

AN ANALYSIS OF THE NAGAS STUDY OF HAIMENDORF

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Abstract

When the “Belt and Road Initiative” was put forward, the Himalayan regions become a vital link between “the Silk Road Economic Belt” and “the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, and the Himalayan ethnic groups are the “buttons” on this link. The Himalayan regions and ethnic groups, which have always been considered the “periphery”, have come into the “core” in the construction of the “Belt and Road”. The Nagas of the Himalayan ethnic group, who live across the border area between India and Myanmar, had caught the attention of the English anthropologist Haimendorf. He conducted systematic research on this traditional society, including social structure, cultural customs, belief systems, etc., and witnessed and recorded the development and change of the Naga society in nearly half a century. During the research process of the Nagas, he turned from a supportive diffusionist to a practical functionalist, and applied participant observation, comparative research, text and audio-visual recording throughout the study. His research results serve as important references for a more comprehensive understanding of the traditional culture and social changes of the Nagas, also provide the valuable experience for the present ethnological research in China, and pivotal inspiration for the construction of the “Belt and Road”.

Key words: Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf; Himalayan ethnic group; the Nagas

The Nagas is an ethnic group with a long history in Indochina Peninsula. They live in the Naga Mountains and its east and west sides, straddling India and Myanmar. According to myth and legend, the Nagas probably came from the areas of Tibet and Yunnan in China.¹ Until the 19th century, *the Nagas* were part of the Ahom dynasty. After India and Myanmar became British colonies, the Naga region, where the Nagas live, became a de facto “quarantine zone” secluded from the outside influence. After the independence of India and Myanmar, the Nagas in the two countries began to seek autonomy. Particularly, the Nagas in India who were heavily influenced by Britain went on the road of pursuing “independence”. At present, the problem of Naga region is a major problem impeding the development of northeast India and even of whole India and Myanmar.

Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf (1909-1995), a famous British anthropologist and founder of the study of Himalayan ethnic groups, first entered the Naga Mountains in the mid-1930s, conducted a comprehensive survey on Konyak Nagas, who had never been paid attention by other scholars, observed and recorded the customs of the Nagas in the areas not under the jurisdiction of the British and Indian government along the Indo-Myanmar border, and collected a large number of physical materials and cultural texts of the local people. Later, he revisited the site several times in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, recording the process of social change of the Nagas, which made the era open to anthropological research of the Nagas.

1. The results of Haimendorf's Nagas studies

After nearly half a century's continuous attention, investigation and research on the Nagas, Haimendorf has achieved fruitful results in the study of the Nagas (see: Table 1), becoming a worthy founder of this research field. He systematically analyzed the social structure of Konyak Nagas from the perspectives of village, *morung*, clan, family, individual, noble and common class and made a comprehensive study of the Nagas traditional “headhunting” and “naked” customs and belief systems, and witnessed and recorded the changing process of Naga society.

¹ Zhu Changli. A study of ethnic origin and customs in Northeast India. *South Asian studies*, 1984(01)40-41; He Yaohua, He Dayong. The historical origin of the Eastern Himalayan peoples of India and the Tibeto-Burman peoples of Southwest China. *Journal of Southwest Minzu University*, 2007(05): 22; Lv Zhaoyi. The evolution of flood and calabash Myth and the migration of Indo-Burmese Nagas. *Academic Exploration*, 2009(03):93.

Table 1: Major works of Haimendorf's Naga studies

Title	Type	Time
Zur Frage der Kulturbeziehungen zwischen Assam und Südsee	paper	1929
A Comparative Study of the Mountain Tribal Society in Assam, India and Northwest Myanmar	monograph	1931
Staat und Gesellschaft bei den Naga	paper	1932
The Sacred Founder's Kin among the Eastern Angami Nagas	paper	1936
Bericht über eine Expedition zu den Kalyo Kengyu Naga, Assam	paper	1937
The Head-Hunting Ceremonies of the Konyak Nagas of Assam	paper	1938
The Morung System of the Konyak Nagas, Assam	paper	1938
Through the Unexplored Mountains of the Assam-Burma Border	paper	1938
Die Hochgottgestalten der Ao und Konyak Naga von Assam	paper	1938
The Naked Nagas	monograph	1939
The Role of Songs in Konyak culture	paper	1943
Culture Types in the Assam Himalaya	paper	1946
Youth-Dormitories and Community Houses in India	paper	1950

The Aboriginal Tribes of India	paper	1950
The After-Life in Indian Tribal Belief	paper	1953
The Konyak Nagas	monograph	1969
Comparisons between the Mountain Peoples of the Philippines and Some Tribes of North-East India	paper	1971
Recent developments in Nagaland and the north-east frontier agency	paper	1972
Return to the Naked Nagas	monograph	1976
The Megalithic Culture of Assam	paper	1989
Life among Indian Tribes	monograph	1990

1.1 Social structure research

Haimendorf divided Konyak Nagas society into two different types and analyzed the local social structure from two dimensions of vertical composition and horizontal stratum.

Based on linguistic and cultural characteristics, he divided the Konyak Nagas into two groups, the *Thenkoh*, who live in the outer ridges that connect the Assam plains, and the *Thendu*, who are found mainly in the ungoverned northeast. In *Thenkoh* village, all members are equal, and there is no authority above all Morons; In most *Thendu* villages, however, the *Morong Angs*, a privileged class, are to be found.

The *Morong* of the Konyak Nagas is a place for unmarried men of the village to live. The village is made up of a varying number of *Morongs*, which are made up of clans. *Morong* is the center of the Naga people's life and the pillar of social and political organization, regulating each individual's relationship with the collective and other members and forming the framework of rights and obligations between individuals and groups. In Haimendorf's view, although the conflict between the

Morongs sometimes leads to serious consequences, it is nevertheless conducive to the development of the Naga society.²

According to his research, there are two classes in Konyak Nagas society: aristocrats and commoners, and they take up different positions in different types of villages. In *Thenkob* villages, the aristocracy, known as *Ang*, and the commoners, known as *Ben*, possess no obvious privileges, and the two social classes have equal social status. In *Thendu* villages, aristocrats are called *Wang* and commoners *Peng*, and the aristocracy produced chiefs who are autocratic rulers whose relatives control the social and political life of the village. No individual effort among the Konyak Nagas can erase or blur the line between chiefs and commoners, or cross class barriers.

1.2 Cultural customs research

The most prominent feature of the cultural customs of Konyak Nagas is their diversity. Even though the neighboring villages are obviously different in terms of language and culture, “naked” and “headhunting” customs are their common and outstanding characteristics.

In early texts, the Konyaks were referred to as the “the naked Nagas” because they were mostly naked, with few clothing attached to them. When Haimendorf researched in 1936, he found that the term “the naked Nagas” was still applied to the Konyaks. The men worked naked, covered only by a small apron tied to a belt. It is also customary for certain persons to perform their ceremonial duties in nude on occasions such as funerals. On a return visit in 1962, he could still see the local young men chatting in the village or working in the fields naked; Underage girls wear only a rope around their waist or are completely naked, and adult women wear only a narrow skirt. In grand festivals or headhunting ceremonies, men were more decorated than women.

The custom of headhunting exists extensively in traditional Naga society. The conflict between the Nagas is never about killing each other. It is about headhunting. Captured heads are carefully preserved and “fed” in the belief that they can bring both good fortune for individuals and prosperity for communities. In the process of investigation and research, Haimendorf found two major features in the Nagas headhunting custom: First, the gender, age and identity of the headhunter did not affect the effectiveness of the head on the individual and the

² Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. *The Morung System of the Konyak Nagas, Assam. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1938(68):376.