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THE AO NAGAS





J. P. MILLS

THE AO NAGAS

BY

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LATE OF THE INDIAN CIVIL SERVICE

WITH A FOREWORD BY

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AND

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY BY

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THE head-quarters of Mokokchung Subdivision being situated in the Ao country and close to some of the most important villages of the tribe, I had every opportunity of observing their customs while holding charge of the Subdivision from the autumn of 1917 to the New Year of 1924, save for one year's leave. But for all my opportunities this book could never have been written without the assistance and co-operation of my numerous Ao friends. Especially are my thanks due to Lentinoktang, Lanukamzak, Likokyangba, Yimtitamzak and Sanchamkhaba, all interpreters on the Subdivisional officer's staff, and to Tsansao Lhota, who typed out the very long manuscript for me.

No less deeply am I indebted to many English friends. Dr. J. H. Hutton, C.I.E., Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills and Honorary Director of Ethnography in Assam, has not only given me encouragement and assistance throughout, but has allowed me to use some of his photographs, has kindly made for me finished sketches of tattoo patterns from rough outlines I gave him, and has immeasurably increased the value of the book by his full comparative notes and his bibliography. Mr. Henry Balfour, F.R.S., Curator of the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, with whom I had the pleasure of doing a long tour in the Naga Hills, has been kind enough to write a valuable introduction and to allow me to use some of his excellent drawings. Colonel J. Shakespear has bestowed ungrudging patience on the laborious task of compiling a very full index. Mr. Meiklejohn, of the Indian Forest Service, has been good enough to allow me to use some of his photographs, and Mr. Dennehy, of the Indian Civil Service, one of his photographs and one of his Chongli Ao folk-tales. Last, but far

from least, the Government of Assam has generously defrayed the cost of publication.

I have attempted, both under various headings in the body of the book and in an appendix devoted to the subject, to estimate the social effects on the Aos of the work of the American Baptist Missionary Society. I have not hesitated frankly to point out what seem to me to be errors of method, and I trust members of the Society will receive my criticisms in the friendly spirit in which they are meant. Dr. W. C. Smith's valuable book, *The Ao Naga Tribe of Assam*, written from a rather different standpoint, was published while my book was in the press, too late, unfortunately, for me to make any use of it or to comment on the few points wherein I differ from the author.

J. P. MILLS

1926

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

JAMES PHILIP MILLS, the author of this monograph, was born in 1890 and came out to India in the Civil Service towards the end of 1913. He was posted to the Naga Hills in 1916 as my assistant, and although not continuously in the Naga Hills he spent the rest of his service in Assam never far out of touch with them, for he succeeded me as Honorary Director of Ethnography for Assam in 1930 and ended his career as Adviser to the Governor of Assam for Tribal Areas and States. He was awarded the Royal Anthropological Institute's Rivers Memorial Medal for anthropological work in the field in 1942. He had been made a C.I.E. in 1941, and was made a C.S.I. when he retired in 1947 to become a Reader in the London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, from which he retired in 1955, after having been President of the Royal Anthropological Institute from 1951 to 1953. He died in 1960 in his 71st year.

I do not think that my friend and sometime colleague could have any more fitting memorial of his years of work in Nagaland than a reprint of his monographs on three of the major tribes thereof, and it is only proper that the Aos should be the first of them. For the Ao tribe, perhaps more than any other, affords material from which at any rate some safe if rather general conclusions can be inferred about the remoter history of the Naga peoples.

Apart from possible obscure references in Sanskrit or Pali literature the earliest specific reference to the Naga tribes is in the *Geographia* of Claudius Ptolemaeus written in the second century A.D. If we allow for the error he made in telescoping the Bay of Bengal, Ptolemy depicts Nagaland accurately enough in its present position¹; he des-

¹ *Geographia*, VII, ii, 18.

cribes it as "the realm of the naked", and survivals down to my time suggest very strongly that a culture little different from that of the Konyak Naga tribes once extended from the north-east corner of what is now the Assam Valley to as far south as at least the North Cachar Hills if not, as seems likely, to the Bay of Bengal. For there are certain features of the culture of the Lakher tribe which are very suggestive of Naga affinities in spite of the overlay of either Kuki-Chin or Arakanese culture under which the whole of the hill area south of the Manipur State has been submerged. If we can regard, as I do, the Nagas known to Ptolemy as approximating to the Konyak tribes in culture and physical type they are likely to have been preceded by a population of Negrito or Papuan affinities. This would account for the occasional occurrence of decidedly Papuan features and also for that of very curly hair, and no doubt for the intense dislike of the latter which was so marked that I was unable to get satisfactory photographs of it, since the owners of quasi-ulotrichous heads of hair put themselves to the greatest trouble to minimise its curly appearance. In one or two Konyak villages it was typical of a particular clan, and one small village, beyond the border of administered territory, in which it predominated and was combined with a prevalence of low stature, was attacked and I think exterminated by its more powerful neighbours after I left the Naga Hills. A survival of this kind might also account for the legend surviving among the old Kuki tribes of the south of the district of a very dwarfish and bitterly irreconcilable people who were living in the country when their ancestors invaded it, and the survivors of whom were ultimately driven into a cave and there destroyed by fire.

The Kuki-Chin tribes seem to have been the latest immigrants into the Naga Hills, and the course of their migration has been traced from north-west of Burma down the line of the Chindwin river to the Bay of Bengal and thence back again as far north as the Manipur State and the Naga Hills, a movement which only came to an end

in the earlier years of the present century². But this movement has clearly been preceded by others. Some movement there has possibly been like that of the Garo and Kachari from the Himalayas to the southwards³, but the main stream of invasion has certainly been from east to west. This stream no doubt included the ancestors of the Khasi, Synteng, or some other branch of the Kol-Mon-Annam, which has left traces of its occupation in traditions of matriarchal villages and of a female chieftainess; even down to my time a female elder — of a sort — survived in Kabza, though the village was generally most unwilling to admit it⁴. The Ao are no doubt largely derived from one of the later streams of invasion as are also, perhaps, the Meithei of Manipur, with whom they have several points of similarity, and they contain traces of physical differentiation from the majority of Nagas significant enough to give them a definitely higher degree of brachycephaly than other Naga tribes⁵. All the tribes are probably of mixed cultural origin⁶, but the Aos have retained in a greater degree of purity than any other tribe a three-clan exogamous system, clear remains of which appear in the Angami and Lhota and probably in some other tribes. In the Ao it had not broken down even in my time, and prevailed across the divergence between Chongli and Mongsen in spite of the difference in language, so that even if a person of, say, the Pongen phratry were inter-marrying with another village and a different clan he or she could still only marry into Langkamr or Chamir^{6a} phratries, though both clan and linguistic division were different. And this rule was

² Vide G. B. Fryer's *Note on the Khyeng People of the Sandoway District, Assam*, J.A.S.B. I (1875), no. 1, and my note on p. 17 of W. Shaw's *Notes on the Thadou Kukis*, J.A.S.B. vol. XXIV, (1928), no. 1.

³ Playfair, *The Garos*, p. 8.

⁴ V. *infra* pp. 8, 108; also S. E. Peal, "*Traces of the Kol-Mon-Annam in the Eastern Naga Hills*", J.A.S.B., i of 1896; & Mills and Hutton, "*Ancient Monoliths of North Cachar*," in J.A.S.B., no. i of vol. XXV. 1929.

⁵ V. *The Angami Nagas*, p. 437.

⁶ V. "*The Mixed Culture of the Naga Tribes*," J.R.A.I., vol. XLV, pt. i, 1965.

^{6a} Chamir. Mr. Mills' spelling has been retained in this edition but the accepted spelling at the present time in Nagaland seems to be "Jamir".

reflected in the terms of relationship in a way as far as I know unique among Naga tribes, in that while the terms used for agnates were constant, those for affines varied according to the phratry of the speaker's mother or grandmother, both of whom might or might not be of the same exogamous group.

Another respect in which the Aos are particularly important for the study of the Naga tribes is in the exceptional number of parallels their culture affords to the related cultures of Oceania. Parallels of this kind may be found of course in all Naga tribes — the Angami for instance having a quite unusual outdoor game once, I was told, known also in the Assam Valley, but otherwise only reported from Fiji⁷. The Aos afford a parallel with Fiji in the journey of the soul to the land of the dead which is perhaps even more remarkable in that in both the Ao and the Fijian versions the soul must cross a river and on emerging on the far side throw against a tree the formal gift to a superior — a whale's tooth in Fiji, a decorated spear shaft among the Aos. Such close parallels cannot be merely fortuitous, and an analysis of parallels between Ao culture and that of Indonesia and of Oceania as pointed out in the footnotes to Mr. Mills' text shows 19 to Malaya, 18 to Borneo, 23 to the Philippine Islands, 17 to Melanesia, 13 to Fiji taken separately, 22 to Polynesia, 5 each to Micronesia and Madagascar. The general affinities of the Ao Nagas have been well described by Dr. W. Carlson Smith⁸, and a plausible hypothesis for the sharing of traits by so many tribes of south-east Asia and Oceania has been put forward by the American anthropologist Fay-Cooper Cole⁹. He points out the existence of an area in south China in which the sources and upper courses of five of the greater rivers of the world are found close together in a comparatively small compass. But these great rivers, the Yangtse-kiang, the Mekong, the Salween, the Irrawaddy (with its

⁷ *V. Man*, XXIX, 112 (Sept. 1929).

⁸ In *The Ao Naga Tribe of Assam* (Macmillan), 1925, ch. VI.

⁹ *Peoples of Malaysia* (New York, 1945), p. 5 sq.

tributary the Chindwin) and the Brahmaputra, after briefly parallel and adjacent courses turn east, south-east, south, and south-west, emptying themselves many hundreds of miles apart into the East China Sea, the South China Sea, or the Bay of Bengal. A uniform culture developed near their sources and carried in migration down these rivers would thus be distributed throughout the myriad islands of Oceania and Indonesia, from Formosa to Easter Island and New Zealand, carried by early mariners to Madagascar, and even perhaps round the Cape of Good Hope to the Gulf of Guinea.¹⁰ It is perhaps worth while here to draw attention to one minor point linking the Ao directly with South-east China: throughout the Naga tribes, metal workers use a double cylinder piston-bellows of the familiar type used in Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, and Madagascar, but the Ao also use a single piston horizontal type which I have seen in no other Naga tribe but which is identical with one used by the Miao-tsu of the Upper Mekong and sketched by General Woodthorpe in the margin of the unpublished diary of his Cochin China-Burma survey now in the Balfour Library of the Oxford University Museum.¹¹

In the monograph which follows this preface, Appendix VI of the first edition, originally my own work, has been amended and extended as Appendix VII, but Mr. Mills' account of the Aos, like Professor Henry Balfour's Foreword, is as it came from his pen in 1926. A few additions have been made in footnotes, and a few printing errors have been corrected; otherwise no alteration has been made in the main text or in the first five appendices. Appendix III, which describes the administration of the Naga Hills under the British regime, has been allowed to remain as an item of historical interest, and the same has been done with Appendix IV, but these, like all that has preceded them indeed, must be read with very considerable reserva-

¹⁰ V. "West Africa and Indonesia" in *J.R.A.I.*, vol. LXXVI (1946) and A. M. Jones, *Africa and Indonesia*, Leiden, 1964.

¹¹ V. *infra*, p. 98.

tion as regards the present day. Many changes have taken place since J.P.M. retired in 1947 and even more perhaps since his untimely death. Change is inevitable in all human institutions, but there must still be Aos living who can remember something of the simple and kindly form which civil administration took when he was Subdivisional Officer of Mokukchung, and the account he has given us of the Ao is evidence of the interest he took in them and in his work.

I take this opportunity of expressing my thanks for the help that has been given me for this edition by Mrs. Mills and by her daughter, Mrs. David Hobson, by Professor Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf and the London School of Oriental and African Studies, by the Curator and staff of the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford, and in particular by Sir Charles Pawsey, while I am indebted to Mr. J. D. Saul of Aberdeen for the drawings in colour and for valuable help with the bibliography.

J.H.H.

NOTE

The word 'Mokongtsu' appearing in a number of places in the book should be read as 'Ao Mokokchung'.

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FOREWORD

It was my privilege in 1921 to write an introductory "foreword" to Mr. J. H. Hutton's important monograph upon *The Sema Nagas*, and I feel highly complimented in being again invited, this time by Mr. Mills, to contribute a "foreword" to his equally valuable work upon *The Ao Nagas*. The pleasure which I now experience in acting as godfather to a new monograph dealing with a Naga tribe has been greatly enhanced by the fact that in 1922, at the instigation of the two friends above-mentioned, I spent some three months in making an ethnological tour of several hundred miles through the Naga Hills, as their guest and under their guidance, with all the advantages that accrue from travelling with men who have taken infinite pains to study intensively the natives whose affairs they, as Government officials, have been called upon to administer. This golden opportunity for first-hand ethnological observation naturally stimulated acutely the interest in the Naga tribe which I had long felt.

Although an excellent general understanding of these comparatively untouched Naga tribes can readily be arrived at by careful perusal of the admirable monographs which have been published in the last few years, the mental picture can never be complete until one has resided among the natives and surveyed them in their own environment. This develops a sense of proportion and perspective, and one can the better realize the interrelationships, the culture interactions, and the adaptations to environment that have brought about the complex which is described as the general culture of the Naga Hills. For, although the Nagas as a whole exhibit a general similarity of culture and possess many ideas, habits, and occupations in common, there are very many individual tribal traits which differentiate the

culture of one group from that of another. Variations in physical type, in language, and in customs afford material for classification and segregation into more or less well-defined ethnic divisions; and, in spite of evidence pointing to a common ancestry, it is manifest that various influences have affected the development of the Nagas, both physically and culturally, and have contributed to a complex which calls for scientific analysis.

As material for this analysis by comparative study, the monographs upon individual tribes already available, thanks to the far-seeing and enlightened policy of the Government of Assam, are of the greatest value. The Angami-, Sema-, Lhota-, and Ao-Nagas have now been dealt with intensively by Dr. Hutton and Mr. Mills, and these four tribes can now be compared and contrasted upon evidence which has been very carefully and laboriously collected. These monographs will have a permanent value as a record of one of the most interesting surviving groups of primitive natives.

The culture of the Naga Hills stands clearly defined from that of most of the neighbouring areas; and yet marked affinities may be traced with cultures outside the region and even very far afield. In order to arrive at a satisfactory diagnosis of Naga ethnography, it is necessary to trace and to evaluate the links through which may be discerned connections and affinities with other ethnic units, however distant they may be. Many striking links have already been established, serving to trace relationship between the culture-phenomena of the Naga Hills *massif* and, for example, Chota Nagpur, China, Burma, the Indian Archipelago, the Philippines, and even far-distant Melanesia. Dr. Hutton's footnotes in the present volume are of much interest in this connection.

It is not only the more important and prominent items which should be subjected to comparative study. Every detail, however insignificant it may seem, is of importance in this diagnostic research. Even so prosaic and seemingly trivial an object as a native scarecrow may help to throw light upon the wider problems of migration and diffusion. I have myself seen examples of somewhat complex bird-

scarers (*Kohkohpfo*) hanging in the cultivated fields in the Sema country whose absolute counterparts are in use in Borneo and in N.E. Celebes. I was also fortunate enough to discover for the first time in the Naga Hills the existence of a peculiar type of thorn-lined fish-trap, whose geographical range I have traced more or less continuously through Burma, the Malay Peninsula, the Eastern Archipelago, the Philippines and New Guinea to Melanesia.¹ I was led to make enquiries because, on ethnological grounds, I suspected that this type of trap might occur among the Nagas, and, sure enough, it turned up. Such a complete chain of links affords a certain clue to distant culture-affinity, and when it is found that many other objects, beliefs, customs, etc., exhibit a closely similar geographical dispersal, it can be realized that valuable evidence is accruing for use in drawing deductions anent ethnic migrations, culture-diffusion, and similar broad ethnological problems.

Detailed ethnographical monographs, such as the present work, compiled without the bias of any fixed and inelastic theory, afford to the comparative ethnologist reliable material upon which he can work, and the scientific evaluation of Naga culture will be greatly facilitated by such intensive studies of tribal units. True, several very important Naga tribes still await similar exhaustive treatment. Perhaps we can best express our appreciation of and gratitude for the interest evinced by the Government of Assam in the problems of ethnology, by asking for more records of a similar character. Is it too much to hope that in the near future monographs may be written dealing especially with the Konyak-, Chang-, and Sangtam-Nagas, and with the little-known Kalyo-kengyu, whose arts and industries, at least, seem likely to furnish a promising field of enquiry? What is known of these tribes indicates how important they are to the ethnologist. The difficulties and risks attending research among the trans-frontier sections of these tribes, which are not under Government control, are counter-balanced by the fact that these peoples are the least affected by exotic influences, and are therefore best worth studying

¹ *Man*, 1925, No. 21.

while their culture remains relatively uncontaminated by contact with alien peoples, and has not yet undergone that inevitable metamorphosis which results from the advent of missionaries, traders, and other disintegrating forces. As one travels through the Naga Hills one can but notice the evidence of a gradual passing away of the old order of things in the administered area, the breaking down of old associations of ideas, in spite of the innate conservatism which is antagonistic to change and yields reluctantly. Ornaments which formerly were worn exclusively as insignia of conspicuous prowess and achievement tend to become, under the altered conditions induced by the *pax britannica* and Government control, mere meaningless embellishments of those who have achieved little, or of the merely rich. The decay of old customs too often involves for the natives loss of pride and interest in themselves and their past traditions; virility gives way to listlessness and apathy, a state which is now recognized as one of the potent factors in promoting depopulation. The arbitrary suppression of all traditional customs, ceremonies, and dances—including even those which in themselves are harmless enough—on the plea that they belong to the “bad old days of heathendom and head-hunting,” is a shortsighted and retrograde policy. It strikes at the roots of practically the whole social structure of the people, and its effects are apt to prove disastrous. Metamorphosis by successive very slight modifications of existing habits and practices may lead to the desired result—that of evolving law-abiding and useful citizens from the sometime head-hunting savages—without loss of that alertness and efficiency which, under the “bad old” conditions, proved essential to survival, and the loss of which is so detrimental to any real and permanent betterment. I must not be tempted to enlarge upon this theme. I have elsewhere¹ stated my views upon the subject of the possible means of uplifting the primitive or “unrisen” peoples. My main point is that the Nagas, with their fine physique, intelligence, and considerable potentialities, are worth preserving and

¹ *Folk-lore*, vol. xxxiv, 1923 (Presidential Address to the Folk-lore Society).

are capable of improvement if a process of gradual successive changes be adopted, and if they are allowed to absorb the ideas of higher culture in small doses whose effects may be cumulative.

Of the Ao-Nagas, who are so fully and interestingly portrayed by Mr. Mills, I have many very pleasant recollections. Reserved they may be in the presence of strangers, but I was often welcomed by them and hospitably entertained. Hospitality, it is true, has its drawbacks sometimes, and the filthy receptacles in which *madhu* (rice-beer) is served rather checks one's enthusiasm for the potable contents. Similarly, the proffer of that arch-delicacy of the Nagas, parboiled hornet-grubs, 1½ inches long—so greatly appreciated by them and, therefore, a generous gift—invokes a feeling of repugnance not easily overcome, especially if one has recently seen the palpitating, peristaltic maggots alive in the comb. To refuse them might hurt the natives' feelings, and one just swallows the grubs and one's pride (or prejudice) simultaneously, feeling that one has at least played the game by Naga altruism.

The Aos practise various arts and industries with success. They are skilful carvers, and the zoomorphic designs carved in complete or high relief which adorn especially the *morungs*, are of great interest from the points of view of technique, of symbolism and of variation upon adopted themes. The paramount glory of the Ao country is to be seen in the huge hollow-log gongs, or xylophones,¹ serving as broadcasting instruments, which sometimes are as much as 40 feet in length and 5 feet in diameter. These are carved at one end with a huge “figure-head” representing the head of the Water-buffalo, though, owing to the conventional rendering of the theme, the Aos themselves mostly fail to recognize the real *motiv*. These instruments are truly

¹ I steadfastly refuse to follow my friends, Hutton and Mills, in describing these as “drums.” The use of the term “drum” to percussion-instruments other than those sounded through the medium of a tense membrane has caused infinite confusion. Since the drum proper also occurs in the Naga Hills, it is eminently desirable to differentiate it from the xylophone, whose evolution has been from a totally different origin, and whose principle of sound-emission belongs to a totally distinct category.

impressive objects and represent immense labour expended both in their hewing out and in their transport up to the hill-top villages from the spots where the huge trees were felled. The dances and ceremonial ritual of these people are vastly intriguing to the ethnologist and lack nothing in the picturesqueness of their barbaric splendour.

It is curious, perhaps, that the Ao Nagas, about whom comparatively little had previously been written, should have formed in the last two years the subject of three distinct works by as many authors. Mr. W. Carlson Smith, an American missionary, published, in 1925, a substantial volume upon this tribe, and in the same year a small book was issued by Surendra Nath Majumder, of the Assam Medical Service, dealing with the same people. The present work by Mr. Mills in no way suffers from the fact of the Aos having already been described by other writers. In each instance the point of view is different, and it is, indeed, a matter of interest to compare the impressions of these Nagas arrived at independently by an American missionary, a Hindu medical officer, and an English resident official of the Assam Government.

Ethnologists, in particular, will be grateful to Mr. Mills for his careful and exhaustive study on one of the important and well-defined tribes in the Naga Hills. The volume well maintains the high standard of excellence set by Dr. Hutton in his two monographs. Great credit is due to the Government of Assam for the encouragement given to its officials to study intensively the natives who are under administrative control. The growing series of tribal monographs issued under Government auspices will be standard works of reference, valuable not only as a record of the indigenous native customs, beliefs, and ideals, but also as a means of understanding and of evaluating the status and potentialities of these "unrisen" peoples, a prime factor in promoting and facilitating an enlightened, sympathetic, and just administration.

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