

A Nation at the Limits of State: The Colonial Heritage and International Reach of Naga Nationalism, 1945-1975

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In its first decades of independence, India came quite close to the progressive West's imagined ideal of a postcolonial state. The new state was democratic, secular, and gradually growing economically. True, the country was haunted by the trauma of Partition, conflict with Pakistan, and poverty, but these issues seemed fleeting in the optimism of early independence. So it seems surprising that some in India would rebel against the new state, seeking assistance not from Communists and other radicals, but the very same Western states that often sympathized with India.

Yet this is precisely what the Naga National Council (NNC) attempted to do, in an armed independence struggle they actively led from 1955 until the Shillong Accord of 1975, but which continued under various successor groups until the first years of the twentieth first century. Led by Angami Zapu (AZ) Phizo, the NNC sought independence for the Nagas, an ethnic group comprised of a collection of predominately Christian tribes living in the isolated region along India's northeastern border with Burma (now Myanmar) with an estimated population of 350, 000 at the time of the conflict (Neville 1973, 13). Today the area constitutes the Indian state of Nagaland. The Nagas attempted present their fight for self-determination as internationally relevant, but were held back by a combination of remoteness, a political message perhaps tied to their British colonial inheritance, India's power, and internal divisions. Their critique of India came not through Leftist politics that would have found them friends in Moscow or Beijing, but in an argument of their fundamental cultural and ethnic difference from mainstream India.

Even Phizo's escape to London in 1960 failed to help the Nagas internationalize their struggle. While the NNC would be militarily revitalized in the late 1960s by Chinese assistance, the new alliance would divide the NNC as a coherent unified body.

Considering the tumult of recent Naga history, archival sources are difficult to obtain. However, relevant materials can be found in the Nagaland State Archives and the National Archives of India, with useful colonial materials hosted by the Cambridge South Asian Archive and British Library. These sources favor mainstream Indian views, but the NNC materials held

there provide some contrast, along with the private papers of Naga nationalist Baptist minister VK Nuh in Dimapur, Nagaland.

Within Empire, within India

The British introduction of Christianity and English-language education shaped a broader Naga identity and created a local elite, which maintained its distance from the Indian mainstream. As a result, the form of Naga nationalism expressed in the build up to August 15th 1947 and in the first few years afterwards had an Anglophilic bent, showing an international element to Naga nationalism even early on.

Without direct records prior to the arrival of the British in the region, the early of history of the Nagas is murky. The British only arrived on the edge of Naga territories after taking control of Assam in 1826, soon setting up trading posts in the hills and sending occasional armed missions in response to Naga raids on the plains (Kar 2013, 340). Control was consolidated after the defeat of a 1879 rebellion (Franke 2009, 34).

Nevertheless the British did not exert too heavy a presence in Nagaland, which they administrated as the Naga Hills District (NHD) within Assam. Only a small number of British officials were sent there, and though schools were established they remained small in number. The majority of Nagas made their living through slash-and-burn agriculture (Yonuo 1974, 20). Most Naga tribes speak distinct dialects, so English gradually became a *lingua franca*, secondary to Nagamese, a creole combining elements of Naga languages with Assamese. Christian missionaries from the United Kingdom and United States of America worked extensively to spread various denominations of Christianity. The British proved surprisingly popular, as it often seemed their rule was limited to visits by the district Deputy Commissioner (DC), missionaries, and anthropologists eager to see headhunting “savages” Some Nagas traveled to Shillong, then the capital of Assam, to attend high school, but this encounter with the wider Indian context seems to have only reinforced a sense of Naga distinctness (Kar 2013, 343).

The first recorded articulations of modern Naga identity came in January 1929 when British parliamentarian Sir John Simon visited the local capital of Kohima with the Indian Statutory Commission, touring the colony to investigate the potential for self-government. The Commission received a memorandum from the Naga Club, a group consisting of *gaonburas* (chiefs), *dobashis* (interpreters), other government employees, and priests (Franke 2009, 60). The memorandum stressed the uniqueness of Nagas and requested that the Naga Hills be placed “directly under the British Government” rather than with the rest of India (“Memorandum” 1929).

Kohima’s 1944 role as a World War II battlefield served to further integrate the NHD with the wider world (Kikon 2009, 90). The Nagas served as stretcher-bearers, porters, and guides

for the British, creating the expectation that they might be rewarded for their help. On the other hand Phizo assisted the Japanese military in Burma, although the extent of his collaboration remains hard to verify (Steyn 2002, 59).

The expressions of Naga nationalism that coincided with Indian independence in 1947 were also closely linked to Charles Pawsey, the last DC. In April 1945, he organized the founding of the Naga Hills District Tribal Council, gathering tribes together to prepare them for political participation in India. However the group evolved into the NNC at a meeting in June 1946 (The Naga Nation, 1947, 5). The complicated situation is captured in an April 1947 letter to Pawsey from AG Clow, Governor of Assam, stating that the impossible “ideal plan” would be an “interim government” with British officials temporarily staying on (Clow 1947). Building on this heritage, the NNC’s early efforts to negotiate their relationship with India looked to the United Kingdom as a potential arbitrating power, with members writing letters to British leaders (Sakhrie, 2002, 113, 114).

A place in the world

Frustrated by a lack of consultation over their inclusion in India, Naga nationalists gathered steam. Arguments for Nagaland’s independence were voiced in the language of modern sovereignty, with appeals made to the UN as an outside arbitrator.

In 1946 Phizo returned from Burma, where he had briefly been detained by the British, and rose to the helm of the NNC. On May 16th 1951 he launched a plebiscite on Naga independence in Kohima. In his plebiscite speech, Phizo stated that India had a responsibility to let Nagaland go if it “wishes to be a leader in this world’s affairs” (“Plebiscite” 1951).

Further articulation of the NNC’s self-perception as part of an international community came in the January-February 1953 issue of *The Nagaland Herald*, the self-proclaimed “Organ of Naga Youth,” which reprinted a letter to Nehru by NNC Vice President Imkongmeren Ao referencing UN discussion of the French colony Tunisia. The implicit comparison to Nagaland evoked a broader anticolonial context, but the fact that “13 Asian nations sponsored [the] Tunisian case under India’s leadership” encapsulates a difficulty encountered by the NNC as it tried to find support from non-Communist, neutral Asian states — India was one of the most prominent members of this fraternity (The Nagaland Herald 1953).

After the NNC and the Indian state began to openly fight in 1955, the NNC had to be more pragmatic about its allies, seeking assistance from Pakistan. Though possibly unreliable, some evidence comes from 1958 statements given to the Indian police by Nagas captured returning from East Pakistan, claiming that Phizo was in Dhaka talking to “High officials of the Pakistan Govt. and American govt” (“Alleged Hostiles” 37).

Once Phizo made his way from East Pakistan to London in 1960, he would redouble his efforts to attract international attention. He would have moderate success gaining attention

from human rights activists, often with Christian links. This perhaps explains the heavy human rights focus in his 1960 pamphlet *The Fate of the Naga People: An Appeal to the World*. He depicts the situation in internationally-legible terms, comparing the Indian state to “European fascists.” The booklet catalogues unprovoked raids on villages, as well as instances of sexual violence against women (Phizo, 1960, 17).

The pamphlet would prove partially successful, as in 1961 *Observer* reporter Gavin Young travelled covertly to Nagaland and embedded with the NNC’s army. The resulting writing represented NNC forces as competent and popular, with the Indian army fumbling through the hills (Young 1962) However, when Phizo finally traveled to America in 1967, he failed to draw significant sympathy (Steyn, 2002, 144).

External Affairs

Looking at the other side of the equation, India’s response to the Naga insurgency alternated between inept and masterful. The government’s unwillingness to seriously negotiate with moderate Nagas in the 1940s precipitated a turn towards armed resistance, while the clumsiness of the Indian army in early fighting only made it more unpopular. Gaining clients in the NHD would prove to be a more effective strategy. On December 1 1963, the Indian state of Nagaland was formally inaugurated, a process assisted by the moderates of the Naga People’s Convention (“Nagaland” 1964). However, the new state was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of External Affairs, where it would remain until the 1970s (Hazarika 1994, 102). The Indian establishment still found Nagaland ambiguously foreign, inadvertently endorsing the NNC’s argument that the issue had to be dealt with in international terms.

Nagaland’s establishment set out the Indian government’s strategy for success, a combination of divide-and-rule, the injection of government funds into Nagaland, and continued military force. In addition to development projects including the construction of schools, hospitals, and roads, statehood created a group of Naga politicians and bureaucrats dependent on India for their livelihood. Corruption was utilized as a political tool, money encouraging militants to surrender (Franke 2009, 118).

The path to negotiation in Shillong was actually intensified military conflict, connected to regional political considerations. Though by then NNC had found a new source for arms and training in China, in 1971 India triumphed in the Bangladesh War. The victory removed a line of support and site of training camps for the NNC (van Schendel 2005). After large-scale Indian operations in 1974 and 1975, the NNC was forced to negotiate in Shillong in November 1975, without Phizo.

Internal Dissent

Another factor behind the failure of the NNC was internal dissent, exacerbated by Phizo being

far removed from the on-the-ground situation. After his departure from Nagaland it is unclear to what degree Phizo was in touch with the NNC and its shadow administration, the Federal Government of Nagaland. Strained communication and the perceived lack of headway made in London led to resentment and further internal divisions (“Underground” 1965). One key figure who grew angry at Phizo’s absence was General Kaito Sukhai, leader of the NNC’s armed forces and a member of the Sumi tribe. While not always emphasized in records, fractures within the NNC were also defined by differences between traditional tribal groups (Bey 1967).

Support from China was also a contentious issue, the fervent Christianity of Phizo and other leaders initially making an alliance with Communists inconceivable. Eventually Phizo would recognize the need for Chinese assistance, but support for trips to Yunnan for arms and training in the late 1960s did not resolve all ideological qualms over the new ally, crippling the NNC as a unified body. The quasi-Liberation Theology Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland, ideologically closer to Maoism, would emerge as a force that wished to continue fighting after 1975, and did so up until the turn the century.

Conclusion

To simply conclude that the Naga National Council’s failure to accomplish its goal stemmed from Nagaland’s isolation, their quixotic struggle not really relevant beyond a corner of Northeast India, is to overlook the nuances of how both the NNC and the Indian state conducted themselves. From the beginning the NNC attempted to present the cause of Naga separatism as an international issue, recognizing that foreign support could help it triumph over its far more powerful opponent. Unfortunately, Nagaland’s remoteness and small size remained an issue, while the NNC’s ideological position, uneasily balanced between admiration for the West and a more pan-Asianist internationalist tone, made it difficult to gain powerful friends. In the meantime, India’s comparative power, not to mention its international prestige as a neutral state with a proud anti-colonial history, left little room for the Nagas to operate. Still, India needed to think regionally and internationally to defeat the NNC. Although Phizo never managed to bring the Naga issue to the halls of the UN, the conflict was more than an Indian internal affair.

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