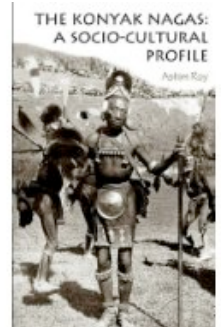


Review

The Konyak Nagas: a socio-cultural profile. By Ashim Roy (Leicestershire: Upfront Publishing Ltd, 2004, ISBN: 1-84426-268-5)



Ashim Roy's *The Konyak Nagas: a socio-cultural profile* is a significant study that merits wider circulation among readers and scholars alike – particularly those interested in the kingdoms and nations of the Naga-inhabited areas of Northeast India and Burma. It is, however, in dire need of a preface. Though Roy is meticulous in detailing practices and rituals related to food, war, tattooing, funerals, marriage, and the politics and policies of the numerous Konyak kingdoms as they were in the late 1940's, he is not so concerned with situating his work within the historical parameters that ultimately give the work its greatest value. For one, Roy comes closer than anyone in demythologising the social, moral, and religious underpinnings of Naga headhunting (or head-taking as some prefer). During his (and his companion Johnny's) month-long excursion into the northernmost corner of present-day Nagaland, he all but witnesses the last major headhunting raid in greater Assam's

history– that of the village of Anghphang in present-day Mon district, Nagaland. In this 1949 raid, roughly eleven neighbouring villages joined together and attacked Angphang village, wiping out the entire population (around three hundred people). Unpublished photographs and text shared with me recently by the author's family in Kohima indicate that smaller raids continued well into the 1970s, and that Roy had returned to the Konyak areas multiple times to document them. As the book was only published in 2004, it is likely that Roy supplemented his diary with notes from subsequent trips.

Before proceeding with the text, however, a few notes about its remarkable author. Originally from Shillong, Meghalaya, the late Ashim Roy (1921 - 2010) moved to Kohima in the early 1940's. At that time Kohima was a sparsely populated British administrative hill-station charged mainly with arbitrating village disputes, and collecting taxes within the administered areas of the Naga

Hills (the Konyak kingdoms were outside of this administered area). He witnessed the events surrounding the 1944 Battle of Kohima, where the Japanese Imperial Army's advance into India was halted by a much smaller but better-supplied British-led defence; as well as events surrounding India's Independence as they translated into the greater Assam region. Roy worked for Calcutta-based 'The Statesman' in the '50s and '60s, and was among only a handful of journalists that documented and photographed Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Kohima in 1953 – a pivotal moment in the region's history as it is during this visit that talks over Naga sovereignty broke down leading into the protracted Indo-Naga war (currently the longest running armed struggle in Asia). Closed to foreign journalists and research scholars since Nehru's visit, ethnographic research has been difficult if not impossible, further heightening the significance of Roy's efforts.

In the first chapter, Roy introduces us to Obu Ahen, a respected Konyak elder who becomes Roy's main informant throughout the first part of the book. Shortly after they meet, Roy and his friend Johnny (a colleague from Calcutta who accompanies him – though we learn very little about him) are immobilised as Obu Ahen suddenly feigns an attack on them –

with little hint that his intentions are purely demonstrative. It is here that Roy shows his giftedness with reflexive description. As chilling war cries, and spinning spears turn to rapturous laughter, the bewildered visitors follow the elder to his home, share *khulap* (a strong, black traditional Konyak tea brew heated with green bamboo and served in bamboo mugs), and listen attentively as he describes the ways of the Konyaks. Over the course of the first seven chapters, they discuss war, raiding and the fundamentals of bravery, followed by a meticulous description of tattooing and the process involved in ink preparation, the tattooing itself, and so on. Another fascinating discussing involves teeth blackening which, like tattooing, is a distinguishing factor among the estimated eighty or so Naga groups. Teeth-blackening was widely practiced among Konyak men and women well into the 1960s, and older generations swear to its dental health benefits! In any event, their time with Obu Ahen concludes with several days of notes dedicated to the various ceremonies and rituals associated with weddings and funerals for both common people as well as the king's closed kinship group. Actually, we never do get the full story on the Konyak anghs– or kings - from Obu Ahen, as he chooses instead to indulge

in some heavy opium smoking just as their time together concludes.

In chapter seven, the book suddenly shifts with the arrival of Baba Chingai, a Konyak angh of considerable influence that has arrived from Kohima on official business. Chingai served as an officer and interpreter for the British, and was largely responsible for halting inter-village raids in the un-administered Naga areas when British attempts had failed for decades. Chingai invites Roy and Johnny to accompany him on a journey to Mon village and then to another dozen or so villages within a thirty-mile radius before finally heading south toward Anghphang – the site of the massacre. Much of the rest of the book is about their long treks together, their utter exhaustion, and the awesome beauty of the mountains and their guardians – the Konyak kingdoms. Though the fear of ambush is always hanging over the

two visitors, every village they enter receives them with incredible tenderness and hospitality - with food and gifts often brought by the king himself. It is in this wilderness – where extremes in cruelty and humanity somehow coexist - that the reader is asked, in a sense, to struggle a bit with their own prejudices. This may be a difficult exercise until one follows the reading of Roy's book with, say, Fergal Keane's *The Road of Bones* – perhaps the most accurate account of the events surrounding the Battle of Kohima. In it, Keane details the often hand-to-hand combat that young British, Japanese, Nepalese, Indian and Naga soldiers are forced into, leading to the deaths of more than eight-thousand men, and thousands more wounded - literally piled high on a hill in Kohima. This, of course, happens only five years before Roy and Johnny pack up and journey from Kohima into the wild to meet the fearsome Konyaks! 🙄

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