Journal of North East India Studies
Vol. 15(1), Jan.-Jun. 2025, pp. 101-110.

Note

Writing the 'Savage': Representation of Nagas in Nineteenth Century Colonial Writings

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Focusing on the Naga Hills, this article looks at the significance of colonial writings on the Nagas in the nineteenth century. It examines some of the complex ways in which colonial writings became an important practice in framing and representing the Naga Hills and its inhabitants, and in the process linking the people and the territory to a range of ideas. Colonial writings comprise an important genre which provides interesting information to examine the relationship between writing, knowledge forms and representation. While various complex facets can be explored regarding the colonial writings, this article focuses primarily on three interconnected aspects: one, how colonial writings were instrumental in producing the idea of the Nagas as "savage"; second, the construction of the Naga Hills in the official writings as spaces of "disorder"; and third, the ways in which the hills were depicted as spaces of "isolation" in colonial writings.

Keywords: Colonial writings, Representation, Naga Hills, Nagas, Savage, Disorder, Isolation

To those accustomed only to the comforts of civilized life, or to the traveller who is indifferent to the beauties of scenery, the monotony, silence, and loneliness of the vast forests of Assam, will present few features of attraction; but as the country offers a wide field of discovery, and so many interesting enquiries remain to be prosecuted in regard to the numerous wild tribes by which it is inhabited, it is hoped that the present brief outline of the condition of the people will not prove altogether uninteresting. The chief object of the following pages is to make Assam better known, to remove some prejudices which exist against it, and preserve the memory of many remarkable scenes.[1]

Captain John Butler
Bengal Native Infantry, 1847

The above excerpt is from the Preface to a book, *A Sketch of Assam With Some Account of the Hill Tribes*. Written in 1847 by Captain John Butler, an officer in the Bengal Native Infantry, this excerpt is interesting for a few reasons. On the one hand, it highlights the important task of writing accounts by officials of the period and their

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ISSN 2278-1455 / eISSN 2277-6869

http://www.jneis.com

role in producing knowledge and information on the frontier geographies. On the other, it shows how through their writings, officials such as Butler, produced a range of ideas and representations of the societies at the margins of Empire. For instance, in the eyes of Butler, Assam was a pristine space awaiting varied "discovery" and "interesting enquiries", especially of the "numerous wild tribes". It is through such written texts that Butler hoped "to make Assam better known" to the reader. Writings on the frontier and its inhabitants by officials such as Butler formed an important colonial practice in the nineteenth century. In fact, the gradual extension of British rule in the region not only brought the British into contact with the frontier geography and people, but in the process, it also engendered a range of written accounts by officials in the employ of the colonial government. In turn, as this paper will show, these colonial writings would shape the emergence of various ideas and representations of frontier societies such as the Nagas.

European writings on colonized societies and the problematics embedded in such writings have formed an important focus of study in post-colonial works. For instance, scholars have examined how European knowledge system constructed notions of "primitive" and ideas of "difference" of colonized societies, and how such knowledge construction shaped the nature of rule in the imperial colonies (Said, 2003/1978; Salemink, 2003). Studies have also analyzed the practice of European travel and exploration writing in connection with European economic and political expansion. These written accounts constituted "a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others" (Pratt, 2008/1992; Hulme and McDougal, 2007; Clark, 2007). Forms of knowledge production, on the other, constituted an important enterprise through which the colonial state produced and constructed India's past. Cultural forms in society newly classified as "traditional" were reconstructed and transformed by and through this knowledge, which created new categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, modern and "traditional", etc (Cohn, 1996). While these studies provide important perspectives on the colonial practices of writing and knowledge making and its implications on forms of representation of colonized societies, studies that focuses on colonial writings on peripheries and how colonial writings shaped enduring ideas and forms of representation of peripheral societies such as the Nagas has not been adequately explored.[2]

Focusing on the Naga Hills, this article looks at the significance of colonial writings on the Nagas in the nineteenth century. It examines some of the complex ways in which colonial writings became an important practice in framing and representing the Naga Hills and its inhabitants, and in the process linking the people and the territory to a range of ideas. Colonial writings comprise an important genre which provides interesting information to examine the relationship between writing, knowledge forms and representation. For instance, writings on "marginal" societies were important for the colonial officials as it provided important grounds to distinguish the "pre-modern" condition that prevailed, and to justify the eventual intervention of colonial modernity over such marginal spaces. Through various tropes and ideas, officials sought to make the Naga Hills and its inhabitants knowable and familiar to the colonial government as well as to the metropolitan audience. Travels, explorations, expeditions and tours were some of the important practices through which officials recorded and produced

written accounts of their encounters and observations in the hills. Official reports, memoirs, journals, etc., recorded a variety of information about the people, customs, landscape and practices. In turn, the representation of the Nagas as "savage" and their landscape as a "wild" space located outside the bound of modernity emerged as dominant ideas in the colonial writings. This article will explore some of these issues and highlight the ways in which colonial writings established a new modern way of representing the Nagas and their landscapes through European frames and ideas. It focuses on colonial writings as a key site to understand imperial rule. While various complex facets can be explored regarding the colonial writings, this article focuses primarily on three interconnected aspects which will be discussed in the following three sections. The first section will examine how colonial writings were instrumental in producing the idea of the Nagas as "savage". The second section looks at the construction of the Naga Hills in the official writings as spaces of "disorder". The third section will examine the ways in which the hills were depicted as spaces of "isolation" in colonial writings.

I

> *On the side of the Brahmaputra, opposite to the Miri or Dophlas immediately beyond the Dikrong river, are said by the native of Nogang to dwell a people called Abor, and farther up another tribe called Tikliya Nagas, both of whom are extremely savage. They are indeed said by the Brahman of Bengal to be cannibals, and to have little intercourse with the people in Asam, although the two territories are adjacent. In Nepal I heard of a nation of cannibals in these eastern regions, who in 1802 were said to be engaged in a war with the Chinese of Thibet, and probably may have been one of those tribes, or at least some kindred race. In place of the Abor, the Raja Brajanath places Khamti, although both the native of Nogang and the Bengalese Brahman place this nation nearly south of Jorhat; while the Tikliya Nagas, which the Bengalese Brahman placed to the north of the Abor, the Raja brings to the west of Nora in place of Khamti. His authority I consider the best, and therefore I consider Khamti, which may be another name for Abor and Bong, as occupying the left bank of the Brhamaputra above Sodiya*.[3]

Written in the 1810s, this account by Francis Hamilton is significant in many ways. For instance, this narrative depicts a space that distinguishes the "people in Asam" from the various "tribes" that occupied the territories beyond the river. In doing so, this account forms one of the earliest representations of the Nagas and the Naga Hills in colonial writings. Not only does the locality appear peculiar and enigmatic to Hamilton. The Nagas and their landscape are portrayed through tropes of "savagery". In order to corroborate this knowledge on the "tribes" and their practices, Hamilton draws on a "hearsay", a practice which European writers often came to rely upon in recording and presenting their observations on colonized lands and people. Furthermore, Hamilton had to depend on the role of intermediaries in the frontier such as the "Raja Brajanath" and "Bengalese Brahman", who were instrumental in providing information

in producing this account. These processes are significant as they shed light on some of the ways in which colonial officials went about producing a range of texts on peripheral people and the territory. In fact, the above-mentioned writing by early officials such as Hamilton would become part of the burgeoning nineteenth century written account and texts on the Nagas and the Naga Hills. The written accounts by various officials would in turn form a crucial basis in shaping some of the dominant ideas and forms of representations that would shape colonial perception of the Nagas and Naga Hills over the course of the nineteenth century.

A view that began to take significance early on in the colonial writings was the attribution of the Nagas with the idea of the "savage". This idea was built on a variety of factors and practices which officials observed and recorded during their encounters and undertakings in the frontier. For instance, in the colonial writings, the imagery of the "savage" was steeped in depicting the strange and the unfamiliar. A representation of a "savage" Naga is found mentioned in this account by Lieutenant R. Grange during an expedition into the Naga Hills in 1840: "Ikkari, also the powerful Chief of Mozemah, who had led most of the raiding parties in Cachar, a perfect savage, wild and suspicious, wearing a collar fringed with hair of his enemies' scalps, came down to see for himself what the camp was like."[4] Such description was an early example of colonial ethnography that linked the savage to the bizarreness of the regalia. From the colonial lens, the peculiar ensemble and paraphernalia became an important marker in constructing the identity of a "savage" Naga.

Framing the "savage" worked through other projection as well. One of this was by linking it to the physical profile and appearance of the "tribes." An example in this regard is found in John Butler's account: "The south-eastern hills of Assam are the abode of many tribes of Nagas. They are a very uncivilized race, with dark complexions, athletic sinewy frames, hideously wild and ugly visages: their faces and bodies being tattoed in a most frightful manner by pricking the juice of the bela nut into the skin in a variety of fantastic figures."[5] Here, the unusual features, appearances and "primitive" customs not only marked the Nagas as the "uncivilized" other. Imageries such as this by Butler added to the growing representation and visible distinguishing characteristic of the Naga "tribes" in colonial ethnography vis-à-vis other neighbouring groups in the region.

Writing the "savage" was also closely entwined to establishing the Nagas as culturally different by emphasizing on the crudeness and absence of other features of civilization. Thus, in Butler's assessment, "The greater number of the Nagas are supposed to be in a very destitute state, living almost without clothing of any kind. Their poverty renders them remarkably free from any prejudices in respect of diet: they will eat cows, dogs, cats, vermin, and even reptiles, and are very fond of intoxicating liquors."[6] These seemingly inherent conditions were framed not only through the language of "primitivity". The imagery also fitted into the colonial modernizing endeavor in constructing an archetype primordial condition which would be appropriate to serve their administration interests and policy.

While the notion of "savage" came to inform colonial writings on the Nagas, in their written accounts, officials also introduced further distinctions within the various

Naga groups through forms of classification. This worked through categories such as "Abors" and "Boree". In a report written on 15th September 1841, Captain T. Brodie, Principal Assistant, Governor General's Agent, makes such a classification: "the whole of the Nagas may be classified under the heads of Abors, or independent tribes, and Boree or dependents – the former generally inhabit the hills of the interior, and few of them only come down to the plains; the latter occupy the hills immediately bordering the plains, and a constant intercourse takes place."[7] This classification not only created a distinction between "independent tribes" and "dependents". It also placed and identified the Nagas through spatial distinction between the interior hill tracts and those who lived contiguously to the plains. Through such exercise, colonial officials sought to organize and fix people unto distinct landscapes that otherwise appeared to the officials nebulous or ill-defined. If such classifications created distinctions within the Nagas, as well as between the Naga Hills and the plains. In the colonial accounts, other categories were further created to differentiate the various Naga "tribes". This included the idea of "kilted" and "non-kilted" Nagas.[8] Thus, if on the one hand, colonial writings produced the notion of difference between the colonizer and the Nagas. On the other, officials also created a new layer of socio-cultural division by way of producing these ideas of difference within the Naga Hills.

II

Another significant idea that emerged in the colonial writing is the discourse of the hills as spaces of "disorder" and "violence". In their writings, officials noted the rampant prevalence of conflict, hostility and violence in the Naga Hills. Strife and unruliness were seemingly perceived as the hallmark of the "tribes". "They are reckless of human life," writes John Butler on the Naga "tribes", "treacherously murdering their neighbours often without provocation, or at best for a trivial cause of offence."[9] It was because of this "barbaric" outlook and actions, officials noted, violence was rife in the hills. To add to this, in Butler's view, violence persisted in the hills because, "No general government exists over the whole tribe: they are divided into innumerable clans, independent of each other, and possessing no power beyond the limits of their respective territories."[10]

In the Naga Hills, violence was also associated to the enduring practices of "feuds" and "raids". The Angamis, Horatio Bickerstaffe Rowney noted, "live high up the mountains… and have always distinguished themselves as caterans and murderers, and also for being perpetually at feud with each other, their feuds going down from generation to generation".[11] From their villages, adds Rowney, "barbarous onslaughts are made, in which neither age or sex is spared."[12] Such unruly actions could often spill into the valleys and was construed to be the cause of much anxiety for colonial frontier officials. In fact, the Angamis, remarked Rowney, "gave a world of trouble to the government by the many plundering inroads they made on the peaceful tribes occupying the foot of their hills."[13] Apart from "plunder", these violent actions were also associated to several factors such as ideas of status, capturing "slaves", "revenge", feuds, etc.[14] Through such narratives, violence was not only depicted as intrinsic among the hill people. In the colonial depiction, the Nagas were also

increasingly characterized as "wild savages" whose socio-cultural existence was represented as one that primarily rested on feuds and raids.

In the colonial representation, the Naga Hills was thus marked by absence of a modern institutional system, one that would ensure a semblance of law and institutional order. Official discourse in the process constructed an "imagined" landscape of the "hills" and the "plains", where the primitive hillmen was not only geographically insulated or cloistered from their neighbours, but also culturally separate from the plains. Representing images of "chaos" and "lawlessness" in the hills signified the impediments to "progress", even as these views simultaneously provided an important basis to rationalize colonial intervention and its task of "civilizing mission". As Harald Fischer-Tine and Michael Mann has suggested in their work in the larger context of British India, "to be civilized was to be free from specific forms of tyranny" (Fischer-Tine and Mann, 2004: 4). Thus, while these ideas of violence and conflicts, constructed through colonial writings, marked out the Naga Hills as unruly spaces, and the inhabitants depicted as possessing an innate propensity for violence. On the other, through such colonial construction, officials envisaged the restoration of order in the hills, even as they marked out the Nagas as "primitives", and thus deemed necessary to be brought under colonial rule and governed as subjects of the empire vis-a-vis their "savagery".

III

In writing the Naga Hills, another theme that figure dominantly in the official accounts is the notion of "isolation". From their valley stations, colonial officials early on came to perceive the Naga Hills as an inaccessible space where the hills were imagined as spaces with little or no intrinsic value. Thus, in the colonial writings of the nineteenth century, the Naga Hills were seen through the trope of "isolation". This view by British officials was largely informed and based on their encounters during their travels and expeditions into the hills. Isolation, in the colonial understanding, was not only based on the physical division and distance between the hills and the valleys. It was also seen as an essential feature in the way the "wild tribes" organized their natural surroundings and themselves. This distinguishing feature can be seen especially in the ways in which officials wrote about the location of the Naga villages and its spatial surrounds. For instance, as early as December 1825, R. B. Pemberton had described the remote nature of Naga villages in his writing: "they have in every instance established themselves upon the most inaccessible peaks of the mountainous belt they inhabit, and from these elevated positions can see and guard against approaching danger long before it is sufficiently near to be felt."[15] It is this isolation, officials contended, that has produced an insular community having little links with the outside world.

If the villages were built "on the very summits of high tabular hills" and its "strongly fortified" setting appeared in colonial writings as owing to the existing "almost constant state of war" in the hills.[16] And if this unsettled condition led people in the hills to seemingly live restricted existences. The occasional instances to venture out from their remote highlands was seen as solely driven by the wild practice of securing "heads". "Grouped in small communities of from 100 to 3, 000 persons," writes R. B.

McCabe, Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills in 1887, "the Nagas have remained isolated on their hill tops, only deigning to visit their immediate neighbours, when a longing for the possession of their heads has become too strong to be resisted. Even in a single village this isolating influence is at work."[17] Through such colonial depiction, isolation is seen as intrinsic and embedded in the lifeworld of the Nagas. Isolation was further linked to other developments in the hills. For instance, McCabe illustrate the linkages between isolation and dialectical change: "As an example of how rapidly isolation produces dialectical change, I would mention the fact that Rengma Naga families who migrated some seventy years ago from Themokedima to the hills along the river Koliani are now almost unintelligible to members of the parent stock."[18] Notwithstanding this state of things, McCabe was hopeful that, "the progress of civilization limiting tribal feuds and developing inter-village communications, must in course of time, efface these dialectical differences and create a *lingua-franca*."[19]

These views, however, also sits alongside references to other practices in colonial writings. If in the colonial texts, the interaction between the "hills" and the "plains" was primarily linked to "outrages" and "raids" perpetrated by the Nagas on the plains settlements. And if in the eyes of the colonial officials, the hill spaces were marked with peril and uncertainty. Yet, this construction of an antagonistic and insulated geography is also contradicted by histories of connections through trade, travel and "tribute" collections, etc.[20] This alternative space can be traced in the colonial writings where there are references to trade links and exchanges such as between the Brahmaputra valley and the surrounding hill "tribes." People travelled and engaged in a variety of exchange practices. A range of goods and people circulated in the frontier, while connecting the hills to other various localities and wider networks of trade.[21] These circulatory regimes implied that the Naga Hills were accessible and "open" to a variety of practices, circulation and relations. And yet, in the nineteenth century, colonial forms of representation often took precedence and provided a dominating frame in characterizing the Naga Hills as wild spaces awaiting the intervention of colonial modernity.

Conclusion

In the nineteenth century, colonial officials produced various written accounts on the Nagas and the Naga Hills, and drew particular conclusions about the people, their practices and the landscape. Through various registers and forms of representations, officials not only constituted the Nagas as "savage", inferior and "tribes" stuck in the past. The imagery produced in these writings also became a dominant way of organizing and framing the Nagas and their landscapes in the colonial texts. As this paper has highlighted, colonial writings in the nineteenth century shaped various ideas on the Naga Hills and its inhabitants, especially in producing the idea of the Nagas as "savage", by constructing the Naga Hills as spaces of "disorder" and depicting the hills as spaces of "isolation". It is through such ideas and representations that Nagas and their practices were made familiar and knowable to the colonial government. These writings also occurred in a context where the foothills along the Naga Hills had emerged as significant spaces for global capital and the efforts of the colonial government to contain the "unruly" violence by the Nagas in the frontier. Besides, the writings not

only established and shaped colonial representation of the Nagas and their landscapes through European frames and ideas.

The genre of colonial writings also remains important because it constitutes a key domain to understand the relationship between writing, forms of representation and imperial rule in the margins of empire. That said, while this paper has highlighted the significance of colonial writings in producing some of the dominant ideas and ways of representing the Naga Hills and its inhabitants in the nineteenth century; on the other, studies that reassess as well as problematizes histories of imperial knowledge production and forms of representation, especially in the context of the Nagas, remains inadequate and needs further exploration. The significance and implications of colonial knowledge production, particularly in contemporary history, also remains an under-researched subject. Exploring these issues would also require a much more detailed and nuanced engagement with the colonial archives and indigenous knowledge practices, using new methods as well as frames of analysis, aspects that presently lies outside the scope of this paper.[22]

Endnotes

[1] *A Sketch of Assam With Some Account of the Hill Tribes By An Officer in The Hon. East India Company's Bengal Native Infantry in Civil Employ* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1847), pp. v-vi.

[2] Of the recent studies, a work that traces the evolution of the British official tradition of military ethnographies in the Naga Hills is, Andrew West, 'Writing the Nagas: A British Officer's Ethnographic Tradition,' *History and Anthropology*, 8 (1994), pp. 55-88. For a study that examines the interaction between the Nagas and the West, and the impact of the modern western notion of "progress" on the Nagas and their culture, see, Tezenlo Thong, *Progress and Its Impact on the Nagas: A Clash of Worldviews* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016/2014).

[3] Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam: With Some Notices Concerning the Neighbouring Territories, first Compiled in 1807 – 1814*, edited by S. K. Bhuyan (Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1940), p. 76.

[4] See, Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (Calcutta: Home Department Press, 1884), p. 104.

[5] *A Sketch of Assam With Some Account of the Hill Tribes By An Officer in The Hon. East India Company's Bengal Native Infantry in Civil Employ* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1847), pp. 149-50.

[6] Ibid.

[7] 'Reports of Lieutenant Brodie's Dealings with the Nagas on the Seebsaugor Frontier, 1841 – 46,' in *Selection of Papers Regarding the Hill Tracts Between Assam and Burma and on the Upper Brahmaputra* (Bengal Secretariat Press, 1873), p. 286. According to John Butler, "Abor is derived from the Assamese word *boree*, friendly; *aboree,* unfriendly. Thus, we understand the term Abor Nagas, Abor Dufflahs, independent or hostile tribes; and this designation seems common to all rude tribes in Assam." See, *A Sketch of Assam*, p. 110.

[8] Writing on this distinction, Lieutenant R. G. Woodthorpe notes: "Speaking generally, the Nagas may be divided into two great sections, viz: (1) the kilted, (2) the non-kilted. The first class embraces all the so-called Angamis, eastern and western. The second class includes all the other tribes, for though all these latter differ from each other in many minor particulars, yet there is a very general resemblance, but the Angami differs most markedly from all the other tribes in every way, appearance, dress, architecture, mode of cultivating, & c., and is nothing is the difference so marked as in the waist cloth." See, R. G. Woodthorpe, 'Notes on the Wild Tribes Inhabiting the So-Called Naga Hills on Our North-East Frontier of India, Part I,' *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. XI, 1882, p. 58.

[9] *A Sketch of Assam*, pp. 149-50.

[10] John Butler writes, "Each tribe seems ever jealous of its neighbour; and cruel hostilities, ending in the most tragical manner – even to the extermination of a tribe and the total destruction of its cattle, stores, and property – are often the result of their mutual animosity." *A Sketch of Assam*, pp. 152-153.

[11] Horatio Bickerstaffe Rowney, *The Wild Tribes of India* (London: Thos. De la Rue & Co.,1882), p. 168.

[12] Rowney, *The Wild Tribes of India*, p. 168. Also see, John Butler, ''Rough Notes on the Angami Nagas and Their Language,' *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 4, 1875, p. 320.

[13] Rowney, *The Wild Tribes of India*, pp. 168, 169.

[14] For instance, see, William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Asam With Sketch of the Local Geography and A Short Account of the Neighbouring Tribes* (Calcutta: Ostell and Lepage, 1841), p. 391; John Owen, *Notes on the Naga Tribes in Communication with Assam* (Calcutta: W. H. Carey and Co., 1844), p. 90.

[15] R. B. Pemberton, 'The Nagas,' in H. H. Wilson, *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War with an Introductory Sketch of the Events of the War and an Appendix* (Calcutta: Government Gazette Press, 1827), p. VXII.

[16] John Butler, 'Rough Notes on the Angami Nagas and Their Language,' *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 4, 1875, p. 317.

[17] R. B. McCabe, *Outline Grammar of the Angami Naga Language with A Vocabulary and Illustrative Sentences* (Calcutta: The Superintendent of Government Printing, 1887), pp. 3-4.

[18] Ibid., p. 4.

[19] Ibid.

[20] For instance, see, Brodie, p. 286.

[21] For instance, in 1848 Major Butler writes in his account as follows: "During the year 1848, a thousand Angami Nagas visited the station of Now-gong, to trade with the merchants in salt and cornelian beads, which they greatly prize and the utmost good will was manifested towards the authorities and the people of the plains." See, John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam During a Residence of Fourteen Years* (London: Smith, Elder 1855), p. 173.

[22] For a study that uses innovative approaches to examine colonial knowledge in various world context, see, Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner (ed.), *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave

Macmillan, 2012); for a recent work on decolonial thought and pluriverse framework, see, Bernd Reiter (ed.), *Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

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