The Glory Hunt

A SOCIÓ - CULTURAL SPECTRUM OF KONYAK NAGAS

DR. KISHORE JADAV

In *the Glory Hunt : A Socio-Cultural Spectrum of Konyak Nagas*, the author Dr. Kishore Jadav has delved deep into the ancient cultural patterns and way of life of Konyak Nagas, one of the most distinctive ethnic groups of India--their customs and social practices, rites and rituals, indigenous religious beliefs and taboos; their cult, pantheon divinities and spirits; especially the ways of prophecy including oneiromacy and animistic acts and performances, and artistic expression—hitherto unexplored by any scholars. His absorbing, vivid descriptions of his experiences during his expedition in this remotest part of the North East, in early Seventies, covers the exploits and chivalry of headhunting—a savage practice in primitive Naga societies—and almost an unique institution of Ahng, the autocratic ruler with his glory and grandeur whose supreme authority ultimately waned out.

His intimate experiences, with rich and variegated knowledge, so ordered and shaped embellishing this volume, would be equally exhilarating and enthralling to the readers throughout, for they are replete with awesome thrills, frenzy and dreadful wild revelry. The flavour of intermittently woven resplendent fables and sombre parables will be reckoned as an added virtue. The whole presentation and lucid expression in a pleasantly articulate manner with felicity bring alive the bizarre past making it palpable.

The author brilliantly illuminates frequent eruptions of socio-psychic behavioural pattern in the form of large-scale violences, in the present context, infesting insurgency in the region. The scholars of different disciplines will amply derive benefits for specialised study from this scholarly stupendous work.

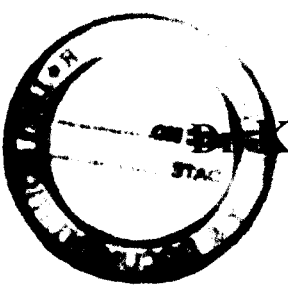
Dr. Kishore Jadav holds M.Com. and later he took Ph.D.in English literature from International University, California. He also secured D.Litt. from Harmony College of Applied Science, California, and D.Phil. from International University of Contemporary Studies, Washington, D.C., U.S.A. He began his career as a senior officer under Nagaland Government and served the offices of Commissioner of Nagaland, Chief Secretary of the State etc. etc.

He has been engaged in creative and critical writings since 1956. He is a renowned and prolific writer and has published about seventeen books. Against the four volumes research project launched by him on North East folk culture, he published two volumes. He is presently engaged in completing his forthcoming book 'The Mapping of Nightmares: An Autobiography.'

He is the recipient of World Intellectual, 1993 accolade from International Biographical Centre, Cambridge; awarded Gold Record of Achievement, International Cultural Diploma of Honor, the Nobel Order of International Ambassadors, Research Fellow Gold Medal by American Biographical Institute, U.S.A. He was also awarded 'Best Contributor for enrichment of Human Values' by United Writer's Association, Chennai, for his contribution in the fileds of Literarure, Social Sciences and Humanities and ' Bharat Excellence Award & Gold Medal' by Friendship Forum of India, New Delhi. He is Research Advisor and Fellow of ABI U.S.A.

THE GLORY HUNT

A SOCIO-CULTURAL SPECTRUM OF KONYAK NAGAS



DR. KISHORE JADAV

2001
INDIAN PUBLISHERS DISTRIBUTORS
Delhi-110007

Contents

One

Across the Territory of the Tattooed Faces

It was my long cherished desire during my youthful life to observe, though not with an academic interest nor for a research study but out of tremendous attraction, the primitive life and the archaic culture of the Konyak tribal societies inhabiting the interior hills, the then Naga Hills of Assam, under the Konyak territory, which remained rather unadministered under British regime, and was undergiong the process of administrative control by the Government of India; this remotest region of the North East of India with its tribal life of ancient culture was then relatively least affected by the adjoining belt of plains sectors of Assam with its winds of civilization, or for that matter by any contact of Burmese population.

Inspite of these facts, the isolation of the area was not complete, nor its backwoods tribal people totally insularised as there existed, though on meagre scale, a sort of bartering of goods etc., by the tribesmen in the *bazaars* of plains. However, it had not caused any radical change nor brought about any impact in their social orders- cultural patterns, and the Hills still remained the most dreaded for outsiders to sneak into.

It was entirely with the assistance of the staff under the then Deputy Commissioner, Tuensang, Mr. M.F Santook, that my expedition into the Konyak territory- a territory of marauding, ruthless head-hunters- was made possible. When I stepped along with my friend Mr. Johnny into this violent land with its terrains of forbidding nature, it was a brilliant day.

The mossy, winding pathways were all laid around soft, incensed, countless shadows of trees, shrubs and wild plants. Tall bamboos, and trees-*dandro gigantium*-grew abundantly. It was a pleasure to walk around the thick, green foliages of the flora and fauna. Struggling sunbeams pierced the foliages here and there. Knapsack on my shoulder, I was enjoying my walking tour in the land of wonders, not much frequented by many of us.

A stranger appeared almost from the blues. " A guy with a glassy countenance, ha!" he blurted out off- hand. I was caught totally unaware. It took a little time for his words to shake me. Were it me, spoken to? Johnny too had a quissical look in his eyes.

There was no one else to be seen around. We two men stood still facing each other. Out of the dark shadow cast by a big tree, there emerged a tattooed faced, medium-height, strong built elderly man, clad in his native apparel. He was chewing pan.

The fellow repeated what he uttered a while ago. I got back from tepid, temporary stupor, and was baffled once again by what he had asked.

"What do you mean, my dear fellow?"

My bewilderment showed in my face, let alone the voice. The man grinned. It was endearing, no sneer meant; of course, it was tinged with a sense of mischief.

"Are you new here? Where from?"

I nodded, and informed him that I had come from

distant land, the Western part of India.

He smiled, revealing his black denture.
I asked him, "But what's the big fun for any human face to be glassy or spotless? What do you mean? I can't follow you, dear fellow."

He explained at length.

"Look, we're Konyak Nagas. We believe that those men devoid of a scarred face, devoid of cut marks on their faces, are either domestic servants, or, yah, simply stark cowards. We consider them to be gutless, spineless, scapegraces, far removed from heroic fights, having had no chance to display or demonstrate any valour, living pitifully cloistered, snail-shelled worthless lives."

I countered him with my question, "And what do you think, valour stands for?"

The man all on a sudden got excited.

He thundered out: " To chop-off one's head. To bring home back someone's cut-off head. Do you follow me, now? Yah, thereby one shows his manly mattles, his heroism. There, they hold a celebration in his village-home. Do you get my meaning, now?"

I was at my wit's end. To me it appeared to be a ghastly inhuman deed, for any body to take pride in. Does this man mean what he says? It is a joke to a stranger?

The man was getting increasingly excited- emotionally heated up. He began, perhaps, to put up a demonstration of some sort- of the gaits of the so-called valiant heroes, the

vigorous head-hunters.

The Konyak Naga picked up screaming, jumping high, whirling about in a circle putting me in the centre. In his right hand he had a shining *dao* which he was brandishing menacingly, muttering something continually in half-gibberish, blabbering. His eyes turned blood-red, rolling somewhat in a fine frenzy. He was indeed in a trance, as if he was possessed.

Johnny, a little while ago, strolled away and was sitting in the shade of a tree a few metres away from me enjoying his cigarette.

I got unnerved, hairs on my nape rising, I was profusely perspiring. My throat went terribly dry, I started gulping. Man! Was the man after my head! Am I nearing my end? My heart almost stopped beating. Petrified, I stood still. My mind refused to work any longer. My expression must have betrayed my feelings. To Konyak Naga abruptly stopped his spine-chilling, rebarbative death- dance.

Blood replenished me again, pulse- beats having returned.

"Have I frightened you, Babu?" he asked, and said further, "Please don't get nervous. I mean you no harm. So, please don't worry. Just felt like displaying the tempo of a headhunting fight when it actually takes place." He smiled a broad ear-to-ear smile.

It was the hell of a nerve- shattering raw fear, I could slowly come out of. The death-dancer smiled invitingly again and said, " Come, get a grip over yourself. It appears that you

have got a fright of some kind. Rest a few minutes in my cottage at a stone's throw. Have a drink. Come."

Taking me for granted, he turned and started making brisk pace in front of me. I followed him, as a tow-boat follows the puller. Still a little shaky perhaps, but re-assured nevertheless. Johnny had joined me already.

Soon we reached the house of the Konyak Naga, having walked about 300 yards. The house was of a modest structure thatched with *toku pata* (a plant of palm family). It contained two big rooms, a spacious courtyard with a small piggery. There was an outer verandah.

He went inside and brought three wooden slabs- looked like V-shaped wooden stools about 10 inches in the length, tapering down to around 5/6 inches in the width. These were smoothly chiselled, but not polished or burnished.

We all got seated on these stools. By now, I could catch a good hold over myself. I was feeling fine, no more awe-struck.

The elderly Konyak Naga spoke Nagamese- a local patois that prevails in Nagaland, being a mixture of Naga dialect with Assamese, Bengali, Nepali and Hindi. He introduced himself as Obu Ahen, an octogenarian, well-to-do ex-warrior, lovingly called '*Obu*', by all and sundry.

Obu's wife came out of a room with a good-looking fair complexioned motherly type slim woman. She brought three bamboo-made cups of hot aromatic tea, what they call "*Khülap*. The lady said: "*Khülap ying tüoh*"- please have tea. But as we could not understand the language she spoke, we simply looked at her in wonder.

Obu sensed our discomfiture and explained: "Mor maike koise tumi dui jon cha khabi" and rubbing his two fingers in his throat said, "Itu buijile aram pabo" means- she asks you to have a sip to drench your dry throat.

"You'll feel good and relaxed. We call this beverage *khülap*, which you call tea. Nevertheless, in both taste and colour tea is different from *khülap*. We prepare *khülap* only with tea leaves, don't add either sugar or milk to it. *khülap* is a strong beverage. *khülap* is a delicious drink. You"ll like it". Obu had his own sip and uttered 'Aah' to express his satisfaction.

We too needed a drink badly. Johnny and I sipped from our Bamboo cups. At once it gave us a repelling strange taste, and a peculiar, unfamiliar smell- it was an odour of the green bamboo and the smoke. Tea leaves are put into cold water, and then heated on a small fire made by raw, green bamboo.

It was beyond me to have a second sip. But I was careful, Obu must not notice what I felt over the cup of *khülap*. Holding the bamboo cup, I began to chat with Obu Ahen. He started talking: "Babu," said he, "I was narrating to you the meaning of ruthless courage!" Obu drank some of his *khülap*.

"A warrior, not credited with bringing the slaughtered heads of the enemies from the battle field, misses out on fame and reward.

"Those warriors who can have chopped off a large number of human heads of their adversaries, are given special respectful recognition by the society, and are considered great battle heroes."

"Those who fall in this head-hunting mission are despised and branded as cowards- interesting in saving their own heads."

Here at this point, I chose to spoke to Obu. "Hey! I don't have more than one head and shouldn't I be acutely interested to save my lone head? Do I do something stupid by trying to keep my head intact on my body?"

Obu guffawed. His wife, attracted by his loud laughter came out of the room rather curiously, and asked Obu something in their native dialect. Obu answered her, and both of them once again burst out laughing. When they stopped laughing, Obu Ahen said, "Look Babu, whatever you say, and if you don't take offence, I must say both you and your friend appear to belong to chicken- hearted brotherhood. Otherwise, why the hell had you got scared as a goat seeing my head-hunting demonstration with the *dao*? We all are mortals, aren't we? Isn't mortality warranted? It is. We all are destined to die-today, tomorrow or the day after. Only a matter of time. One who is born, must die. So our inference is that God has sent men on earth for doing courageous, heroic deeds". Obu stopped to drink *khülap* from his big bamboo cup. I allowed him a little time to have two more sips, then asked, "Obu, does God really want us to kill those who are also human beings like us?"

Obu explained in his own way: " You must agree, Babu, that human beings are supposed to be the best amongst all the creations of God. Don't you?"

I watched Obu's house carefully. The place, where we were seated, had been the entrance of the house- not a room proper. It was like a terrace, used as sitting room. The ceiling was made of bamboo splint, the rear wall and two side walls

too, were thickly fenced by bamboo strips. The front of this terrace was open with no door. At the corner, there was a small enclosure separated by four bamboo sticks kept for making fire. These bamboo sticks were about four feet in length with one-inch diameter. At the moment, a fire had already been made inside the enclosure. Behind the fire-pot a green bamboo stick was put up with the support of a couple of V-shaped bamboos. There was a knot in the bottom of the erected green bamboo, the top of which was cut diagonally. Water was poured into the hollow bambo, with a handful of tea leaves. Another green bamboo stick acted as strainer being placed on the top of the erected green bamboo-fibres taken off, it was made into a ball. The heat of the fire kept the liquor warm. There were bamboo-made tongs. A five by three feet cane-mate was spread on the floor of the terrace. On one of the three bamboo walls, there hung two huge elephant tusks. On the floor-mat at a corner, was a wooden box with drawers used as a desk required for those sitting on floor-mats.

There was a three-four inches long "*chillim*" (smoking pipe) for smoking opium. For preparing opium, there was a big-size table spoon and a trident with double sharp edges. There were two cane sticks and one country-made chopper. Both these were painted with red and black colours, partially coated by the fur of hill goats.

These were used by the king, called 'Ahng'. There was, in that terrace, another head-hunting chopper, with a strong handle and a V-shaped sharp head. It could weigh between 5 and 6 Kgs. In length it was about three feet from the handle-end to its head. This, we were told, was used in war for chopping away enemies' heads, and was always carried while visiting other localities.

The bamboo fence was variously fitted with small mirrors and looking glasses, in addition to knives and iron-bars resembling walking sticks. Some knives looked like the Assamese knives used in house-hold work. There was a wood-piece carved in the shape of a human face.

I picked up the conversation once again: "Obu, I would like to ask you something about tattooing of faces, a very common practice amidst you. Actually, when at what point of life these are done? Are there any occasions? Who are those accomplished in tattooing others' faces? We feel eager to know about this custom."

Obu said: " Oh, about tattooing? A very easy thing after all. If we have at the moment all the necessary materials and equipment, I can even show you a demonstration."

Obu Ahen called out for his wife. When she came, they exchanged words in their own language.

Obu's wife disappeared inside the house and after a while came out carrying a cane-made bag, and said something to Obu in their dialect.

Obu said "Babu, you're in luck. Somebody got tattooed in our colony only yesterday, and so we have all the materials in our possession at the moment. The ingredients are rather very fresh.

"We call tattooing " S*etadeupu*" in our language. Normally, we require about four kinds of ingredients. One is a powdered incense called "Y*a deu sie –asi-unyak mak*".

Obu Ahen picked up two burning coals from the fire

place, and sprinkled some dust of incense on them. A soothing fragrance spread in the room immediately. From the cane-basket he took out an earthen pot, and put into the pieces of coal mixed with the incensed powder.

Obu covered the pot. The black smoke generated a black carbon which was very useful for tattooing.

The second ingredient was ' *Zu* or "*Shui*" rice-beer. This must be made from black coloured sticky rice. It is called '*Modhu*' or "Shui", a kind of local drink.

Naga families prepare this '*Modhu* ' in various and different ways. *Modhu* or *Shui* has got its own intoxicating power. It was not sold in the market during those days.

During preparation some extract comes out of ' *Modhu*' and this extract is mixed with that incensed carbon. It becomes "Dawai" or Deu-sie.

The third ingredient is arranged from the thorns of cane.

The fourth one is some soft stem of cane, called "*Beng*". The thorns were pierced through the "*Beng*" in such a way that only the tips of the thorns were visible on the other side of the "*Beng*". These thorns are carefully arranged so that these could perform the function of piercing the skin of the body and face.

Sometime thorns are arranged in two rows, depending on the design of the tattoo.

All these four items were essential for making tattoo. Besides, a fine bark of bamboo was also required. The size of

the bark varies in accordance with the tattoo-designs.

The bark was to be put into the mixtures, "*Dawai*", and then the wet bark was required to be put on the hands, legs or face of the concerned person who was getting tattooed, in order to get the design embossed on the skin.

Then, after this the painted portion of the body had to be tattooed with the help of the sharp thorns (*Beng).* The tattoo-maker had to be extremely cautious while piercing the thorns, so that the thorns in no way can go deeper into the skin. It must be very light surface-piercing. Tattooing as an art had been kept a secret, and some rituals were involved before commencing the tattoo-making ceremony.

The person wishing to be tattooed should pass through some regulations. These were some stipulations, which had to be obeyed by the concerned person.

He or she was not allowed to take food anywhere outside his or her home. Everyone-young, old, male or female-could make their skin tattooed.

However, the tattoo artist is invariably an expert woman. Though any and every woman would not be eligible for making tattoo. Conventions vary in Nagaland from area to area. It varies among different tribes. Nevertheless, one thing is quite common in most of the Naga tribes-it is that all girls should be tattooed in their adolescence only.

The edict does not hold good for menfolk.

Konyaks, and for that matter almost all Naga tribes, consider the tattoo as their ornament.

Almost all parts of a Konyak woman's body should get tattooed except faces, whereas the Upper Koynak women-folk gets their faces tattooed. In some tribes, women can be tattooed only between wrist and elbow, elbow to shoulder/ankle to thigh. Women of some different clan have to be tattooed from their fore-heads to the tips of their noses, and again from the lower lips to the chins.

The particular tattoo design, as Obu Ahen demonstrated, happened to be the Konyak tribe symbol. As a rule, the upper portion of this tattooed sign had to be made thick, the lower one thin.

Again, around the navel of woman, four lines-each one two to three inches in length of tattooed marks- had to be made.

In some of the tribes, women used to have two tattooed lines on both corners of their lips. As for as men-folk were concerned, they used to be tattooed during their youth time. It was believed that the youngsters full of zeal and a great courage required for head-hunting fights, should be desperate enough to have bodies hued with various tattoo patterns.

Amongst the males, one particulars tattoo design was very common or rather popular- it was shaped like the letter "V", tattooed on the chest. The design had the single line mark on the two sides of the chest, tapering down to the navel.

Some tribes among the Naga people preferred double-lined "V" mark. Sometime, they also liked half inch to one inch thick "V" shaped tattoo-marking on their chest.

Yet, there were some Naga tribes who were not

satisfied with this "V" shaped tattoo. They liked human figures to be tattooed on both sides of their stomach, their back and also on their thighs and hands.

Some Konyak Nagas preferred to wear tattoo-marks around their necks resembling necklaces.

One noticeable, interesting thing may be pointed out here, which is that excepting the Konyaks, the male members of other tribes never get their faces tattooed. It is the Konyak who would like to go in for face-tattooing.

In the meantime, Obu Ahen had been explaining the art of tattooing. He was quite enthusiastic in getting us acquainted with their pet customs. He painted some tattoo designs himself on a seasoned-bamboo.

Now came the moment when my mute friends Johnny, who was observing everything keenly, broke his silence.

"Doesn't blood ooze out when thorns get pierced into the skin"?

Obu was apparently pleased with this question from Johnny. He smiled an obliging smile and said, "Indeed! Blood does ooze out. It must be. If it does not, the purpose of tattooing would totally be defeated. Because, yes, if blood does not get mixed up with this solution, no black dots would appear at all. Tattoo markings are made and lasting design made only when blood blends with "D*awai*" or "D*eu-sie*".

There must essentially be after-tattoo care.

Two hours after the tattoo ceremony, the concerned person who had been tattooed had to be treated very carefully. The entire portion of the tattooed skin should be applied with a soft compress of lukewarm water.

The compress should continue twice daily for about five to six days. During all these days, the concerned person would have to be confined in the home, and not in any case allowed to go out atleast for the first three days soon after the tattooing.

Sometimes, the tattooed skin developed dwelling for some kind of infection. In order to avoid such complications, lukewarm compress treatment became very effective, because the affected part would heal up quickly, and within a week or ten days time the tattooed person would get well and recover from pain and swelling.

I asked Obu, out of my curiosity: "Won't you say that girls and boys cry out in pain during the process of thorn-piercing during tattooing?"

Obu said, "Oh yes, they do. Especially the girls do, because they're usually tattooed at a very early and tender age. Sometimes, they even throw out their hands and legs. Hence, two or three persons always stand by to hold them tightly.

"However, the boys don't cry, and bear the pain with clenched teeth. Because crying is a sign for the cowards, and nobody would dream of being called a coward. They shudder even at this thought. However, the tattoo ceremony is held in high esteem as a sacred ritual. Tattoo marks on males are considered to be symbolizing courage".

Obu Ahen was speaking in broken Nagamese mixed

with movements of hands, body and eyes- with body language- almost like mimicry, in order to make himself intelligible to us; he continually gestured-as if he was putting up a stage performance. When excited, Obu would show his jet-black teeth, and this prompted me to ask Obu; "How do you have such jet black teeth? Do you use some such leaves or herbal paste that make your teeth look so black? or do you paint them in this way?"

Obu expressed his surprise at my question: "Don't you know, Babu, that coloured black teeth and denture are protected considerably from decay? We can happily eat meat – we're primarily meat eaters-even in old age.

"We use choppers to prepare herbal medicines. This chopper," he showed us one, "I always keep at hand. We wash a chopper thoroughly, then light a fire on a small heap of cloven bamboos, especially the green bamboos. Then we keep the wet chopper on the open flames. Carbon is formed thereby. We collect the carbon from the chopper with our finger tips, and paint our teeth carefully. We must be careful. Because, if while painting the teeth, the carbon gets in touch with the bare gum, the later starts burning even there comes irritation to the eyes and tears well up. However, soon it becomes normal and alright. Our teeth, thus coated with this black carbon, remain free of dental disease and decay."

I ask what age is considered to be the right one for getting the teeth thus painted black. Obu pointed to a teenager boy, who was standing in the outer courtyard away from us.

" Look, boys of this age group, normally get their teeth coloured black."

I said, "You have a nice well-set denture. You must have

looked very handsome with white teeth."

Obu promptly replied: " And I would have been laughing all the time like monkeys, as you do. Any way, our custom didn't allow that we keep white teeth."

The live-long day came almost to dusk, and while talking to Obu we were not much aware that we were getting late and our colleagues in the camp would be worried. Our colleague Sarmah with two peons came to Obu Ahen's house in search of us. It was a little after 3 PM.

We also felt hungry, and took leave of Obu, having promised that we would again come to him the next morning to hear from him many interesting things about his community.