

Naga Hill Tribe New Year Celebration

The north-western area of Burma is known as Naga land. Naga land had been off-limits for a half century, and the last comprehensive book on the Naga, the naked Naga by Christoph Von Fureh Haimendorf, had been published in 1939. The Naga were and probably still are, in the remote northern Patkai range of mountains confirmed headhunters. During world war two, major C.M. Enriquez said that Japanese heads, taken during their retreat into India, hung in Naga bamboo groves with arrows driven through the eye sockets, to insure that the spirits could not wander away, sold for two heads for a penny. Many tribes of Naga live in both India and Burma, and traveled back and forth as they wished. Nothing was more troublesome to the central government than groups of nomadic hill tribes who pack up and move all the time. Even more of a problem is the idea that national boundaries did not exist, and that the hill people were free to wander about the mountains as they choose. Burma's border with India was there, delineated on a map, but the Naga found themselves in both countries, and didn't know or care about the difference. Porous borders, far away from any government control meant nothing to the Naga since they had no national identity, but only that of kinship with their own tribe or clan. I had made arrangements with the Naga central committee back in march 1996, and I had received word that they were expecting me to join them for Naga new year. Nobody in authority would dare to say "yes" while nobody directly said "no", but "no" was implied as I went to speak to the ministry, to immigration and to the tour companies seeking permission to travel to Singkaling Hkamti for Naga new year. I began to be ground down under the crushing wheels of bureaucracy as the sand fell through the hourglass. I had what passed as breakfast, and satisfied my minimum daily requirement of grease and beer as I watched boys in a circle playing Chinlon with a woven cane ball, lofting it into the air with skilful kicks off their knees or feet, up over their heads, off their heels, to another player in the circle. I went to every agency in Rangoon, all of whom told me that although the ministry of tourism had issued a directive last march allowing foreigners to fly to Hkamti, I would not be sold a ticket, and worse, I began to believe them. I had an invitation letter from the bishop, one from the Naga central committee, and another from some boss at Myanmar airways requesting a ticket be issued. Time was running out if I was going to be able to be in Singkaling Hkamti for the Naga celebrations. I had to go, and this would be my only chance. I left for Mandalay in the north to link up with the flight scheduled for the next day. If I could not get a ticket issued in Mandalay, my base in Rangoon would be far away, and communications were always difficult. The new year's celebrations were to be held on Wednesday, the fifteenth of January, but flights to Hkamti were only on Sunday, Monday, and Thursday. If I couldn't get a ticket for Sunday, and for some reason failed to get out on Monday, the Thursday flight would be too late. I carried my pouch of authorization letters which I was ready to present, but found at the airlines office that all I really needed was a friend who had gone to school with the office manager, and a crisp hundred dollar bill in payment. Somehow I was issued a ticket. I checked the code again to make sure, yeah, that was it. "Kti" Hkamti. So I actually had my ticket to Naga new year. The land route was not possible, and even on modern maps, Hkamti was shown without the airport in which I would be landing. I would be the first foreigner to ever witness the event, and I knew that I was looking at taking photographs of historical significance. History is what was written after it was lived. I felt that somehow I had fallen through the cracks, in a place where I did not believe cracks existed. After the bomb blasts at Christmas inside the Kaba aye pagoda in Rangoon, which was displaying the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha, on loan from the Chinese. Several people had died in the explosions and the relic was moved to Mandalay. I was wearing a gold ring with a Ceylon blue sapphire, which had been panned from a river in Ratnapura, found as an ancient intaglio, discovered with an elephant carved into the face of that stone. That elephant, carved so long ago into the sapphire, was carrying that same sacred tooth relic of the Buddha on its back. I knew I was wearing a lucky omen. I sat outside at a restaurant near the Mandalay airport and was befriended by a monk with the features of a Naga. Soon we were joined by a policeman, two immigration officials, and a man in ray bans whom the others had told me, when he gotten up to go to the bathroom, was military intelligence. We all waited together ten hours slugging back beers, and eating fried eggs, but the plane only landed at dusk, too late for today's flight as planes in Burma do not fly at night; we would all have to wait until tomorrow morning, Monday, the last and only day to get to Hkamti before the festivities would begin. Immigration would evidently be coming with me, as they said that they would help to get me onboard. At least I would not have to pay for their tickets. Early the next morning, I again checked out of the nylon hotel, and although an hour later than the check in time written on my ticket, I came back to the airport and met the monk and the immigration men who assured me that we would be flying out today since the plane was already there on the runway. When the flight was called, they saw to getting my boarding pass and checked in my baggage. One hour and twenty minutes later, we touched down on a dirt runway ahead of clouds of dust the plane had stirred up, in Singkaling Hkamti on the Chindwin river. Only a few days hike were Assam and Manipur in India, and defying all national boundaries, lived the Naga. Hkamti was a relic of the Shan's expansion, and so at least I knew the food would be good and that I could eat. The monk showed me on my map where he lived, five days walk from here, and I noticed that it was roughly thirteen miles inside India. By now it was clear that the immigration guys had been assigned to me, and I accepted the arrangement as they became quite friendly and followed me wherever I went. I told them that if they were going to follow me, at least they should carry my camera bag. They did. I had been at this a long time and was older than both of them. In the market I had my first glimpse of Naga girls with several vertical tattoos from their lower lip to their chins, and a hooked diamond shape on their foreheads. The next morning I woke up my guards, and we walked uphill to a Naga morung, or men's house with its long thatched roof, open doors and totems, carved with opposing leopards, snakes and human forms, which were brightly painted and lined with animal skulls. Just a short time ago, these skulls would have been human. In the distance as we walked down the path came the low, monotonous sounds of grunting punctuated with high pitched screaming and rhythmic singing, rising up from the banks of the Chindwin river. As the sounds grew louder, and I knew that they were coming my way, I stood at the upper side of the trail and over the crest of a hill came about sixty Naga warriors who ran

past with ox leather shields, and long spears covered in dyed red goat fur which they raised in unison. They wore woven cane hats, some with designs in red and yellow circled with black monkey fur, draped with wild boars tusks hanging over their eyebrows, topped with long black and white hornbill feathers rising from the center for their caps. Some warriors had their chins and jaws ringed with tiger claws. Around their necks they wore red beads flanked by tiger's teeth. These men were elegant and had the finely carved muscles of athletes. As they ran past together, singing and screaming, I was suddenly aware that the last time any foreigner had their ears singed by these war chants, and had seen such an amazing spectacle, that they were just about to ceremoniously lose their heads. The Naga were coming down from the hills. I had been transported to a time and a place from a very, very long time ago. Continually during that day and all evening, hundreds of Naga men and women from five different groups came pouring into Singkaling Hkamti from Kuki, Layshi, Lahe, from all directions of the hills and mountains. That day before Naga new year, I spent with the Naga central council explaining my aim to capture the Naga culture on film. My two immigration men and the head of the Naga committee joined me as we went from settlement to village photographing the different Naga. There were two different groups of Naga staying in one large compound, and after I had finished shooting one group, because of the direction of the sun, I asked the other group to move into better light at the other end of the compound, but I was told that they would not cross into the other group's area. The council told me that there were to be sacrifices beginning at 3:00 a.m. As a necessary cleansing ceremony for the grounds in which the festival would be held and that I would be the first foreigner to ever witness the event. Shortly before 3:00 a.m. The Naga council leaders came to wake me. My two immigration men were sleeping outside my door to the guesthouse whose paper-thin walls could disguise no movement; in what could be considered a lobby, huddled on either side of a clay pit containing the embers of burning charcoal. We all walked uphill towards the festival grounds shivering in the cold January darkness underneath a sky that was absolutely pure and clean with no electricity for miles to distract from the light of the stars which glittered in an endless universe of black eternal depth. The festival grounds were across the trail and down the hillside from the Morung. Into those grounds which were blazing with fire fed by whole logs, the only light, the Naga led a docile buffalo with massive horns, two squealing pigs, and a few chickens. There was a solid bamboo lattice tied together and inclining towards the totems painted red, black, and white in the shape of V's. The Naga led the buffalo up into the sacrificial bamboo lattice with a rope over his massive head and through his expanding nostrils which were belching steam. Several men pulled the buffalo into place, his legs were wedged into spaces between the bamboo and the grating against his heavy chest, and began to sing and chant, dancing around the rising flames, punctuating the silent night with high pitched eerie screams. When the buffalo's feet were firmly held in place, a Naga chief in a red-and-black robe whispered into the buffalo's ear and asked him to die. The chief said that they were sorry to take his life, and blessed him with Naga beer before the sacrifice. One warrior silently removed his Dah with the two sharpened edges and the blunt end, sliding out of the bamboo scabbard at the small of his back, and with one swift stroke, chopped through the tendons at the back of the animal's legs so that he could not jump. The buffalo's surprise and agony were short-lived as another warrior plunged a long spear into his adrenalin-pumping heart and the blood rushed from his mouth staining the earth and his teeth red as he fell over and died. The pigs were much noisier, tied to bamboo poles, screaming and grunting in displeasure and fear; they seemed to know their fate, complaining until the spears were driven into their hears with one single thrust. The chickens faced an ignoble end as their necks were simply broken with a twist and their heads severed. The night was bitterly cold, and I warmed myself by the bonfire as the Naga sang and grunted, circling the fire, they dragged the buffalo away down a small hill where other men with bronze disks covering their genitals tended fires which had been built beneath huge cauldrons filled with meats, stirred with wooden ladles the size of boat paddles. There would be hundreds of people to feed. I brought out a litter of scotch whiskey chilled by the night, and served my hosts, and the council poured me Kongye', a kind of milky Naga rice beer served in neatly sliced lengths of bamboo which went straight to the head. Naga beer is fermented with leaves and some kind of tree bark, sealed in ceramic containers and stored underground for three to five years. The wide sections of bamboo had the top part sliced off and reversed to plug the top, tight as a cork, enclosing the tube with a long bamboo straw inserted into the center of the plug. It was better not to remove the plug and to take a closer look at what you were drinking. I was asked by the Naga council to don a Naga hat and black blanket with red squares and threaded cowery shells and to give a testimonial to the Naga for their new year's celebration as their guest. After that while still dark, I walked back down the trail to Hkamti town, swaying a bit in the moonlight, to get a few more hours of sleep before the celebrations began. The water at the guesthouse was available at the side of the establishment in fifty-gallon drums near the sidewalk, and was nearly freezing. Brushing my teeth and washing my face were about the extent that I could bathe. I became very used to the cloths that I had been wearing. Early the next morning at the festival grounds, the Kongye' began to flow again, and I was given a chair and a table at the front with the Naga council. I remembered the story a priest had told me about the time he had brought a group of Konyak Naga girls to Mandalay for the first time. "You must wear these tee shirts," he told them, "you cannot go into town naked." "But these tee shirts itch," they protested, "and we cannot wear them." "You must wear them when we are in the city," the priest insisted. The next morning, the priest went to collect the girls for a sight-seeing trip around Mandalay. They were wearing the tee shirts he had given them with a picture of Pope John Paul on the front, but they had cut out holes with their breasts poking out on each side of the pontiff's head. At the celebration, Naga girls who were not topless, continually poured Kongke' into the hollow lengths of bamboo we were given. When they came to serve, it would have been an insult not to have drunk enough to allow them to again fill the tube. By now all of the Naga groups had arrived. The Hunimya, the Makhury, the Naukawe, the Kuki and the Lai Nawg. The Tanghun and the Konyak Naga were absent perhaps in the case of the Konyak, because of the government's requirement for the girls to wear cloths, as the Konyak would never do. The Naga assembled and danced, some in black blankets with red squares and monkey fur leggings. Some had hollow elephant tusks worn around the upper arm muscles. Hundreds marched around shouting "Wow Wah, Wow Wah". While beating their leather shields against their legs and screaming

shrill war cries. Some Naga shouted "Ah Hay," which was high praise, and sang welcome songs. Girls served meals of pork, chicken and beef, mixed together with wild mushrooms and sticky rice cooked and wrapped in banana leaves. Food and beer, dance and song, continued all day and into the night with different groups performing. Some of the girls were lovely and flirtatious, while others were shy. Girls of the Kuki Naga wore huge tufts of white fur puffs in their ears with strands of dyed red goat's hair nearly touching their shoulders. On the backs of their necks were white sea shells which had been cut in half. Although some of the songs were songs of welcome, other songs and dances were of triumph when the men and women would welcome the warriors back into their villages with the trophies of the heads they had captured in headhunting raids. The Wa tribes on the opposite side of Burma, near the Chinese border, had also been headhunters, utilizing the heads for agriculture, and were not above buying them, staking them on long poles of bamboo placed in their rice fields to insure a sufficient crop. After the harvest, those heads would be put into stone lanterns which would line the walkway into a village. Although the Naga would not buy heads, slaves would sometimes be bought for this purpose, being well treated, fattened up, made drunk before the slaughter, then decapitated. Many of the heads would be scalped, and several of the warriors dancing around the fire wore long strands of human hair in their ears. This practice has supposedly been stopped, but I have heard of heads being taken in raids as little as three years ago, and in the Patkai mountains and the Anngpawng Bum Northwest of Singkaling Hkamti, beyond any administration or control, who really knows? There seemed to be no taboos regarding sexual relations between boys and girls and virginity was nothing to be valued. Late at night, when everyone had drunk their share of Kongye', fist fights broken out, and some of the girls could be seen carrying their drunken boyfriends away on their backs, not really struggling under the weight, but staggering none the less, silhouetted against the moonlight.

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