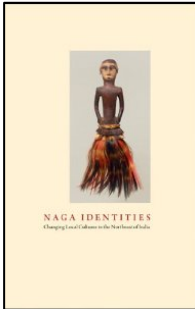


## REVIEW: *NAGA IDENTITIES*

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Michael Oppitz, Thomas Kaiser, Alban von Stockhausen, and Marion Wettstein (eds). 2008. *Naga Identities: Changing Local Cultures in the Northeast of India*. Gent: Snoeck Publishers. 464pp, numerous illustrations (400+ photos, drawings, and maps), index, bibliography. ISBN 9789053496794 (hardcover 45USD).

This rich volume, with 464 pages packed with information on many aspects of the history and culture of the Naga peoples of Northeast India and Burma, and with a wealth of fascinating illustrations, was simultaneously published in German as *Naga-Identitäten: Zeitenwende einer Lokalkultur im Nordosten Indiens*. This English version was translated by a team of dedicated editors and proofreaders, resulting in a remarkably rich and well-produced book of great value to everyone concerned with the peoples of Asia's highlands.

The Nagas, a large grouping of distinct Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples whose ancient lands have become a part of Northeast India and northern Burma, occupy a key place in the history of Asian highlands peoples. This book explores the last several centuries of their history, up to the present day. It deploys a host of different perspectives to examine how the Nagas have survived and dealt with the three major 'shock-waves' that have affected them over the last 150 years: the onslaught of British colonial rule over their areas, as extended from British-occupied India and Burma; the spread of Christianity by foreign missionaries; and the struggle for autonomy against the Indian state, which sent tens of thousands of

troops to deny the Nagas' aspirations for autonomy just after India itself had gained independence from Britain (on these terrible wars, also see Franke 2009).

The sheer scope of materials presented in this 'orchestral' composition of a book (to quote the preface) is most delightful and makes it probably *the* most important book on the Nagas in recent years – a critically important reference point on a host of issues.

Oppitz' moving preface makes clear that the key aim of the work is to present the Naga peoples' own perspectives on their dramatic history and their own view of their identity. Accordingly, the volume includes a number of articles by Naga authors, on topics such as Naga identity and heritage, changes in Naga family structure, and so on, as well as a series of interviews with Naga interlocutors, including the healer and craftsman S. Ayim Longkumer; a museum director; a social worker; a Christian priest; and a bishop (these latter two perspectives are important not least since today over ninety percent of the Nagas are Christians); a 'tigerman'; a musician and café owner; a freelance journalist; and a young woman who reflects on topics such as the beauty pageant, or fashion show, which is one of the latest phenomena in Nagaland (perhaps unexpectedly so, for many Western readers) – and which is also discussed and richly illustrated in a separate article on this topic.

These interviews are interspersed with topical articles, on the one hand, and with a series of 'object essays' and 'pictorial essays' on the other. The book as a whole makes for an eminently well-structured, readable, and enjoyable experience, which seems to never end, as the reader/ viewer navigates through it.

The scholarly articles written by a combination of Naga and non-Naga scholars discuss further topics, such as the earliest Naga history and the mapping of Nagaland by explorers and colonialists; the most recent gains made in Nagaland archaeology; how the many Naga languages relate to each other and to languages wider afield, in India, Tibet, Burma, China; and so on. Several closely related articles introduce the state of the art of research on Naga oral history and the folklore of magic stones and such matters; on the treasure house of Naga songs, which is fading fast; and Naga music generally. Other

articles deal with weaving (under the evocative heading of "Defeated Warriors, Successful Weavers"), woodcarving (a major Naga artistic genre also undergoing tremendous changes), jewelry, and basketry. There are several specialized articles on religion, healing, and pilgrimage. One piece on Naga tiger-men ("Shadows and Tigers," by Rebekka Sutter) is a tremendous contribution to the wider literature on were-animals and the like, in their social context. The recent history of occupation, proselytization, and war is discussed in the seventeen-page Introduction as well as in several other pieces, through the pictorial essays, and the interviews. There are also, appropriately, articles on the history of outsider's exploration and ethnography, such as on the exploits of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf and on the history of British and other Western collections of Naga objects, and on their digitization, enabling 'the Return of Culture' to the Nagas.

The accompanying pictorial and object essays offer a wealth of both contemporary and historical photography, evoking other recent works (e.g., Jacobs et al. 1990 [2012], Stirn et al. 2003, van Ham and Saul 2008) similarly drawing on the vast archives of older photography from Nagaland. Nearly all previous literature is duly cited in the admirable and very useful bibliography (readers will love the well-made index, too).

It is difficult to think of anything omitted in this wide-ranging, indeed marvelously rich work. One aspect that could have been raised, but is not, is the important work of the American anthropologist Jonathan Friedman, whose *System, Structure, and Contradiction: The Evolution of "Asiatic" Social Formations* (1998 [1979]) includes much discussion of Naga ethnographies as a key part of his critique of Edmund Leach's much more widely known, but deeply flawed, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. Friedman attempted to account for the processes of change in 'peripheral' societies of Asia's highlands from Northeast India to Laos and China, and argued forcefully (against Leach) that social structure and its transformations must be understood by reference to the inherent dynamics of the total ethno-political systems of which they form part, and which include both centers and peripheries as well as the

material conditions of these inter-related societies. One of Friedman's Swedish students, Thomas Hedén, wrote a sequel essay (1979) that took Friedman's argument further, specifically as regards the Nagas, but not many other scholars have taken up this challenge. One key advantage of the theoretical perspective that is deployed in the writings of Friedman and Hedén is that it provides a far more productive framework for explaining 'headhunting' as warfare and as the product of conflict – a more productive explanation than either the mystifying views of the origins of headhunting found in some of the indigenous Naga accounts referred to in this volume or, worse, the unconvincing generalizations about a supposedly violent human nature suggested by British observers like Hutton (also mentioned here, p. 19-20), but which today appears much more like demonization that directly served to justify British imperialist violence, than a scientific explanation. Of course, in overlooking Friedman's substantial attempt at understanding the long-term trajectories of Naga societies, this volume's editors are not alone. For unclear reasons, this is a pattern in recent scholarship of the region: even a voluminous 2007 book devoted solely to the reconsideration of Leach's work fails to engage it (still, see Bouchery 2007, a contribution on the Nagas included in that same work). And Friedman himself, in his preface to the 1998 second edition of his book, acknowledges his own lack of a historical perspective and expresses the hope for more historical accounts (including by indigenous peoples' representatives themselves) – exactly the kind of accounts contributed by this volume!

On another note, given the considerable impact of foreign Christian missionaries, it would have been interesting if the missionaries that brought Christianity to the lands of the Nagas had been included in some way. There is considerable and sophisticated discussion of Naga religion here already, such as in Joshi's contribution on healing, but perhaps a period piece from one of the American Baptists might have been included, expounding on the ideological justifications for their incursions, and the destruction of tradition that they wrought. Raymond Corbey's work (2010) is a fine example of the new genre of critical scholarship of Christian

missionaries, who often destroyed elements of local religious paraphernalia that they saw as being incompatible with the foreign religion they wanted to impose while, at the same time collecting specimens of those same paraphernalia for sale or for display in museums at home, as trophies of sorts, of the peoples and lands they helped conquer.

Michael Oppitz, one of the main editors of this comprehensive work on the Nagas, contributes a fascinating article on the imposing Naga log drums, which also extends to comparisons with the log drums of the Wa in Burma and in Yunnan, China, and those of other highland peoples of the region. I must note for the interested reader that Oppitz has published many other works on the region's religion and culture, including, for example, an important book in German on the widespread lore of 'lost writing' (*Die verlorene Schrift*; Zürich: VMZ, 2008; a topic that has recently come into focus in the English-speaking anthropology literature on the 'Zomia' region); and a film on Magar shamans in central Nepal (*Shamans of the Blind Country*). Especially notable for those interested in this Naga volume is the similarly rich and generously large-sized book *Naxi and Moso Ethnography: Kin, Rites, Pictographs* (also beautifully produced by the ethnological museum at Zürich, in 1998), co-edited by Oppitz and Elisabeth Hsu, on the Tibeto-Burman speaking Naxi and Moso peoples living in Yunnan, China, not far to the east of the Nagas – their distant relatives, we must assume.

The book will be of great interest and lasting use for everyone interested in Asia's highland peoples, including both amateurs and scholars and experts, and, I believe, of great interest to indigenous peoples' activists and other intellectuals, both among the Nagas, and also among other peoples across the region and around the world.

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