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## Travel, Empire and Ethnographic Self-Fashioning of a White Headhunter: Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf's *The Naked Naga*

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### Abstract

Travel Writing produced under the frameworks of colonialism and ethnography offers an opportunity to delineate the entanglement of the traveller in the ideological underpinnings of empire and ethnography. Drawing on the interdisciplinary formulations of the writing culture debate, the paper construes Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf's *The Naked Nagas* (1939) as a travel text that narrativises encountered life-worlds in the Naga Hills, a contact zone in the frontier of the colonial Northeast India. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the paper traces the text's ideological incarnation under the Nazi regime and foregrounds the self-fashioning by the European ethnographer-traveller as a salvager, a cultural translator and a white headhunter of folkloric proportion. It thereby posits the contact zone's congeniality for translation and circulation of identities. The text exhibits a futuristic gesture towards postmodernist configurations of ethnographic writing and self-fashioning, and emerges as polysemous and simultaneously participates in and subverts the discourse of headhunting by deconstructing the inherent discursivity in headhunting. Read in the context of the colonial Northeast Indian frontier, Furer-Haimendorf's narrative, generally marginalised in academic studies, signposts a critique of Christian evangelism as a threat to the ethnographic present of indigenous societies. The paper contributes to the interdisciplinary knowledge on the configuration of the colonial Northeast Indian frontier by envisioning the roles of, and contested affinity among, travel, empire and ethnographic exercises as evinced in travel writing.

**Keywords:** travel, empire, ethnography, Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas*.

The story of the Austrian-origin anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf (1909-1995) may be said to be one of continuous circulations, mobilities and translations from the metropolitan Vienna and London to the farthest frontier of the colonial Indian subcontinent. A similar story of circulation and translation is discernible in the case of his book *The Naked Nagas* (1939a), whose German version, *Die Nackten Nagas* (1939b), became a bestseller. A fruit of Furer-Haimendorf's extensive fieldwork during 1936-37 among a group of Nagas called Konyak, this text is his first ethnographic monograph and his "most famous work" (Baruah, 2018, p. 18). Prior to the publication of this book, in a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society in 1938 – attended by the Society's President, Henry Balfour, and J. H. Hutton — Furer-Haimendorf duly reported his fieldwork-findings from the Naga Hills and went on to declare: "There a great field lies open to the anthropologist" (Furer-Haimendorf, 1938, p. 216). In that meeting, Henry Balfour described

Furer-Haimendorf as "one who is the greatest authority on the Naga Hills in general" (Furer-Haimendorf, 1938, p. 216). In *The Naked Nagas*, Furer-Haimendorf offers a foreign traveller's elaborate account of an ethnographic space under the sway of empire, almost a *terra incognita*, with graphic descriptions of the peoples, cultures and geography, substantiated with photographic illustrations.

This paper extends the colonial concept of 'dobhasi', literally a bilingual speaker/translator or go-between, to situate Furer-Haimendorf in a delicate frontier of the British empire as an anthropologist 'dobhasi' apropos his roles as an authorial subject, a chronicler and translator of cultures, including linguistic. Furer-Haimendorf's life reflects "the avocations of explorer, administrator, writer, and academic" (Bailey, 1992, p. 201), whose anthropological collections have circulated and been 'translated' in academia and popular cultural imagination as markers of multiple identity formations. Most prominently, his fieldwork-photographs, numbering more than ten thousand, have contributed to the circulation of an ethnic imagery of the Nagas in Europe, especially among the Germans (von Stockhausen, 2013, p. 26) and established him as a pioneer in visual anthropology. His oeuvre facilitates continual image-making through multiple texts: notebooks, diaries and publications, alongside material culture, and multiple gazes – the ethnographer's gaze, and also the technologically-informed gaze of the camera. A significant dimension in this story of cultural circulation and translation is discernable in Furer-Haimendorf's brief convergence with the Nazis, a strand in his biographical history that has hitherto been accorded scarce attention, especially in India. Furer-Haimendorf was for some time a Nazi sympathiser with "secret Nazi party membership (since 1933)" (Gingrich, 2005, p. 115). However, he defected after his relocation to British India. In this regard, Gingrich (2005) has posited that amid the pre-war Nazi years, "exoticist popular culture" was disseminated through exhibition of ethnic groups, museum shows, films and books. Amidst this climate of cultural translation, anthropological works like Bronislaw Malinowski's *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929), and Furer-Haimendorf's *Die Nackten Nagas* (German) "flirted" with a "kind of voyeuristic exoticism". During the war in 1944, the military sections of Furer-Haimendorf's book were republished in German. Popular anthropological works were, thus, subjected to ideological deployment via recirculation in the "public sphere that contributed to the gradual integration into the Third Reich of some academic fields, like anthropology" (Gingrich, p. 113).

As a school boy, Furer-Haimendorf sowed an interest in India through his readings of Tagore and Gandhi. Later on, his anthropological training was influenced by Vienna's "Kulturkrieslehre". However, the paucity of funds for fieldwork in interwar Vienna compelled him to earn his Ph.D. without fieldwork, on a comparative study of hill tribes in Assam and Burma (Myanmar). Fortunately, a scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation, which provided significant support for fieldwork and advancement of anthropology in the period between the World Wars, brought him to the London School of Economics and the celebrated seminars of Malinowski, a doyen of fieldwork, during 1935-36. His teacher, Heine Geldern, a specialist in South East Asian anthropology, exercised a lasting impact on him and influenced his choice for, besides being inspired to an extent by Malinowski (Macfarlane, 1995, 21), the maiden fieldwork of thirteen months in the Naga Hills during 1936-37. Before landing in India, he studied Assamese at SOAS. London served as a setting for meeting future British anthropologists, including a fruitful meeting with J. P. Mills (Macfarlane & Turin, 1996, p. 548). Mills, the dedicatee of *The Naked Nagas* was an

anthropologist who also served as the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District. Mills kept his promise made in London to help the young anthropologist during his fieldwork in the Naga Hills – indeed, a rite of passage for the neophyte fieldworker.

### **The Poetics and Politics of the Literary Turn in Anthropology**

This inquiry on Furer-Haimendorf's ethnographic travels and their significations vis-a-vis *The Naked Nagas* builds on a literary analytical framework drawn from the writing culture debate. As a trailblazing time, the 1980s brought a "conceptual shift, "tectonic" in its implications" (Clifford, 1986, p. 22) – "a time of reassessment of dominant ideas" across disciplines (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 585), informed by insights from postmodernism and literary and cultural studies. The 'crisis of representation' offered a critique of written ethnographic practice or the 'literary project' of anthropology (Trencher, 2002, p. 212). In other words, it performed the onus of directing attention to the subject, method and medium of anthropology– a rethinking of the modalities of representing the other, observation/fieldwork, and writing as a discursive practice. Clifford Geertz (1976), a prominent discussant in this debate, construed culture through a semiotic-interpretative lens as a 'web' of meanings (p. 5), and propounded the concept of "thick descriptions" i.e., the derivation of meaning of a cultural act from the informant's perspective through a holistic exploration of strands of significance, and conceptualised anthropological writings as 'interpretations' (p. 15). George E. Marcus and Dick Cushman (1982) offered in their work a critique of ethnographies as *texts*. James Clifford and Marcus' seminal edited volume *Writing Culture*, and Marcus and Michael Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, both published in 1986, formally buttressed the literary project by consolidating in a framework of literary epistemology. Furthermore, James Clifford posited that "Literary processes– metaphor, figuration, narrative– affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered, from the first jotted "observations", to the completed book, to the ways these configurations "make sense" in determined acts of reading." (1986, p. 4). He built on the idea of 'the predicament of culture' to grapple with questions of authority in ethnographic representations of culture and also enunciated the ethnographer's engagement in 'ethnographic self-fashioning'. Later scholars have, however, critiqued the literary analytical approach in anthropological studies for its shortfalls. Nevertheless, the debate usefully delineated the textual trait of ethnography and cleared a space for interdisciplinary moorings within anthropology. By problematising the traditional understanding of an anthropological text as an unambiguous window towards deciphering other cultures, the literary turn not only imparted intellectual stimulus to experimentation in ethnography but also broadened the disciplinary canon by subsuming hitherto marginalised texts within the folds of the discipline.

### **Travel, Empire and Ethnography**

Ethnography's "own discursive practices were often inherited", notes Pratt (1986), from other genres, including travel writing (p. 26). As a literary genre, travel writing exhibits an "openness to inter-and multidisciplinary readings" (Das & Youngs, 2019, p. 11). Therefore, the interdisciplinary reading of travel writing from an anthropological standpoint and of ethnography through the lens of 'travel tropology' is a productive practice as it facilitates "a more comprehensive view of their functioning as texts and in terms of interdisciplinary studies" (Borm, 2000, p. 94). In this context, it is important to foreground that Furer-Haimendorf's book has been variously described: as an ethnographic monograph, "a travel book" (Hutton, 1948, p. 33), "a personal account", "the most

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vivid and exciting narrative of "traditional" fieldwork ever published" (Needham, 1971, p. 93) and "a travelogue" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 454). Indeed, travel, observation and writing are a few of the common denominators between travel writing as a literary genre and ethnography as a constituent of anthropology. Consequently, one of the debates that have informed anthropology and travel writing since the 1980s when travel writing set its foot forward as an academic discipline has been the difference between the two areas. In this context, Graham Huggan (2015) notes:

while anthropological fieldwork is a 'distinctive cluster of travel practices', clear overlaps can be seen with other sets of practices, including those associated with travel writing, whose 'transient and literary approach, sharply rejected in the disciplining of [anthropological] fieldwork, has continued [both] to tempt and [to] contaminate the scientific practices of cultural description on which professional anthropology first established, and has since defended, its disciplinary grounds. (p. 233)

It was under the nineteenth century colonial regimes that the academic discourse of ethnology flourished. Nevertheless, the "European ethnographic impulse", Joan Pau Rubies (2002) has posited, predates this flourish and is traceable to "the humanistic disciplines of early modern Europe in the primary forms of travel writing, cosmography, and history". Following the Renaissance, the "description of people in their variety" was greatly valued (p. 243). After the sixteenth century, descriptions in ethnographic terms abounded in travel writing which facilitated the impression of ethnography being a constituent of the genre. The works of naturalists, missionaries, and travellers supplied to anthropology its ethnographic data and tradition. Travellers from Europe contributed to the birth of ethnography as a new science through their documentation of ethnographic and spatial other (p. 257).

As a child, Furer-Haimendorf is said to have listened to "fireside tales" about the exploits of his family members such as Christoph Furer von Haimendorf (1479-1537) who authored a book based on his travels in Egypt, Palestine and Arabia. These tales, along with "his childhood preoccupation with opera, facilitated his entry into the realm of exotica" (Korom, 1992, p. 509). In *The Naked Nagas*, the travelling ethnographer sets out from England towards India in May, 1936, to study the lifeworlds of peoples who had by then been already evoked as primitive and headhunters in colonial exploration and ethnographic accounts– notwithstanding the expanse of the canvas. Nevertheless, the ethnographic eyes of the traveller gaze at the Nagas as subjects who are "almost untouched by the waves of civilization" (1939a, p. 3). Interestingly, the ethnographer's travels and consequent subject-positions puncture the disciplinary distinction between the observer and the observed: "I have not tried to veil my affection for my Naga friends", declares the author in the Preface. His initial approach towards the Nagas, whom he refers to as his "friends", was "that of a scientific observer". Yet, the disciplinary distance is subverted consequent upon his personal association with the objects of research, tantamount to going native: "the first studied aloofness gives way before a growing emotional attachment". He posits, therefore, that *The Naked Nagas* is neither a "scientific book" nor "overladen with anthropological data" which is why he has "not tried to veil" his "affection" and "attraction" for the natives (1939a, p. vii). It is interesting that the French structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) opens his narrative of fieldwork and travels, *Tristes Tropiques* ([1955]1961), through a notable ironic declaration: "Travel and travellers are two things I loathe – and yet here I am, all set to tell the story of my expedition" (p.

17). Strauss' text— often read as ethnography and travel narrative simultaneously— signposts the intimate yet anxious association between the travelling-subject and the ethnographic-fieldworker. During the time when Furer-Haimendorf was conducting his fieldwork in the Naga Hills, Levi-Strauss was amidst the 'tristes tropics' of Brazil teaching and conducting fieldwork. Significantly, Susan Sontag (1966) configures Levi-Strauss as an anthropologist hero who mourns, and is also a custodian of, "the cold world of the primitives" (p. 81). Drawing on Sontag, Kubica (2014) elaborates that the anthropologist is a hero in his struggles with travel, quest for alleviation of modern western alienation, and tussle with philosophical aporia of the un/known (p. 600). In Furer-Haimendorf's narrative, the traveller-ethnographer is both a mourner on the loss, and a custodian, of cultural practices and artefacts. The natives, incidentally, receive and configure him into a hero, a simulated image of a headhunter being fashioned, after his return from the punitive expedition: "Wherever I go I am acclaimed the hero of the day." (1939a, p. 198).

In the context of the colonial Northeast Indian frontier, Furer-Haimendorf's work signalled the emergence of "the first 'real' anthropologist in the region" who wielded an administrator's "aura" and "closely befriended" experienced colonial administrators like J. P. Mills (Wouters, 2012, p. 114). He emerges as a connector between colonial and postcolonial ethnography in Northeast India by virtue of his anthropologically richer and more grounded works than the early administrator-ethnographers. While it is true that colonialism was productive in bequeathing a rich legacy of writings on Northeast India, this corpus cannot be, however, seen as singularly definitive and more objective than later writings. Indeed, the crisis of representation, and postcolonial theory have unearthed the want of neutrality in acts of observation and inference. Thus, in his paper read out in the meeting of the Royal Geographical Society, Furer-Haimendorf did not forget to laud the colonial British administration's endeavours to conserve native culture: "It is fortunate that a wise administration makes every effort to preserve native culture, thus sparing to the Nagas the sad fate that has befallen many other primitive races" (1938, p. 216). Views such as this, coupled with Furer-Haimendorf's participation and exploit in punitive expedition and his proximity to the colonial regime, signal the crucial ideological affinity between empire and ethnography. Indeed, it is undeniable that the cultural heritage of societies that would otherwise remain undocumented and lost have been enriched through the "sympathetic recording of indigenous forms of life" by anthropologists (Asad, 1973, p. 479). Nevertheless, the reality which anthropologists sought to unpack and represent, and the way they sought to do so were always informed by "European power, as discourse and practice" (Asad, 1991, p. 315).

Nicholas Dirks (2001) has shed light on the process through which ethnographic knowledge in the late nineteenth century colonial India came to be privileged over other forms of knowledge as the maintenance of social order and operation of rule demanded better knowledge and modalities of knowing. The "ethnographic state", therefore, invested in anthropological knowledge to understand and rule the subjects (p. 44). According to Nayar, alongside those who worked for territorial conquest in colonial India, the practitioners "of historiography, archaeology, anthropology-ethnography, and architecture" – whom he calls "scholar-colonials" – effected "an epistemological conquest" by "furnishing a set of discourses of expertise, interest, and labor that served the self-fashioning of the white man as the authoritative interpreter of India's past and present" (2012, p. 206). In the context of Northeast India, colonialism and ethnography, notes Wouters (2012), shared a "fairly straightforward" relationship as the ethnographer was

simultaneously an administrator (p. 101), and ethnographic writings supplied "vital intelligence" about the natives to the colonial regime (p. 102). A cognizance of such transactions between anthropology and colonialism and the corresponding context is essential, but to view anthropology as solely the handmaiden of the latter would be fallacious. Interestingly, in an entry of the classic Orientalist manual for fieldwork in 'uncivilised lands', *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (1874), entitled "Morals", its author E. B. Tylor reflects on the issue of contextual understanding, in this case, of native morality: "It is necessary to place ourselves at the point of view of the particular tribe, to understand its moral scheme" (p. 47). In this regard, Pratt's (1992) theorisation on the "contact zone" is useful in comprehending the context of colonial encounters between different subjects. She defines it as "the space of colonial encounters" in which "peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict". Pratt's concept foregrounds the "interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters" and is often used in a synonymous sense with "colonial frontier" (pp. 6-7). In Furer-Haimendorf's instance, it must be underscored that mobility and fieldwork were largely facilitated by the imperial framework within colonial India and the network of museums and anthropological collections operating from a metropolis like London. It is pertinent to bear in mind that in later years the colonial Indian government appointed him as a special officer of the North East Frontier Agency. He also went on to become the advisor on tribes and backward classes to the Nizam's government in Hyderabad.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, with the decline of empire and the onset of faster means of transportation and mobility, few lands remained unexplored and unconquered. Furer-Haimendorf's cartographic imaginary, predicated on the rhetoric of empire, is reminiscent of the musing of Conrad's Charlie Marlow on unmapped spaces on the earth:

"Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth [...] But there was one yet—the biggest—the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after.

"True, by this time it was not a blank space anymore. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. [...]" (Conrad, 2006, pp. 7-8)

In a similar fashion, to Furer-Haimendorf, some of the *blank/white* spaces to be traversed in the colonial frontier, being unmapped by any Westerner, brimmed with ethnographic wealth and adventure. At certain narrative moments, his sentiment smacks of idioms of imperial conquest, such as the following:

The maps, drawn up by the Survey Party of 1924, lie spread out on the improvised table. So far they have served us well, but now we have come to the edge of mapped territory; before us lies unexplored country. Great white patches, standing out from the green and brown, indicate its extent, and a line boldly drawn through land where no European has yet been marks the probable frontier between Assam and Burma. (1939a, p. 1)

A year ago, he had "bent over these same maps on one of the large tables of the Royal Geographical Society in London" dreaming "of tropical heat and of blue skies" and the opportunity to "be among real 'savages'" after "years of anthropological work on the green table" (1939a, p. 2).

During the explorative phase of colonial ethnography in Northeast India, pejorative images of natives, like 'savages' and 'headhunters', among others, especially of the Nagas – "an ethnological hotbed, arguably even a cradle of British Social Anthropology" (Wouters & Heneise, 2017, p. 5) – were constructed, which reflected "intense political contestation and the associated feelings of animosity and anxiety" (Wouters, 2012, p. 109). In Furer-Haimendorf's work, *The Naked Nagas*, and *Himalayan Barbary* (1955) as well, notwithstanding his empathetic representations, stereotypes of the Naga as naked, barbarous and headhunter are foregrounded. Such essentialising propensity, ingrained in Orientalist discourse, is a general feature of the rhetoric of empire. In *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, for instance, an entry entitled "Clothing", has its first question thus: "Is any clothing used, or do the natives go entirely naked?" (Franks, p. 99). Thus, in the words of Bampfylde Fuller, Chief Commissioner of Assam (1902-05), the Naga warriors' "fantastic" sartorial appearance is reminiscent of the Red Indians in Fenimore Cooper's literary works, and this "bloodthirsty savages" (1910, p. 169) offer a "promising" field for "missionary endeavour" (1910, p. 170). However, there were also representational instances which projected the native in a positive light. Furer-Haimendorf's travel amongst the natives, for example, assures him of the similitude of the "mentality" of the "'primitive peoples'" and their *modern* counterparts. In Wakching, the natives appear to him in a new light through their considerate nature, helpfulness and tact:

Several of my companions were old-time head-hunters, but any deduction of hardness or cruelty of mind would be quite wrong. Big books are written about the psychology of 'primitive peoples', and the presupposition is usually that their mentality is essentially different from ours. Only very seldom do you hear the real unsensational truth, that 'primitive man' thinks and feels, in all fundamentally human things, exactly as we think and feel. (1939a, p. 86)

Indeed, the ideological bedrock of colonial writers was in general informed by the "then dominant theories of evolution, utilitarianism, and race, taught to them [the British colonisers] in established universities in the United Kingdom" (Wouters & Heneise, 2017, p. 7). In a later publication, however, while reflecting on *The Naked Nagas*, Furer-Haimendorf noted that: "Though written by an anthropologist this book was not in the nature of an academic study [...] but reflected the impression of a western observer exposed for the first time to close contact with an Indian tribal people persisting in an archaic way of life". He confesses further that much of the original description may appear to the latter Nagas as "naive and excessively romantic" in spite of the narrative being written through the "eyes of a sympathetic foreign observer" (1976, p. v).

### **The Salvage Paradigm and Critique of Christianity**

During his travels, Furer-Haimendorf gazes at the native spaces as cultural landscapes at the cusp of transition precipitated by the onset of Christianity and the gradual expansion of colonial rule. Congruent with the salvage paradigm, he fashions himself in the narrative as a collector, custodian and chronicler of indigenous material cultures and everyday practices through textualisation, and



hence memorialisation, in the form of writing, salvaging and photographic documentation. James Clifford (1989) defines the salvage paradigm as a reflection of "a desire to rescue something 'authentic' out of destructive historical changes" that is locatable in ethnographic writing, the art world, "in a range of familiar nostalgias". This paradigm is present as "a pervasive ideological complex" in "'art-and-culture-collecting'" practices of the West. Inherent in it is a global framework of time and space that assumes history as "linear and nonrepeatable". This includes the plotting of 'primitive' or 'tribal' groups within nineteenth century evolutionism, "from savage to barbarian to civilized", in the 'ethnographic present' (p. 73). In a coterminous spirit, Furer-Haimendorf notes that "the oldest cultural types" are "still surviving in the Naga Hills" and "Most of them still live practically the same life as their ancestors" (1938, p. 216).

To Furer-Haimendorf, the simulated headhunting rituals and his self-fashioning as a headhunter imparted not only an occasion to document the ritual ceremonies associated with headhunting, otherwise prohibited in British administered spaces, but it was also an act of "helping" to "the younger generation to acquire the dress of their fathers" (1939a, p. 204) and hence, the status of headhunters. The anthropologist doesn't regret the distribution of pieces of the 'hunted' skulls to the natives "for the recording of an ancient head-hunting ceremony, so obviously doomed to extinction" (1939a, p. 193). The salvage paradigm is beautifully manifest in the text, and is prominently evoked at the end of the narrative:

THE veranda of my bungalow is covered with the specimens of my collection: spears and daos from Wakching, Longkhai, Chingmei, and various villages beyond the frontier; valuable bronze gongs; cloths of different colours; red plaited hats with buffalo horns; ornaments for men and women; baskets; wooden dishes and agricultural implements; a long row of carvings, and hundreds of other things, many of which I have acquired only after long negotiation and at a high price.

I cannot help my eyes falling also on those objects which I feel now I would rather never have possessed – a small log-drum, a pair of grave-statues, and the model of a chief's coffin – for their making has brought much sorrow to their creators. (1939a, p. 234)

Furer-Haimendorf notes, much later, that the cultural artefacts he had collected from the Naga Hills were not taken "out of the men's houses which I think would have been quite wrong, even if one could have done that, but I got the same artist to carve them for me" (Macfarlane, 1996). Ironically, however, *The Naked Nagas* corroborates his participation in the plunder and destruction of a native village in an unadministered region, among other negotiations for salvaging artefacts.

*The Naked Nagas* also critiques the evangelism of the American Baptist Mission among the Nagas and shows their interventions as a fosterer of cultural erosion. The deserted and dilapidated bachelors' hall or "morung" in an Ao village presents "a deplorable sight" to the ethnographer. To him the morung becomes a nostalgic signifier of lack: "Gone are the merry feasts, when young and old alike assembled in the morung round the great pots of sweet rice-beer". In sharp contrast to the morung stands the Baptist missionaries' chapel wherefrom emanates the sound of Christian song that is "not in harmony with Naga expression", while the natives exiting the chapel "seemed

to me [him] mere shadows of Nagas, or, even worse, caricatures of Europeans" (1939a, p. 55). With the displacement of the morung by the chapel came other corresponding cultural changes:

The Aos' most cherished and valued possessions, the pride of generations, lay unheeded and scattered in the jungle: 'vain trifles' that Christians should not value – ivory armlets, necklaces of boars' tusks, cowrie shells, head-dresses and baldrics, and artistically woven coloured cloths all discarded, for are they not temptations of the devil? (1939a, pp. 55-56)

Through the juxtapositional images of the perishing morung and the discarded artefacts, vis-a-vis the thriving chapel, Furer-Haimendorf documents a paradigmatic contrast between two lifeworlds and their corresponding ideologies and relevance in a climate of colonial evangelical intervention. With the advent and consolidation of missionaries among the Nagas, proselytisation was carried out and new believing-subjects were fashioned as evidenced in missionary writing, in *A Corner in India* (1907) by Mary Mead Clark, for instance.

When Furer-Haimendorf questions the village-pastor on the desertion of the morung, the latter replies thus: "They are from the olden times; to use them would be against our rules". This shift had critical repercussions on native lifeworlds to the extent of evacuating the significations of cultural objects and practices. Indigenous material culture and everyday practices, in an emergent Christian setting, become markers of a linear temporality so that morungs can only be construed in terms of times past whose use is prohibited by "our [Christian] rules". As an anthropologist, Furer-Haimendorf comprehends the vitality of the morung as a composite site of education, regulation, social engineering, and communitarian spirit, including the consequences of its decay: "But now the old community spirit is lost, and many people fall into the evil ways of selfish individualism" (1939a, p. 56). In Western conceptions of memory, this ethnographic present signifies a past, and represents culturally unique time/s or 'traditions' that are always on the verge of change due to various forces like trade, missions, ethnographic exercises, among others. (Clifford, 1989, pp. 73-74).

### **Headhunting and Ethnographic Self-Fashioning**

In one of the crucial episodes of travel "into unadministered territory" – dubbed as "the promised land" by J. H. Hutton (Furer-Haimendorf, 1938, p. 216), Furer-Haimendorf accompanies the then Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, J. P. Mills, as part of a military expedition against the 'Kalyo Kengyus' who "were completely terrorizing their neighbours, and had developed the hunting of heads into systematic man-hunts". On this occasion, the travelling-anthropologist reflects: "It is the dream of every anthropologist once to enter 'virgin' country, and so this was a particularly solemn moment for me" (1939a, 131). Interestingly, many of the Naga coolies have also joined the expedition with the hope of engaging in headhunting and a "dream of attaining the rank of head-hunters" (1939a, 151). Surprisingly, as the expedition reaches Pangsha, there is a reversal of stereotypical roles; the coolies and scouts are granted permission to plunder the deserted village:

Jubilantly they throw themselves on the deserted streets, on the empty, fated houses. A spear flies through the air and hits a squeaking pig; the head of a cow falls under the mighty stroke of a dao; the last pieces of furniture are brought out of the houses, and one or two forgotten ornaments. (1939a, 166)

Amidst this grotesque scene of plunder, Furer-Haimendorf joins the loot for ethnographic artefacts. He justifies the plundering of Pangsha by reminding them of the massacres the people of Pangsha had committed, of which the recent trophies in the form of dislodged human heads hanging from a low tree were ample evidence. In a moment of self-reflection, he notes on the destruction of indigenous art that the "regret of the ethnologist at the destruction of such works of art must once more give way" (1939a, pp. 172-173). He removes "four heads from the head-tree", puts them in a basket and "hoist the gruesome booty on my [his] back, much to the amusement of the Nagas and the slightly shocked surprise of the sepoy" (1939a, p. 173). It is in such moments that an element of fictiveness and want of ethical moorings, both disciplinary and humanistic, within the discourse of the civilising mission, and colonial anthropology gets uncovered.

Although in reality Furer-Haimendorf doesn't cut off human heads, yet in order to preserve and accentuate his image as a *sahib* among natives, also to document associated rituals, he brings back the human heads. Upon return, pieces of the skulls are distributed to the village morungs, for their supposedly inherent auspiciousness and magical effects, while Furer-Haimendorf keeps one for himself as a memento to be exhibited and museumised in Europe. He notes in his paper that he "had looted" the skulls from a "hostile village" whose inhabitants were killed and therefore the salvaged heads "could be considered perfectly good head-hunting trophies" (1938, p. 212). While citing the reason for his intention to carry a skull to Europe, Furer-Haimendorf tells a simulated anecdote to a native named Shankok: "But think, what would the girls of my village say if I returned after a whole year in a foreign land without a head?" (1939a, p. 205). Later, he is invited to participate in a ritual dance of headhunting because the natives believed that he had "brought us [them] the head". He is conscious of his already constructed public-image: "I am considered the real head-hunter", and that his refusal to partake in the dance will "shake the people's confidence in me [him]" (p. 207). On another occasion, he transcribes a folksong believing it to be a record of ancient headhunting ritual, only to eventually discover that it is "a song about myself [himself]" (p. 209).

The western anthropological fascination with skulls is well known. For instance, in *Notes and Queries on Anthropology's* entry entitled "Preserving Specimens", Barnard Davies advises travellers that when human skulls can be salvaged, one should "get them in as perfect a state as possible" and even "imperfect specimens" should not be cast away (1874, p. 142). He goes on to detail the methods of packing, documenting identity, and transmitting a skull. Indeed, headhunting was an important trope in the colonial discourse pivoting around the Nagas. A striking instance is found in the work of Bampfylde Fuller who notes that some "hill peoples" of Assam "are certainly in an early stage of culture, addicted to head-hunting and constantly at war with their neighbours" (1930, p. 111). Fuller argues that only through the imperial annexation of native space – the Naga Hills, could the "brutal raiding of the plains" be checked, and that "The effect of our [British Raj's] control has been marvellous". In describing a people "collectively spoken of as Nagas" (1910, p. 168), Fuller categorises their geographical space through an ancient cultural practice: "We are in a country of head-hunters" (p. 167). Contrastingly, Furer-Haimendorf offers a contextual basis: "the bringing in of a head not only furthers in a magical way the fertility of the village, but also in a more concrete manner acts as an incentive to trade and production" (1939a, p. 204). He construes headhunting as "a practice connected with the magical idea of the

fertilizing power of the blood" (1969, p. 156). Contemporary scholars, like Zou (2005), have contextualised the trope of headhunting as "an ambivalent site of discourse where the coloniser/ethnologist can inscribe his/her desires" and that "imperial pacification was no less violent than native headhunting" (p. 76). In *The Naked Nagas*, this trope facilitates the emergence of a novel subject that stands as a paradox from an Orientalist standpoint. After the publication of the groundbreaking texts of Edward Said (1978) and Marry Louise Pratt (1992), the genre of travel writing which pivots on the representation of the other witnessed intense scrutiny as a site of colonial knowledge formation, and for its discursive agency in Orientalism. Said formulated Orientalism as a discourse founded on "an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"" (1979, p. 2) via which the Europeans come to know and dominate the other – the Orient. This modality of knowing the other – involving manoeuvres in fashioning the subjectivity of the other and, therefore, of the self – operates within the relational ideological framework of knowledge and power. In this backdrop, travel writing has been viewed as a vehicle that dramatises "an engagement between self and world" (Blanton, 2002, p. xi). In its negotiations with a variety of alterity – cardinally, the self and the other, travel writing offers insights into subject position/s and self-fashioning. In this regard, Thomson posits that since the late eighteenth century there has been an increasing proclivity in travel writing "to foreground the narratorial self, so that the traveller becomes as much the object of the reader's attention as the place travelled to" (2011, p. 99). In a similar context, James Clifford (1988) has posited that a new "ethnographic subjectivity" developed in the early twentieth century that may be seen as a "late variant" of the "sense of the self" that Stephen Greenblatt had enunciated (p. 93). He further notes that the "ethnographic discourse" functions in a "double manner" by portraying "other selves as culturally constituted", yet simultaneously constructing "an identity authorized to represent, to interpret, even to believe – but always with some irony – the truths of discrepant worlds" (p. 95). Joseph Conrad and Malinowski who grapple with the constructed nature of culture and language in their works are Clifford's paradigms of ethnographic subjectivity. In this context, Furer-Haimendorf, as an ethnographer, is invested with authority issuing from his status as an inscriber and cataloguer of identity as well as his association with colonial power. This facilitated his negotiations with the other and his manoeuvres with self-identity to the extent of fashioning and performing the fictive figure of a white headhunter.

## **Conclusion**

Read through the prism of postcolonialism, Furer-Haimendorf's ethnographic self-fashioning, especially as a white headhunter, presents potential moments for the collapse of colonial difference. Indeed, the colonial climate contained a creative tension, as postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha have shown, in its proclivity to generate hybridity and deconstruct normative notions of purity and contamination. The contact zone as a dynamic space for the circulation and refashioning of identities of the self and the other is evident in the story of Furer-Haimendorf who had already transformed into a folkloric hero during the course of his fieldwork. The polysemous text *The Naked Nagas* and its dynamic ethnographic-author, thus, epitomise translation and circulation. Indeed, borrowing the language of Clifford, it can be said that Furer-Haimendorf's fieldwork "'takes place' in worldly, contingent relations of travel" (1996, p. 11). He emerges as a veritable 'dobhasi', a chronicler and translator of cultures who has helped shape identities by textualising ethnic markers often predicated on racial stereotype. By going native, he destabilises

traditional ethnography's claim to objectivity and, in the wake of the literary turn, his text may be said to be gesturing towards postmodernist configurations of ethnographic writing and self-fashioning. The text participates in the discourse of headhunting and simultaneously subverts it by unpacking the discursivity that the practice predicates upon through the instance of the ethnographer-traveller's self-fashioning as a white headhunter. In the context of the colonial Northeast Indian frontier, the text signposts a critique of Christian evangelism as a threat to the ethnographic present of indigenous lifeworlds and offers a window to comprehend the contested affinity between travel and ethnography, as also the ideological negotiations between empire and ethnographic practices enacted in an imperial frontier.

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