villages and never deliberately between citizens of the same village or between friendship-villages or allied villages.¹⁸ In other words, headhunting was a socio-religio-political activity that operated within a well demarcated political jurisdiction. It had the mandate and sanction of the village authority. For instance, before going for war/raid, warriors needed to observe certain rituals and abstain from sexual intercourse and after returning from war/raid, they could not return to their home directly but they had to stay in the *morung* (male dormitory) to undergo the rituals associated to the custom of headhunting.¹⁹ In short, the culture of headhunting among the Nagas was well regulated by socio-religio-political norms.

The fact that headhunting happened within the normative structure of the society did not entail that all adult males were expected to become headhunters. Though the headhunting culture has been essentialised as the defining identity of the Nagas, in actual practice headhunting was not the *vocation* of most adult males. Put differently, not all the adult males would naturally become warriors though no one was restricted from becoming one. In holding this view, I disagree with the popular view which holds that headhunting culture is a kind of rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, and that a man without taking a head would find great difficulty in winning a wife (Smith 1925: 70; Shimray 1985: 75). Only when the village had to be defended against enemy attacks or

¹⁸ Traditional friendships between villages were established with great seriousness and solemnity involving rituals and feasts. Such friendship and alliance is very important for the peace, prosperity and security of the village. As a rule, every village would have some friendship-villages. A village can also make alliance or friendship with some individual warrior or some clan from another village. The existence of such practices negates the stereotype that Naga villages were isolated from each other. On the contrary, it shows that vibrant diplomacy was the order of the day.

¹⁹ The details relating to headhunting rituals are meticulously described by both Thong in his article (Thong, 2012b: p.376) and Thong in his book (Thong, 2012a: pp.17-18).

when it invaded another village,²⁰ then and only then was every abled bodied male expected to participate in war. As far as the Chakhesang tribe is concerned, only some would be recognized as (full time) village-warriors. These warriors would guard the village as a full-time duty. When others were busy in the fields, they would be guarding and scouting the area. Each morning before anyone would cross the village gate, they scouted the areas commonly used by the villagers for cultivation or for fetching drinking water. Only after performing this duty, the villagers would usually go out of the village. For this service, that of warriors, each household gave a portion of their harvest to them. Village warriors themselves would usually not cultivate land. Even if they had land, others would work for them. When a warrior would successfully bring home a head from another village, the villagers offered him grains and other food items in addition to giving him a hero's welcome with war cries and dances. It is said that if a warrior would successfully take three heads in a year, the contribution from the villagers would enrich him significantly.

Another important role of the warriors was that of the founding of a new village. From a different angle, it may be argued that to establish a new village was one of the biggest tests of a warrior's courage and skill. Without a warrior, no new village could be established as it was thought it would not survive without one. Though headhunting was not as widespread as is often imagined, there could be no village without a warrior to provide protection. When a village lacked one, normally some good warrior(s) from another village would be invited by offering incentives, such as offering the best settlement area. For instance, when one village was facing security problems due to the lack of skilled warriors, the people of that village approached my village (Kikruma) with a request to let some warrior settle in their village. One noted warrior from our village, by the name Yosu, agreed to settle in that village. When he settled there, the village was named after him and called Yosuba, whose literal meaning is 'Yosu is here' or 'Yosu's settlement.'²¹ Usually the largest or best shares of the land would go to the warriors. However, since they defended the land, they often also occupied lands in the village borders, especially in the grey or disputed areas.

Given the important roles they played in the village, headhunters were highly respected and honoured by all. It is said that some mighty warriors would go to different villages and collect 'taxes'²². For instance, a warrior from Khezakeno village by the name Azo, who was believed to be 8 feet tall, used to ride a buffalo to collect 'tax' from the neighbouring villages (Zehol and Zehol 2009: 29-30). Sometimes, the collection of 'tax'

²⁰ Under normal condition, no full-fledged war would be declared between villages though raids would continue between warring or enemy villages. Full scale war would happen *generally* when a village openly challenged another village to decide who was more powerful or when a territorial dispute could not be resolved amicably.

²¹ After a lot of issues and with the final consent of our village, Yosuba village has been renamed as Enhulumi in the present time.

²² Tax in the sense may be understood as a protection tax or even a tribute.

in the neighbouring villages by warriors were done rather randomly. They could walk into a neighbouring village and pick a chicken or piglet of their choice without being questioned. Some of them would do the same even within their own village. Apart from such unpleasant practices by some of them, warriors in general would be given special privileges. Among the Chakhesang, only a warrior had the privilege of standing on the monolith stone when it was being pulled in honour of the couple performing the *Feast of Merit*.²³ Other than the economic benefits mentioned above (i.e., land and wealth), songs were sung in warriors' honour. They also earned the right to decorate their attires with curved images of human heads or the hair of women whom they killed. Among the Konyak tribe, warriors would wear necklaces with curved images (normally of metal) of human head to indicate the number of human heads they had taken. For the Aos, a specific shawl (called *tsungkotepsu*) was designed originally only for the warriors (called *nokinketers*, meaning 'those whose daos have power or magic') but later on it was permitted to be worn by the village rich who had performed the *Feast of Merit* as well (Ao 2014: 16-17). In this way, rewards were instituted by the community to celebrate the life and achievement of a warrior.

Reinterpreting the headhunting culture

To argue that the headhunting culture of the Nagas was not due to a culture of lawlessness is not the sole focus of this paper however. This misconception has been dealt with by several writers including some colonial writers. Rather my interest here is to suggest that the practice has a deep-rooted connection with some of the fundamental values of life, namely, equality, justice and freedom. This is not to say that headhunting was instituted to promote these values, but that it reflected these values from the vantage of modern interpretation. It is from the analysis of these and related concepts with special reference to headhunting that I will now attempt to interpret the practice of headhunting among Nagas. Let me begin with the observation of H.B. Rowney: 'The Nagas have no kind of internal government, and acknowledge *no supreme authority*. If spoken to on the subject they plant their javelin on the ground and declare that to be their Rajah, and that they will have none other' (Rowney 1969: 102; emphasis mine).

In the process of writing this article, I realized that, for Chakhesang Nagas, there is no historical record or narratives of one village surrendering or submitting to another village, and through which a relation of ruler-subject was established between villages. Interestingly we even lack the term 'surrender' in our languages.²⁴ It is true that a powerful

²³ The *Feast of Merit* was the most important feast among many Naga tribes, the performance of which would earn the hosting couple (only married couple could host it) the right to wear special shawls and decorate their house with specific items including horn-shaped wooden structure.

²⁴ I have been trying without result lately to find this term 'surrender' in other Naga languages as well. My initial inquiries of Naga tribes include Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Lotha, Mao, Rengma, Rongmei, Sema, Tangkhul, Zeliang. This is not to say that Naga people of have no idea of surrender. As a matter of fact, there were established ways by which a person can save his/her life when pursued by warriors. In his book,

or 'mother village'²⁵ would be recognized in terms of certain tax or tribute. This was especially common among those Naga tribes which practiced hereditary chieftainship. But this was more a customary practice of recognizing village's leadership role or religious role rather than the act of submission or surrender of one's autonomy.

The right to live with dignity and freedom as a sovereign or autonomous village was the unquestioned belief of the Chakhesang Nagas and I infer that this is true for Nagas in general, despite varied forms of government, ranging from the hereditary chieftainship among the Naga tribes in the eastern side to republican forms of democracy among western tribes. One of the reasons for holding such a view is that there was a total absence of imperialistic ambition among the Nagas. Wars or raids were not known to have been carried out to enslave or oppress others. There was no record of a powerful village trying to impose their custom or religion or language on a weaker or defeated village. A defeated village would not give up its right of self-governance, nor would it be demanded from her. The internal affairs of any village would not be disturbed by an outside force unless invited so for specific reasons. If a village was too weak to defend herself, then diplomacy would often take over and war or rivalry between the two parties would come to an end. Shimray, for instance, narrates the common practice among the Mao tribe as follows: 'The weaker village would to the enemy village with a wine-pot, a spear and a spade. When such presents were brought, the war ended without raising the question of surrender and payment' (Shimray 1985: 96). As such, the right of every village, weak or strong, to remain as a sovereign political institution was upheld almost like a sacred belief.

The basic inclination of human nature for harming one another in the form of revenge is one way of asserting equality. In the Hobbesian view, the nature of humans is such that even the weakest by treachery and cunningness can kill the strongest of man, and that this serves as a natural indicator that humans are equal to one another. It may be pointed out that between unequal relations such as masters and slaves or conquerors and the conquered, or even between some kind of hierarchical relations in a society like parents and children, the term 'revenge' is normally not applied to action or violence involving the two parties. Rather the (re)actions of the former group are better read respectively as acts of punishment or discipline in relation to the latter and the latter in relation to the former are better read as acts of rebellion. Within this type of relationships, neither threatened the other with the 'language' of revenge. Even if, for instance, a son kills his father out of some grudge, we may not typically look upon his action as a revengeful act. At best, his action may be regarded either as appropriate or inappropriate, justified or unjustified. In other words, revenge is peculiarly the language of the equals.

Shimray describes those circumstances and forms of 'surrendering' to warriors in order to save one's life (Shimray 1985: 93-97).

²⁵ By 'mother village' I simply mean a village from where members came out of it to form new villages and to which they depend for performing one or more religious rites and rituals during important occasions.

Imagine the following scenario in the pre-modern Naga context. Someone from village-A kills someone from village-B over, say, a land dispute. It would then be natural for Village B to seek justice. But the obvious question would be this: 'How can one seek justice when there is no higher authority over both the villages to which one can appeal for justice?' The natural desire for justice was made more difficult by the absence of independent judiciary and regular police. In the absence of such an arrangement, one can only think of taking revenge - *life for life*. But how can one ensure that the dead of someone has been avenged? For that, some evidence would be needed. We can ask further – 'what is the best evidence to claim victory or success in such a vengeful mission?' The most likely choice in the context of the Nagas was to bring back a head. A head has been considered as a symbolic mark of respect and identity among the Nagas. The head of an animal would be offered during important occasions to only some people such as the village chief or headman, or the eldest person in the clan, or the eldest among the siblings. As a symbol, the practice of giving and receiving a head of an animal has been well institutionalized. Certainly, it was not given to any. Ao observes:

in villages when animals are slaughtered for community feasts, the head of the biggest animal is *always* (mine) given to the chief or the headman as a token of recognition of his status in the community.... The heads of chickens or even fish heads cannot be eaten by anyone else except the head of the family, i.e., the father [among the Sangtam Naga tribe] (Ao 2014: p.13).

The heads of animals butchered or hunted would normally be displayed at the house of the rich and powerful. A traditional house of a rich man (performer of the Feast of Merit) in the context of the Chakhesang tribe would be decorated by the curving of mithun heads on special planks that form part of the frontal wall at the veranda. A head, in this sense, was a symbolic marker of status and identity. Accordingly, it is possible to infer that a human head not only served as an evidence of a kill but more fundamentally that the honor of that person or village had been restored by taking away a head from the enemy village. Interpreted thus, the symbolic act of restoring honor through the culture of headhunting serves the function of delivering justice as well.²⁶

Seen from this perspective, headhunting as a form of justice vis-à-vis revenge is not directed towards some specific individual. It can be arbitrary. If the slain is from the same village, that by itself would be sufficient. The dead is avenged and justice is considered achieved. To an outsider, especially from a modern liberal perspective, the act or custom of killing someone for no crime of his or her would be to distort the very concept of justice itself. However, the Nagas' sense of identity was not individualistic but communitarian in nature. For Nagas, the identity of an individual is primarily understood

²⁶ Apart from its symbolic function, the culture of headhunting suggests that the historiography of Nagas need to be approached from the perspective of embodied and performative history.

in relation to one's community. Collective identity was more fundamental than individual identity. Hence if a crime was related to headhunting, it was treated as a direct, deliberate and open challenge to the honor of the village in question.

In the absence of a larger political organization beyond the village authority to deal with questions of justice in terms of inter-village feuds, revenge cannot be simply dismissed as immoral and savage. The reason is that the community expects revenge whenever a wrong is done to one party by another party (both within and outside the village). However, revenge between members of the same village never involved the practice of headhunting though in extreme cases, revenge may become violent including murder. However even in such extreme case, a person's head was never decapitated. It may be worth mentioning that killing a person from the same village was considered 'murder' while the killing of a person from another was headhunting. If someone took revenge within or outside the village in order to defend the honor of a person or a village, it would never be interpreted as unlawful or morally wrong. Rather it was looked upon as a virtuous or rightful act. This was perhaps due to a very strong sense of equality rooted in our culture.²⁷

It may be noted here that revenge in the sense I am using the concept here has both personal and non-personal elements. It is personal in that it is an act initiated by the wronged person and justice was sought to be achieved personally. Revenge of this sort normally happens within the community. Revenge in the context of headhunting is also impersonal in that revenge needed not happen directly between the two (or more) persons involved. Anyone from the village of the afflicted clan or community can take revenge on anyone from the village of the perpetrator. The impersonal element of revenge is consistent with the word 'ga', the suffix for head taking, which has no moral connotation and has no element of personal offence. Compared to modern forms of warfare, this way of seeking justice between two sovereign political entities is less violent and economic in that the question of justice is taken care of without having to declare war on the entire village for the action or activities of some individuals.

It follows from the above that revenge was primarily seen as a form of delivering justice and, as such, it was justified by the society. Conversely, failure to rise to the social expectation of taking revenge created imbalances to the justice system given that Nagas had no regular police or courts to enforce justice. The implication is that without first rejecting the system of traditional justice as practiced by the Nagas, it is difficult to demonize or write off the culture of headhunting itself. To put it within the framework of my argument, headhunting reflected the Nagas' belief in the inherent principle of

²⁷ It may interest some to know that from my village there is a person by the name 'Khupo' which literally means 'revenge' and he even named his first son as 'Khasuho', meaning 'never give up'. If taken positively, it means that injustice should be avenged by all means.

equality.²⁸ The larger implication is that headhunting is indispensable for understanding the ancestral philosophy of Naga life, their beliefs, values and practices. Accordingly, the foregoing account on headhunting and its relation to the basic value systems of the Nagas may be taken as a proto-type model through which we can understand, explain and (re)interpret ourselves as Nagas.

Conclusion

To sum up, let me reiterate my central points. I explored and examined the concept of headhunting from an insider's perspective. I have done this by analyzing the term 'headhunting' in the Chokri language of Chakhesang tribe on the one hand, and in relation to the elitist culture of trophy hunting during the colonial time on the other. However, my basic attempt has been to locate and interpret the practice of headhunting within the larger framework of the values and normative structures of traditional Naga society. In doing so, I am suggesting the possibility of rediscovering and reinterpreting our value systems and traditional practices in order to understand ourselves better. Such an exercise is likely to affect the ways we see ourselves – seeing each other as equals – and this in turn may significantly change the way we see and relate with each other as Nagas. Not only that, this may also provide us with interesting insights as to why we not only constantly question the superiority of others, and the right of others to subjugate us, but also struggle passionately to reclaim our rights to live as free and equal people. 🙏

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²⁸ This type of equality is however not the same as modern liberal principle of equality which is grounded in individualism but rather it may be considered as collective or group equality.

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