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Naga Identities: Changing Local Cultures in the Northeast of India

edited by Michael Oppitz, Thomas Kaiser, Alban von Stockhausen and Marion Wettstein

Gent: Snoeck Publishers, 2008, 464 pages, 376 illustrations, bibliography, index, ISBN: 978-90-5349-680-0

Reviewed by Stéphane Gros

In his Preface, Michael Oppitz talks of the ‘weight of the losses’ that overwhelm the helpless ethnographer as he witnesses the ‘signs of decline.’ This note of melancholy and nostalgia about a declining culture, with which the book opens, is nevertheless counterbalanced by the particular attention given to contemporary voices and the perpetual redefinition and restructuring of cultural forms. Hence the title given to this dense and extremely interesting volume: *Naga Identities*, which addresses the ‘polyphony’ of Naga self-image and identity within the flow of past and present threats or challenges from diverse and complementary perspectives.

Despite its size, one should not expect this book to be an encyclopaedia: it does not aim to cover all aspects of Naga history and culture, past and present, which would surely be a failed attempt from the start. Instead, this volume covers a wide range of issues and succeeds brilliantly in combining the results of work conducted in the field, on archives or on museum collections, and in showing the often subtle interactions between collective conceptualisations, material concretisations and identity, and how they change over the course of time.

Once feared head-hunters, the Naga people of the south-eastern foothills of the Himalayas have undergone tremendous transformations since the middle of the nineteenth century. With British colonial rule came the indelible mark left by Baptist missionaries, while the later integration of the Naga tribes in the new post-1947 Indian State resulted in a war of independence that raged for fifty years. A ceasefire has been in place since 1997 and now that the region has reopened to foreign visitors and researchers, it is the subject of increasing attention, as this book—among others—goes to show.

This volume is a richly illustrated collection of in-depth analytical studies (ranging from ethnology, to archaeology and linguistics), alternating with pictorial essays (glimpses of past and present life styles and artefacts), as well as excerpts from interviews with people from Nagaland. Each contribution sheds light on the elements, material or immaterial, which help to forge a link between past and present and to foster 'Naga' identity, the main concern of the book.

Given that the book originates from an exhibition¹ built around a collection of Naga artefacts from European museums, most of which were collected during colonial times, it is not surprising that the focus of the volume is on the objects and photographs representing the past grandeur of Naga culture. By the end of the nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth century, the first ethnographers of the period of British rule (Mills, Hutton and von Fürer-Haimendorf being the most important) were already documenting the demise of local cultures. Head-hunting, for which the Naga had become known, was then already a dwindling tradition, the subject of great ethnographic interest on the one hand, and colonial and evangelical repression on the other (even if paradoxically, it could be argued that colonial occupation actually fostered head-hunting by provoking rivalry between groups). Nevertheless, head-hunting does not define Naganess; much emphasis was given to the display of wealth and fertility associated with *mithun* (local semi-domesticated cattle) sacrifices during 'feasts of merit.' Such sacrifices were forbidden during colonial times, together with the *morung* system (men's ceremonial houses and dormitories, centres of collective life and repositories for head trophies) as well as tattooing. Several pictorial essays in the volume manage to evoke times gone by and the artistic expressions linked to these lost practices. However, the book is not an exhibition catalogue. The authors, some from Nagaland themselves, have done a sterling job of presenting today's Nagas and deconstructing their exotic image.

So, who are the Naga? Naga identity is certainly to be understood as an awakening to world politics, and to past and current nationalism (Abraham

1 The exhibition is part of a research project entitled 'Material Culture, Oral Traditions and Identity Among the Nagas', launched by the Ethnographic Museum of Zurich University, and is a complimentary exhibition to the one that opened at the Museum der Kulturen, Basel (Switzerland), in August: 'Nagas: A Forgotten Mountain Region Rediscovered.' For the catalogue, see Kunz and Joshi (eds.), 2008.

Lhota, Dolly Kikon), along with a need for political unity in their struggle for independence since the early twentieth century. This struggle has led to the recognition of the Federal State of Nagaland by the Indian government (1963), but has not, however, put an end to the armed resistance and conflict between opposing factions. The historical context of colonial rule and the spread of Christian missions also gave birth to the instrumentalisation of the supra-tribal ethnonym 'Naga.' Today, however, Naga identity goes beyond the expression of tribalism rooted in the colonial urge to control and categorise everything, or the rhetoric of evangelical Christianity. New expressions of identity and a search for meaning outside Nagaland are now emerging among the young generation, even if this implies the rejection of traditional culture (Alban von Stockhausen).

The nostalgia for disappearing traditions evoked by Oppitz in the Preface, and the 'tragedy' of the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity expressed by Macfarlane and Turin, justifies the need for compilation, recording and collecting. This situation of great cultural loss increasingly raises the issue of the relationship between the anthropologist and the host community, and the shared responsibility for rendering the results accessible, and for 'returning the culture' to the people from whom it originally came, as in the example of the 'Naga videodisc' (Macfarlane and Turin).

Given the important internal socio-cultural diversity—or even linguistic diversity, since the Naga languages do not represent a single coherent branch of the Tibeto-Burman family (George van Driem)—the process of selecting common features is bound to be an ongoing process, from both outside and within. Fortunately, this volume goes far beyond this and avoids providing even a tentative definition of Naga identity. Instead of sustaining the representation of a monolithic and exoticised Other, the book constitutes an exemplary attempt at restoring some nuance and fuzziness in the multiple manifestations of Naga identity. In so doing, it also avoids an all too easy opposition between tradition and modernity.

Material culture and artefacts are a strong focus of the book which nevertheless seeks to grasp both intangible and tangible manifestations of identity. Various contributors shed light on fundamental layers of meaning encapsulated in handicrafts (Marion Wettstein, Iris Odyuo), or new fashion trends (Moalasa Jamir). Others point out the cultural value of ancient stone monuments and monoliths (Stuart Blackburn) or of barely

surviving log drums (Michael Oppitz) and their intimate link with oral traditions and spiritual meanings. They remind us of the importance of different means of communication and the threat looming over oral traditions, story-telling or rarely studied song traditions (Thomas Kaiser). They also reveal the still lively traditional musical heritage (Wolfgang Marschall), or how nationalist feelings express themselves today through new songs and stories, and how political claims make use of origin and migration stories (Dolly Kikon).

Local religious traditions and practices are altogether a tougher field of inquiry, mainly due to the high dominance of Christianity (more than 90% of Nagas are now Christian). Hence, only one chapter on soul concepts and links between tigers and humans (Rebekka Sutter) refers to a layer of animistic beliefs, while other contributions focus on the local Baptist tradition (interview with Reverend Noklen Longkumer), on syncretic aspects of healing practices (Vibha Joshi), or on the more exceptional influence of Hinduism (Arkotong Longkumer).

The theme of social and cultural change runs through the whole book. It is sometimes dealt with somewhat too simplistically regarding changes affecting the family (Kevilhunino Nagi). One also comes to wonder what the 'enduring' heritage really is, so that Abraham Lotha's depiction of the 'core' of Naga identity seems either a little anachronistic or too politically oriented. In fact, aspects of how Naga societies have become transformed permeate most of the essays, but emerge with even greater force in the short interviews with Naga people that punctuate the volume. These nine interviews open other windows onto their past and present life and nicely complete the analytical essays by enriching the 'polyphony' that makes up the volume and by providing an insider's analysis and perception of the contemporary Naga social and cultural context (such as HIV, rock music, politics and religion). Maybe some biographical information about these 'representatives', or some further contextualisation, would have helped the purpose of letting these people have their say.

In one of the interviews, 'a young Naga woman' tells the reader how members of the older generation very often react negatively to inquiries about the past: 'Let us all be happy and move on. Why do you want to learn about the past?' Yet at the same time the younger generation faces the injunction: 'Regain your culture!', though left with little sense of what this culture *really* is. The young are therefore bound to recreate a culture,

'a new one', while giving up on the past to which they are not granted access.

Nevertheless, as this volume shows, there are some aspects of continuity: the strong stability in activities such as basketry which survived the arrival of modern goods (Iris Odyuo); prophecies in church circles which may parallel the traditional role of the tiger-man/shaman; the expression of deep-rooted cultural values through handicrafts such as shawl-making, even though reformulated and standardised, with an interesting shift from individual (status oriented) to collective identity, as demonstrated by Wettstein. Nonetheless, even if *mithun* sacrifices and headhunting, no longer practised but such an important component of male identity, 'are kept in iconic form in the design' on shawls, Wettstein is right in depicting the important repositioning of gender roles and the fate of these 'defeated warriors.' This echoes a similar comment, once highlighted by Ramirez (1987), made by a Naga man: 'They have made helpless females of us [...] they have forbidden us to take heads and thus deprived us of our way of proving our manly bravery' (cited from Ganguli, 1984: 192). Does the fundamental and positive role of social violence in Naga culture still express itself today through other means? Obviously, Christianity provides new cultural reference points and is a factor in instilling a sense of unity and identity; but it has also made a profound contribution to the disintegration of the internal mechanisms that organized Naga society in the past. The Hornbill Festival promoted by the State of Nagaland is a re-enactment of a shared Naga culture that never existed in this form, a form of invented tradition, as several authors point out. It serves an increasingly international public with a commercialised culture, and it seems impossible to revive anything that would contradict Christian precepts.

The episode told by Alban von Stockhausen of an incident during the 2005 Hornbill Festival is eloquent: that year, one of the invited troupes organized a traditional game that consisted of fighting over a live dog which in the course of the game was torn apart limb by limb. Shortly afterwards, this act was highly criticized and vilified as barbarian and as a form of gratuitous violence. Such an event can be understood as a sign of an ongoing search for meaning, through which the reader ultimately comes to share a deep sense of uncertainty concerning the future of the Naga culture. The future will no doubt involve re-establishing memories, attributing new

meanings to old, and developing a politics of heritage that could provide a ‘technology of healing.’² It is perhaps this kind of palimpsest that S. Ayim Longkumer, a craftsman and healer from Nagaland, is calling for when he says: ‘The key with which the English people have locked the Nagas in is still deposited somewhere in England. So please come and open, set us free.’

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2 See De Jong and Rowlands, 2008.