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Visual Repatriation: A Study of the Colonial Anthropometric Photography of the Nagas

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Abstract

This article offers new ground regarding the role of colonial photography and race in the development of the identity of the Nagas of Northeast, India. It studies the role of a specific type of colonial photographic practice that has been discussed in the context of colonial images of the Nagas: anthropometric-style photographs of the Nagas that distributed through monographs, journals and various publications in the late 19th century and following the turn of the 20th century. This article attempts to do a formal analysis of the colonial anthropometric-style photographs, a process that further objectifies the subjects and ignores the coercive and visual exploitative experiences that resulted in these images. A counter-visuality in the form of visual repatriation is employed to critique the visual anthropometric materials and to resist the dominant and violent photographic technologies and representation. It also attempts for a self-reflexive interrogation of the photographic archives as a way to create new understandings of the past and facilitate greater indigenous agency in the recording of Naga histories challenging Eurocentric cultural analysis, including Eurocentric notions of photographic meaning.

Keywords: Colonialism, Anthropometry, Photography, Visual Repatriation, Nagas

Introduction

From the founding fathers onwards, anthropology has sought out the exotic "others" and had usually concentrated this search in the colonial possessions of the British Empire. Throughout the colonial period, much of its efforts were devoted to the study and analysis of non-European societies dominated by European power, carried out by Europeans for a European audience. Colonialism provided the perfect conditions for fieldwork by making the object of anthropological study accessible and safe and the knowledge produced by anthropology has been of significant help to control administration. At the same time, while anthropology offered knowledge and in turn received patronage from the power structure, photography also came to be understood as an expression of power and superiority during the colonial period over the non-European natives.

Photography acquired legitimacy and substantiated the success of missions, administrations, plantations, companies and ethnographic fieldwork. It especially responded to demands for scientific evidence of the "others" joining the British community of colonial subjects. Thus, photography was used as an investigative modality to create a record of native systems value and perceived as a way of representing new cultures and a scientific inventory of unfamiliar environments and dominated individuals. Also, the use of photography to represent European superiority in the colonies was one of Empire's most powerful weapons.

It provided visual evidence for categorization, affirmation of previous notions and beliefs of the other, which according to Elizabeth Edwards were crucial for the "expansion and maintenance of European colonial power" (33). Photography also, indisputably, played a central role in the practice of anthropometry that facilitated to index race itself by pointing to specific bodily features of the photographic subject that confirmed its reality. This indexicality a race or surveillance projects aimed at the domination, control, and classification of difference (Ortega 167) and produced, as Roland Barthes would say, "desirable" or "detestable" bodies (115).

Images within the Naga Hills quickly became a concrete source of evidence for the expanding field of racialised "science" during the British Colonial period. While the colonial ethnographic genre of the Nagas[1] reflected the late 19th Century anthropological concerns about the articulation of the origin and migration of people, photographs too occupied a prominent site in the monographs to epitomize the "colonial exotic" that was employed as dynamic visual entertainment for a metropolitan audience. Camera was used to portray as a truthful witness to the missionary work, and policing of Civilised Western style progress. However, it is undeniably the case that the camera contributed to the "panopticon gaze," in Michel Foucault's terms, by which a subtle form of power was exercised over the Nagas by classifying them and making them visible. In short, the colonial images of the Nagas show that photography was promptly aligned to the practices of 19th century racial thought and colonialist desire.

The development of photography, concurrent with the advance of racial theories shifted Naga "otherness" from the realm of the cultural into that of the physical. Anthropometric photography gradually began to develop well into the early 20th century in the Naga Hills, reinforcing colonial ideas of the natives as a lesser "race." The anthropometric system and the ethno-pornography that developed from it, involved forced nudity and the objectification of the Nagas, chiefly women, by colonial powers in the form of colonial officers, missionaries, field anthropologists with cameras. The conditions under which many historical photographs were taken in in the Naga Hills need to be interrogated, and issues such as inherent racism and visual exploitation of those pictured need to be critically studied. Thus, a study of the problematic representations of racialised bodies of the Nagas becomes crucial. It becomes imperative to engage with the various ways in which photography and photographic technologies such as anthropometry are complicit with practices of "othering." A critical approach to the nexus between photography and its practices allows for a complex reading of complicit photographic role, techniques and criticism that not only discloses the involvement of photography with violence against those deemed different but also provides possibilities for counter-visuality in the form of visual repatriation that resist dominant and violent photographic technologies and representation.

Anthropology and Photography: an Asymmetrical Power Relations

From the establishment of the *Royal Anthropological Institute* and until the Second World War, anthropologists were interested in developing a closer relationship with the Colonial

[1]Starting from the 1830s till India's independence, British Administrators, American Missionaries and Anthropologists contributed extensively to the study of the Nagas. The colonial ethnographic survey and cultural documentation in the Naga Hills resulted in the publication of various monographs and articles. Colonialism, therefore, serves as a critical dimension in the development of Naga ethnography.

administrations. In 1896, the *British Association* passed the following resolution that it is of "urgent importance to press upon the government the necessity of establishing a Bureau of Ethnology for Great Britain, which by collecting information with regard to the native races within and on the borders of the Empire, will prove of immense value to science and to the Government itself."[2] Throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, the yearly presidential Addresses to the *RAI* reflected the direct relevance of anthropology to administration that fit the demands of the administration of colonies and all matters concerning natives. Many of these addressers like Professor J. Myres, Rev. E.W. Smith and Lord Hailey refer to the problems involved in the relationship between anthropologists and administrators. They discuss the role of anthropology in colonial development and the relationship of anthropology and government, the attempts at setting up various anthropological institutions and the development of the teaching of anthropology to colonial office staff (Asad 138-140). And because of the consolidation as an academic discipline and associations to colonialism, anthropology has sometimes been looked upon as the "child" of Western imperialism" (Gough 403) the "daughter" of the colonial era of violence (Strauss 124) and as "scientific colonialism" (Lewis 581).

While the proponents of anthropology envisioned to define and defend the position of anthropology as an academic discipline, cultural anthropologist Talal Asad in his work, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) questions the nature of anthropology's knowledge and draw attention to its use in colonial administration. He locates ethnography as a textualized construction and derided anthropology as a little more than an imperial's tool for administration that perpetuated the implicit and explicit power asymmetries of the colonial period. Asad maintains that though anthropology has contributed to the cultural heritage of the societies it studied by a sympathetic recording of the indigenous forms of life that would otherwise be lost to posterity, the discipline indirectly has also contributed towards maintaining the power structure represented by the colonial system. It assisted in perpetuating power relationships and established inequalities between the colonial system and the indigenous people by representing the latter as an inferior "other." He exposes how anthropology is rooted in an unequal power encounter between the West and Third World which goes back to the emergence of bourgeois Europe, an encounter in which colonialism is merely one historical moment. It is this encounter that gives the West access to cultural and historical information about the societies it has progressively dominated, and thus not only generates a kind of universal understanding, but also reinforces the inequalities in capacity between the European and the non-European worlds (and derivatively, between the Europeanized elites and the "traditional" masses in the Third World). The questioning of the relevance of anthropology by such critics led to the emergence of a new set of interests instituting a new departure. And today, the people of Third World are becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that information and understanding produced by bourgeois disciplines like anthropology are acquired and used most readily by those with the greatest capacity for exploitation.

Like ethnography, the project of photography is not innocent, but often embedded in existing power relations. For the past 25 years or so, a growing body of scholarly work - in history, art theory, anthropology and other fields- began to address increasingly the problematic of photography with its historical ties with relations of power that constitute

[2] Proceedings of the British Association, 1896, JRAI vol. 59 (1929): 38

colonialism. Elizabeth Edwards describes photography as not only "part of Europe's new arsenal of technological advancements during the age of empire," but was one that "served both to symbolise the power differential in the colonies, and to bring it into visible order" (Peffer 242). In short, photography functioned as a cultural and political medium intricately tied to the establishment and support of colonial powers and paired with the "legitimacy" of the photograph. Scientists also began to consider photography as an objective, unbiased and reliable recording of reality in their particular research and therefore photography has become a promising scientific method (Soukup 538). However, former colonial nations began to see photography as a propagated tool used by colonisers as an agent of cultural domination and to forge the identity of the colonial subjects to establish the coloniser's control over them. Instead of a medium of capturing true reality, colonial photography came to be seen as a tool of manipulation and began to scrutinise or question its supposed objectivity and its claim to transparent truthfulness.

Photography, like any of form of representation, was and is inherently biased in its subject matter. Questions such as how the photographer framed the photograph, what the photographer included or excluded, and how the subject was posed all contribute to the meaning of a photograph (Mabry 1). Colonial photographers also represented the ideas and values that they wanted to in a photograph, both consciously and subconsciously. Because of this inherent bias it is important that colonial photographs are not seen as objective, but as representations that exist inside a multifaceted cultural process. They are not truth; rather they are "ways of seeing" (Soukup 540-541). To substantiate the argument, Alban Von Stockhausen's ideas on images is also cited who diagnosed photographs as being seductive rather than documentary. He argues that photographs use their aura of objectivity to give viewers an impression that what they are seeing is typical/ exemplary of a subject or to amuse readers by breaking up the text rather than adding information to it. Such act of manipulation or misuse of documentary photographs and films for political propaganda changed the former belief in the objectivity of the medium into its contrary: the "lie" of the photograph (Stockhausen 21-22).

Anthropometric Photographs and the Making of the Racial Identity of the Nagas

The theories of race in the 18th century was shaped by the scientific revolution and the age of colonialism. So during the scientific revolution, scientists aimed at categorising the world and people were placed into different groups, and attempted to find differences between them. And by the 19th century, theories about race were wide spread. These theories often created hierarchical structures, and showed how superior or inferior races were to one another. The concept of race also began at a time when colonizing powers tried to scientifically explain the differences between themselves and those whom they colonized. Anthropometric system, devised in the late 1860s by British biologist Thomas Henry Huxley and photographer John Lamprey, was used by European anthropologists and ethnographers from the last quarter of the 19th century, in large part to document "scientifically" the racial hierarchies that ostensibly reinforced imperialist ideas of European superiority and legitimized colonial rule. Measurements of humankind in which photographic technologies were employed promptly aligned to the practice of anthropometry. In short, while photography took a central role in the practice of anthropometry, the most troubling uses of the camera in colonies was the production of certain sorts of physiognomic photographs (Vokes 11) in which subjects were photographed in the nude against a measuring scale. Within a formalised system of display,

no longer were these individuals human but were objectified and depersonalised with the goal of quantifying human physical characteristics.

No doubt, the idea of racial differences as scientifically significant was itself a product of 19th century racial thought and colonialist desire but photography's authoritative claim to represent "reality" made it a more appealing tool for 19th and early 20th century anthropology (Terence 20). Photography served to illustrate racial theories and played an integral role in actually constructing and promoting these theories as "natural" (Cathrine 24). By visualizing non-Western peoples through, it was thought anthropologists could extract objective scientific data that would shed light on the origins and development of humankind and preserve for the future a record of the "vanishing" races by illustrating the classification and ordering of peoples into "types." However, categorisation of racial types became scientific proof not only for race itself but for the inferiority of certain races. At the same time, combining the evidential weight of the photograph with "science" proved to be one of the most influential ways in which racism was used to justify colonial power and exploitation. In this case, photography only allowed to further reinforced racism and influenced the stereotypical representation of subjects; it enabled the transformation of a subject into what was perceived by Europeans as an object to be categorized, defined and in essence dominated by the European powers (Scherer 33).

As already mentioned, racial and cultural perceptions of the Nagas fostered by the anthropological community, emerged in the British popular arena. The Nagas were commonly documented through the perspective of anthropological paradigms and colonial images of the Naga Hills portrayed explicit cultural ideas and tribal community and fed into a racial discourse of European superiority. Anthropometrical measurement too was given considerable emphasis in the Naga Hill by earlier generations of anthropologists. By the turn of the 20th century, anthropometry was a well-established trope in the colonial monographs' images of the Nagas, and were widely circulated, collected, and published (Fig 1: a, b, c & d). Thousands of images of the Nagas contributed by Christopher von Fürer-haimendorf, J P. Mills, and J.H. Hutton, Hans-Eberhard Kauffman, Ursula Graham Bower and so forth are some examples of publication genre that was popular throughout Europe in the early 20th century. Their works purported to share the results of anthropological research analysing the relative physical attributes of the Nagas, their origin, race and cultures. This type of publication also served to expound the racist ideologies of the colonial enterprise.

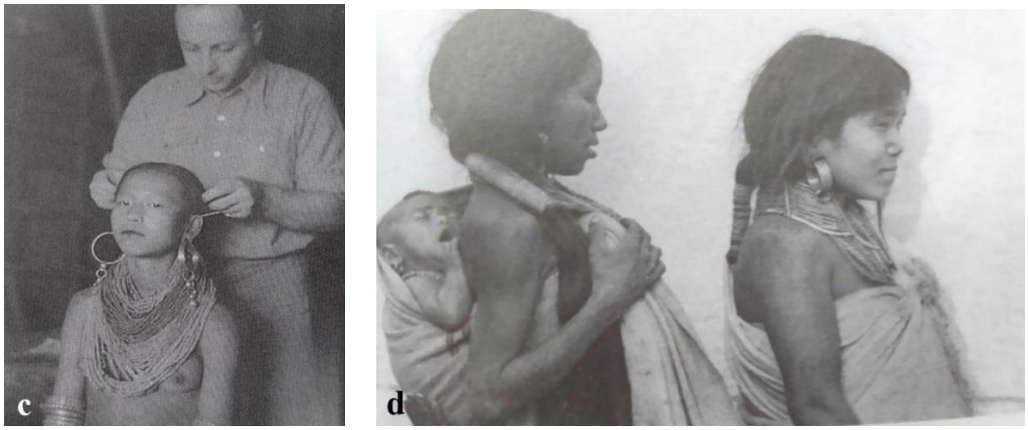

Fig 1. **(a)** Hans-Eberhard Kauffman taking anthropometric measurements among the Sema-Naga tribe of Sakhai. 14th Feb. 1937. HEK (30-35). **(b)** Kauffmann photographing Konyak-Nagas against a background made of a white towel. Longkhai, 11th April 1937. CFH (081-06). (**c)** Anthropometrical measurement. 1937. CFH.
(d) The two Konyak-Naga women Shongmet and Phengna of the ang (chief) clan in an anthropometric photograph by Kauffmann. One carriers her child on her back. Chingtang, 19th April 1937. HEK (39-39).

The distinctive anthropometric style shown in the images are the idiosyncratic juxtaposition of poses: frontal, profile, and seated or squatting in the foreground, occasionally staring or facing away from the camera. Physical features were thought to be indicative of moral characteristics, and so they were also photographed in a specific angel to expose cheekbones, made the nose seem broader (a sign of "barbarism") or the eyes more deep set. Also, images are often incorporated with weapons along with men posing as warriors- spears, shields and knifes- that are almost sculptural in their tight groupings (Fig 2: a & b).

Fig 2. **(a)** Mao-Naga from a photograph by E.J. Mitchell. C. 1900s. (In: Hodson 1911:opp.6).
(b) A decorated Konyak warrior waits on his house platform for a dance to begin in Wakching Village. April 1937. HEK (40-13).

The anthropometric system and the ethno-pornographic images that developed from it chiefly consisted of the forced nudity of the Naga women as the fascinations of the colonisers to capture images of nudity is quite apparent in their works. Naga women were pictured in seminude wearing bodices attired in elaborate cowrie-shell costumes and jewellery, most likely at the directive of the photographers; the composition that itself carried license for

imposed nudity under the guise of "science" (Cohan 63). These images of "colonial nudes" managed to bypass the strict censure on pornography that existed in the European countries because the objects were non-European and the images passed as a scientific anthropological study. These type of images were collected by colonial officers, missionaries, field anthropologists and colonial archives, museums, and libraries, among others. At the same time, such intentional aesthetic adaptation of the anthropometric style offered a venue for erotica, enabling the circulation of countless images of anonymous nude and seminude Naga women that appeared even in other pseudo-ethnographic publications (Fig 3: a, b, c, d & e).

Fig 3. (**a**) Henlong, "The Belle of Wakching." 1937. CFH. (**b**) Henlong in a cartoon-like character printed on the dust jacket of the 1946 Indian edition of The Naked Nagas. **(**c) Portrait of an Ao-Naga woman wearing several rows of carnelian bead necklaces with trumpet-shaped metal pieces, and ear ornaments made of crystal or glass. Photograph by J. P. Mills, 1920s. (SOAS Library, PPMS58_S007). **(d)** Ngapnon, a Konyak-Naga girl of the aristocratic ang (chief) clan, photographed for Kauffmann's study. Part of Kauffmann's photo album (HEK FA1). Longkhai, 11th April 1937. HEK (37-19, FA). **(e)** A Phom-Naga woman from Mirinokpo village with a chest tattoo. Jan. 1937. HEK (24-38).

Furthermore, since nudity was highlighted as "savage" character, accentuated by their wild expression, capturing hundreds of images of the bare-breasted women were considered to be a more appropriate setting for a colonial subject. The camera did capture the beautiful

necklaces, ornaments, armlets that adorned the bodies of the women but also has strong sensual and sexual connotations. However, in many cases, their faces fails to exhibit the same serenity or sensuality as their bodies. Perhaps, the photographs were displayed halfway between wildness and sensuality to present as evidence of "primitive morality" or an "object of savagery" to display images of their bodies to the "civilised" world. Frequently, the subjects are also shown as emotionally removed and looked straight or coyly at the camera with a facial expression showing apprehension towards the camera and fails to engage with the viewer directly. Although, in contrary, it can be read as a strong expression of hostility or resistance in particular presumably to the directives and violations that shaped the corpus of colonial images. For the colonialists, photography became a medium to capture the essential qualities of the "typical" or "pure" natives; to identify a unique Naga type. But there is no "pure" view of the subjects. It has always been filtered through existing social and political structures- the scenes, clothes, poses, and types of actions recorded reveal not only a visual construction- but also a conceptual one in which pre-established concepts help to complete the image's meaning (Rueda 95).

The fact of the matter is that the descriptions of images that exemplified anthropometric measurements are filled with racist beliefs wherein individuals are turned into specimens and objectified. The lack of clothing, dishevelled, tattooed, weapons and so forth emphasised the savage quality and lack of evolutionary advancement among these individuals. Portraying them in such deplorable situations lead the viewer to consider them as primitive thus, turning them into the inferior beings. The racist depictions of these images are not only justified by photography but through these types of images the colonial power were able to affirm their beliefs in scientific racism. Also, the stylistic strategies and the composition of the images were prepared in advance and deliberately acted as an engineered propaganda that allowed colonisers to maintain their authority and power over the Nagas. Furthermore, the colonists' use of the photographic technology for surveying and classification that often resulted in Nagas being photographed or forced to pose, in ways over which they had no control over how they are pictured, were subsequently distributed and commoditized (Peffer 246). The commoditization of such images, according to Mariana Ortega, led to an emergence of modern "visual economy" and "organised around the production and circulation of image objects that both reflected racial discourse and helped to create understandings of race in European modernity" (Ortega 164). Through such a visual propaganda viz., production, distribution and varied uses of photographs, further constructed, disseminated and perpetuated the stereotypical images of the colonial era.

Visual Repatriation: an Act of Resistance

In 1996, anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan coined the term visual repatriation to describe the return of museum artefacts, images of ancestors, and in most cases, historical knowledge/information to source communities and are used as materials for interview in which the community members share their narratives of history and culture. This visual repatriation process, according to Kristen Dobbin, "allows source communities access to their cultural heritage in the form of photographs while also enriching museum collections through knowledge sharing and through the building of valuable relationships between researchers/institutions and indigenous communities. In this definition, the visual repatriation process almost always involves an official partnership between a museum/institution and a community" (130).

However, in this current study visual repatriation diverts from the conventional methods and puts it in slightly different terms adding much more political bite to it. It is not necessarily the transportation of physical photographs to the Nagas by outside researchers to collect "insider" narratives. Instead, here the repatriation process occurs when anthropological images, which are already in the possession of the Naga community are recontextualized taking on new meaning as they are read and conveying elements of history, memory, and identity that are associated with the images (Dobbin 131). According to Onondaga photographer and curator Jeffrey Thomas, visual repatriation aims, "to find a new agency for the photographs and … uncover the voice of the people posed before the cameras" (Payne and Thomas 2002 113). Here, at this juncture, the natives' intervention becomes crucial and visual repatriation is understood to be useful for source communities who are able to re-interpret ethnographic photographs according to the narratives and culturally and communally derived knowledge of the community. In a similar vein, Hulleah J. Tsinnahjinnie coined the term "photographic sovereignty" (4) to demonstrate the shift that takes place when photographic meaning is derived from source communities (Dobbin 131).

Since the forced nudity and prescribed poses of subjects in colonial photographs stripped them of their agency, the visual repatriation, therefore, is employed to facilitate greater indigenous agency and empowerment in the recording of the history of the Nagas challenging "Eurocentric cultural analysis, including Eurocentric notions of photographic meaning" (Payne 13). Such engagements has led to insights into how communities have experienced the role of photographic subject and the effects of colonialism and its aftermath. As a counter-narrative to the photographic archives, Zubeni Lotha, a Naga Photographer, initiated a photo exhibition in Guwahati titled *Looking at the Tree Again*. The exhibition focused on the Haimendorf's work and the representation of the Konyak-Naga tribes. According to her, the images, particularly the anthropometric photography, depict the "violence of colonialism." Here, she created a space of effective insider's position and gave voice to the subjects being photographed. As uncovering memories give new interpretations, she juxtaposed the colonial images with current testimonies and interviews of families whose grandparents were captured in the photographs. Lotha, in an interview with Dolly Kikon states as:

> They (interviewees) said their grandparents were very upset when these white people touched their bodies, sharply twisted their neck and body parts for the camera, and forced them to look at the camera. Many naked pictures of Nagas women that were taken by colonial ethnographers and administrators were also staged. I came across stories in the villages where families narrated how their grandmothers when they were young women were forced to take off their shawls and clothes. They were instructed to show their breasts or to put their hand behind their head to get frontal shots of their bare bodies. (127)

Without a doubt, the anthropometric-style photographs were a European construct and the compositional framework that carried associations of the primitive, having been used in the field and in colonial hegemonic photographic space had currency as a means of representing "exotic" bodies to European audiences for decades. Thus, visual repatriation serving as a model of critical interventions into the photographic archive destabilises the hegemonic photographic archives (Payne and Thomas 2002; Wareham 2002; Macdonald 2003). As such it contests the notion of a singular or official telling of the past proposing a

model of multivocality. Here, Lotha, in using the photographs in her exhibition, translates the images from the public realm of anthropological archive, a scientific entity, into the private sphere of the local Naga community affirming community history. These photographs are no longer a record of the hegemonic narrative of the Naga "otherness" rather reflects histories and memories grounded within the Naga community. In this way, the historical images would be mined for invaluable information about families, community members and historic figures, while simultaneously critiquing its imperialist origins (Payne 13). Such engagement with historical photographs in the form of visual repatriation would reclaim indigenous subjectivity.

Conclusion

All the images shown here are some examples in the construction and use of the very notion of the "other" that perpetuate various kinds of violence on their subjects which ultimately raises a very real concern about historical photographs taken in the Naga Hills. As in any anthropological and photographic project, it is important to provide images. Yet, it is clear that displaying certain examples of photographic "othering" is itself complicit with practices of "othering"—so this is itself one of the difficult but key issues that has to be addressed in this paper. We should be well aware of the fact that all these images were created in a power relationship predicated on the colonial situation. The coloniser's sense of place was confirmed not only through their fantasy of the natives but also through their "panopticon gaze" where they perceived only what they believed to be fundamentally true of the native people and their culture. This colonial mythology reinforced a sense of superiority and maturity over the subjects that it saw and had become so entrenched that in some cases even Nagas themselves have come to believe these fictions. This oppressive system continually perpetuates the myth of the Nagas and the images that perpetuate this rationalising fiction effectively transform myth into nature. Consequently, the colonial imageries that represented a colonial fiction are still visible in mainstream news, magazines, literature, art, advertisements. Thus, it is imperative to analyse the colonial corpus of images and feed into existing and problematic discourse. In critiquing these images within a contemporary discourse, it would open up a space for multiple readings of the past in the present; making sense of the past in our lived experience today. Here, performing a self-reflexive interrogation of this colonial photographic collections and arguing for a pluralized examination of historical photographs and photographic archives would pave the way to create new understandings of the past. Furthermore, code of ethics concerning the use of this imagery in publications and exhibitions need to be formulated. Much work still lies ahead, and such projects should be initiated to encourage a critical attitude on the part of readers on the knowledge and understanding of how Nagas have been objectified through the Colonial gaze.

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