

Who Owns the Ethno-Cultural Past: Cultural Objects of the Nagas in Far off Museums

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Introduction

In the 19th and the early 20th centuries, museum movement was at its peak and private collections had become a status symbol in European countries. There was hoard of competition among the countries and their allies which colonised others to collect the cultural materials from colonised countries and display the same in their home country. This was the time when the empires of European countries were ruling many Asian and African countries. Among the hill and forest living people anthropological expeditions were carried out for the collection of curious and fascinating objects and often those collections came to the United Kingdom (UK), Europe and United States of America (USA) without the context and variable details relating to acquisition and use of the same by the indigenous people. One such community whose cultural wealth has attracted the world's attention but which has lost a good deal of its cultural material is the Nagas living in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur states of India, and in parts of Myanmar (**Fig. 1**). It was perhaps a coincidence (if deliberate, we wouldn't know till detailed research) that the Naga Hills were exposed to the western world, when the focus was on study of anthropology, ancient knowledge systems and collections of ethnological museum objects, and within no time it became the focal area for ethnological collections for museums across the western world.

Starting from the mid-19th century till India's Independence, cultural documentation/research on the Naga Hills was done/initiated by three groups – the American Missionaries, the British Administrators and the German speaking Anthropologists. The early 20th century writings by the British scholars (Hudson 1911; Hutton 1921a, 1921b; Mills 1922, 1926, 1937; Smith 1925) on the Nagas became part of day-to-day readings and all anthropological academic syllabuses. Some followed it up to mid-20th century (Bower 1951, 1953). In the late part of the 20th century, a few pictographical books appeared basing on the collections of different museums with textual source borrowed from the collectors' diaries (Jacobs 1990). In the early 21st century some German scholars (Oppitz *et al.* 2008; Stirn and van Ham 2000, 2003; van Ham and Saul 2008) and Indian scholar Vibha Joshi based in the UK (Arya and Joshi 2004) made noteworthy contributions with colourful books based on fieldworks and archival data. The period when doing field work among the Nagas were not feasible for many due to indigenous political movements from 1950s till end of the 20th century, there was exceptions like that of Ganguli (1984, 1993). There have been number of research papers by many other scholars during all these years right from the mid-19th century (Butler 1847, 1855, 1875; Godwin-Austin 1875; Peal 1874; Woodthrope 1882a, 1882b).

1939, 1966 (in Naga Hills 1936-37); Paul Witz in Naga Hills 1938] and America (Vernay-Hopwood 1936). Many a times, the administrative officers, military personnel and missionary personnel worked as antique collectors over there. J.H. Hutton and J.P. Mills (both Deputy Commissioners of Naga Hills) together collected more than 5000 objects for the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) alone. It is noteworthy to mention Henry Balfour, the curator of the museum who would write letters in almost bi-monthly basis to these administrators, sometimes even giving drawing of the objects he needs for the collections. Military personnel collections came to various other museums like the collections of K.J. Kiernan who worked in the Indian Army between 1943 to 1948 that are now housed in the Horniman Museum, Forest Hill. More than 50,000 Naga objects are in the possession of 43 public museums and private collections in the UK. In Pitt-Rivers museum alone, there are about 8,000 items, in Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology there are about 1500 items, in British Museum there are about 1000 items from the Naga Hills.

The largest collection outside the UK is in Germany (collections in the Ethnological museums at Berlin, Munich and Dresden counts to about 2000 objects, mainly consisting of Adolf Bastian, Otto Ehlers and Lucian Scherman) and then in Austria (Ethnology Museum mainly consisting of Haimendorf's collections of about 800 objects) and followed by Switzerland (Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann and Paul Wirz's collection in Museum of Cultures, Basel and Zurich counts to more than 700 objects), France (objects in Musee du Quai Branly, Paris are mostly bought from Jean Paul Barbier, a Swiss collector of tribal arts) and the Netherlands (Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden) in Europe. America has huge collections of objects from the Naga Hills both in various museums like the Natural History Museum (1935 Vernay-Hopwood expedition's collection), Smithsonian Museum, and University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (W.H.

Furness's collections of about 400 objects) and also in personal collections. Just checking any ethnology museum's catalogue in these countries, one invariably finds hundreds of objects with reference to the Nagas. These items include the Naga dresses, textiles, ornaments, weapons, shields, agricultural tools, fishing and hunting accessories, utensils of day-to-day use, wooden and bamboo objects and carvings, helmets, head gears, baskets, beads, and stone tools besides numerous human skulls. The export of such a large quantity of material culture from a small population (2 lakh, Hobson 1999) over a short period of time has been attributed to the enormous attraction it held for the White people but this explanation ignores the fact that the collectors were more interested in the objects than in the culture of the people to whom they belonged. If an investigation is carried out of the ratio of anthropological objects collected and the number of people of any community administered by the British, then undoubtedly the highest proportion will be that of the Nagas. It is an irony that even the handful of researchers who carried out fieldwork among the Nagas after the departure of the British from the country, too preferred to donate/sale their collected objects and field photographs to European museums (sizable collections of objects and photographs of Mileda Ganguli came to Pitt Rivers Museum and Museum of Cultures; diaries of freedom fighter Rani Gaidinliu (**Fig. 2**) ended up in Pitt-Rivers museum; Vibha Joshi's photographs are in the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin at Dahlem) than to Indian Cultural store houses. Nevertheless, all the collections are far well conserved and well accessed in these places than in India.

Modus Operandi of Collection

The culturally rich Nagas had neither script of their own nor any written language till recent past. Their origin is obscure. Their history needs to be inferred from their cultural materials. If the history of the Nagas is written, the symbols of their heroic deeds depicted in the carvings on the wooden walls (**Fig. 3**), beams



Figure 2: Diaries of Rani Gaidinliu (Courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, UK, Collected by J.P. Mills)

(**Fig. 4**) and posts of their traditional houses (**Fig. 5**), youth dormitories (*morungs*) (**Fig. 6**), memorial posts (many a time of wood as ‘Y’ posts, **Fig. 7**), other wooden carvings, their unique styles (**Fig. 8**), ornaments (**Fig. 9**), use of various objects from far-off places (**Fig. 10**) will be of much help, besides their customs, agricultural practices and languages. Every design has a meaning; be it on the houses, pillars, walls, beams, drums, coffins, shawls, head gears and ornaments. These designs show an account of glories and fertility brought to the village by the brave owner/user, the number of enemy/tiger hunted, the number of expedition with which he accompanied, the number of expensive and village serving feasts of merit given by the family and their ancestors, the social status they enjoyed and many a times, the contact they had with

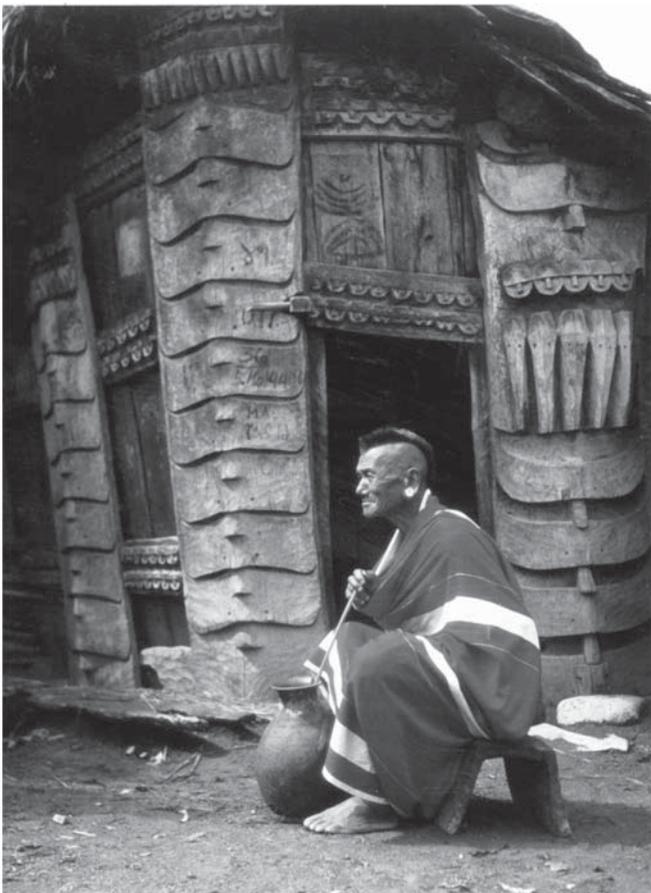


Figure 3: Carving on wooden wall [a house in Nungbi, Tangkhul Naga in Manipur by Mileda Ganguli in 1963, Inv.-Nr. (F)IIa 6813, (c) Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland]

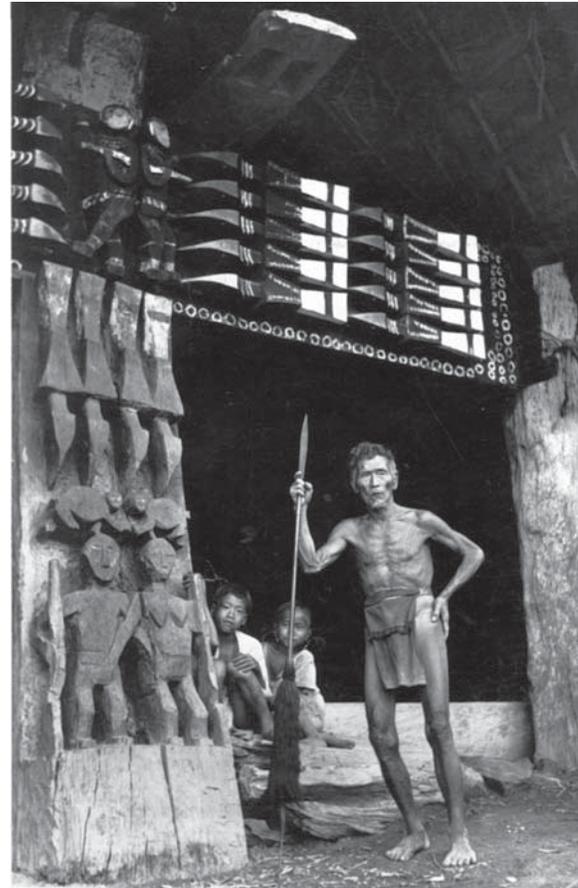


Figure 4: Carved beams [a dormitory in Wakching, a Konyak Naga Village in Nagaland by Mileda Ganguli in 1965, Inv.-Nr. (F)IIb 3859, (c) Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland]



Figure 5: Wooden posts of the house (House of the Chief of Longwa, a Konyak village in Nagaland in 2006)



Figure 7: Y posts (After <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga>, Inganumi, an Angami village, photo by C.F. Haimendorf in 1936)



Figure 6: Wooden post of the youth dormitories (Dormitory of Shenghah Chingnyu, a Konyak Village in Nagaland in 2010)



Figure 8: Wooden Carvings (Naga Heritage Museum & Research Society, Kohima, Nagaland)

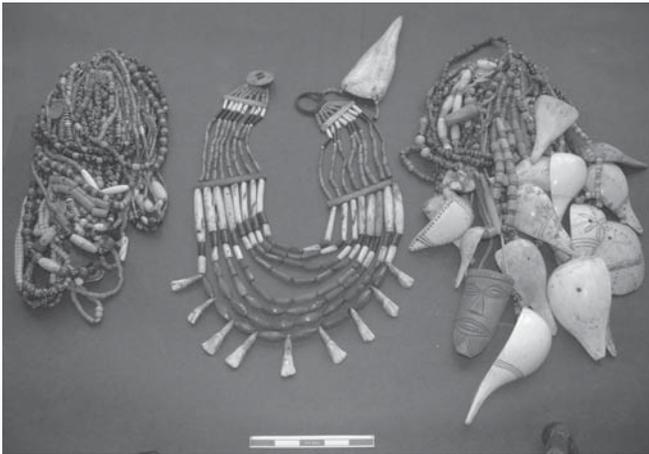


Figure 9: Naga Ornaments



Figure 10: Objects from far off places (a Yimchunger lady wearing a quartz earring in 2009, Kutthur village, Tuensang, Nagaland)

the outside world. A two year long war with Burma which ended with the Treaty of Yandabo, on 24th February, 1826 made the British Empire realise the importance of the strategically located Naga Hills and a need to cut through the hills to make direct communication between Manipur and Assam. This inroads to a sovereign loving people resulted in revolt which ultimately resulted in unleashing of numerous

and repeated punitive expeditions by the British officials invariably meaning burning down of villages after villages, movable cultural objects moved to collections and destructions of immovable objects. The Nagas raiding the plains/new British subjects for heads did provide reasons for such punitive expeditions as well. The cultural destruction has been encouraged by the missionaries on the hills since 1840 advocating abandoning everything which was the past. After persuading the baptized Nagas to leave head hunting tradition, which the Nagas accepted, there seems to be an effort to particularly relate every custom which was not suiting the missionary practices to head hunting tradition; thus making the Nagas to forgo many cultural practices like *morung*, ornaments, nature worship, spirit beliefs which otherwise had the potential to challenge the basis of Christianization.

With the opening of communications, markets were introduced in the hills which gave a way to the locals to acquire new objects from source unknown to them. The first such market was established at Samaguting (Chumukedima) with the initiative of Major J. Butler and this was placed under the supervision of Daroga Bhogchand. In 1848, large numbers of the Nagas came there for trading. Introduction of western objects, which were tempting to their cultural practices like the modern day tobacco pipes, foreign glass beads, red wools, food and salt of plains, weapons required, currency to acquire in a society, which lived either on barter system or of some monetary system which is local from community to community. This need of the Nagas must have helped the collector to buy traditional things from Nagas in exchange of currency.

It is seen that till the last years of the British occupation, whenever the Nagas attacked/killed a single Britisher or their subjects or servants or villagers who paid annual tribute to the British empire, all the things from the village of the attacker looted and the village was set on fire (Kanungo, in press). The materials collected from these lootings were sent to

the UK and Europe (Kanungo 2007b). There are references to payments of exorbitant prices for the collections of exotic objects. For example, while purchasing some Naga items including ornaments worn by a Naga couple in 1915, Rs. 200/- were paid (Kanungo 2007b)! The entire set of ornaments is now displayed in the South Asian section on the second floor of Pitt-Rivers Museum, and the picture of the couple given here is collected from the archives of the collector (**Fig. 11**). In other words, post-photography, the couple was literally and virtually left naked of their cultural property, which they could only earn by doings. Another example can be seen from the collections of O.E. Ehlers for Berlin Museum of Ethnology. A person is photographed wearing a head gear (**Fig. 12**) and then the head gear found its way to Berlin museum (**Fig. 13**). There is documentation that a Konyak lady exchanged her own daughter for a conch shell and other things (**Fig. 14**), which indicates how important the shells were to the Nagas (Kanungo 2007b). One can ask why these people should sell such valuable and hard earned possessions without any forced and/or compelling reason.



Figure 11: Picture of a Naga couple wearing ornaments (After <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga>, Photo by J.H. Hutton; insert: necklace in Pitt Rivers Museum display).



Figure 12: Nagas wearing the head gears (by Otto Ehrenfried Ehlers 1893/1895, Inv.-Nr. VIII C 4633, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany)



Figure 13: Head gear in the Dahlem Museum Repository (by Otto Ehrenfried Ehlers 1893/1895, Inv.-Nr. I C 28388, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany)



Figure 14: Konyak lady wearing the conch shell (After J.H. Hutton 1930: 81; insert Conch shell wristlet in Pitt Rivers Museum display)

The introduction of Inner Line Permit in 1873 (which was not easy to obtain for non-British) made things well in control of the British to allow people and collectors and/or researchers in and out of Naga Hills. To an extent that Kauffman in 1938, quoting some British high officer for the reason of continuation of such Inner Line Permit system writes, 'The outside world need not know that these Hills even exist' (Stockhausen 2011: 375). Looking at the less media coverage the Naga Hills got and the way it was administered till the popular writings of Haimendorf and Kauffman appeared in late 1930s, this reservation of Kauffman needs a serious examination. The amount of burning of village and mass revenge killing of the Nagas in pretext of punitive expeditions would not have been possible had there not been the above

arrangement of facts (Kanungo, in press). Looking at the diaries (Hobson and Mills 1995; Maitland 1880; Mills 1936; Hutton 1917, 1918, 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1934, 1935, 1936; Woodthorpe 1876a, 1876b) one cannot help but question the other reasons for punitive expeditions and burning of villages than what had been officially recorded.

There is nothing wrong in collecting specimens for museums but the amount collected and the ways and means employed to collect them need to be justified. Such large-scale collection and change in geopolitical scenario have created a situation in which the Nagas have very little of their original cultural material left, and now they are obliged to use replicas of the cultural objects made from other materials. The large scale use of forest and animal products is no longer possible because of the considerable loss of wildlife due to indiscriminate hunting and government imposed restrictions on the exploitation of forest resources. The flora and fauna used by them in Pax Britannica period is no more available in plenty. Their contact with the rest of the world before World War-II has become history. The Nagas have retained their colourful traditional culture mostly through their festivals. They as well as the other people interested in the Naga culture miss the original dress, ornaments, weapons, etc.

What is displayed and How

Every individual and every community has great respect for, and pride in, his/her/its culture and cultural heritage. Cultural heritage has to be conserved and preserved very carefully and with a feeling of emotional attachment to it. But when communities which have lost their cultural heritage come to know that their lost cultural items are in the possession of foreigners and the skeletal parts including the skulls of their ancestors are being used for public display, it comes to them as a deep emotional shock. Many items of the Naga culture which are not available with the Nagas themselves are on display or stored in thousands without context in

museums. One finds that more emphasis has been given to the display of weapons, skeletal material, and heads of the ancestors of the Nagas, than to their colourful lifestyle, traditional knowledge systems, architecture, textiles, crafts specialization and trade contact with far-off places.

Invariably wherever the Naga heads are displayed, they are mostly seen with multiple arrows stuck to their eye orbits and/or buffalo horn tied to both ends (Fig. 15). Many a times, these heads are not displayed at a respectable chest height but at knees height (Fig. 16) with hardly any information given about them. In the repository of non-displayed collections, the skulls are kept with many other objects just lying as of any inorganic objects (Fig. 17). In their present form, these galleries certainly arouses resentment and spread wrong information and create a negative impression about the Nagas to people visiting them, especially if they have not visited Naga Hills and have no knowledge of the diversity of Indian culture.



Figure 15: Display of Naga Cultural Elements in Pitt Rivers Museum (After <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk>)



Figure 16: Display of Naga Skulls with arrows stuck in eye orbits in Pitt Rivers Museum (After Julian Jacob *et al.* 1990: 183)



Figure 17: Stacks with Naga Cultural materials in Museum für Völkerkunde Repository, Vienna, Austria

When an object is displayed in a museum, one or a few copies are kept in the reserve collection but while looking at the number of replicate items including the number of skulls in boxes, in museums in Europe, the UK and the USA, it is clear that the motive behind the collection was not only for museum display but for transferring as much cultural material as possible from

India for future trade, exchange and experiment. In fact, it is not only the objects which were virtually displaced but the objects which were mainly collected and the way of display seems more of exhibiting and advocating how we controlled/visited the war-like people than what we know about them. One do not find any big wooden carvings like log-drums (**Fig. 18**), coffins (**Fig. 19**), village gates (**Fig. 20**), wooden pounding base (**Fig. 21**), *morung* pillars and beams in these museums. They are big and heavy, so are the boats and pillars from the Indian American and the Pacific regions. If those could be collected and displayed in numbers then the materials belonging to the Nagas could also be collected and displayed. Those materials display their variable and dynamic architectural signatures.

Each and every Naga objects including carvings and designs on textiles are earned with deeds and not with money and has a permitted stratified meaning and a specific story behind it. And the meaning and reason for the object differs from community to community among the Nagas thus it is variable. The meaning of many objects and use of the same varies from time to time and from circumstances to



Figure 18: Log-drum (by Otto Ehrenfried Ehlers 1893/1895, Inv.-Nr. VIII C 4614, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany)



Figure 19: Coffins (Naga Heritage Museum & Research Society, Kohima, Nagaland)



Figure 20: Village Gate (Khonoma, an Angami village in Nagaland, 2006)



Figure 21: Wooden Pounding base (Courtesy Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna, Austria, Photo by C.F. Haimendorf at Wakching, a Konyak village in Nagaland in 1936)

circumstances thus it is dynamic. This variable and dynamic meaning ought to find its place in display. The same is true of the heads. Every skull kept in a hut or in a grave or in granaries or at home or on the village entrance or in the dormitory or on trees had a history and reason.

Problems with the Collection

Most of the time, the research/collections were done by the visitors on a non-literate and un-informed society with pre-conceived ideas. The Nagas did not know the value of their cultural objects and in many cases, did not know for what the objects and data were collected. The Nagas were exotic to the Westerners, similarly some questions and collection of the data and objects about their culture were matters of curiosity for the Nagas. Consequently, ignorant pride might have led them to give superficial glory and misleading information. Once given, it spread by whispers. Many of the texts on the Nagas were written mostly on the basis of the information from short visits or second hand information from invited people to administrator's bungalow/tents than from the actual field. Many of the objects in museums are collected

from secondary sources than from the villages. Thus, it is not surprising to find many of the objects in these museums catalogued as of the Nagas, although they do not really belong to Nagas but to the neighbouring communities.

We have information in different publications on how such and such system/objects were part of their culture but we seldom have all probable answers to why the system/objects were required/necessary and what role they play in society at different times. Answering this variability of system/object is more important than the description of the object. The best answer to this can only be given by the indigenous people but society is ever changing and cultural materials are also made to change with large scale collection and outsider's interference. Thus, even by the time the indigenous people become literate enough, communicative enough and broad-based, the system/objects we want to understand disappear from the cultural milieu of the existing society.

Resurgence of Research on the Nagas

In the last decade or so, there has been a resurgence of serious academic research on the culture of the Nagas by foreign scholars, not only focusing on their exotic costume and lifestyle but on their language, migration pattern, religion, music, medicinal plants and many other aspects. Nevertheless, the antique peddling from Naga Hills has again gained momentum.

As soon as the foreigners are given relaxed access to visit the Naga Hills from early 21st century, there mushroomed a series of exhibitions in Europe, the UK and the USA on the Nagas. Combining some field trips, modern day collections and photography, and the 19th and 20th century collections and archives, these exhibitions did draw a large crowd. Some of the exhibitions brought out individual catalogues (Ao 2003; Kunz and Joshi 2008). All brochures, pamphlets and catalogue have accepted that Nagaland is vibrant, education has reached the people, communications has been established, University and colleges have been

functioning and the old culture is dying. Yet in none of these exhibitions, has there been integration of the indigenous Nagas in selecting the objects, in writing captions and story board for the exhibition, let alone trying to put an exhibition in Nagaland. In some cases, a few Nagas were invited to lecture. The displays were again without contextual dynamics and variability. One can well imagine about the number of exhibitions during the 20th century on the Nagas. It is noteworthy to mention here that Prof. Michel Oppitz (2008) did collect fresh data from Nagaland before the exhibition at Zurich and the publication did carry a few research articles from scholars from Nagaland. Given below are the lists of a few exhibitions on the Nagas in the 21st century:

1. 'Naga - Kopfjäger im Schatten des Himalaya', from 20.03.2004 to 29.09.2004, at Museum der Weltkulturen (Museum of World Cultures), Frankfurt Main.
2. 'Naga Tribal Adornment: Signatures of Status and Self', from 21.09.2003 to 12.12.2004, at Bead Museum, Washington DC.
3. 'Naga, Schmuck und Asche (Naga, Jewels and Ashes)', from 07.06.2008 to 06.09.2009, at Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich (Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zürich), Switzerland.
4. 'Naga, A Forgotten Mountain Region Rediscovered', from 22.08.2008 to 17.05.2009, at Museum der Kulturen, Basel, Switzerland.
5. 'The Measure of a Man in a Head-Taking Land: Tribal Adornment of Nagaland India', from 18.09.2008 to 31.07.2009, at the Bead Museum, Glendale, Arizona.
6. 'Nagas: Hidden Hill People of India', from 13.03.2009 to 21.09.2009, at Rubin Museum of Art, New York.
7. 'Naga People – Jewellery and Ashes', from 01.02.2012 to 11.06.2012, at Museum of Ethnology, Vienna.
8. 'Fiercely Modern: Art of the Naga Warrior', from 26.04.2013 to 16.09.2013, at Rubin Museum of Art, New York.
9. 'Wildes Indien Himalaya zwischen Tibet und Burma', from 04.05.2013 to 17.01.2014, at Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum St. Gallen, Switzerland.

Corrective Measures Required

Though in the past the Nagas were non-literate and hostile to outsiders, they valued their culture and tradition. They did not have the infrastructure and means of transport and communication for collection, preservation and display of their cultural heritage. One can perhaps argue that had such collection not been made in those days, the materials would have perished with time. But now Nagaland has the facilities and infrastructure for taking care of its precious objects. The Nagas are now well equipped, educated and have adequate means of transport and communication, and are in contact with other communities through education, employment, etc. Since 1994, there has been a Central University in Nagaland with a Department of Anthropology, History and Archaeology, a Tribal Research Centre attached to the Department of Sociology. In 2011, Kohima Science College celebrated its 50 years of existence which has a Department of Anthropology since its inception where Cultural Anthropology is taught. It is natural that those who are studying history, cultural anthropology and archaeology will like to study items which will give information about their ancestors. But unfortunately, the items which will be useful for such a study are now not available in Nagaland but in various western museums, visiting there is not within the reach of all indigenous Naga researchers. Archaeologically, the most important clue to infer the original place and period of migration of Nagas to Nagaland would have been the neolithic celts in context. There are 274 of them in Pitt-Rivers museum (**Fig. 22**) whereas the numbers in Nagaland does not exceed two digits.

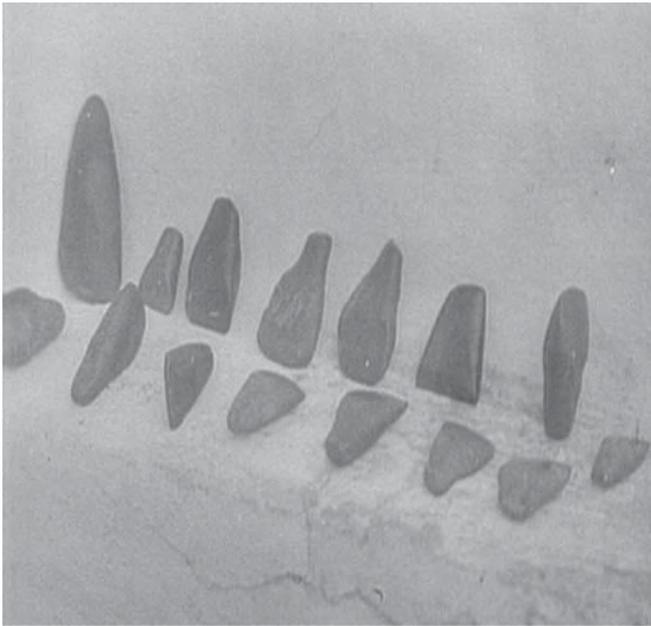


Figure 22: Celts in Pitt Rivers Museum (After <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga>, Celts found at Seromi and Tichipani in Sema Naga Area, photo by J.H. Hutton)

With changing times, the possibilities of exploring for a thematic change in approach of the museum towards these collections should be explored. While maintaining to attract the people from exposed societies, it should also try to reach to the people where the story about the collected objects are still in talk, may not be object itself anymore.

It should be made mandatory for every museum which has more than 500 objects from any non-extinct community to put exhibitions of not only photos but also collected objects at regular intervals in the region of collection. This will help in creating an awareness of their culture among the people and foster a sense of unity and cultural pride in the community. In turn, this will help the museums to put their collections in a contextual flow with vital inputs from the indigenous people with ethno-museology data. These museums/exhibitions should also take an initiative to hire persons belonging to community/region as co-curator of their section. They will help in a better interpretation of the cultural materials. Any cultural object which is not in Nagaland Museums but in duplicates in western

museums should be sent back home with mutual understanding and co-operation.

There is a need to bring the Naga skeletal materials back home from various museums across the world and give them due respectful burial in their homeland with proper ceremony. This is necessary for getting justice to the Nagas, whose innocence and ignorance about museums has been exploited for long.

Concluding Remarks

The future of all museum collections is to work with people from whom the objects were collected. Collections of data and objects were done from unequal society thus giving rise to many misconceptions and gaps in information about the collections. The collectors and non-Naga researchers worked on a culture with which they were not brought up but they recorded for the future and too mostly limited to static details from short visits. Now a few generation gaps have already taken place after the collections were made and there is no way that either the present generation would know the exact context of the collected objects or cross-check the authenticity with the then or the next following generation. Yet it is more important for the collections to be given a scope to be evaluated or commented or acclaimed by the local people at large and collect the variable dynamic meaning of each object. Thus, it becomes increasingly important for the museums to take the mobile exhibition of the objects at regular intervals to the society from where they are collected and give the collections a context. It will also keep the enthusiasm about the objects in both scholarly and native world. Such evaluation and re-evaluation of the collected objects by both scholars and the natives contextualize the static objects and such effort will take the subject of ethnography and museology closer to science.

The museum approach for the collected cultural object from an extinct community or civilization should be different than from the existing and vibrant society which is in transition to westernization. Physically, the objects might have moved to different repositories but

the intellectual right on ethno-cultural past remains with the indigenous people.

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