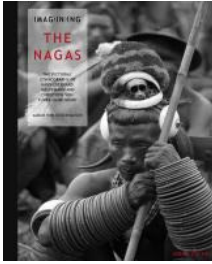


---

 REVIEW: *IMAG(IN)ING THE NAGAS*

Reviewed by Mark Bender (The Ohio State University)<sup>1</sup>



Stockhausen, Alban von (2014). *Imag(in)ing the Nagas: A Pictorial Ethnography of Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf*. Vienna and Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers. 452 pages, 400 illustrations in color and black and white, maps, bibliography, ISBN 978-3-89790-412-5 (hardback 58£).

This beautifully executed work is a reexamination of thousands of photographic images of Naga peoples from North East India collected by Hans-Eberhard Kaufmann (1899-1986) and the ground-breaking visual anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf (1909-1995). The book cover is dominated by the arresting image of a brooding man, crouching in full warrior garb consisting of rattan loops covering his forearms, hands clutching the bamboo shaft of a spear, bone arm bands about his triceps, wild boar tusks framing a tiny monkey skull and cluster of feathers atop his head, and large bone or shell discs above his ears. His eyes seem intently fixed on something outside the frame. This image seems to convey a way of life now regulated by politics and technologies beyond the purvey of the uplands, an image that appeals to modern sensibilities towards the wild and untamed.

By flipping to the frontispiece, the reader encounters another image from this upland realm of the past, that of a young woman clad in strings of beads around her neck, beaded arm bands, and silver earring loops. Her head cocked slightly to one side, she seems to gaze directly into the lens, and into the eyes of the beholder. The back cover shows a close-up of a larger image that appears inside the volume. It is a beatific image of the face of a Naga woman gazing, seemingly, past the camera into the distance. The ethnographer Furer-Haimendorf

---

Bender, Mark. 2017. Review: *Imag(in)ing the Nagas*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 45:93-97.

---

subjectively described the face as the most beautiful he encountered among the Naga.

The author, Alban von Stockhausen, has taken material assembled for a university thesis - which includes samples from over 5,700 images - and in concert with Arnoldsche Publishers has crafted a text that is both visually and theoretically stimulating. As a form of visual anthropology, the work utilizes innovative strategies to allow readers to examine the photographic shadows of Naga cultures in the mid-1930s from the vantage point of contemporary visual theory. While the author has presented information on every accessible collection of Naga photographs in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and other European archives, the focus of the volume is the collections of the two German ethnographers who were active on expeditions (detailed in the volume) to a portion of present India that now borders on China to the north, Myanmar to the east, Bangladesh to the west, and is connected in the northwest to mainland India by a tiny corridor of land.

A multi-ethnic area, North East India is comprised of seven states in which dwell over 200 ethnic groups, many of which speak Tibeto-Burman languages. Among the Tibeto-Burman speakers are the Naga, who have over thirty cultural subgroupings such as the Ao, Angami, Tangkhul, Sema, Sangtam, Chang, Konyak, and Lotha. Many Naga live in the state of Nagaland, founded in 1963, which has a population of about two million. Nagas also live in surrounding states including Manipur, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as the country of Myanmar. Furer-Haimendorf and Kauffmann (whose work was nearly unknown until Stockhausen's research) were documenting a society that had already felt the influences of British Colonial rule and Christian missionaries since the nineteenth century, and today faces encroachment by other ethnic groups, the social and environmental impacts of government development projects, increased population pressures, and globalization that further alters what remains of the cultural life ways that drew the German photographers halfway across the globe.

---

Many of the images presented in the work are accompanied by comments of Furer-Haimendorf and other ethnographers (Kauffmann's written materials have been lost) utilized by Stockhausen that belie a romantic subjectivity towards indigenous peoples that persists even today. On page 157 is an image of two "Chang warriors" utilized on a Christmas card in 1936, which Stockhausen notes was one of Furer-Haimendorf's favorite images. He is quoted as saying, "Never have I seen more magnificent Nagas than these Chang men, whose athletic bodies were of perfect proportions."

Images of young women were produced by both Furer-Haimendorf and Kauffmann. In one instance, they photographed the same young woman simultaneously, and an image of Henlong, known as the "Belle of Wakching" was included in *The Naked Nagas* (published in 1946), with a print version of the image on the dust jacket of the pictorial book. Stockhausen provides background information on the photo shoot, based on his archival research. Frames from both photographers, juxtaposed on the page, show snippets of the process, include Henlong "giggling" (161) in the moments before she removes her shawl and poses "holding her hands behind her head and pushing out her upper body" (162). The author notes that this and other images appealed to the imaginations of both the photographers and exemplified the "inherent eroticism that was usually associated with 'archaic ' tribes by the European public" (161).

Among the photographs positioned throughout the text are other intense portraits of Naga women, men at work constructing a ritual drum, scenes of daily life activities, and objects of every dimension of material culture. A key part of the reengagement with these photos was the author's presentation of the images to the local communities where the images were originally taken mostly in 1936-37 during a trip in late 2007. The images of young Nagas examining the ethnographic photos on a laptop computer contrasts with the observation that many of the older Naga could identify people they knew in the photos, but could only find themselves by a process of elimination. This was because none of the locals had photographs from

---

that far in the past and the subjects did not know what they looked like as children.

The outstanding contribution of this volume is the chapters with photographs and supporting contextual commentary on Naga vernacular culture of the era and the use of the camera. For instance, Chapter 7.2 entitled, "The Naga Village and its Architecture," has many examples of Naga material culture and people hard at work in a variety of tasks that support family and community as documented by the photographers. From the perspective of visual anthropology Stockhausen, as elsewhere in the volume, takes care in reconstructing camera angles and provides comments on composition and technique. For instance, in the description of Kohima village, now a major city in Nagaland, he describes how Kauffmann found a vantage point above the already large village and later combined three images into a "panoramic view," and "used the wide panorama format to convey his own astonishment at the size of Kohima village" (251).

The author also provides fine-grained detail on the images, noting that traditional thatched roofs were already few, displaced by tin sheeting, and some covered with small shingles, probably of "flattened cans." Moreover, he notes, "Deforestation was already quite advanced: a few highly developed trees show how high the forests must have been beforehand" (251). The background information, supplied in part from the photographers' accounts, can go into even greater detail regarding traditional practices. In a description of a Konyak home in northeast Nagaland, the treatment of the thatched roof dwelling includes the information that, "To keep the vast roofs free of harmful insects, sometimes a special type of ants are put inside specially made nests on the roof" (255) that in concert with smoke destroys the larvae.

This mix of image and interpretive ethnographic comment covers nearly every dimension of traditional life as represented in the photographic collections. As the author notes, the collection is also important for the perspective offered by the German photographers. The images shot with state-of-the-art German equipment provides an alternate viewpoint from that of images throughout the British colonial

era (415). The volume compliments images and text in such works as Peter van Ham and Jamie Saul's *Expedition Naga: Diaries from the Hills in Northeast India: 1921-1937, 2002-2006* (2008), Stuart Blackburn's *Tribal Cultures in the Eastern Himalayas: Photographs of Arunachal Pradesh, 1859-2006* (2008), and Julian Jacobs and Alban von Stockhausen's *The Nagas: Hill Peoples of Northeast India* (2012).

In all, Stockhausen's stunningly wrought work is valuable both for its interpretation and contextualization of iconic images of Naga cultures and the valuable information on the various projects to document Naga lifeways on film. In its insights into decoding ethnographic visual imagery in decades old photographic images the volume will be an inspiration and model for projects on other cultures and those that imagine them.

#### REFERENCES

- Blackburn, Stuart. 2008. *Tribal Cultures in the Eastern Himalayas: Photographs of Arunachal Pradesh, 1859-2006*. Leiden: Brill.
- Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph von. 1946. *The Naked Nagas Head-Hunters of Assam in Peace and War*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., Ltd.
- Ham, Peter van and Jamie Saul. 2008. *Expedition Naga: Diaries from the Hills in Northeast India: 1921-1937, 2002-2006*. Suffolk: ACC Editions.
- Jacobs, Julian. 2012. *The Nagas: Hill Peoples of Northeast India*. Second Edition. London: Thames and Hudson.