

Pre-Historic Culture of Nagaland

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The Nagas are an Indo-Mongoloid folk living in the North-Eastern Hills of India. They are at present found in the hills of the states of Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. These people are divided into over a dozen of major tribes, speaking languages and dialects more than double the number of tribes.

The Nagas have a hoary antiquity. They are known for their rich, distinctive culture and love of art and beauty. Every Naga tribe has a festival with a variety of dances, songs and costumes and every month of the year is associated with a festival or two. The rich tradition of the Nagas is also depicted in their handwoven clothes, wood-crafts and carvings on the morung, drinking mug etc. Their rich historical traditions are attested to by the Greek, Chinese, Persian and European scholars.

For the prehistoric culture of Nagaland, our sources are very meagre. Archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics and similar other historical materials are conspicuous by their absence. However, there are few archaeological sources which indicate very vague pre-historic traditions. The celts are reported to have been found by the villagers on the surface of the ground in course of their work of cultivation. A nicely polished celt found on the bank of a river in Mokokchung district is now preserved in the Nagaland State Museum. The Nagas believe that these stone celts are thunderbolts hurled from heaven to cause lightning.¹

There are only two types of celts traceable in Nagaland. The first one is triangular in size with its widest part at the working edge, while the other one is much longer and resembles a Naga adze. Most of the earlier iron weapons and implements are prototypes of the stone celts.²

There are a few sites of archaeology in Nagaland:

Longtorok — Longtorok stones are situated in Sangtam area, some 20 kilometres by road from Mokokchung. There is a group of six stones. The Ao Nagas believe that they have originated from that group of stones.

Khezakenoma Cave — Khezakenoma Cave is situated at a place of the same name in the Chakhesang area, in the mid-south of Nagaland bordering Manipur. The traditional stories record that the Nagas have emerged from a cave at Khezakenoma. It is also said that some of the major Naga tribes came from Burma and halted at Khezakenoma for some time and subsequently dispersed.

Longchum Stone — A Stone Pillar located near Longchum village in Lotha area. It is within Bhandari range near the plains. It is known that the Stone was erected by the Burmese during their march through that area at the time of their invasion of Assam (1820-26). Probably the Kanyaks, Aos, Lothas and Rengmas of the lower ranges were affected by the Burmese invasion.³

A unique neolithic site named Chungliyimti in Tuensang district led to the discovery of relics of Stone Age man. Chungliyimti is a small village located at a distance of 8 kilometers from Chare administrative outpost overgrown with dense forests. Even to-day there is settlement on the hill-top 7,000 feet above sea-level. This is a composition of tertiary sandstone with debris scattered all around. Most of its remains have been washed away by the heavy rains due to the cliffy nature of the hillocks.⁴ The stone artefacts consisted of stone bowls, pestles, grinding stones, balls, hammers, querns, mullers, whorls, knives, hand-axes, scrapers, cores, flakes, teracotta and stone smoking pipes etc. The potteries are crude hand-made thick grey and red wares occasionally with cord-marked impressions carved on them. The fabric is coarse with a few exceptions. The shapes are limited to cooking vessels, jars, bowls and pots with flaring out and splayed rims. Many of them were unfinished ones and some show secondary working. Most of the tools were highly decorated and weathered. The raw material employed for these implements was sandstone with occasional use of quartzite. Some of them betray the existence of palaeolithic tradition. According to Mr. Nienu, Chungliyimti is a culture complex of pre-neolithic, neolithic and post-neolithic age.⁶

Other two sites known as Changsang and Maksha in the same district indicate, through their existence of ceramic industry, the habitation of the prehistoric man.⁷

The above archaeological studies reveal that Nagaland possessed palaeolithic as well as neolithic civilisations. To strengthen the hypothesis we may consider few well known Naga traditions. Amongst them mention can be made of ancestor worship, burying the dead near house, organised political unit, classless society, elaborate moral codes, high standard of music and dance, practice

of Jhum cultivation, patriarchal family life and high status of women in the society.⁹

Like the Nagas a common practice of ancestor worship also flourished in the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Greece, Rome and the Orient. Gods were, at first, idolised dead men.⁹ Burying the dead near house by the Nagas was common with Merimidian culture of pre-historic Egypt.¹⁰ The Naga classless society or brotherhood of all men was the same with and attracted attention of the Stoic School of Greek philosophy well known all over the world. The Naga's elaborate moral code reminds us the golden age of Babylonia under Hammurabi. High standard of music and dance of the Nagas takes us at once to the prehistoric Cretan influence on Greek art.¹¹ The Naga practice of Jhum cultivation is a clear instance of Mesolithic culture of the people of Nagaland. The patriarchal family life and high status of women in the society are clear legacy of the Vedic Indian traditions and the Nagas may have cultivated them through their close contacts with them.

Notes & References

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11. Ibid. p-89.