



Tribal Hair-Style and its significance

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This is an attempt to bring out an account of the various hair-styles as worn by different tribes inhabiting the lovely hills of NEFA, Nagaland and Assam.

There are numerous tribes living in NEFA¹, Nagaland and the hill districts of Assam and among these tribes we find a great variety in customs and traditions, and in fact in the culture-pattern as a whole, the mode of dress and the style of wearing the hair are one of the most apparent features by means of which we can readily distinguish one tribe from another. Although our main interest will be directed towards the various tribes of NEFA and Nagaland, those tribes living in the hill districts of Assam will also come

under discussion for comparison.

Before we start with our discussion on the hair-styles of the above tribes, it will not be out of place to make an attempt to answer the question : " Why do people dress their hair in a particular way ?" or " Why do we develop coiffures at all ?" Here mention may be made of the various social, religious, as well as magical factors influencing the mode of dress and the way of hair-dressing of, say, a particular man or woman belonging to a particular society. Over and above this, we also have such influences coming from individual taste and last but not least, the differences in sexes. To answer the above question, let us reproduce here the opinions of some famous writers on the subject.

¹ Arunachal Pradesh, since Jan. 1972

Dr. Moti Chandra wrote in 1940: "It has been customary with human beings in all ages and climes to use cosmetics and to arrange their hair in one way or the other. A savage whose worldly possessions are few, and whose daily means of sustenance are furnished by hunting and fishing, sticks feather into his hair, paints his body with various designs and arranges his coiffure in various fantastic forms because it gives him pleasure, raises him in the estimation of his fellow beings and has a magical significance to him." ¹. In the last part of the above statement, the writer has pointed out the special significance of coiffure for the primitive tribes. Indeed, it must be added here that leaving aside the mode of dressing or wearing it, the human hair itself plays a significant role in the day to day life of the tribal man. For every tribal man, whether in Assam or in Africa or elsewhere, his hair is his pride; he sings of beautiful flowing tresses specially those of his lover; narrates wonderful tales of the beauty of the hair, and the magical power it possesses of its own. Coming to the practical side of tribal life, we find that the hair on the head is held very dear, and no tribal is willing to dispose of his hair clippings in a careless manner lest his enemy might get hold of

it and work magic on it which will bring harmful results on the owner himself. Here again mention may be made of the primitive belief that "any portion of his body, though severed, still retains some sort of connection with himself". Similarly, among the Greeks, the hair is itself regarded as the seat of life. Thus, hair being regarded as a part of man's personality, it is no wonder that great care is taken in dressing and trimming it.

Coming back to our discussion on the dressing of the hair, let us see the opinion of another writer, Hilaire Hiler. He wrote: "Hair-dressing, while primarily ornamental, may serve as a tribal or social mark, a sign of mourning or may have a totemistic significance. Certain elaborate coiffures may possibly be based upon a religious taboo which forbids the cutting of the hair" ². The writer is not unaware of the fact that coiffures are adopted for ornamental purposes or to beautify oneself; moreover, he has brought to our notice that the different ways of dressing the hair have other purposes too as, for instance, a tribal mark or an indication of the circumstances under which a particular style is used. This remark is very true of the tribal people. A tribal man or

¹ Moti Chandra "Cosmetics and Coiffure in Ancient India", Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Vol. VIII (1940) pp 62.

² Hilaire, Hiler "From Nudity to Raiment", pp 101 f.

woman wears his or her coiffure in one particular way as an indication of his or her status e.g. married or unmarried, slave or king or queen etc. Thus, a slave will shave off his hair whereas kings and free-men may wear it long to indicate their ranks in society. "Among the Konyak Nagas of Assam, an Ang's (chief) daughter wears her hair long, while others must cut it short; among the Sherdukpens, girls of different ages must do their hair in different styles" ³. Such examples are many, and within this limited space, we will not be able to quote each and every significant item of the endless ways of dressing the hair. Instead side by side with the description of the hair-styles, we shall try to add a few points on the significance of each style for the people who practise them.

Another point which may be mentioned in connection with hair-styles is the importance of coiffure as part of the dress. We are aware of the fact that proper arrangement of the hair is a "must" when we want to get 'dressed' up. Great attention has been given to the arrangement of hair. As a result, we find many professionals who are masters of the "art" of dressing the hair. In the film industry, both in the East and in the West, we invariably find mention of the name of

the particular hair-stylist of a particular picture. Indeed, no picture is shown on the screen unless and until the important brains working behind the production are mentioned and, interestingly enough, we always find mention of the Hair-Stylist included among these! This fact only helps us to prove how important the coiffure is for people of all levels of society.

Shri Rajendralala Mitra, writing on the Indo-Aryans, in the late 19th Century stated: "Next to clothing for the body, the arrangement of the hair or the decoration of the head, forms the most important element of dress. It has in all ages and in every state of society engaged particular attention, and among savages has often had precedence of most other modes of ornamenting the person. With females, it has been a subject of the most earnest solicitude, and the extravagance to which they have been led in this respect under the fascinating sway of fashion, has often been made the subject of keen sttire, of un pitying ridicule, and severe reproof. But the lashings of the wit and the anathemas of the moralist, have invariably proved too weak to set the hair of the head, the loveliest ornament bestowed by nature on the human form, free of unnatural restraint and the most grotesque disfigurements. The glossy ringloets of a young lady dropping gracefully in their native luxuriance, is a style too genuinely beautiful

3 V. Elwin, "A Philosophy for NEFA", pp 47f.

and natural to be let alone by art; and in their place, therefore, the fair sex has everywhere resorted to the most extraordinary, the most extravagant, and the most fantastic contrasts conceivable. In Europe, braids and plaits steeped in oils, pastes and pomades, or the tower, the commode, and the chignon of outlandish piles of borrowed hair powdered and curled and bolstered up with bows and pads and basket frames, have always reigned in some form or other; and in India they seem to have exercised their potent sway with no less vigour and influence.”⁴

Now, examining all the above statements and arguments given by various authors as presented here, all of us must, at this stage, have a clear conception of the “how” and “why” of different hair style and other significance. Now to proceed to the description of the various hair-styles and being more concerned with the tribal people of Assam, NEFA and Nagaland, their ways and customs, beliefs and norms, let us consider in greater details.

Among the tribes of Asam, NEFA and Nagaland, where tradition is highly valued, the modern art of coiffure (by this meant the electric hair perms, cold perms, curlers

etc. of the West which are becoming very popular among the ladies in India to-day) has not, so far, been accepted by the tribesmen and women : Of course, exceptions are always there. Among our tribesmen, some of them have, as a result of contact with non-tribal people, taken to western or “civilized” ways of living, and the most natural thing that happens is that even they have adopted the dress and “coiffure” from those “civilized” people. However, leaving aside the small minority of the tribesmen who have left their fold, the rest (and the majority) of the tribal people still cherish their traditional ways of wearing the hair (which, in fact, is no less charming than the “modern” coiffure!), the art of which is being handed down from generation to generation since time immemorial, and no doubt, it has got a very special sentimental value for the tribal people.

Taking the whole range of coiffure and its varieties into consideration; the tribes inhabiting the beautiful hills of Assam, NEFA, and Nagaland as well as Manipur, may be grouped into three main divisions for the sake of convenience in describing them. Thus, we have :

(a) **Cropped** :- the hair on the head is cropped short, with the length of the uncut hair varying.

(b) **Knot or Bun** :- here the hair on

⁴ Rajendralala Mitra, LL.D., C.I.E., “Indo-Aryans”, contribution towards the Elucidation of their ancient and medieval History” (1881) Vol. I, pp 210

the head is kept long, and is being tied into a knot or a bun on the head, usually with the help of a thread or a bodkin.

(c) **Plait** :- The hair is allowed to grow long, and is plaited with the help of a thread, which may be coloured or plain.

In the above grouping, children of both sexes are not included since they too have a variety of hair-styles according to the difference in age. Thus the grouping mainly concerns adults of both sexes. We must, however, bear in mind that even among adults belonging to the same tribes, difference is noted according to status, rank or sex.

Our representatives from Group (a), i. e. those who 'cropped' their hair, come from the land of NEFA, Nagaland as well as Manipur. From Nagaland we have the Sema, Ao, Lhota, Phoms and Konyaks. From NEFA there are the Wanchos, Idus, Noctes, Adis while the Tangkhul Nagas and the Kabui Nagas hail from Manipur.

Starting with the Sema Nagas of Nagaland, who 'cropped' their hair, we find a difference in style between the two sexes. All the (Sema Naga) males cut their hair round the head just a few inches above the ear, the level of the line being kept even all round the head; among the fair

sex (of this tribe) a difference is noted according to the status. Thus the hair of a young girl is shaved until she attains a marriageable age, say, 13 or 14. After marriage, the hair is allowed to grow long, and is tied up in a knot at the back of the head. The difference in hair-style between married and unmarried Sema girls is interesting from the sociological point of view. The shaving of a young girl's head probably serves as a mark to distinguish her from girls who have attained marriageable age. On the other hand, we must not forget the practical nature of this custom since this is a means of protecting the head from vermin etc. When a Sema girl is betrothed, she wears a circlet of orchid-stalk and red cane-strips on the forehead which is removed after marriage. Wigs are also sometimes worn by hald men of this tribe, and these wigs are prepared from the hair of a black bull or even from human hair.

Among the Ao Nagas of Nagaland, the hair-style in vogue is practically similar to those of the Sema Nagas. This is quite natural since the Ao Nagas live close to the Semas, and the Aos themselves admit that their 'cropped' hairstyle is an influence of the Sema people whose heads they often brought home in war. At a time when razors and scissors were still unknown to the Ao Nagas, an indigenous way of cutting

the hair had already been invented. That was by shaving the head with round brass discs which were also used as currency, whereas the trimming of the hair was done with the help of a dao and a small stick. Thus when an Ao Naga trims his friend's hair, he places the sharp edge of his dao under the cocks, and with the help of a small stick, he taps off the hair, and thus gets the style he wishes; of course this depends on his skill in manipulating his instruments. We cannot but help admiring what clean a line an Ao Naga can produce and how neatly with his improvised tools. Among the young lads and lasses of the Ao Nagas, the head is cleanly shaved, as among the Sema Nagas. Coming to the womenfolk of this tribe, we find that they take great trouble in first letting the hair grow long, and then tying it into a bun, or an attractive loop at the back of the head. This style again necessitates the use of threads, coloured or plain, for fastening the locks and for keeping the coiled hair or bun in position. It is charming to see an Ao Naga woman, carefully combing her hair and tying the hair into an artistic bun or loop. This very often takes as much time as any "civilized" lady would take in arranging her coiffure!

We now pass on to the Lhota Naga tribes, who inhabit the country south of the hills occupied by the Ao Nagas. Mr.

J. P. Mills, in his monograph "The Lhota Nagas" (1922) gives an interesting description of the hair-styles of this tribe. He writes: "The style of hair-cutting resembles that of the Semas, Aos and other tribes. The back and sides of the head are shaved all round up to a point level with the top of the ears, the hair on the crown of the head being left long enough to reach to the top of the shaven portion. When asked why they have adopted this style of hair-cutting they say that their forefathers used to wear their hair long, but took to cutting it in the present fashion because it kept getting into their eyes and catching in the jungle. The custom obtaining in the Soughern Sangtam village of Phulangr perhaps gives the clue to the real origin of the fashion. There no man is allowed to shave the back and sides of his head till he has killed an enemy in war. Till then he wears his hair cut more or less like a European. Little Lotha girls have their heads completely shaved till they are about seven years old, when the hair is allowed to grow. Women wear their hair in an untidy bun on the nape of the neck, tied round with a bunch of their own hair..... Baldness and grey hair are both uncommon and disliked, and old men some times hide their scanty locks under a wig of black goat's hair on a bamboo frame." ⁵

⁵ J. P. Mills, "The Lhota Nagas" (London, 1922) pp. 7-8.



Hair-style of Digaru Mishmi woman.



Hair-style and head-dress of Miniyong (Adi) girls.



Hair style of Dafla man.



Hair-style of Digaru Mishmi
woman

Now, from the above description an interesting point stands out clear for our information regarding the choice of hair-style among the Lhota Nagas at least. We are informed that a man is not allowed to shave the back and sides of his head till he has brought home an enemy's head. Thus, that particular hair-style, that is, the shaving of the back and sides of the head serves as an indication of status in Lhota society, since warriors are allowed to wear that style. It must be remembered that formerly the practice of head-hunting was a flourishing institution among the Nagas, whether they be Sema, Ao or Lhota. Among such people, warriors must invariably occupy a status above that of the others. Hence, this hair-style is a mark of bravery as well as status, and we can imagine that a man who has achieved the honour to wear this style must be very proud of his hair-do.

From Nagaland, we will proceed to the neighbouring tribes inhabiting the beautiful hills and valleys of the North-East Frontier Agency. In this area, we come across a number of tribes, whose culture and tradition present a lovely pattern made up of varieties. Talking of varieties, the first thing that catches our attention is the variety in hair-styles. In the whole of NEFA, we find three styles, i.e. 'cropped', 'knot' and 'plait', being well represented

in a number of tribes. We will first discuss the hair-styles of the Wanchos, Noctes, Idus, Adis, Sherdukpens, Monpas, as they fall under our Group (a).

Among the Wanchos of the Tirap Frontier Division, the adult males 'crop' their hair all round the head at a level of about an inch above the ears. The hair below this level is cleverly shaven clean with the help of a dao and a stick, whereas above this line the hair is allowed to grow. The women, however, grow their hair sufficiently long so as to be able to tie the hair in a loose bun at the back of the head.⁶ The hair-styles of Wancho Women, therefore, allow more facilities for display of some artistic combs and hairpins of bamboo or bone which are conveniently stuck into the knot of the hair. Warriors among the Wanchos enjoy the privilege of wearing a sort of decoration, usually a carved wooden hand, in their hair, and we can easily infer that this hair-style of the Wancho warriors must have a social value apart from ornamental purposes. Talking of Wancho babies, young boys and girls, the hair on the head is shaved; in the case of babies, at the time of birth or a few days after. The Wanchos excel in the art of wood carving, specially those

⁶ The commoners usually shave the head which enables to distinguish them from the women of the chieftain's family.

of human figures, and in these wood carvings, the hair style is clearly shown.

The main tribes of the Tirap Frontier Division are the Noctes, who almost shave their head completely save for a small tuft left at the crown of the head. This is the fashion adopted by the Nocte males. Among the Nocte women, we find that the hair is kept long in contrast to their menfolk. Children of both sexes among the Noctes have their heads shaven and special care is taken to see that the head of a new-born baby is shaved at the time of the name-given ceremony.

From the Tirap Frontier Division, we now proceed further north to the valley of the Dibang river in the Lohit Frontier Division, where we find the Idu Mishmis (Chulikatta) who also wear the 'cropped' hair-style. An interesting point regarding the hair-style of the Idu Mishmis is that both the sexes 'crop' their hair in almost the same fashion. The adult males of the Idu Mishmi tribe cut their hair about an inch above the ears or even higher, the line passing across the forehead from one ear to the front and at the back of the head. The hair is allowed to grow, and among the fair sex it is loosely rolled into a bun at the nape of the neck. The women cut their hair but the line is lower, just above the ears, and the hair above this

line is allowed to grow. It is interesting to note that only this tribe in this division wears the 'cropped' hair-do.

Our next survey will be of the tribes of the Siang Frontier Division to the North-West. In this Division, we come across a variety of hair-styles, from 'cropped' to 'plait'. Thus the Minyongs who occupy the central as well as the south-eastern portion of the Division, cut their hair, the line of the cut running round the head about an inch above the ears. Both males and females cut their hair in the same fashion. The absence of scissors and other similar instruments have not prevented the people to invent ingenious way of cutting and trimming their hair. These were done with the help of two daos working like a pair of scissors, and as the lust for money has not entered into the lives of the people, hair-cutting is done on a voluntary basis. Besides the Minyongs, we have other tribes like the Padams, Shimongs, Karkos, Pasis and Pangis who live in the neighbouring villages. All these tribes, it appears, have a special fascination for the 'cropped' hair-style so that only from their-style it would seem there is no difference. However, a closer study of the hair-style of the above tribes reveals that there are slight differences in the length of the uncut hair or the level of the line of cut. While the Shimongs and the

Karkos cut their hair exactly like the Minyongs, among the Pangis the line of cut is roughly half an inch higher than among the former. The Padams and the Pasis wear the line of cut still higher so that the level of the line of cut is almost a couple of inches above the ear. Mention may be made of the Ashin tribes, the men folk of whom wear a hair cut similar to that of Idu Mishmis of the Lohit Frontier Division. Thus the Ashing men cut their hair only at the front, that is, from ear to ear, and the hair on the rest of the head is allowed to grow, and is left hanging loose over the shoulder. The women of this tribe usually wear long hair which is plaited into long pigtailed decorated with coloured beads and some cowries.

In the southern and south-western part of this Division, there live the Gallongs, who like the Ashing men, wear their hair-cut at the upper edge of the forehead from one ear to the other but unlike the Ashings, the Gallong males cut the hair in such a way that the hair line tapers into a point towards the back of the head. The women-folk of this tribe, however, like the Ashing women, grow their hair long and wear them in two plains and parted in the middle on the crown. It is not unusual to see Gallong women sometimes wearing the hair in the fashion of a loose roll at the nape of the neck. An interesting parallel of the

Ashing male hair-cut is seen among the Karko Gallong women of this Division. The Karko Gallong women cut their hair on the front along the forehead, while they leave the hair at the back of the head long allowing it to hang down over the shoulders.

The rest of the tribes in this Division, who occupy the western and north-western parts, seem to present an intermediate stage between that of the 'cropped' hair-style and the 'plait' style. The tribes under this discussion are the Boris (who live very close to the Gallongs), the Ramos, the Bokars and the Pailibos. Both the males and females belonging to these four tribes wear their hair long, dropping at the back while the hair on the forehead a line starting from one temple is cut in and ending in the other. Fair up in the northern part of Siang in the villages near the northern border, there are the Membas, the menfolk of which tribe keep the hair cut short almost in the European style, the only difference being that the head is first shaved clean and after one shave, the hair is kept short.

The chain of 'cropped' hair-style is broken when we move further west to the next Division, Subansiri. It is interesting to note here that Subansiri forms a gap between Siang and Kameng Divisions

regarding the cropped hair-dos. Therefore, we will now go further west till we reach the westernmost part of NEFA, that is, the Kameng Frontier Division. There, the Monpa tribe, who occupy the south-western part of the Division, wear short hair which is not, however, "cropped" as with the tribes mentioned in the previous paragraphs. The Monpa males cut their hair almost in the European style, but the hair on the forehead is cut pretty short. This cut, so the Monpas say, gives them a really dignified look. Among the Monpas, the religion being Buddhism, there are a number of Lamas. Some of these Lamas, after the Buddhist manner, shave their hair completely off but this is not true of all the Lamas.

The Sherdukpens, a neighbouring tribe, are of special interest to us because here we find the difference in age, specially among the fair sex, clearly denoted by the hair-style. As for the Sherdukpen men, the hair is cut short, as among Monpa men. On the other hand, the fair sex of this tribe presents an interesting variety of hair-styles as one passes through the different stages of life. Thus, the hair of the girls is 'cropped' short when they are young. As they grow up and attain puberty, the hair is allowed to grow long, and a lock of hair is allowed to fall over the face, sometimes almost covering the

face and this, according to them, is considered to be very charming. All the while the girls wear their hair veiling the face, courtship goes on till they at last select their partners. When a girl gets married and settled, she no longer hides her beautiful face behind the lovely tresses, but instead combs it up and ties the long hair into a bun at the nape of the neck. We must comment here, that it is among the Sherdukpens that we find the practical nature of hair-styles which is of great sociological interest.

Other tribes living in Kameng Frontier Division, especially in the eastern portion, will not be discussed at present. Nevertheless, we have to say a few words regarding the children of both sexes of these tribes. The Khowa, Miji, as well as the Aka youngsters have their hair cut pretty short; so also is the case among the Bangnis. Here again, we find an interesting practice; that is, the hair of Bangni girl is cut short till she attains puberty after which she wears it in a neatly rolled bun. What with the absence of the "golden rings" of our civilization, the choice of hair-style serves in determining the status of a women regarding maturity and capability for entering into marriage etc. among these tribes.

For the present moment; we will leave NEFA, and proceed eastwards, beginning

our study in Tuensang District of Nagaland. Here we find two interesting tribes, the Phoms and the Konyaks who are excellent warriors and wood carvers. The Phom and Konyak tribesmen 'crop' their hair in almost the same style as that of the Noctes of Tirap Frontier Division which has been described in the previous pages. Children, however, have their heads shaved till they attain puberty or even before.

We need not go into details regarding the hair-styles of Phoms and Konyaks. Only one point worth mentioning here is that, among the Konyaks, a tribe ruled by chiefs, difference in rank and status is seen in the style of hair-do. For instance, only the women and children belonging to the chief's family are allowed to grow their hair long whereas women and young girls other than those of the chief must wear their hair cropped short. Here is a case where the choice of hair-style is affected not by individual taste but by the custom and traditions of the society. This will only make it clear that hair-style among the tribesmen has important roles other than those of decoration.

Going further down south, we will now study the Naga tribes living in the state of Manipur. Here we find the Tangkhuls, inhabiting the eastern part of the state and the Kabuis who live in the south-western part; both tribes wearing what

can roughly be called a 'cropped' hair-do. For our description on the Tangkhul coiffure, we shall refer to T. C. Hodson who wrote in 1911: "The Tangkhul men wear the hair in a curious manner, which is to a large extent distinctive of the tribe. They cut the hair closely at the sides, leaving a broad crest, which varies in width from five to two inches down the middle of the skull. From the point of the skull the crest narrows to the nape of the neck, where the hair, which they allow to grow long, is tied in a loop".⁷ This style recalls the coiffure of some of the tribes in NEFA which we have just discussed. Young boys and girls of the Tangkhul tribe also shave their heads. Like the Bangni girls of Kameng Frontier Division, the Tangkhul girls shave the head till they attain a marriageable age, after which the hair is allowed to grow long. After marriage, the Tangkhul women wear their hair in a bun at the back of the neck.

Of the Kabuis of Manipur State, the men have their hair cut short, a portion of the forehead being sometimes shaved, whereas the women wear their hair in a knot at the back recalling those of Manipuri women. Young girls, however, wear their hair short till they reach a certain

⁷ T. C. Hodson, "Naga Tribes of Manipur" (London, 1911) pp. 27.

age. With the Kabuis, we shall complete our description of the various tribes wearing the cropped hair-style. We now pass on to the next group, i.e. those who wear the 'Bun' or 'Knot'. By this we mean those who grow the hair long and wear them in a 'bun'.

Under Group (b) i.e. those who wear the 'bun' or 'knot' we have the following tribes : (i) Khamptis, Tangsas, Singphos, Hrussos (Akas), Apa Tanis, Hill Miris, Tagins, Kaman Mishmis, Taraon Mishmis, Mijis, Bangnis and Daflas from NEFA ; (ii) Angami Nagas, Marring Nagas, Thadou Kukis, from Nagaland and Manipur (iii) other hill tribes like Mikirs, Khasis, Garos, Mizos, Kacharis, etc. from the hill districts of Assam. Among all the above mentioned tribes, a slight degree of variance is noted in the position of the bun or knot on the head.

Starting with the tribes from NEFA who fall under Group (b), we shall go from one division to the next in an east-west direction. The Khamptis, who probably migrated from Burma, are found settled near the foot-hills of Lohit and Tirap Frontier Division. Their dress and especially their coiffure is largely influenced by Burmese culture and as such we find that the Khampti men and women wear the same hair-style as the Burmese. The

Khampti men wear short hair over which they wrap white turbans as do the Burmese men. The women of this tribe wear their hair combed up from the back as well as the sides, and the hair is rolled up at the crown of the head, this being again tied with cloths of colourful designs. Unmarried girls usually wear the knot a little lower down at the back of the head.

The Singphos who are the neighbours of the above tribe, wear their coiffure in exactly the same style; the only difference being that the Singpho men tie the hair in a knot at the crown of the head, which again is wrapped in a turban. The Singpho women also wear a turban like the men, and this distinguishes them from the Khampti women. Silver bodkins which are very popular with the Singpho women, are used for fastening the hair.

The Tangsas of the Namchik and Tirap Valleys of Tirap Frontier Division, like their neighbours the Singphos, also keep their hair long. Both the sexes wear long hair, which is worn in a knot at the top of the head in case of males, and at the nape of the neck in case of women. Both the men and women again use turbans for covering their heads. However, this traditional style of hair-do is almost dying

out, and we are not surprised to see a Tangsa man or woman wearing the hair after the style of the Plains people.

In Lohit Frontier Division, there are the Kaman Mishmis and the Taron Mishmis who wear almost the same hair-style; the custom here being that both men and women keep their hair long, and wear it in a knot at the top of the head, the knot usually being supported by hair-pins. In addition to this hair-style, a piece of cloth is also wrapped around the head as a turban, and among the women, a thin flat piece of silver is worn round the forehead, which for them, gives the finishing touch.

In the next Division, that is, Siang Frontier Division we do not find any of the tribes wearing the 'knot' fashion, thus our chain of 'knot' hairstyle is broken here in the same way as the chain of 'cropped' hair-style was discontinued in Subansiri Frontier Division.

Coming to Subansiri Frontier Division we come across very fine, attractive 'knots' which seem to be the speciality of this Division. We can even say that, it is here in this Division, that our 'knot' style reaches its perfection in beauty and artistic arrangement. First come the Daflas, who live in the north-western areas of

this Division, and it is here among the Daflas that we find the origin of their present hair-style told in brief but interesting myth. Thus the Daflas say; "In the beginning monkeys used to tie their hair in a knot in the front of the head in the fashion that the Daflas call "*Podum*". One day a man named Nima Teni killed a monkey and removed the *podum* and decorated his own head with it. This is why all the Daflas, who are descendants of Nima Teni, tie their hair in a knot in front of the head",⁸

The Dafla men wear their hair long, and this is combed up towards the forehead. The long hair is plaited first, and is tied in the style of a chignon at the forehead with the help of coloured threads. A brass skewer almost ten inches long, is pierced through the knot, or '*podum*' as they call it, the skewer being in a horizontal plane parallel to the forehead. Around the head is also worn a thin strip of cane wherein small metallic rings are fixed. Young boys wear their hair short, or shaved, till they attain puberty. When a boy reaches puberty, say at the age of 15 or 16, he starts wearing his *podum*; and the wearing of a *podum* is indicative of the maturity of the boys.

Defla women also believe in the beauty

⁸ V. Elwin, "Myths of the N.E. Frontier of India" (Shillong, 1958), pp 199.

of long tresses, and although the young girls have their heads shaved, they soon take to plaiting the hair when the tresses are long enough. The hair is then done in a loose bun at the back of the neck, or among the young girls the hair is sometimes worn in plaits.

The Daflas, who were formerly engaged in frequent inter-village fights, used to bring home the palm, the *podum* and a lock of hair from the victim they killed in such clashes. We can assume from this that these tribesmen, like all other tribes, must have a belief in the magical power of human hair.

The Apa Tanis, who occupy the central position of this Division, are very similar to the Daflas in the manner of hair-do. The Apa Tani men, like the Dafla men, wear their hair in a knot though of a slightly different shape at the forehead, through which a long brass skewer is fixed. The women, however, unlike Dafla women, do their hair in a coil or knot on the top of the head through which a bamboo needle is passed. The children shave their head, leaving a small lock in front which, for the young boys, is definitely reserved for the future *podum* or knot they will wear at puberty.

The Hill Miris, a tribe living in the South-eastern part of Subansiri Frontier

Division also wear their coiffure in the same fashion as the Daflas and Apa Tanis.

Besides the above named three tribes, there are the Tagins, who inhabit the northern part of the Division. People of this tribe also keep their hair long, but do not take much care in making a neat knot as the other three tribes do. Small children usually have their heads shaved, probably as a means of getting rid of the vermin that usually infest hair. It is also not unusual to see even adults of this tribe resorting to cutting of the hair for the same reason.

Moving west from Subansiri we reach Kameng Frontier Division. In the Central area of Kameng, there live the Khowas (Buguns), a tribe which is very small in number. The Khowas men wear their hair in a knot at the crown of the head, and in this respect of they resemble their neighbours the Hrussos (Akas). The women of this tribe grow their hair long and do the hair in loose bun or knot at the nape of the neck, with the help of silver hairpins. Sometimes coloured beads and cowries are worn in the hair.

The Akas (Hrussos) and the Dhammais (Mijis) are the neighbours of the Khowas (Buguns). Men belonging to the above tribes wear their hair long, and tie it in



Hair-dressing of Idu Mishmi woman



Hair-style of Idu Mishmi women



Hair cutting (Idu)

a knot at the crown of the head. The women also keep long hair which is combed back and tied in a loose bun at the nape of the neck. Children, however, cut their hair short till they attain puberty or even a few years earlier. The Buguns (Khowas) as well as the Mijis (Dhammais) like the Daflas of Subansiri Frontier Division have an interesting myth as to how they came to adopt this particular hair-style. In a Bugun myth, we are told how the ancestors of the Buguns were born as a result of the union of a man and a girl living inside a gourd, "...and the Buguns even today tie their hair in a knot at the top of their heads, for this resembles the shape of the gourd from which they came"⁹. Again, among the Mijis (Dhammais) we have a myth telling us how the three brothers, Labukkhanlung, Sangso-Dungso, and Kimbu-Sangtung had a quarrel, and how Labukkhanlung eventually caught hold of Sangso-Dungso's hair "...and twisted it into a knot and the Dhammais tie their hair like this even today"¹⁰. From these accounts it is clear that the coiffure adopted by tribesmen is more by social or mythological sanction than by the mere quest for beauty.

Before we leave Kameng, we will briefly mention the hair-style of another tribe

living in the eastern area - the Bangnis (Dafla). This tribe is more or less identical with the Daflas of Subansiri. Men wear the 'podum' like the Daffas, and the women also wear a bun like the Dafla women. The hair of young boys and girls is, however, cut short or partially shaved. This concludes our account about the 'knot' or 'bun' style in NEFA. Now we pass on to Nagaland and Manipur, where some of our representatives of the 'knot' or 'bun style live.

The Marring Nagas who live in the eastern part of Manipur State presents us an interesting coiffure. Men of this tribe grow their hair long and comb it from eth sides and the back upwards and wearing it in a coil which resembles a horn in front of the head. Strings of beads are fixed at the base of this coiled hair. Women, in the other hand, part their hair in the middle, and the hair is done in a loose knot at the back of the neck.

The Mao and Maram Nagas, as well as the Thadou Kukis, wear the hair in a knot at the occiput of the head ; both the sexes wear this style. Children have their hair cut close till they reach puberty. The knot of hair is often supported by rolls of cotton. Among the Marmas, only those men who have erected a stone (lung-ching-bas) are entitled to make a parting in the

⁹ for a detailed version of this story pl. see V. Elwin, op. cit., pp 103.

¹⁰ for detail, see V. Elwin, op. cit. p 106.

middle of the bead. In Nagaland, we have the Angamis, who practise 'knot' or 'bun' hair-style. In fact, the Angamis are the largest group in the whole of Naga tribes inhabiting this area. Dr. J. H. Hutton wrote in 1921: "The real Angami method is to let the hair grow naturally in front while tying up a small knot at the back. The hair which goes to form this knot is separated from the rest by a narrow circle of shaved skin, but this is omitted by the Eastern Angamis, and the Kezami Angamis in certain cases let the back hair fall untied to the neck, In the front a fringe is worn without a parting by the unmarried men, while the married men brush their hair back from the forehead, often parting it in the middle. —The primitive method of cutting the hair is with a dao and sort of wooden hammer (SI vii), the dao being held under the hair and tapped along the edge with the price of wood." ¹¹

"The hair of unmarried girls is shaved, or cropped quite close, universally, as is also the case among the Semas and Lhotas and some of the Aos, while the hair of the married women is dressed differently by different groups. The women of the Khonoma and Kohima Angamis tie their hair up in a knot behind as soon as it is long

enough, nor do they hesitate to supplement it, if scanty, with purchased tresses. They wear no hair ornaments, but the Viswema and the Eastern Angami women wear their hair down their backs, and also wear a long brass ring through the top of each ear, the pair being joined by a string across the top of the head, and a second round the back of the head, thus keeping the hair on top of the head smooth and tidy. The general effect of this is very becoming." ¹²

Other hill tribes living in different districts of Assam may also be mentioned here. Interestingly enough, almost all these tribes in the Assam hill districts have the traditional 'bun' or 'Knot' style which, however, is not practised much these days, The Mikirs or Arlengs as they call themselves, (Arleng means "man") inhabit the Mikir Hills as well as North Cachar and Kamrup District and this tribe in fact, has spread over a wide area both in the hills and plains of Assam. The Mikir men wear their hair long, tying it into a loose bun at the nape of the neck, and the women of this tribe also wear it much in the same style. This is the traditional way of wearing the hair, but owing to frequent contacts with the plainsmen the hair-style adopted by these people

¹¹ J. H. Hutton, "The Angami Nagas". (London, 1921) pp 22

¹² J. H. Hutton, *op. cit.* pp 27.

now-a-days is far from being the traditional style.

Another tribe, the Kacharis or Bodo ('Bodo', meaning 'man') are found in many plains districts of Assam. The women of this tribe wear their hair in a knot high on the head, and no skewers are used for fixing the knot. As this tribe has been most in contact with the plains people, the traditional way of coiffure is almost dying out.

Next come the Garos or Achiks (Achik being the local name of the tribe) inhabiting the Garo Hills and other districts of Assam. Both the Garo men and women grow long hair, and the hair is tied into a knot at the occiput of the head. Round the hair-knot, several coloured threads are woven, and this applies to both the sexes. The turban is also common to both sexes. Young boys and girls of this tribe have their heads partially shaved; the hair on the front half of the crown as well as the sides is shaved while that on the back of the head is allowed to grow long.

The Khasis and the Jaintias of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district of Assam, who are the neighbours of the Garos, also grow long hair. The turban is worn by the men, and the women keep their hair long tying it in a neat bun at the nape of

the neck. Of course, this description applies to the traditional hair-style.

From the Khasis, we pass on to the tribes living in the Mizo District. Among the Mizos of Mizo District, the traditional way of hair-style is the 'knot'. Adults of both sexes grow long hair which is nicely combed with wooden combs, and the hair is tied into a knot at the back of the head. Skewers of brass, ivory and bamboo are fixed into the knot of the hair, and both the men and women wear turbans. The Mizos in former times, we are told, were very particular about their combs. These people being ruled by Chiefs, a man belonging to a lower clan could not use a comb belonging to the chief's clan. The difference in the rank of clans was indicated by the type of combs used.

Besides the Mizos, there are tribes living on the Indo-Burma border of this District, who differ in the manner of wearing the knot. Thus the Pawis, a tribe living on the eastern border, wear their hair-knot on the forehead or sometimes on the crown of the head. Again, on the south eastern border of this District, there are the Lak-hers, the menfolk of which tribe wear their hair-knot on the forehead but slightly inclining to the left side on the head. The women wear their hair parted in the middle, and the hair is done in a bun at

the nape of the neck. Hairpins of brass and bamboo are used for supporting the knot. The hair-style of the Lakher men recalls those of the Daflas of Subansiri Frontier Division in NEFA. Turbans of white cloth are in very common use among the Lakher men. With this tribe our discussion on the 'knot' or 'bun' style concludes.

We come to the third and last variety of hair-style under Group (c), that is, the "plait".

There are only a few tribes under Group (c), who grow long hair and wear it in a pigtail or plaits. Except for a few tribes from NEFA, and some section of the tribe in Mizo District, the "Chinese Pigtail" is not very widely used,

Among the Membas of Siang Frontier Division, both the men and women keep long hair worn in plaits. Men usually do their hair in a single pigtail, whereas women make two plaits which are crossed over the head and the two ends of the plaits are tied together at the forehead or the crown of the head. The Khambas, their neighbours, also wear long hair in pigtails and plaits. Sometimes, Khamba men also wear two plaits like the women. Only these two tribes, in the whole area of NEFA, wear the Plait style.

However, an interesting parallel of the

Khamba and Memba women's hair-style is seen among the women of the Hmar tribe who live in parts of Mizo District as well as Manipur. The women here wear the hair in two plaits which are passed round the head and the ends are tied in the forehead. With this description, we come to an end of the accounts of the various hair-styles of NEFA, Nagaland and Assam.

Now if we carefully examine the survey of hair-styles presented in the foregoing pages, we may arrive at certain conclusions which are, from the sociological point of view, interesting as well as worth noting. Thus, taking the hair-styles of NEFA above, we have three distinct styles, which, no doubt, recall three distinct groups of people living in the bordering areas. In the northern most parts of Kameng, Subansiri, Siang and Lohit Frontier Divisions of NEFA, the hair-style is definitely that of the Tibetans; and indeed the tribes living in these areas have a culture-pattern quite similar to those of Tibetans, having been in close contact with the latter for a very long time.

Again another group of tribes living in Siang and Lohit Frontier Divisions, mainly the Adis, and the Idu Mishmis adopt a 'cropped' hair-style, which distinguishes them from the rest of the tribes

in the neighbouring areas. This particular style of hair-do is exactly similar to those of the Naga tribes (except the Angamis) of Nagaland. Of course, the tribes of Tirap Frontier Division, like this Noctes, and Wanchos also wear this style ; however, this is quite natural since these two tribes are physically and culturally akin to the tribes of Nagaland.

The point of interest is : how have these tribes - the Adis and the Idu Mishmis, (who now live in areas quite far off from the Nagas, with so many groups of people having different culture-patterns living in between them, and what is more, with the mighty Brahmaputra flowing in between the areas inhabited by the former and the latter groups) ever come to adopt not only a similar coiffure, but a culture-pattern quite similar to that of the Naga tribes of Nagaland. For clarification of this point, we will look into the views of one author, Shri Sachin Roy who had studied these Adis tribes. Of the Adis he wrote :—"While the Adi culture thus stands in distinct aloofness from the Tibetan culture, though it is its immediate neighbour, it has clear affinities with the culture far away from it beyond the Brahmaputra in the south. In all the features in which it differs from the Tibetan, it resembles the trans-Brahmaputra hills peopleIt is hard to believe that the simi-

larity is accidental or even a later borrowing".

...“And there are traditions too which say that there have been migrations from the south of the Brahmaputra to the Adi Hills in the past, In early days the Brahmaputra valley was not a barrier to movements from north to the south and vice versa. Such movements stopped only with the establishment of strong states in the valley”¹³.

Also he wrote : “Another feature links the Adis with the Idu Mishmis : both cut their hair. This hair-cut style distinguishes them from all other neighbouring tribes and draws again a line of affinity with the trans - Brahmaputra tribes :”¹⁴. Here we can see the importance of the study of hair-styles (traditional) among the tribes, and in fact we may say that it is one of the most apparent traits in tribal culture by means of which we can study the effects of culture-contact as well as trace the affinities and migrations of a particular tribe.

The third and last influence on the hair-styles of NEFA can be traced to the south and south-eastern border of this area. The rest of the tribes other than those

¹³ Sachin Roy, "Aspects of Padam-Minyong Culture" (Shillong, 1960). pp 261 & 262.

¹⁴ Sachin Roy, *op. cit.* pp 265.

previously described, show a touch of Burmese influence in the manner of hair-dressing. Tribes like the Daflas, Apa Tanis, Akas, etc. wear a hair-style which closely resembles that of other hill tribes of Assam. The Khamptis and Singphos, who are migrants from Burma, show a distinct Burmese style in their coiffure. This strain, (I mean the knot hair-style) definitely comes from the Burma side, and there are ample evidences to show that racial migrations did actually take place from Burma in the direction of the hill districts of Assam.

We will now conclude our discussion on the hair-styles of NEFA, Nagaland and Assam. Truly, as Dr. V. Elwin has pointed

out, "throughout NEFA, there is a great variety in the style of dressing the hair by boys and girls, men and women".¹⁵ It must also be remembered that it is our duty to find out what lies behind this variety, and what does it signify for the tribesmen. More appreciation of the variety of coiffures among the tribals will hardly lead us to an understanding of this tribal practice. Therefore in this paper I have made a rather poor attempt to bring out the significance of the hair-styles, so that our appreciation may be firmly rooted in understanding the customs and practices of our tribal brothers in NEFA, Nagaland and Assam.

¹⁵ V. Elwin, "A Philosophy for NEFA". Shillong, (1958) pp. 62