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ANCIENT NAGA HEAD HUNTERS

AND TALES IN PROSE AND POETRY

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T. Penzu



People around the world know that the forefathers of the present Naga people were head hunters. Head hunting meant that man killed his enemy, cut off his victim's head, and carried home the head as a victor's trophy.

Ironically, there were no murders or secret killings. There was no random killing of people just for head counting. There was a set of unwritten laws that guided the head hunters. Ref. Sl. No. 25, Page 131, *Head Hunters' Code of Conduct*, of this book.

It is a unique book in a sense that its author-poet himself is a direct descendant of famous Naga head hunter-warriors. Stories in longer poems are true stories stranger than fiction. (a) Shorter narrative poems give pictures of head hunters' lives in general. (b) Longer poems narrate real-life stories of head hunters in details.

To avoid any possible injury of hearts in the minds of today's descendants of earlier head hunters, I have converted all names of locales of the stories, characters or actors and actresses of the tales into fictitious names. Presentation of tales in fiction form also prevent raising again of any dormant ill-feeling down in the human hearts of head hunters' descendants.

Its author-poet had collected material of this book from the following sources: (i) Tales in shorter narrative poems are from those which he had learnt from old-generation people during his childhood and youth in his village, Merangkong, a hub of Naga folklore and culture. (ii) Details stories narrated in longer poems were collected from tale-bearing old men in different rural Naga villages elsewhere in Nagaland as well as from his birth village.

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The author of this book. T. Penzü (Tsüknung Penzü) himself is a descendant of ancient Naga head hunters, who were noted warriors in their time. Penzü feels proud to be a rural man. He was brought up in a rural village, Merangkong, in Mokokchung district of Nagaland, belonging to Ao Naga tribe. Merangkong was a hub of Naga culture and folklore.

T. Penzü is a self-made man, not a man with spoon on his mouth, from a cultivator's family. He learnt while earning. Obtained B.A. degree reading in evening section of a college, while serving as a teacher in a high school in a small town.

He claims himself a research field activiest in the field of Naga folklore and culture; and not a university-level-doctorate research scholar. For all his five books, his story materials were all collected, learning by heart in oral tradition' of transmitting from 'father to son' and 'old to new generation people'. That is the reason why names of particular 'resource persons' and bibliography are not given in his books in respect of materials collection.

This is a unique book. Its readers will rediscover an ancient world so far remained unknown by the world. It is thrilling to read it, and equal to having a rich treasure.

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ANCIENT
NAGA
HEAD HUNTERS
—LIVES AND TALES IN PROSE AND POETRY

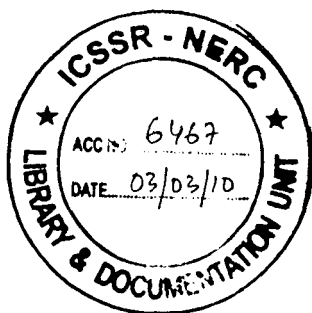
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INTRODUCTION

Who and Where are the Nagas?

Nagas are sturdy hill tribesmen belonging to Mongoloid race. They are a warrior tribe. They are in North-East India. Main Naga population concentration is in Nagaland State. They are also found in Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh of India and North-West of Myanmar. They are said to have migrated from China and Far East long-long ago in prehistoric time and settled in their present habitation. Population of Nagaland State alone is 19,88,636 (*Source*: Census of India, 2001); and many more in the places mentioned above. There are 16 Naga tribes in Nagaland, each having its own dialect and language. English is the official language of the State. Nagamese or broken Assamese is the common communication language among the masses. It is derived from the neighbouring Assamese language of Assam, but has lately become a mixture of Assamese, English and Hindi.

Their Occupation

Nagas, from ancient time to the present day, are mainly cultivators. Their main staple food is rice. Among them, tribes in the north and eastern region practised jhum or shifting cultivation. Under this shifting system, two paddy fields are maintained every year, old and new ones. A new field is made every year by cutting and clearing new jungles. Then the previous year's new one becomes old one in the second year, and they abandon the field in the third year. The cycle of shifting complete its round for a village from 8 to 10 years' time in the jurisdiction of its village land. In permanent terrace rice cultivation in the south, in addition to rain water, small irrigation

canals are made on the hill slopes and water is supplied from hill streams to terraced rice field.

Head Hunting

Nagas had been head hunters from time immemorial. No one knows for sure when it was started. In ancient times, compulsory training in warfare was imparted to all young men in their dormitory institution which was called *Arju* or *Morung*. However, all men were not professional head hunters. Training was mainly for village defence and self-defence. There were professional head hunters who took head hunting as their game of life, without commiseration or remorse for his killing and bloodshed. They protected the village from enemy attack. They earned personal glory, fame and titles in defence of their respective villages. A noted brave head hunter was treated as a wall for his village. All adult males were involved in fighting during inter-village battles or fighting on greater scales. Inter-tribal war was however rare. Naga head hunting practice came to a gradual end by the beginning of the 20th century with the combined efforts of early Christian missionaries for the Nagas and the administration of the (then occupying) British government.

Village Administration

There are three types of village administration as follows:

- (a) Majority of the Naga tribes were having independent local self-government, like ancient Greek City States. Each village was governed by a group of nominated members, from each clan, forming an apex body somewhat similar to today's Village Council. Among the Ao Naga tribe it is called *Putu Menden*, equivalent to (and I have 'translated it as) *Village Parliament*. This system exists from ancient times till today, and is found to be one of the best village administrative systems in India today, mainly in rural villages. Of course, here were leader or leaders in a clan or sector who were treated or regarded as village chiefs, although they were under the Village Parliament.

- (b) Among the Konyak Naga tribe there is one *Angh* or king over a village or several villages. He holds overall village administration with the help of Deputy Angh and other confident village elders or relatives.
- (c) Among Sema Nagas and some other Naga tribes a Village Chief is all-in-all in village administration. His designation is *Gaonbora*, derived from Assamese, simply meaning a village elder. He is near-equivalent to a Konyak Angh.

Arju

Arju or Morung was the dormitory for unmarried young men of the village. It was not a mere sleeping hall. It was itself a Naga institution which existed among almost all Naga tribes, whether under Village Parliament or Angh or Gaonbora or any other type of village administration. It was a centre for compulsory training of young men in the arts of warfare and social etiquette. Arju inmates had to undergo strenuous, spartan training for head hunting war, sports and all manly games. Decision-making for declaration of war with another enemy village mostly depended on the strength of the Arju manforce. Arju inmates were regarded as protectors of the village. A young man graduated well in the Arju system was counted and honoured as a hero-in-making. Number of *Arjus* in a village depended on the size of the village: two in a small village, and even upto six Arjus in a big village; normally one Arju in one Khel.

Belief and Worship

Ancient Nagas had no common major religion. There were mythical gods for each tribe with different names of gods and goddesses in each tribe. In addition to these mythical deities, they worshipped inanimate objects like stones, water, lakes and some local god or spirit that was found only in a particular place. Worship of the deities were held individually and in groups, in family and in public, in the form of an open festival for all or in a restricted observance.

Festivals and Folk Dances

Naga tribals were lovers of festivals and dances. Each tribe had at least two major festivals in a year which are being celebrated from ancient times till today. As they are cultivators, their festivals are associated with seasons of cultivations and worship of gods and goddesses for blessings in seeds and crops of their cultivations. All major festivals are associated with tribal folk dances in colourful costumes.

Modern Nagas

Modern Nagas are fairly educated. Nagaland's literacy rate at an all India level is 67.62 (2001 Census). Educated persons are mostly employees of government, public and private sector establishments, like offices, industries, educational institutions. A small percentage of people are engaged in business, private farming and other works. Almost all indigenous Nagas are Christians, may be around 98% (private source). Of course Nagaland has a sizeable number of non-Naga, non-Christian residents.

Nagaland has 82.26 % rural and 17.14 % urban population. (2001 Census). Almost all rural people are still cultivators. In spite of fairly good literacy figures (67.62%), professional researchers, writers/authors are yet to come up from among the native tribals. Due to economic reasons, potential and talented writers get themselves employed in salaried posts under one or another establishment.

Position of Naga Tribal Folklore Today

Naga tribal folklore has no written record. One has to rely still on oral traditions as have been surviving from time immemorial till today. However, modern generation people do not know the folklore stories and they have no interest to learn them from older people. On the other hand, old-generation people who carry the folklore tales in their memory are dwindling year by year due to their natural death of old age. Only few remnants of them are to be found in rural villages. Naga folklore stories are precious, rare national heritage treasures, not only for India but for the whole world.

Yet there is every possibility of these treasures vanishing forever if these are not written today, within few years' time, before the tale-bearing remnants of these older men and women die one by one. Even now also, these are in a near-extinct position.

The world-famous Naga folk dances are similarly on the verge of vanishing from existence. In Nagaland State there is no dance academy or institution, not a single one, with well-set syllabus, offering certificate, degree or diploma courses. There are no professional instructors. Luckily, some interested young men and women learn the dances at their own initiative, in their own villages and towns after arranging voluntary instructors from villages. These self-trained youths are occasionally used by government and NGO agencies for displaying Naga tribal folk dances in India and abroad. It is now right time to see that these charming dances are preserved without allowing to be extinct.