

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

# Dispatches from Nagaland: Headhunters, Baptist, and the New Generation

By Malia Politzer

LONGWA, NAGALAND: “You should have brought whiskey,” the king of the Naga headhunters told me, looking despondently into his empty flask. My traditional offering—five pounds of dry tea leaves and three packs of assorted biscuits—had been discarded disdainfully on the dirt floor a few feet away.

The headhunter king (called “Ang” in Nagamese) was dressed in a leather cowboy hat, a fire engine red vest, shorts and plastic flip-flops. Only a brass necklace that hung heavy like a museum plaque around his neck indicated his royal position, labeling him in stylized English script to be “Shri Ngowang, Chieftain of Longwa.” Apart from his comment about the whiskey, the King said very little, instead directing his attention to shaking the last few drops of his whiskey into a ceramic mug decorated with cartoonish red hearts.



*Ang Ngowang Konyak house is sliced in two by an international border, half in India and the other half in Myanmar.*

We were sitting across from one another on small woven stools in his ancestral home, a cavernous hut constructed from bamboo and thatched palm leaves sprawling more than two hundred feet long. Squatting on his haunches to the king’s left, one of his brothers puffed dreamily on an opium pipe, his watery gaze fixed on the flickering flames of an open fire. Though we were in the same building, we were technically in two different countries: my stool was in Myanmar, while the

chief’s—less than two feet away—was in India.

Built on top of a verdant mountain encircled by fingers of silver mist, the village of Longwa has been cleaved in two by the international border, which slices across the mountain peak directly through the chieftain’s living room, leaving the villagers on the western side of the mountain in India, and those on the eastern side in Burma. The king told me drily



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*Based in India, Malia Politzer will be looking at immigration, identity and border management strategies along India’s northeastern border, from Kashmir to the North Eastern states—a border region that shares an international boundary with six different countries, and hundreds of distinct linguistic and ethnic groups. Prior to receiving an ICWA fellowship, Malia worked as a reporter for Mint, India’s second-largest business and economics news daily paper, where she covered development, gender and social issues. In addition to India, she has lived and reported from China and Mexico. She has a B.A. in Liberal Arts from Hampshire College, where she focused on migration issues, and an M.S. from the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism in multimedia and investigative journalism.*



*The Ang's brothers, behind him, smoking opium in the King's hut.*

that the day Burma received independence from the British, half of his grandfathers' wives woke up from the previous night's sleep as newly anointed Burmese citizens.

In many ways, the division of Long Wa is a metaphor

for the fate of the Nagas. Scattered across two countries and four states, the Naga tribes are a divided people who have been unsuccessfully fighting for their own independent nation since before India achieved independence from the British in 1947. Nagas maintain that they have always



been an independent people, with no ancestral ties to India. When the British forcibly made them a part of India, they reacted with a revolution that continues to simmer to this day.

No one knows exactly where the Nagas came from. A nomadic tribal people without a written language, their entire history has been passed down orally from generation to generation. For many years, they existed as an independent people in the Naga Hills, a lush plot of land spanning western Myanmar and parts of northeast India. Each village existed as an independent unit of the tribe, ruled by a council of elders—and in the case of the Konyaks, the largest of the 16 Naga tribes—ruled by the Ang (king). Nagas were also fierce warriors, and would frequently raid neighboring villages and return with their victims' heads, which they believed would imbue them with mystical powers.

Over the next hundred years or so, their culture would be virtually destroyed by Westerners. In the 1800s, the British put an end to the practice of headhunting. Soon after, American missionaries came, spreading the gospel and converting tribes to Christianity by the droves. Today, the *moktungs*, the traditional center of culture where adolescent boys had come together to learn the culture, history and stories of their tribes, have been almost entirely supplanted by the Baptist church, which has a religious monopoly in Nagaland.

Nagaland's current highly complex and dysfunctional

political structure reflects this history, with four different systems competing for power over the state. First and officially, Nagaland is ruled by India, though locals I spoke to frequently complained that the Indian administration was weak, corrupt, and neglectful. Second is what Nagas call the "parallel government," which consists of various militant groups that are currently in ceasefire negotiations with the Indian government, funding themselves through "voluntary" taxes levied on Naga households and businesses. Third is the Baptist church, which in many ways is the most organized and unifying force across the state, establishing schools and spearheading many of the social challenges that should be addressed by the government, like HIV and poverty. Last in the pecking order is the traditional Naga system—led by the council of elders, and finally the Ang. Formerly the supreme leader of the Nagas, today the position of the Ang is largely symbolic. With no relevant role in modern society, many Angs are disappearing into opium addiction.

A few hundred feet from the chief's home, about a dozen long angular stones stick out of the ground at odd angles in a rough circle. An elderly Naga, back curved like a bow, leaned against one of the long stones for support. "Do you know what is buried here?" He asked me through tobacco-stained teeth. I shook my head. "This is where the missionaries buried the heads hunted by our ancestors, our jewelry and our traditional clothes," his fingers reflexively caressed the surface of one of the rough stones. "This is where our culture is buried. Nowadays, Naga children



The monument where the heads of enemy tribes were buried, behind the Ang's house in LongWa.

no longer remember the old songs or stories. We have lost what it means to be Naga.”

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It occurs to me that Naga society is in transition in many different respects. Beyond the challenge of having to negotiate state and international borders, there are other internal divisions—the uncertain balance between maintaining ancient traditions while also embracing modernity, the transition from revolution to economic integration with India, and more recently, a sharp divide between the older and younger generation in what it means to be Naga.

From what I gather from conversations with the older Nagas, for them, Naga identity is relatively simple: We are Christians, we are (whichever tribe they belong to), and we are decidedly *not* Indian.

For the older generation, much of this identity is rooted in conflict. The day before India declared independence from Britain on 15 August 1947, the Nagas, led by their leader Phizo, declared independence from India. Phizo represented a movement that believed that the Naga tribes had been coercively divided, first by the British, and then by India, who deliberately put their people in different states<sup>1</sup>. According to Phizo, the Nagas’ ancestral homeland had been an independent country prior to colonial rule, and he wanted it to remain so.

What ensued was a bloody conflict that spanned nearly four decades. The Indians called in special troops to control the region, adopting a highly controversial law originally established by the British called the “Armed Forces Special Powers Act,” which permitted Indian soldiers to shoot to kill on mere suspicion of foul play, without any legal repercussions. Naga villages were repeatedly burned and pillaged, women raped, and men tortured and killed, ensuring Naga enmity for the Indian mainland.

In 1962, the Indian government attempted to mollify the Nagas by establishing a state called Nagaland, carved out of the neighboring states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. However, this did little to stem the tide of violence, despite numerous unsuccessful ceasefire negotiations. Finally in 1997, a controversial ceasefire agreement was negotiated between the government and the various Naga militant groups, since which Nagaland has maintained an uncertain peace, though the conflict has still yet to be resolved.

Neingulo Krome is a 63-year old Naga human-rights activist who has meticulously maintained a record of atrocities against the Nagas. We met in the lobby of an old colonial house converted into a hotel in the capital city Kohima. Wearing creased khaki pants and a crisp white

button-up shirt more appropriate to a diplomat than a freedom fighter, he sat in a rocking chair on the terrace, closing his eyes while he recounted the march toward independence. “There was a time when all we knew was violence. The Indian paramilitaries didn’t know who had guns, so they saw every Naga as a potential enemy,” he said. “At that time the human rights abuses were innumerable—they were raping women, torturing people, burning down villages. One village was burnt 18 times in two years. But since the ceasefire, things have been much more peaceful.”

Now that violence has been stemmed, Krome’s main concern is for the death of the dream of Nagan independence. He worries that the younger generation are abandoning the independence movement, seduced by economic and educational opportunities offered by India. Oddly, though he was one of the actors directly involved in the negotiating the ceasefire, he admits to sometimes feeling almost nostalgic for times of war—and the easy nationalism created by conflict, that today seems to be ebbing away. “The younger generation, honestly speaking may not even be aware of full extent of our violent history,” said Krome. “It’s the price we pay because of this ceasefire. Fifteen-odd years of peace has killed nationalism.”

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A few days later I met a family who helped me put Naga’s transition into perspective.

My journey to Mon district had begun in the backseat of a hulking white Bolero jeep, driven by a Naga prince. “*I left my love behind,*” he caterwauled from the front seat, singing along from a track by one of his favorite George Jones albums. On the passenger side, his wife—a Naga from Ao tribe in Manipur—munched on ginger candies that she had made using an experimental recipe she planned to teach the Konyak women on the Myanmar side of LongWa.

I had been told that it would be impossible to get to LongWa because of a series of border conflicts between Nagaland and Assam that had led authorities to temporarily close the land pass to everyone except locals. Nyamdo Konyak and his wife, two teachers native to Mon district, had offered to give me a ride to the border.

Nyamdo was a Wang Sha—considered to be a prince—and was distantly related to the Naga Ang (king) that I later met in LongWa district. Though Naga culture does not have caste, his royal status did give him a social boost, which he had used to gain support from the Nagaland Baptist Church Council to build a Baptist-funded school in Mon district. In the process of getting to know Nyamdo, his older brother, wife and son over the next three weeks, I got a glimpse of different generational perspectives on

<sup>1</sup> Singh, M Amarjeet, *The Naga Conflict*. National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore India 2012



*Nyamdo (right) and Ashim Konyak, two teachers in a Baptist run school in Mon district.*

Nagaland's current political situation.

Now in their late fifties, Nyamdo and his wife, Ashim, were of the generation that grew up during the revolution. Ashim, an Ai from Manipur, remembers having to flee into the jungle as a girl twice, when her village was burned to the ground by Indian paramilitaries. She was only 18 when her sister and best friend left their village to join guerilla militants hiding in the jungle. "I remember waking up and seeing them bundling all of their belongings together. They wanted me to join them...but I couldn't. It didn't seem like the right way for me." Today, her younger brother works in the underground, while her older brother holds a post in the Indian government.

Nyamdo's father was a translator in the British government, and worked closely with the British to negotiate peace between warring Naga villages. Like many Nagas, Nyamdo's father had considered the British to be a friend of Nagaland, and felt deeply betrayed when the British included Nagaland as a part of India. "No Naga would ever consider themselves to be Indian—the British knew that," Nyamdo said. "Our situation is a little like Tibet, which is occupied by China. If you ask around here everyone will feel the same way—that we are different. Even Indians know that we were never a part of the Indian union."

Though they consider themselves to be Naga nationalists, Nyamdo and Ashim chose not to join the guerilla groups, instead dedicating their lives to the Baptist church. As a young couple, they secured church funds to build a

school in Mon district, which has grown from 20 students to more than 700 over the course of 20 years.

Today, Nyamdo believes that the Baptist church is well on its way to becoming the most powerful political force in Nagaland. "Religion plays a very important role here—not just spiritually, but politically. Everyone is a part of the church—it's been very successful at bringing all factions together," he said. "So if the younger generation knows how to use this as a tool, maybe they can use it to help the movement."

I found myself wondering, though, whether Naga nationalism has any real relevance in Nagaland today. With nearly twenty years of relative peace, do the newer generation even want an independent Nagaland anymore? Nyamdo is adamant that they do. "No Naga youth will ever tell you that they are Indian," he says. "There might not be a war, but they are still Naga. They want independence just as much as we do."

But Nyamdo's own son, WangTok Konyak, seemed to have a different perspective. I spoke to him in a frond-thatched gazebo in front of his father's house, overlooking a stunning view of a stream a few hundred feet below. A lanky 25-year-old, WangTok had decided to follow in his father's footsteps and also became a teacher. Weekdays, he lived in a poor village a few hours away from his parents' home, teaching at a school for underprivileged Naga youth.

Since the ceasefire agreement, India has abandoned

violence as its primary tool in Nagaland, and appears to be courting the newer generation with soft-power—adopting special quotas in Indian universities and colleges to attract budding Naga intellectuals, and implementing programs—technical trainings and job placement—that would encourage integration. It appears to be working.

In many ways, Wangtok Konyak embodies a synthesis of Indian and Naga culture. Though he is proud of being Naga, he also appreciates what India has to offer—both economically, and culturally. An avid athlete, he’s founded a cricket league in Nagaland, finished a college degree in Bangalore, and enjoys Bollywood movies.

WangTok said that he did not consider himself to be a part of his parents’ movement, and welcomed India’s intervention in Nagaland. “I think we’re better off under India,” he said. “If we were better developed, with greater resour-

es, then perhaps there will be other options—but until we can take care of ourselves, it’s better to be under them.”

Most of the Naga youth I spoke with during my nearly one-month stay in Nagaland appear to share WangTok’s perspective—a sharp departure from their parents’ generation. Still, WangTok believes that true integration needs to be done cautiously—to become Indian without losing sight of what it means to be Naga. In this regard, the next generation has their work cut out for them.

“The culture is not being preserved,” he said. “If we do not do something, it may be lost. We need to be more disseminating in education, to write down in books our own culture and customs—to interview the elderly in the villages, to write down their stories before they are lost. But I do not see that we need to be a separate country to do this—we can exist under the umbrella of India and still be Naga.” □



*WangTok Konyak, Ashim and Nyamdo’s son, enjoys cricket and Bollywood movies, and believes that Nagaland should remain an Indian state.*





# 2013 FELLOWS

## **Hannah Armstrong** (2012-2014) W. AFRICA

*Topic: State-building and security in the Sahel Region*

Hannah is a recent graduate of London's School of Oriental and African Studies with an M.A. Distinction in International Studies and Diplomacy. She previously worked as a freelance foreign correspondent, reporting on politics, economic development, and security from Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, and Haiti. Her work has appeared in the *Financial Times*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Monocle Magazine*, among others. Fluent in French and proficient in Moroccan Colloquial and Modern Standard Arabic, she served as a Fulbright Scholar in Morocco, where she researched tensions between Islamist feminism and liberal feminism in civil society. She holds a B.A. in Political Philosophy from New College of Florida.

## **Amelia Frank-Vitale** (2012-2014) MEXICO

*Topic: Unauthorized migrants en route*

Amelia is looking at the intersections among the war on drugs, organized crime groups, party politics, and the varieties of violence faced by Central American migrants who are passing through Mexico in hopes of reaching the United States. Amelia graduated from Yale in 2005 with a degree in Anthropology. A former union organizer, she completed a master's degree in Ethics, Peace, and Global Affairs at American University in 2011.

## **Malia Politzer** (2013 - 2015) INDIA

*Topic: Internal and international migration trends, remittances, citizenship issues and identity in India.*

Formerly a writer for *Mint*, an Indian business and economics news daily paper, Malia wrote on a variety of social issues including disability issues, internal migration, gender, social entrepreneurship and development trends. As a fellow at the *Village Voice*, she wrote primarily about immigration. She has won multiple awards for her reporting and published articles in the *Wall Street Journal Asia*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, *Reason Magazine*, and Migration Policy Institute's monthly magazine *The Source*. She has also reported from China, the US-Mexico border and South Korea, and speaks fluent Spanish, conversational Mandarin, and working on learning Hindi. Malia holds an M.S. in multimedia and investigative journalism from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she was a Stable Fellow, and a B.A. in Liberal Arts from Hampshire College.

## **Shannon Sims** (2012-2014) BRAZIL

*Topic: Stakeholder involvement in the governance of South Atlantic Coastal Forest, the Mata Atlantica*

Shannon is a 2011 graduate of The University of Texas School of Law. Shannon holds a B.A. in International Relations with Politics concentration from Pomona College in 2005 and attended Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul, Turkey with University of the Aegean, Mytiline, Greece, in 2004. Following the BP Oil Spill in April 2010, she was nominated for an environmental law internship with the United States Coast Guard District 8 Legal Division in New Orleans, where she helped draft unique legal regulations defining the role of the Coast Guard during a drilling moratorium. In 2009, through the Rapoport Fellowship from the Rapoport Center for International Human Rights and Justice at the University of Texas School of Law, Shannon completed a legal clerkship with the Attorney General's Office of the Ministry of the Environment of Brazil (IBAMA). She researched concessions management in environmentally protected areas along the coast, and documented small Brazilian fishing communities.

## **Chi-Chi Zhang** (2012-2014) CHINA

*Topic: China's next generation and its role in the country's political, economic and social development.*

Based in southwestern China, Chi-Chi will be working in an urbanizing landscape impacted by incredible social change, mass migration, and a growing yet potentially problematic economy. As a producer for CNN in Beijing, Chi-Chi covered ethnic dilution in Inner Mongolia, traveled to the North Korean border for Kim Jong-il's death and documented Tibetan unrest in Sichuan Province. She previously worked as a correspondent for the Associated Press in Beijing, covering events such as the lead-up to the 2008 Summer Olympics, the Xinjiang riots and China's 60th anniversary. A Utah native who moved back to China in 2005, she has also lived in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Follow her on Twitter @chi2zhang.

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