

Postcard from Nagaland

December 2011

Nagaland is one of the 'Seven Sisters', the states of India marooned above Myanmar, and about as distinct from mainstream India as it is possible to be. Nagaland was closed until recently, and for unclear reasons, they have recently lifted the prohibitions and you can visit without permits. Whatever the logic, safety of tourists is clearly not a significant factor as the place is still under military lockdown and there are regular shootouts between communities. The Nagas have something of a reputation in social anthropology, with a whole series of monographs by administrators in the 1920s, characterised by a mixture of horror at some of their more bizarre customs, such as head-hunting and leaving the dead to rot on platforms in the middle of the village, and admiration for what are undoubtedly tough and extremely colourful peoples. Later there came a sort of mortuary anthropology, chewing over the collections in Western museums, but completely disconnected from actual life in Nagaland. The Nagas are not one people but about forty different ethnic groups, all with approximately similar customs and styles of dress. This diversity is important, as it was part of the dynamic of headhunting raids (which probably ended in the 1950s) and is at the root of much of the fractiousness which marks the area today. Most of the Nagas are concentrated in Nagaland, but there are different subgroups spreading across into Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, as well as a sizeable community in Myanmar. These outliers have adapted to the dominant culture in the other regions in different ways; but by all accounts the Naga in Myanmar remain significantly more conservative in terms of their culture than those in India.

The second plank in the transformation of the Nagas was the coming of American Baptists in the middle of the nineteenth century. Oddly, given the British claimed this area early, the Christians who really made an impact were extremely fundamentalist strain of American and Canadian Baptists. They began work on the various languages and were surprisingly successful in transforming traditional Naga friction between communities into religious rivalry. Most Naga would claim to be Christian today, although churches are beginning to multiply and almost certainly being incorporated into the system of 'explosive democracy' which is so characteristic of the area.

There were two interesting consequences of this early interaction with the Baptists; the Naga became very pro English as a prestige speech and language of intercommunication between tribes. They have also developed Nagamese, a version of Assamese with Naga syntax, which is an unwritten market lingua franca. They have rejected Hindi extremely strongly, unlike in Arunachal Pradesh, which makes their children less likely to be victims of the flood of trash television and advertising now bleaching the minority cultures of India. The early conversion of the Naga has meant that they now send out missionaries to 'unreached' tribes in India, although the missionaries I encountered seemed more interested in cricket scores than converting the natives.

The other strange but essential part of Naga history is that the region was a major battleground between the Japanese and the Empire forces during the Second World War. This is really quite hard to picture; small yellow men battling it out with moustachioed Punjabis as the Naga sat in their *morungs* watching in amazement. A large military cemetery in the centre of Kohima, expensively tended by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, memorialises this event. It is a strange ocean of calm in the middle of a noisy town, order in the midst of chaos. Carefully tended flowerbeds, raked gravel paths and an unnatural silence pervade the grounds. Indian tourists come on brief tours, striding around, pointing out the inscriptions, descrying the names of the dead, carefully marked with their attributed religion. The museum has an exotic painting of a Naga hillman, dressed only in a few beads, playing the Scottish bagpipes, apparently a gift from the British Army.

The further consequence is that the Naga have never been enthusiastic about being part of the Indian Empire, along with their neighbours in Mizoram and Manipur. They have been fighting a sub rosa war for decades, blowing up railways trains and occasionally doing away with a few policemen. This turns out to have been a poor strategy, as the Indian government is always seeking an excuse both for repression of native tribes and ramping up nationalist rhetoric. As a consequence, there are troops everywhere; I was startled to go out on a Sunday morning and find snipers on the rooftops overlooking the vegetable market. Despite this, things have calmed down in recent years with a sort of cold peace, and Nagaland is fairly safe for outsiders, despite the inter-village battles. And being British does you no harm, I must say.

English has given the Naga access to the global community, and despite its isolation, Nagaland is more developed and connected than other parts of the Northeast. In Kohima, its montane capital, there are pleasant places to hang out and have coffee with posters of Jim Morrison and Bob Dylan on the wall, and interior design and airline magazines to glance through. This is quite unlike Gauhati, the capital of Assam, a vast sprawling place along the main commercial arteries, which has nothing to offer beyond the parameters of lower-middle-class Indian consumerism. Thus also the Naga are seriously into heavy metal and black American music. This was first impressed on me as we climbed up into the hills from Dimapur and the taxi driver was playing some almost eccentrically obscene American rap, something of a contrast to the anodyne film music favoured elsewhere on public transport. Whether the heavy metal (which involves Iron Maiden tribute bands) is connected with another Naga enthusiasm, coffins, is harder to say. Coffin shops abound and offer both personal fittings, discounts for quantity [!] and other inducements to buy.



This contrasts oddly with the positive obsession with Christmas. Houses hang five-pointed illuminated stars from their roofs and children pass along the streets chanting carols. Fake snow decorates the windows of the Hindu shopkeepers, who greet you with a Merry Christmas!

The Naga are extremely conservative when it comes to food. They like wild food and preferably still alive. Every market is filled with wriggling creatures, whether grubs, fish or frogs. Indeed the range of plates of grubs on sale is quite astounding. And this must surely be the only place in the world where live frogs are vacuum packed for easy transport home. On the positive side, the pork and bamboo shoots make quite a change from endless lentils and rice.

Naga disunity? Enter Naga intellectuals. Their solution to all these different tribes and languages is to try and develop an idealised Naga person. To this end, you enter the museum and are greeted by a display marked 'Unitary Naga lad', a sort of ritual costume they imagine might be worn if people were one day to lay down their arms. The Naga are indeed good at cultural reinvention. Although everyone wears t-shirts and trainers on the street, much time and energy is expended on 'traditional' costume, and interspersed with the designer shops on Dimapur high street are places where you can kit yourself out as a traditional Naga. Bear fur and wild boar teeth are now in short supply and anyway not so durable, so a niche industry has grown up in plastic imitations. Every year now a Hornbill Festival takes place, where 'traditional' Naga dances are performed, politicians make speeches, and wealthy Indian housewives sell food on charity stalls.