

The practice and significance of head-hunting amongst the Nagas: Excavating new dimensions in a given cultural context.

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Abstract

The study of any cultural practice must always recognize its changing historical circumstances. Head-hunting is one such subject that has long had a great hold on the imaginations of both European and Southeast Asian peoples. Nineteenth century travelers and explorers published a series of accounts of encounters with head hunters in the jungles of Southeast Asia that were widely read and discussed. Popular accounts of head-hunting describe the head hunter as the cannibal and the noble savage, as a result placing a very exotic image for the Western audiences. The fascination is, however, not limited to Westerners. Today, most of us perceive head hunters as the savage warrior who severs the head of the victim to rob him of any dignity in death.

Keywords: historical accounts, sanctioned ritual, head-hunting, Naga society.

Temsula Ao, in her seminal essay “**Head-hunting : Some Thoughts**”, offers us a different point of view in this clichéd perception that we have been harboring in our consciousness . The little knowledge that we have about the hill-tribes of North-Eastern India is directed to us through the written accounts of various British administrators, anthropologists and travelers. And since they considered head-hunting to be an aberrant social behavior we have also been conditioned to accept head-hunting through the eyes of the ‘other’ . Head- hunting, in fact, “ is an organized, coherent form of violence in which the severed head is given a specific ritual meaning and the act of head taking is consecrated and commemorated in some form. It would be unfair to treat head-hunting as a form of primitive warfare triggered by the expression of man’s aggressive nature in stateless societies because of competition over scarce resources” (**Hoskins, *Head-hunting and the Social Imagination in Southeast Asia*, 2-4**).

If we develop a rational insight we could see that within a framework of sanctions, head-hunting is an accepted social practice in the Naga community. “The oral histories of the different Naga tribes laid overriding emphasis on head-hunting as a necessary strategy for the survival of each village community” (Ao, “**Head-hunting Some Thoughts**”, 16). The prestige associated with head-hunting is closely linked to the safety and survival of a particular village. So basically, it was a way to safeguard the progeny of a particular community. Violence could be conceptualized as an indispensable part of social life and not necessarily seen as evil, during the pre-colonial Nagaland. “It was the ultimate good when exercised in appropriate contexts against the right opponents”¹ (Hoskins, 5).

Further head-hunting as a necessity during that time, was practiced to appease the spirits of the dead, to ensure the production of crops and when the head hunters went for wars, it symbolised enterprise and teamwork amongst them. Head-hunting as a ‘need’ was constructed out of social and political circumstances and cannot be understood as purely ‘blood, piercing and savagery’. In spite of the prevalence of head-hunting, Naga villages were tightly-knit, self-administered social units and the state of affairs was far from being anarchic or chaotic.

It should be noted that head-hunting wasn’t merely practiced to uphold one’s honor and prestige in the society. The hunters didn’t engage in it and slay each other’s head for fanfare or to display their snobbish heroism. “Unauthorized killings were strongly condemned by the society and were liable to appropriate punishment by the village authority and any head taken in such ‘stealthy’ manner would not be considered a trophy but would be destroyed as taboo” (Ao, 21). The Ao Nagas believed in the cycle of retribution, feared the wrath of the God of the Land of the Dead and condemned those killings which were not included within their jurisdiction.

Another point which proves how head-hunting wasn’t merely about relentless killings was the fact that the hunters followed codes of ‘military etiquette’ and a certain form of ‘abstinence’ was also observed. There were certain restrictions for a man about to go on a raid. These rules ensured that the men remained chaste during their absence from home and the women didn’t go wayward.

The ceremony that followed a successful head-hunting expedition included dancing, feasting and general merry-making. The number of feasts varied from tribe to tribe and hosting of this kind of communal feasts was always an expensive affair, necessitating lavish supply of cattle

¹ In this paper, I have drawn on some of the insights prevalent in Southeast Asia and tried to place head-hunting in a wider regional perspective.

and rice beer, and each series in the feasts of merit becoming more elaborate and costly than the last one performed. Every Naga hoped to perform the whole series in the feasts of merit and gain honor both in life and after death. At the same time, these ritual feasts of merit demanded not only the intensification of economic production such as rice and grains, breeding of pigs, *mithun* and fowls but these ceremonies also ensured that the wealthy individual shares and redistributes his accumulated wealth with his fellow villagers who are less fortunate thereby creating a balance in the society.

Whole generations of Nagas grew up within this culture of head-hunting and learnt to emulate famous warriors of their respective tribes whose exploits were encoded in many a folk-song and narrative. This way, the community knowledge of the past is recorded through formal verse or ritual speech and passed on to their progeny. Oral narratives on the past serve to locate people and validate their claims in a given territory thereby bringing an order of political organization.

There is also an economic aspect related to the whole enterprise of head-hunting. A successful head-hunting raid generates a lot of trade. Villagers sell their hand-made plaited dance hats with goat's hair plumes, ceremonial spears, dance baskets and *dao* handles in the markets of the plains. Through this process there is an interaction with the outside world and it facilitates inflow of trade and money.

“Until the advent of the British into the Naga territories, the question of rightness or wrongness involved in the killings during head-hunting raids, doesn't seem to have entered the Naga mind not because they couldn't differentiate right from wrong but because the practice had social sanction and was accepted by all the people as their way of life” (Ao, 27). But towards the end of the nineteenth century colonial power overtook the Nagas and distorted their entire way of life. Taking a comprehensive view of the situation in Nagaland, it is a patent reality that the political leadership under the Raj committed grave errors over the years in confounding the practice of head-hunting and criminal behavior and then seeking to deal with it in stringent measures.

As the new masters, the Britishers asserted their authority by administering justice as they saw fit. They first prohibited head-hunting and later introduced fines on the offenders. As a result, there began a conflict between approved and accepted behavior. The administrators often resorted to punitive actions which were not prescribed in the legal system; burning down of entire village, forced labour, indentured slavery etc. Tamsula Ao raises a very significant question to her readers, “Would the burning down of entire village for the acts of a few, by extracting forced labour meet the requirements of their version of justice?” (Ao, 29).

Although the arrival of the ‘other’ remodelled and remoulded beyond what could be reasonably imagined and made a profound impact on their age old customs, the Nagas didn’t completely yield to the compulsion. “Jostling for space and acknowledgement, negotiating and resisting the impulse to homogenize a distinct cultural form, the Nagas have adopted a synthesis of the old with the new”² (Goswami, *Troubled Diversity*, 1). The urge for head-hunting is as old as the instinct for survival and has been the essence of human existence in this part of the world. No threats or military power or historical account could possibly attempt to wipe out and devalue the tradition that has been etched in the memory of the Nagas since ever.

² The wresting of colonial changes for self-construction and presentation has always been present amongst the various ethnic communities in the post- Independence era. Readers can refer to the chapter “Constructing and Performing Diversity : Colonial and Contemporary Processes” in the book *Troubled Diversity* edited by Sandhya Goswami

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