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Article

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Introduction

This paper seeks to decolonize the oversimplified imaginaries of the Nagas as a lawless and warmongering society that is often portrayed by the 'plain' (Kapai 2020) and 'mainland' Indians (Wouters 2019). The Nagas constitute sixteen major tribes in the northeastern Indian state of Nagaland which are composed of a heterogenous mix of clans (or *khels*) and villages. This study presents interviews conducted in Nagaland from June 2019 to January 2020 to counterpose a lifeworld that resists this hegemonic enframing of the Nagas as foreigners within their own country and violent dissidents of the state. The state of militarization is certainly a significant social reality in Nagaland spanning seven decades between Naga nationalists seeking full-autonomy and the Indian state (Alemchiba 1970; Yonuo 1974; Hannum 1990). However, the ethnographic analysis presented here demonstrates that the misrepresentations of Nagas as warmongering "disturbed area" is not the only social reality.

The study highlights a rich landscape of indigenous social relations to redresses the misperceptions of the Naga people that have been fueled by decades of ultra-politicized and sensationalized misrepresentations by Indian political-media outlets. Furthermore, these findings also corroborate broader critical discourses which are decolonizing the 'Nagas in the 21st century' (Wouters and Heneise 2017; Wouters 2018) and correcting the sub-national orientalism (see Poddar and Subba 1991) of India's majority Hindu lens (Subba and Wouters 2013) on Northeast peoples like the Nagas.

State of Nagaland in North East India

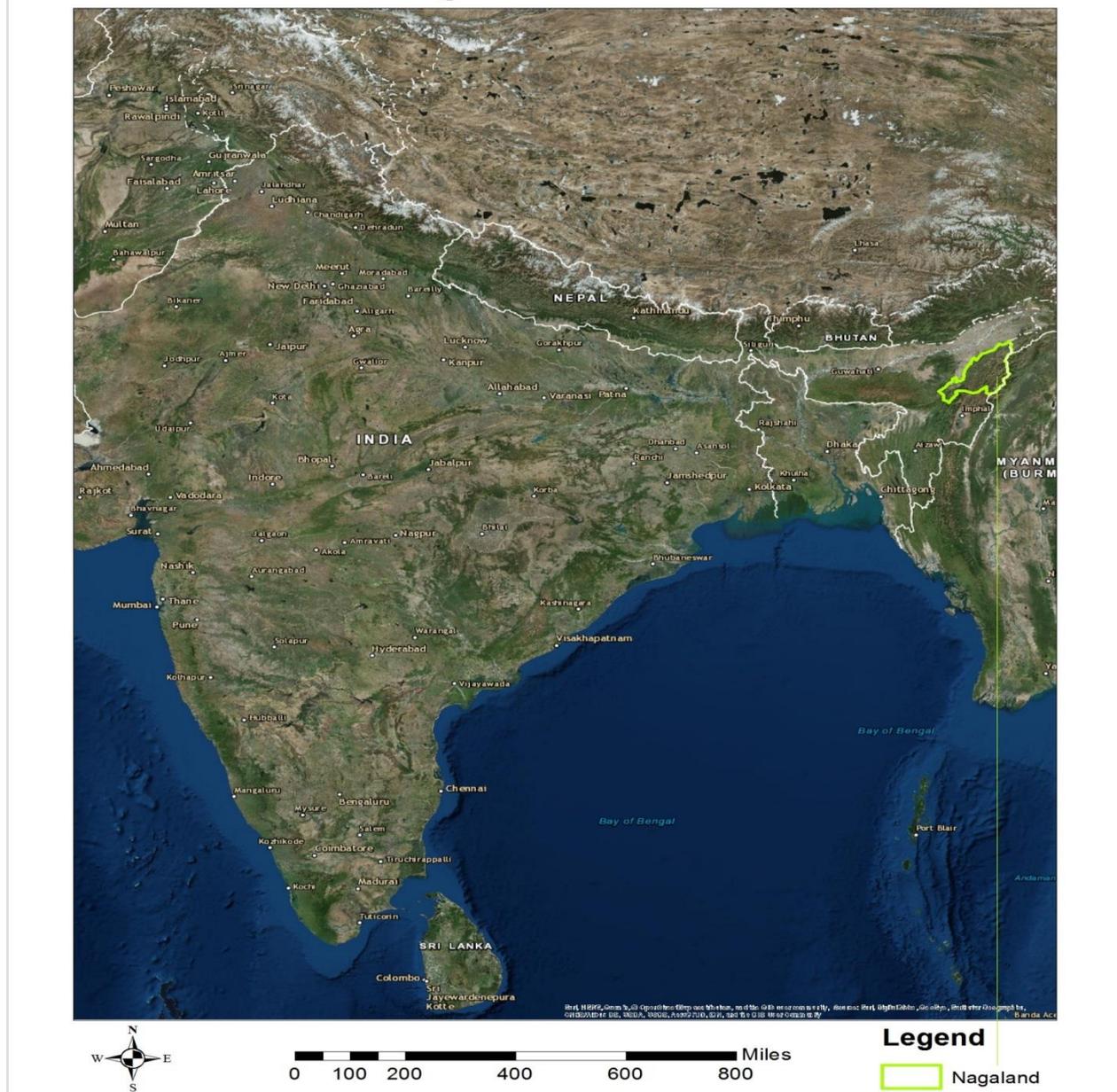


Figure 1. State of Nagaland highlighted in green.

Source: First author, 2019. Data source: Esri, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DS, USDA, USGS, AeroGRID, IGN, and the GIS User Community.

Analytical Framework and Empirical Data

The analytical framework of this study is based on ‘epistemology’ as a conceptual tool to define the ideological processes and systems of power which condition the social realities of particular groups of people (adopted from Foucault 1980; Feder 2011; Alcoff 2013). In other words, epistemology helps to explain how a particular social reality was induced at a particular place and

time. Therefore, we use this optic to examine the connections between historical epistemologies and its present-day manifestations in Naga society — particularly on *gennas* and territoriality of land relations. Our analytical approach centers the voice of the local Naga interviewees (drawing on the works of Saffari 2016) by focusing on the informants and allowing their form flow (also drawing on Pederson and Holdebraad 2018).

The empirical observations for the genealogical analysis were collected in Nagaland's Dimapur, Kohima, and Mokokchung districts from June 2019 to January 2020. The fieldwork included 32 direct interviews with common villagers, village elders, local academics, forest officers¹, community leaders, and other agency representatives. The sample cohort included 11 females and 21 males from the Aö, Sumi, Angami, Chang, Lotha, Sangtam, and Konyak tribes. The interviews were contextualized using archival research, historical photographs, government documents, and village agreements.

Epistemologies of *genna*

As a starting point of decolonizing the common misperceptions of the Nagas, we will draw on interview responses to forward that *gennas* were an epistemology of power and knowledge. According to the Nagas, *gennas* are a cosmology of animistic beliefs, worship, practices, and taboos that circumscribe the Naga lifeworld. One of the conventional medium of communicating and passing-on the indigenous cosmologies of *gennas* are through folklore. In this norm, several informants shared folklore to express the spiritual basis of land in Naga cosmology.

Historically, *gennas* ordered the Nagas' primordial social interactions with land through set customs, beliefs, and expectations, which governed their perceptions and interactions with land and nature. Here is one typical example of Nagas' relationship to their ancestral lands:

OP²: What were the historical meanings and worth of the land and forests to the Nagas?

CH³: If you look...everything was linked to the land. So, like for the Changs, even the words which are used when you say Manyü, it means Mother Sky. Kanyü, Mother Earth...even stones were worshipped so there was a lot of divinity ascribed to nature itself. So much so that for the Changs for example, even if you were to cut down a tree, you will actually first worship the tree. And there was a lot of *genna* around that you know...there was a lot of worship...and on the third day only, you cut down the tree. And

¹ From the Nagaland Department of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change.

² OP: first author; interviewer (Aö male).

³ Local social worker and community philanthropist (Chang male). Interviewed on 8 Aug. 2019.

then you get the villagers to come and pull the tree, and if you can't pull the tree, then you would say that the tree is pregnant and so we should not touch.⁴

The first element we will unpack here is the epistemological effects of *genna* on Nagas' social relations to land and nature. The social worker's (CH) response reveals that *gennas* not only ascribed spiritual values to forests but it also prescribed the social rules of interaction with forests (e.g., 'pregnant trees and so the people were not allowed to touch'). As such, *gennas* may be conceptualized as an epistemology of well-defined ideology, practice, and customs that conditioned the Nagas' social interactions with the world. In other words, the epistemology of *gennas* induced the normative structure of Naga society by regulating their social relations.

In another example, the embodiment of 'Manyü as Mother Sky, Kanyü as Mother Earth' (CH), illustrates that the Nagas perceived and experienced the world monistically and did not differentiate the nature-world from the human-world. This animistic cosmology rested fundamentally on the monistic worldview that all things possessed a spiritual essence and Nagas were stewards of their lifeworld, not its owners. Accordingly, they were expected to conceive their surroundings not as inert and inanimate objects but other-dimensional entities, and this worldview conditioned their social interactions with land and nature. For example, fishing was prohibited in certain Aö villages during the spawning seasons because it was believed that the river was giving birth. Illustrating again that the epistemology of *gennas* engendered the social rules and norms that conditioned the Nagas' material relations with nature and its resources.

The conducted interviews also demonstrate that the epistemological conditioning of *gennas* is not limited to historical Naga societies but also bears on contemporary social realities in Nagaland. Consider the words of a local academic,

A7⁵: "Here the land for them is regarded as sacred, one cannot just have their own claim over something which doesn't belong to them...this is also held true even till today when it comes to demarcation, when it comes to boundary issues people are very strict...if somebody lies and gives a wrong demarcation of the boundary it so happens that the

⁴ As an aside, this folk knowledge of the Chang tribe can be considered a representative portrayal of the broader Naga historical relations with land and nature because the sixteen recognized Naga tribes share a common folk knowledge. Folk stories like the one above are important to understand Naga cosmology because absent a written language, oral history in the form of folklore (including traditional artifacts like weapons, textiles, tools, etc.) are the primary sources of their historical records (for archaeological artifacts see Jacobs et al. 1990; and indigenous ethnographies see Changkiri 2015).

⁵ Professor of History at Fazl Ali College. (Aö male). Interviewed on 19 Dec. 2019.

person just dies quickly or some misfortune happens. So that tradition still remains and it is very strong”.

This response reveals that the *gennas* of traditional boundaries continues to regulate the ways in which the boundaries and tenure of land is established in Nagaland even today. This is further supported by another local academic,

A6⁶: “We Aös by nature we believe that we should never stop people from accessing the road and water because *atak-atemtse* we say “it will be a curse” no? So we do not blockage the well and not let people use the water because we believe that God has given us freely so you can’t take the land but you can use the water.”

In this case, the *gennas* of “curses” continues to prescribe the social norms of sharing natural resources among the Aö tribe. Illustrating again that *gennas* are intrinsic to the ways that the Nagas perceive their world and interact with it. Thus, based on the above observations we posit that *gennas* are characteristic of a ‘history of the present’ (Garland 2014) because customary *gennas* have significant bearings on the contemporary imaginative and material social realities of the Naga people.

Despite the permanence of *gennas* in Nagaland, these epistemologies have undergone major *epistemic ruptures*⁷ which continue to be a topic of decolonization in the literature (Jamir and Lanunungsang 2005; Shikhu 2007; Longkumer 2017). It is well established that various forms of epistemic ruptures began with British colonization from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. This period enforced various forms of assimilation including the conversion of Nagas into Christianity by American Baptist missionaries (Pruett 1974; Takatemjen 1998). Several Naga scholars have discussed that Christian proselytization assimilated the Nagas into western ideologies and demoted their values of nature (Jamir and Lanunungsang 2005; Shikhu 2007). This view has been supported by western scholars⁸ who suggest that Christianity replaced the position of nature with a new deity which denigrated the sacramental value of land and nature in the Naga cosmology. Several interviewees in this study also supported these views by narrating old village accounts. For example, a local academic stated that after her village converted to Christianity the ‘women dug holes *of their own accord* to hide their animistic tokens of worship’ (A6). The fact that the women “voluntarily” hid these artifacts underscores the discursive power that Christianity possessed in

⁶ Professor of Geography at Fazl Ali College. (Aö female). Interviewed on 17 Dec. 2019.

⁷ Epistemic ruptures are major epistemological rifts imposed by western discursive frameworks (Hammer 2017).

⁸ E.g., Varah’s (2017) study on the Tangkhul Nagas.

inducing a condition of “self-regulation” amongst the Naga people. This is why we postulate that the epistemic rupture of Christianity in Nagaland constitutes more than a denigration of sacramental values by a new deity, or the depreciation of indigenous human-nature values, as other studies have suggested, by adding that it was a fundamentally new epistemology of social relations.

To elaborate, the epistemic rupture of Christian theology amounts to a reorganization of the Nagas’ imaginative and material relations which had previously been regulated by the monist cosmologies of *gennas*. We also observe that this process of epistemic rupture synthesized elements of *gennas* with Christian practices in Nagaland. For example, the occurrence of sickness, death, and other misfortunes in a Naga family is still widely perceived as divine retribution which requires weeks and months of prayers and fasting at the church. While it is not uncommon for Christians in Tampa or Houston (where we are writing from) to also believe in divine retribution, the degree of penance practiced in Nagaland is more of a progeny of Naga monist cosmologies which required physical acts of penance to pursue supernatural effects. In another example, many Christian prayer centers in Nagaland simultaneously serve as psychiatric wards, drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, and hospitals for the terminally ill. The connection between *gennas* and Christianity is especially visible in the former of these functions because the mentally challenged are treated as “demon-possessed” who are in need of exorcising at the Christian prayer centers. Furthermore, the fusion of customary practices with Naga-Christianity is exemplified by Christmas Day programs which are nativized into ceremonial *feasts-of-merit*⁹.

There is also a growing scholarship that foregrounds the role of the Naga-Christian identity in uniting the Naga tribes under common ‘moral geographies’ (Longkumer 2017) which served as a catalyst for Naga nationalism and its struggle for sovereignty and security (Thong, 2010; Thomas 2017; Angelova 2017; Jamir 2020). Our views align with these discourses by propounding that the epistemology of *gennas* and customary practices manifests through Naga-Christianity and continues to shape the social relations in Nagaland.

Epistemologies of territoriality

One of the local academics raised an interesting point by stating that “you can’t take the land, but you can use the water” (A6). We use this as an appropriate starting point to discuss the territoriality of customary tenure as another epistemology that has conditioned land relations in

⁹ Feasts-of-merit are a customary practice amongst the Nagas where a wealthy person hosts a feast for a village as a performative passage to prestige and status in the community.

Nagaland. Territoriality as used here refers to the politics of land, the social meanings of land, “how people use the[ir] land” and “organize themselves in space and how they give meaning to place” (Sack 1986: 2). We now present two local interpretations and draw on extant literatures to contextualize the historical and contemporary implications of territoriality in Nagaland.

The first is an Aö village elder’s interpretation about the meanings and value of land to the ancestral Nagas.

LE¹⁰: So, the land had no value but that which came out of it, the vegetables, leaves, seeds, all of that had value. And then head hunting was there so to not have one’s head taken away! That had the utmost value. To be healthy, to not be hungry, to till the fields and grow crops, these were not important to our forefathers. And there was no boundary on the lands. Therefore, the land here is yours and mine, and it is also the village’s because to protect this your forefather’s head and my forefather’s head were sacrificed.

The crux of the village elder’s response is that while land had utility-values, it was the ancestral legacies of headhunting which ascribed the “utmost value” to the land. There is need to unpack this statement. First of all, the decapitation of one’s enemies was a traditional Naga practice which was dubbed ‘headhunting’ by the British. However, several local scholars have problematized that the term ‘headhunting’ is a colonial construct that was intended to otherize the Nagas as barbarians in need of civilizing (Zou 2005). As such, native insights from a contemporary Naga perspective have now decolonized the term by clarifying that Naga headhunting was not trophy hunting but actually an institutionalized way of Naga life (Ao 2014). More specifically, it was a “socio-religio-political activity that operated within a well demarcated political jurisdiction” with the “mandate and sanction of the village authority” (Tinyi 2017: 91).

There were codified *gennas* that regulated the norms of headhunting. For example, the human head (called *mangkuo* in Aö) was not prized for its own sake but had a purpose that served the interest of the village in settling scores or to assert their power. Additionally, the *genna* ascribed to the spiritual value of human heads meant that a head could be reclaimed once that purpose had been served. It is for these reasons that we forward Venusa Tinyi’s (2017) argument that the culture of headhunting embodies the Nagas’ fundamental values of equality, justice and freedom. We

¹⁰ Longsa Village Elder and Council representative (Aö male). Interviewed on 19 Dec. 2019.

further build on this argument by adding that headhunting also embodies the Nagas' fundamental value of territoriality.

It can hence be inferred that the Nagas' value of territoriality manifested through the culture of headhunting. For instance, consider the village elder's response that "the land here is yours and mine, and it is also the village's because to protect it your forefather's head and my forefather's head were sacrificed" (LE). Essentially, the ownership of land by the village—as the customary unit of political organization—has been legitimized through the historical practice of headhunting as an act of protecting those claims.

If we consider that headhunting was both an act of protecting as well as legitimizing the village's claims over land, such a framing elucidates the Nagas' epistemological manifestations of ownership. This optic helps to explain the village elder's statement that the legacies of headhunting ascribed value to land which previously "had no value" and "no boundary" (LE). In other words, headhunting reified the abstract idea of 'land' into a material value of 'territory' and its ownership. Furthermore, the village elder's claim that "the land here *is* yours and mine" also signifies that the reification of land and its ownership claims are very much relevant in the present context.

Notwithstanding the legacies of territoriality in Naga land relations, however, it is also necessary to note the epistemic ruptures of territoriality that were imposed by British colonialism. While the British administration did not actively reorganize the normative social structure of the Naga tribes (Ketholesie 2015), the social implications of British interference was irrevocable. The British administration in the Naga hills was primarily to enforce a state of law and order that prevented the tribes from raiding British tea estates in neighboring Assam (Misra 1998). However, these enforcements brought the Naga villages—which had previously been independent entities—under the jurisdiction of a centralized authority and its umbrella of financial administration. The British imposed this centralization through taxation and the prescription of an "Inner Line" to regulate the Nagas' movement and trade of commodities like rubber and tea with the plains people.

The imposition of taxes by the British reconfigured Naga social relations by introducing money as the new medium of value and exchange. This transformation was consolidated further by road construction and trade which transformed the traditional bartering economy of the Nagas—involving conch shells and *mithuns* (endemic Naga bison)—into a cash economy. Additionally, the British administration imposed severe fines on cases of headhunting and warfare, and together with American Christian proselytization, eventually ended the practice of headhunting. Ultimately, British colonialism not only enforced a new system of exchange-value, but it also transformed the

Nagas' epistemology of territoriality, particularly their "great shield, which they believed in viz., isolation," to cite a remark by a Lieutenant John Butler, British political administrator of the Naga Hills in May 1873 (Dzuvichu 2013: 474). As a result, the Nagas' indigenous reification of land (i.e., ascribing the territorial value of land through the culture of headhunting) was replaced by capitalist modes of labor and production.

The British replaced the institutionalized order of headhunting with new forms of authority and control that was symbolized by "red and black waistcoats" and "red blankets" awarded to the *gaonburras* (village headman) and *dobashis* (interpreters) for their service (Zetsuvi 2014: 67). Several studies have already explained that the *gaonburras* and *dobashis* were agents of the British Raj to tax the villagers, and to create a labor force of coolies (Dzuvichu 2014), clerks (Kikon 2006), and masons to build roads that would "tame the wild hill tribes" (Dzuvichu 2013: 474) through constant military surveillance and troop mobilisation. However, we suggest that this discourse can be further enriched by reinterpreting the epistemological significance of the 'red and black waistcoats' and 'red blankets'.

We postulate that the British marked the *gaonburras* and *dobashis* in red waistcoats and blankets not only as a constant reminder of colonial authority and surveillance in the villages, but also as an epistemological subjectivation of the Naga people. This is because the red and black uniforms represented the normalization of a new way of constituting knowledge, a new optic of making meaning, which made the Nagas into 'subjects of and to' the discourse of British imperialism. In other words, the bodies of the *gaonburras* and *dobashis* served both as a physical representation of discipline and regulation (similar to the discursive subjectivation of the body described by Foucault 1979), and also as an epistemological conditioning of the Nagas' subjugation to the British Raj. This is one example of how British colonization converted traditional social systems into class-based ones that funneled considerable power and wealth to those serving the Raj like the *gaonburras* and *dobashis*. In short, the British ushered in a capitalist "ontology of scarcity and money" (McCarragher as cited in Walden 2020) based on economic competition, capital accumulation, private land ownership, and control.

We will now draw on another interviewee's response to decolonize the notion that the Nagas' epistemologies of territoriality were erased by British imperialism. Despite the agenda of assimilation enforced by British colonialism, the interviews conducted in this study exemplify that the epistemology of territoriality persists as a fundamental condition of contemporary land relations in Nagaland.

FO2¹¹: The Nagas, when we talk about the worth of the land, not in the monetary terms, but in terms of attachment of the tribe, or to the village, or to the family, or lineage, it's very important. Here even if we don't get a single rupee from a land...or getting any direct economic benefit out of it, if someone else goes and cuts a tree then it becomes an issue. It's like how a tiger defends its territory...and that is how we have been able to maintain our territory, not by written law but by unwritten heritage or custom which has passed down through the ages.

The first element to unpack here is that the territoriality of village ownership is inseparable from Naga identity. In other words, village-based territoriality is a fact, a social truth, that has been "passed down through the ages" (FO2). These legacy effects are a good example of the ways in which historical customs of land relations have conditioned present-day social reality in Nagaland. Although there were 'no written laws' (FO2), the existence of customary ownership and stewardship of village-lands has induced a particular code of social behavior in Nagaland¹². In other words, the genealogy of customary knowledge has conditioned the normative structure of social and material interaction in Nagaland.

Another important feature of the forest officer's interpretation is that the indigenous relations of "attachment" to land ascribes intrinsic values that supersede its monetary values. This resounds native interpretations which have underscored that the Naga identity is inextricably linked to the concept of customary land (Imsong 2011). It is in this context that the analogy of "how a tiger defends its territory" foregrounds the inalienable relationship between Nagas and their land, in ways that are far deeper and meaningful than the mischaracterizations of Nagas as warmongering dissidents of the state - which are often portrayed by the mainstream Indian media. The following discussion seeks to illuminate some of these deeper meanings that the Nagas hold for their native lands, in an attempt to decolonize the common Indian misconceptions about why land is so important to the Naga people.

Redressing the othering of India's tribal citizens

First of all, the culture of alterity towards the Indigenous peoples of the 'Northeast' is inherently paradoxical of the fact that India is a democratic post-colonial construct. The othering of minorities evades the ontological fact that a federal social contract birthed India in 1947 which

¹¹ Forest Officer. (Angami male). Interviewed 25 July 2019.

¹² For information on Naga customary laws see Moatoshi (2019).

brought together diverse communities and races of people who had never shared borders, boundaries, nor identities before. Instead of celebrating and respecting this richness, the discursive misrepresentations by Indian media and political outlets have engendered a culture of alterity which propagates a false narrative that seeks to effectively erase this richness. To redress some of these biases, we will briefly contextualize the Indo-Naga history in British colonization which laid the foundation for post-colonial state of Nagaland in India.

The earliest classifications of the Naga hills people were codified by British colonel R.G. Woodthorpe in 1881. A significant factor informing Woodthorpe's classifications was that the Naga tribes self-identified and engaged in self-governance at the village-level as a discrete unit of social and political organization. This social formation was markedly different from the monarchical social orders of neighboring *Ahom*, Manipur, and Myanmar kingdoms at the Indo-Burma frontier. What was really interesting about the Nagas' village-based polity was that there is no record of imperialistic ambition or domination of one village over another. This is why Tinyi (2017) asserts that every village, regardless of being weak or strong, had the right to live with dignity and freedom as a sovereign and autonomous political institution. In other words, the right to dignity and sovereignty was a social truth - a normative fact of Naga social relations. This explains why the fundamental values of equality, dignity, and freedom, are existential to the Naga way of life. Parenthetically, this indigeniety in practice ought to exemplify the egalitarian ideals of Indian democracy, instead of being misportrayed by the media hegemony as a threat to Indian nationalism.

Coming back to the Indo-Naga history in British colonization, the Naga struggle for self-rule is now almost 100 years old which began with the Naga Club's memorandum to the Simon Commission on 10 January, 1929, exhorting the British to recognize the Nagas as the independent people they were before the advent of colonialism. These concerns were also shared by British administrators like Robert Reid, J.P. Mills, and J.H. Hutton who strongly forwarded the Crown Colony Plan (CCP) to designate the indigenous regions of 'Northeast India'¹³ as a protectorate of the British government because the people had no racial, historical, cultural, nor linguistic commonalities with the plains people of mainland India (Hazarika 2018). The CCP cited the precedents of other British Crown colonies such as Basutoland (now Lesotho); the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana); and Swaziland (now Eswatini) in South Africa. However, the politics of the CCP were soon displaced by the exigencies of World War II and the demands of anti-colonial nationalism. Instead, the rushed

¹³ Which included present-day Arunachal Pradesh and areas inhabited by the Nagas, Lushai (Mizo), Manipuris, Khasis, Chins, and Shans in the Sagaing and Kachin provinces of Burma.

adoption of a highly controversial and ambiguous Hydari-Naga National Council (NNC) nine-point accord on June 9, 1947, marked the beginning of a series of missed opportunities that could have led to a more amicable resolution for India's Northeast, and potentially more accurate and respectful representations of its Indigenous peoples by the Indian hegemony of political-media outlets.

The Hydari-NNC accord between the Indian Union and the NNC was supposed to be a peaceful agreement to resolve the political status of the Naga people. The accord stipulated a ten year period of coexistence between the Nagas and independent India. Instead, the accord became a source of conflict after the Indian Union failed to honor the ninth point of the accord - which stipulated that the Nagas would have the right to determine their future after the ten year period. This breach of social contract ignited the Indo-Naga conflict which remains unresolved. Although the seven decade conflict is now well documented (Aosenba 2001; Shimray A. 2005; Shimray U. 2007; Franke 2009), and most parties on both sides are eager to peacefully resolve the issue, many mainstream media and political outlets in India continue to politicize the conflict to feed the culture of alterity.

The ongoing peace-talks for a Naga Accord which began in 2015 between the central government and the separatist groups is in deadlock. Meanwhile, the sensationalist media recently used the rescinding of Jammu and Kashmir's Article 370 to propagate precarity about Nagaland's customary ownership of land and resources under Article 371(A)¹⁴. However, the Governor of Nagaland reassured the Naga people that,

“Nothing of that sort will happen because Article 370 was a temporary provision. However, the special constitutional provisions for Nagaland under 371(A) was the result of over three years of negotiation between the people of Nagaland and the central government. It is a solemn commitment, it is not temporary or impermanent as Article 370 was” (India Today, 17 Aug. 2019).

Despite this assurance, the harrowing history of state brutality in Nagaland is resurfacing in human-rights and political debates after 17 Naga coal miners were murdered in Oting village by the Indian armed forces under an alleged case of mistaken identity on 4th December, 2021 (Kikon 2021). This tragedy has galvanized political activists and academics globally to repeal the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which grants legal impunity to the Indian armed forces in “disturbed areas” like Nagaland. Naga academics like Dolly Kikon have clearly exposed the

¹⁴ Article 371(A) was passed in 1962 by the 13th Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution.

contradiction between alleged Indian democracy and its state militarization under the AFSPA (2009).

One of the endearing epistemologies of the Naga people, who have lived in a state of war for seven decades, is their territoriality of customary lands and its relation to identity and security. This is demonstrated by the people's implacable resolve to withstand the vicious territorial campaigns by the post-colonial Indian army which included the torching of expansive tracts of forests and villages in the 1950s and 1960s (Martemjen 2017). Notable Naga writers have chronicled the umbilical connection between Nagas and their ancestral lands which signifies their enduring survival, and unquenchable quest for freedom (Ao 2005; Kire 2015) despite "more than 60 years of de facto military rule through the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958" (Ngaithe 2015: 368).

The recent murder of innocent civilians in the Naga village of Oting by the Indian Army has invigorated the long struggle for fair treatment by its own citizens in Nagaland. The AFSPA has sanctioned innumerable human-rights violations in the Northeastern states of India for decades because it provides legal impunity to Indian security personnel to shoot, kill, forcefully enter homes, damage property, and detain civilians without warrant. According to veteran journalist on Northeast politics, Sanjoy Hazarika (2018), the AFSPA institutionalized the central government's military action to address political problems in India. Despite growing national and international pressures to repeal AFSPA, the undemocratic and draconian militarization and surveillance of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, and parts of Arunachal Pradesh, continue.

This might explain why the village elders and village representatives interviewed in this study repeatedly reasserted their claim over ancestral lands because they have been legitimized through legacies of defending and protecting its integrity. It seems that the constant militarization of Nagaland has forced the people to constantly defend their established territorial rights. This foregrounds the ontological contradiction about citizens in Northeast India having to continually assert their territorial rights and human freedoms in their own country.

The Indian politics of alterity is a complex set of material, cultural, moral and political factors that shape the ways the Northeast, and Nagas, are represented in India beyond the state and into society and popular culture. Outside their own states, people of the Northeast are constantly subjected to racism and alienation because of their antagonistic portrayals by biased national media. This is why Dolly Kikon (2005) argues that mainstream media portrayals of Northeastern people have produced distrust and discord in the minds of mainland Indians, which in turn, instigated racial prejudice and discrimination against Northeastern people. Meanwhile, these

mainstream media portrayals conveniently evade the fact that India is experienced by Northeast people at home as migrants, and yet the Indian state is also coveted for central posts like Indian Administrative Services etc., extension of state bureaucracy (i.e., new district councils etc, formal financing of customary bodies), and heavily contested elections. As such, we infer that this bias of representation, and the broader culture of alterity against Northeastern people, explains why many interviewees' were cautious of the Indian hegemony and commonly summoned Article 371(A) as both a legal provision and a social right to security and freedom. We argue that these apprehensions are important in decolonizing the distrust on both sides. Moreover, it also demonstrates the complicated social realities of the Nagas as citizens of India, where on one hand, the Indian state is coveted, and yet on the other hand, they are subjected to insecurity, alienation, and alterity.

Conclusion

The summative findings reveal that the epistemologies of *gennas* and territoriality are fundamental in present-day social relations of the Naga people. The culture of headhunting is also contextualized in the politics of customary land to foreground the Naga values of equality, dignity, and human freedom. These interpretations are used to decolonize the misperceptions and misrepresentations of the Nagas by hegemonic media as warmongering dissidents of the state.

In closing, the discussed analysis emplaces the Nagas' territorial culture and politics of land in the perpetual alienation and federal state militarization of Nagaland and the broader Northeastern people. The Indian political-media treatment of alterity towards its own citizens in the "recalcitrant periphery" (Longkumer 2017: 5) of the Northeast has engendered a growing political and cultural divide that is especially damaging to India's reputation as the world's largest democracy. Clearly, this calls for a decolonization of media misrepresentations as a starting point.

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