



The Anecdote of Hutton's Dream: Responses of a Sumi Naga Family to J. H. Hutton's Cylinder Recordings

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In this article, I examine the meaning of the oral accounts of a Sumi Naga family whose narrations I heard in the village Surumi in Nagaland, where I conducted fieldwork with the wax cylinder recordings of the British administrator-anthropologist John Henry Hutton (1885-1968) in February 2022. In response to a song recording featuring the voice of his Sumi Naga interpreter Vikhepu Ayemi (d. 1919), two of Vikhepu's indirect descendants shared with me anecdotes on Hutton and their ancestor, including a dream they said that Hutton once had. Aligning Hutton's notes and other British colonial sources providing information on Naga interpreters with these oral accounts, I discuss how British colonial conceptions and Sumi traditional notions of social and cultural hierarchy influenced the interactions of the two men and examine what significance their connection has for Vikhepu's descendants today. I argue that Hutton's representation of Vikhepu serves as a means for the family to underline their longstanding involvement in governmental matters and thereby reaffirm their high social status and leadership role in the village of Surumi. Furthermore, the oral accounts seem to act as a mechanism for them to recollect differently and redraw the power relations that existed between Hutton and Vikhepu, as they reverse the notion of Vikhepu's subordinateness and, more generally, Naga subservience that emerges from Hutton's publications and other colonial sources. In a wider sense, my article thus throws light on the way how members of a Naga community process legacies of colonial domination and racial discrimination through the proposition of alternative oral histories that inform their collective remembering of past events.

Keywords: Nagaland, ethnomusicology, audiovisual archives, wax cylinder recordings, performing arts, oral history

Introduction

In recent decades, historians and anthropologists have become aware of the relevance of orally transmitted information about the past for the historiography of indigenous communities (Cruikshank 1994; Maiga 2009; Miller 2011). Recently, indigenous scholars have contributed to discourses on the theorization of the term "oral history" itself, pointing out that Western conventions of conceptualizing oral history and oral tradition as two different academic disciplines imply "a reading of [indigenous] oral histories

as false, unreliable, or the puerile imaginings of ‘the other’” (Mahuika 2019, 1).¹ Regarding South Asian communities, Western oral history research has focussed on diasporas so far (Hamlett et al. 2008; Herbert 2009; Raghuram et al. 2009; Raychaudhuri 2019), whereas, on the subcontinent itself, oral history has gained the attention of academics only quite recently.² Yet oral history research on ethnic minorities remains marginal in India, certainly not only due to language barriers but probably also because academic discourses sometimes neglect the internal historiographies of these communities. The troubled recent past of the wider Nagaland region³ (Nuh and Lasuh 2016), in particular, has led to the suppression and marginalization of Naga perspectives on the modern history of their communities, which has made oral history research in the region difficult and, at the same time, very important. Although the abating Indo-Naga conflict has made fieldwork more feasible in the Indian state of Nagaland in recent decades, little oral history research has been done in the region yet.⁴

In ethnomusicology, on the other hand, it has become a common research method to recirculate historical sound recordings among cultural heritage communities to make access to archival collections more equitable and evoke responses to recordings from communities (Toner 2003; Lobley 2010; Campbell 2014). As a result, ethnomusicologists have become, like historians and anthropologists, aware of the fact that such recordings are relevant not only because performing arts and oral traditions contribute to the continuity of culture, but also because they may contain information that can be in other ways of vital importance to the present, an example being indigenous land ownership claims supported by the content of archival sound recordings (Koch 2008).

As an ethnomusicologist, I applied the method of recirculating historical sound recordings in countries of origin for the first time during my PhD research, which concerned the field recordings of the Dutch ethnomusicologist Arnold Adriaan Bake (1899-1963) (Poske 2020). During my fieldwork, I reconnected musicians and dancers in Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Bangladesh with the sound and silent film recordings that Bake had made in these regions between 1931 and 1956, to evaluate their responses to the recordings and enhance Bake’s recording documentation. Between January and March 2022, I conducted another research project based on this method in Nagaland, this time with the cylinder recordings of the British administrator-anthropologist John Henry Hutton (1885-1968) (Poske, forthcoming). Hutton served in the British colonial administration of the Naga Hills district from the early 1910s to 1929 in a region that roughly corresponds to the territory of the Indian state of Nagaland today. Between 1914-19, he recorded the songs of five different Naga communities of the district. During the research project, I recirculated the recordings in Nagaland to elicit responses from listeners (Lobley 2010), documented their reactions on film, and used the information provided by them to enhance Hutton’s recording documentation. Due to time constraints, I conducted most listening sessions with members of different Naga communities in the state capital Kohima. Guided by Hutton’s recording notes, I also visited the villages of Khonoma (Kohima district) and Surumi (Zunheboto district), where I played the recordings to Angami and Sumi listeners. In Surumi, I played the recordings to two members of a Sumi family who shared with me anecdotes on Hutton’s interactions with one of their ancestors, Vikhepu Ayemi, which gave rise to this article. Rather unexpectedly, the family’s accounts thus brought my project into contact

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1. Oral history emerged as a field of research in the USA and UK in the mid-20th century. In the 1980s, the American oral historian Charles T. Morrissey thought of it as “a basic structured collection of spoken firsthand memories in an interview setting” (Sommer and Quinlan 2009, 1). In this article, I use the term in a more general sense as encompassing all processes of collecting oral information about the past and the recordings resulting therefrom.
 2. The Oral History Association of India was founded in 2013 (<https://ohai.info>, accessed 8.4.2023).
 3. The wider Nagaland region encompasses all territories inhabited by Naga communities, including the Indian state of Nagaland, parts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, and parts of neighbouring Myanmar.
 4. A notable exception is the “Lest we forget” video series of the film collective TakeOne Nagaland, which is a documentation of oral accounts on the Naga independence movement and military violence (<https://www.youtube.com/@takeonenagaland2111/videos>, accessed 31.12.2022).

with the domain of oral history, a point that I will return to at the end of this article. Amongst others, their accounts included a dream they said that Hutton once had, which confronted me with the topic of Naga dream narration and interpretation, which I outline later in this article.

When we examine the relations between British colonial administrators and their Naga subjects, we must take into account the wider ideological frameworks that shaped British attitudes towards South Asians in the colonial period. Investigating the period of the British Raj (1858-1947), historian Thomas R. Metcalf points out that there was an enduring tension between the ideals of similarity and difference in how the British contemplated India, which shaped differing strategies of governance. He argues that “from 1858 to 1918, the ideas that most powerfully informed British conceptions of India and its people were those of India's ‘difference’” (Metcalf 1995, x).

The Naga Hills district, however, remotely located in the northeast of the subcontinent, was a world in itself, inhabited by minority communities whose ethnicities, cultures, indigenous religions, and ways of life were very different from those of the majority Hindu population and the larger religious minorities of mainland South Asia. Arguably, this was one of the reasons why British administrators like Hutton tended to see more similarities between themselves and the Nagas than with other South Asian communities. Thus, Hutton asserted that “[t]he least that can be said of the Naga is that in general he has mental outlooks and mental processes far more consonant with those of the European than has the ordinary native of India” (Hutton 1921a, 38), arguing that this was so because of the absence of the Hindu caste system. Cultural similarities, such as shared dietary preferences for non-vegetarian food, the absence of religious taboos on alcohol consumption, and the progressing conversion of Naga communities to the Christian faith arguably contributed to these notions of connectedness, which fostered friendships between British administrators and their Naga associates.

These companionships were often particularly close in the case of Naga interpreters who worked for the British administration for extended periods, sometimes over decades. Consequently, they became important informants for the ethnographic research of J. H. Hutton and other British administrator-anthropologists (Hutton 1921a, 1921b; Mills 1922, 1926, 1937). Sometimes, interpreters even became human models for visual representations of Naga culture created by British artists (Elliott 2014, 20-22). In these ways, Naga interpreters contributed to the production of representations of Naga cultures that are now at Western cultural and academic institutions, which inform our understanding of Naga cultures till today (Heneise and Moon-Little 2014, 1).

Nevertheless, we usually have very little detail about the personal interactions that took place between British administrators and their Naga associates, and the little we believe to know is, all too often, based on colonial writings articulated by defunct ideological frameworks (Wouters and Heneise 2017, 4). Sucharita Sen points out that in terms of British India, “[e]xisting literature on interracial relationships has largely oscillated between the two opposites of racial animosities and heterosexual intimacies” (Sen 2022, i), and that academic research neglected the large spectrum of interpersonal interactions that took place in other contexts. This article contributes to addressing this lacuna by discussing the interpersonal relations between Hutton and his Sumi Naga interpreter Vikhepu Ayemi.⁵

In the first section, I discuss how Hutton and British contemporaries represented Naga interpreters in their internal reports and published writings to see what conclusions these documents allow about the ground realities of the work of Naga interpreters and Hutton's relations to Vikhepu. Subsequently, I discuss the oral accounts of the Sumi Naga family I visited during my fieldwork, which offer an alternative perspective on the social hierarchies and resulting psychological dynamics that influenced the two men's interactions. In the following section, I place the oral accounts of the family in the context of the Naga practices of dream narration and interpretation and examine what meaning the accounts carry for the family. This leads me to my conclusion, where I reflect upon the implications of interpreting the family's accounts and my fieldwork in Surumi.

5. In the following, I refer to Vikhepu Ayemi with his first name “Vikhepu”.

The British perspective: colonial representations of Naga interpreters

In this section, I discuss how Hutton and other British writers represented Naga interpreters in their publications and other writings to examine which conclusions these sources allow on the ground realities of the daily work that Naga interpreters carried out in the British period, and on Hutton's relationship with his Sumi interpreter Vikhepu Ayemi. Written in the English language and originally intended for Western audiences, these sources today also provide educated Naga readers with extensive information on the traditional culture and the history of their communities, and on the complex web of interpersonal relations and allegiances that existed between Naga interpreters and British administrators like Hutton. Therefore, these sources are relevant to the question of how contemporary Naga society processes the legacy of British colonial rule, a point that I come back to later. In this section, I also probe what insights these sources contribute to the question how Hutton perceived his cultural situatedness as administrator and anthropologist posted in the Naga Hills district of British India at a time when Western colonial notions of racial hierarchy and political loyalty clashed with indigenous conceptions of individual rights, clan hierarchies, and community allegiances that had developed in Naga societies over the course of centuries.

With the colonization of Nagaland, Western cultural concepts of social and political structure made inroads into Naga society and began to influence the organization of village policies, setting off processes of social, political, and cultural change that continue till today (Wouters 2018). When the British began to colonize Nagaland in the 1830s, they first attempted to secure administrative control over the region through restrictive measures, then through military subjugation, and eventually through a more sophisticated system of indirect rule that used existing hierarchies of Naga societies (Jacobs et al. 2012, 24). Under this system, the British colonial administration employed influential individuals of Naga communities as *dobashi*-s, a term meaning "person speaking two languages". These were interpreters who acted as intermediaries between the administration and village communities, aiding the administration in the implementation of orders and giving them the feedback of village communities, a two-way process that led to relatively smooth governance. Another important role in the British administration of the Naga hills region was that of the *gaonbura*, meaning "village elder", which was also held by important members of village communities, who carried out administrative tasks on behalf of the British administration.⁶

Hutton joined the Indian Civil Service in 1909 and was transferred to the Naga Hills District in the early 1910s. In the following years, he was stationed as an Assistant Commissioner in Kohima and as a Subdivisional Officer in Mokokchung, after which he became Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District in 1917. He retained the post until 1929 when he became Census Commissioner in Delhi, which he remained until 1933. During his administrative career, Hutton studied the societies and cultures of Naga communities and published articles on the topic from 1914 onwards (e.g., Hutton 1914, 1915, 1920). His first two monographs, *The Angami Nagas, With Some Notes on Neighbouring Tribes* (Hutton 1921a) and *The Sema⁷ Nagas* (Hutton 1921b) examine Angami and Sumi culture and society in detail. After his resignation from the Indian Civil Service in 1936, he returned to England, where he became a Lecturer in Social Anthropology and subsequently Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge University, a post he held until his retirement in 1950. In recognition of his research, he received numerous awards,

6. Jelle P. Wouters points out that "[t]he position of Gaonbura was introduced by the British who selected a number of persons in each village, whom they thought had considerable local influence [...]. They were bestowed with the [responsibility] to collect house-tax and to submit these to government offices, upon which they received a commission. They were also empowered to settle local disputes, and to notify the government in the event of any serious disturbances. Besides occasional commissions, they were also granted a red shawl to signal their allegiance to the British, and, in some instances, a gun. After the British departed from the Naga Hills, the position of Gaonbura was kept in place by the postcolonial government" (Wouters 2018, 129). As we will see in the example of Vikhepu Ayemi, the positions of *dobashi* and *gaonbura* sometimes converged in the same person.

7. Nowadays, community members refer to themselves as "Sumi".

including the Rivers Memorial Medal and awards from the Royal Society of Arts, the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and the Anthropologische Gesellschaft of Vienna. Today, the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Cambridge) hold numerous artefacts of Naga culture collected by Hutton, as well as his correspondence and official tour diaries.

These print and archival sources offer information on the work that Naga interpreters carried out on behalf of the British administration. Amongst others, there are notes on Hutton's interpreters in the obituaries that were written for him after his death. The obituary written by his second wife Maureen Margaret Hutton (née O'Reilly) includes the following quote on the reflections of an unnamed Naga interpreter:

An Indian colleague wrote "one of the old Sema Interpreters said 'Dr. Hutton was like a lamp in the Naga Hills during his service in that land.'" (M. M. Hutton 1968, 73)

Although the quote suggests that the interpreter remembered Hutton's tenure as having positive effects on the lives of Naga communities, the exact meaning of the statement attributed to him remains unclear. Perhaps, he thought that Hutton was a guiding light in a period of darkness and political turmoil, as the phrase "like a lamp" suggests. The obituary written by the British colonial administrator Charles Ridley Pawsey (1894-1972), on the other hand, provides some information on Hutton's interactions with his interpreters. Although Pawsey portrays these interactions as trustful and informal, different from the procedures that characterized the workings of the British administration in other regions of British India, he notably also ascribes physical violence to Hutton, which illustrates that despite the alleged air of informality, colonial hierarchies and a readiness to enact violence defined his conduct with Nagas:

In the Old Naga Hills there was always a feeling of mutual trust and friendship, direct access to the District Officer by word of mout[h] without the expense of a petition endorsed with an eight-anna stamp. An air of informality was prevalent in the Court room. In any case of importance the Court room would be packed, reeking with the smell of wood-fire smoke and rice beer and damp hair and clothes, with Naga Dobashis (the backbone of the administration) stating the claims of the parties. Nobody enjoyed this more than Hutton, who sought to preserve order with some noise himself, and occasional violence; for some years the stain on the office wall from a hurled bottle of ink was preserved by the Dobashis and pointed out as an awful example of what happened to recalcitrant litigants. Later to avoid material damage Hutton had a series of apparent pincushions at hand but these contained shot and varied in weight, and were used as ammunition according to the degree of recalcitrance shown by the witness or accused. On tour the atmosphere was even more informal... (Obituary for Hutton, Pawsey [1968?], 2-3, Pitt Rivers Museum, Hutton collection)

Hutton's tour diaries are perhaps the most important source of information on his interactions with Naga interpreters, elucidating his personal views and attitudes.⁸ Commissioned by the British colonial administration, the diaries include notes on the collection of taxes, the imposition of fines, the settlement of community disputes, and other aspects of Hutton's official duties in the district. Here, we find numerous entries illustrating that Naga interpreters not only facilitated communication with village communities and supervised actions ordered by the British. While this certainly constituted an important aspect of their employment for the administration, we find information that they also had to carry out menial tasks, some of which may have affected their social prestige in the eyes of Naga communities, as the following entry on a dispute between two Sumi Naga factions indicates:

8. The Pitt Rivers Museum holds Hutton's tour diaries from 1917-29 and 1934-35. A footnote in Hutton's first monograph suggests that he wrote tour diaries at least from September 1913 onwards (Hutton 1921a, 247), but the whereabouts of these early tour diaries remain unknown.

Apparently the foment was given an additional fillip some time ago – probably some years ago – by a quarrel in which one party quoted the authority of the dobashi Luzukhu for something. The other replied that Luzukhu was no dobashi but a scullion in Mokokchung kitchen.⁹
(J. H. Hutton, diary entry for 24.11.1920, Pitt Rivers Museum, Hutton collection, box 2)

Another entry from September 1921 illustrates that interpreters also had to take on other unpleasant tasks:

The village had a deserted air and is usually inhabited by mithan only who have trampled the village street into an almost unpassable morass of mud. The unfortunate dobashi who had to carry backwards and forwards through it – for there was no way round or across – sank literally knee-deep as he went along, and that for about 80 yards.
(J. H. Hutton, diary entry for 30.9.1921, Pitt Rivers Museum, Hutton collection, box 2)

Once, an interpreter even saved Hutton from danger of life, which further evinces the subservience of Naga interpreters to him:

Before reaching the pass I left the path for a yard or two and narrowly escaped a very nasty accident if not a sticky finish; the ground gave way suddenly under me and I was thrown violently forward, luckily, so that I managed with my outstretched arms to hang on my armpits on the far side of the pitfall and stay there balanced. I had gone through the leaves covering and concealing a trap which consisted in a deep hole about 10 ft. down with sides like a well. I was afraid of slipping in and being horribly spitted on panjis,¹⁰ but could not pull myself out and dare not move for fear of slipping back. I was a long way ahead of the coolies but luckily one dobashi was following pretty close and he came and pulled me out when he heard me singing murder, and then told me how a man of Setuho fell into such a pit he had dugged himself and was killed transfixed on his own panjis.
(J. H. Hutton, diary entry for 4.3.1935, Pitt Rivers Museum, Hutton collection, box 2)

Nevertheless, the inherent racism of colonial hierarchies shaped Hutton's interactions with his interpreters until the end of his career in the Indian Civil Service, despite the invaluable assistance that he received from them. Thus, he called the mass resignation of Sumi interpreters "a bluff", outlining a cool-headed strategy of replacement in this entry from 1934:

The Sema dobashis, being dissatisfied with an order of the S.D.O.'s resigned 'en bloc' – a piece of bluff, of course, which they will not get away with. Their places can be filled three times over with men every bit as good as they are tomorrow, but I told Sub-Divisional Office to keep them open till the end of the month anyway, to allow a chance to recant, and then to start replacing them, one at a time only, from the top.
(J. H. Hutton, diary entry for 18.-21.7.1934, Pitt Rivers Museum, Hutton collection, box 2)

Furthermore, the entry suggests that many Nagas aspired to secure employment as interpreters, arguably not only because the post provided an income, but also because it increased their social status in the eyes of many community members.

In his publications, Hutton generally writes in a respectful tone about his Naga interpreters, highlighting their contributions to his anthropological research. Arguably, he did so not only to do justice to their assistance in his research but also to present his research as informed by high ethical standards. Indeed, he refers to his interpreters repeatedly in his two Naga monographs *The Angami Nagas With Some Notes on*

9. Hutton's headquarters were in Mokokchung when he was Subdivisional Officer from 1915-17.

10. *Panji-s* were sharpened bamboo sticks that Nagas placed at the bottom of earthen pits for defensive purposes (Hutton 1921b, 24).

Neighbouring Tribes (1921a, 38, 168, 247) and *The Sema Nagas* (1921b, 29, 161, 249, 303, 363-64), which suggests that they contributed significantly to his research. He acknowledges this input in the prefaces and through a footnote in the first monograph (1921a, viii, 247; 1921b, viii).

Sections of the two works indicate that Hutton's Sumi interpreter Vikhepu Ayemi played a particularly significant role in his research on Naga culture and that the two men were connected on an intellectual level. In the preface of his second monograph, Hutton thus highlights Vikhepu's contributions:

Last, but far from least, I have to mention my Sema friends who have been the real means of my making what record I could of tribal customs – Vikhepu, Chief of the Ayemi Clan in Seromi, Inato, Chief of Lumitsami, Khupu of Lazemi, Nikiye of Nikiye-nagami, Hezekhu of Sheyepu, Mithihe of Vekohomi, Hoito of Sakhalu, Ivikhu of Lizmi, Inzhevi of Yepthomi, Hoito of Kiyeshe, and many others, but the first five or six in particular... [M]y indebtedness for information to Vikhepu, four years my personal Sema interpreter at Mokokchung, was particularly great, and his death in the influenza epidemic of 1918¹¹ was a grave loss to the district. (Hutton 1921b, viii)

Correspondingly, he credits Vikhepu as one of the two main sources for the Sumi folk tales published in the second monograph (1921b, 303-61). Notably, he describes Vikhepu as “one of the most intelligent Semas I ever knew” (1921a, 404) and “a chief and a man of superior intellect” (1921b, 303), which suggests that he respected him not only because of his status in Sumi society but also on account of his intellectual capacities. Amongst other notes on Vikhepu, the second monograph includes a footnote that proves that he shared with Hutton details about the extramarital affair of a Sumi village chief (1921b, 206), which suggests that there must have been some camaraderie between Hutton and Vikhepu, as otherwise, Vikhepu would have not shared such sensitive personal information with Hutton. In the book, we also find a detailed genealogy chart of Vikhepu's ancestry, based on information provided by himself (144; second family tree following the page).

If we look at the visual representations of Naga culture in Hutton's Naga monographs (1921a, 1921b), we find that both works feature eye-catching coloured frontispieces contributing to their aesthetic appeal. The first monograph features a portrait of an Angami warrior and the second one a portrait of Vikhepu Ayemi in ceremonial attire, holding a spear and a shield.¹² One of Hutton's photographs from the Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford [PRM] (Fig. 1) and a half-coloured sketch from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology Cambridge [MAA] (Fig. 2) suggest that Vikhepu's portrait (Fig. 3) is derived from Hutton's photograph.

The clarity of the photograph suggests that Hutton took it with Vikhepu's permission, while its natural ambience evokes a notion of primordality, in line with the romanticized notion of traditional Naga culture that we find in sections of Hutton's publications where he deplores the loss of culture effected by Westernization and Christianization (e.g., 1921a, vii-viii).¹³ Nevertheless, he regarded Western civilization as superior and thought it was its task to carefully guide Nagas on the path to progress because he regarded them as “savage races” (1921a, 177) whose culture was “primitive” (397).

Overall, the sources that I have referred to in this section leave no doubt that Hutton regarded himself as superior to his Naga interpreters not only because of his social status as a representative of the British colonial administration but also culturally and intellectually because he considered himself a member of an advanced civilization that had reached a higher level on the ladder of human evolution. Regarding Vikhepu Ayemi, we can summarize that he was an important associate of Hutton who not only assisted

11. According to his descendants, Vikhepu Ayemi died in 1919.

12. On the portrait, the shield is oriented upside-down, with the square end on top and decorated with a plume of goat's hair, which indicates ceremonial use (Hutton 1921b, 25).

13. The visual representations of Nagas on the covers and frontispieces of Hutton's and Mills' monographs can be regarded as an exoticization of Naga culture, as Westernization had already led to changes in the clothing of Nagas by the turn of the century (Shakespeare 2021).



Figure 1: “Vikhepu of Seromi”
(PRM 1998.221.42.9)



Figure 2: Partially hand-
coloured black and white
photograph (MAA P.59429.
HUT)



Figure 3: “Vikhepu, Chief of
the Ayemi Clan in Seromi”¹⁴
(Hutton 1921b, coloured
frontispiece)

him as an interpreter but also contributed significantly to his research on Naga culture. Moreover, Hutton’s respectful comments hint at a personal friendship between the two men, which raises the question of how conceptions of Naga hierarchies and British hierarchies influenced their interactions. It also opens the question of how contemporary Sumi Naga society assesses the social relationship that existed between the two men, a point that I address in the following section.

The Sumi perspective: Hutton’s dream and other anecdotes from Surumi

During his tenure in Nagaland, Hutton made fourteen cylinder recordings, which he sent to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. During the research project that I conducted on the recordings in early 2022, I visited the Museum in the month of January to examine the inserts that Hutton had sent with the cylinders to Oxford. This enabled me to identify Vikhepu Ayemi (d. 1919) as one of the singers whose voice is audible on Hutton’s cylinder recording No. 14 (Poske, forthcoming). The following month, I travelled to Nagaland to conduct my fieldwork with the recordings. Because of information I had found on the insert of cylinder recording No. 14, I decided to visit Vikhepu’s home village Surumi to locate his descendants and play the recording to them.¹⁵ Lanuakum Aier, an Ao Naga researcher of the Highland Institute in Kohima, contacted the headman of the village via telephone with the help of a Sumi intern of the Institute, who called the headman. Lanuakum and I received permission for our visit and after all logistics had been arranged, we were on our way from Kohima to Surumi a few days later. We travelled via Mokokchung, a six-hour drive from Kohima. During our lunch break at a roadside restaurant, Lanuakum informally introduced me to the practice of Naga dream narration, telling me that before I had notified him of my plan to visit Surumi, he had dreamed of visiting his relatives in Mokokchung. A few hours later,

14. Hutton attributes the creation of the portrait to Ms A. M. Grace from Hove (Hutton 1921b, viii). Today, the village is called “Surumi”.

15. Hutton’s recording note states: “Mithan cutting song at Sema harvest festival[:] Vikhepu Mithihe Nikiye Hoito Hezekhu” (insert of cylinder No. 14, Hutton collection, Pitt Rivers Museum). The names of these five interpreters appear in the preface of *The Sema Nagas* (Hutton 1921b, viii).

we arrived in the town. After an overnight stay in a hotel on a hill overlooking the town, we picked up his cousin Suneplong and departed for Surumi at dawn (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: Sunrise in Mokokchung (Mokokchung, 19.2.2022; photo: author)

We arrived in Surumi two hours later, where we were welcomed by the headman's son, Vikishe. He brought us to the *achükaki*, the kitchen and dining room of the family, a large room with a stone hearth on the one side and a large wooden table with benches on the other. We held the listening sessions and interviews that would follow at this table, assisted by Vikishe who translated between English and the Sumi language. We began with Vikishe's father Qheniho Jakhalu (b. 1964), who turned out to be Vikhepu Ayemi's grandnephew.¹⁶ Qheniho holds the post of *akükatou* (head of the village chiefs) in Surumi today, a designation that has replaced the title of Head GB (principal *gaonbura*).¹⁷ During our meeting, he wore a red vest, a garment that has largely replaced the red shawl that used to be worn by *gaonbura*-s to signify their post (cf. Fig. 3). Apparently, he wore the vest because he had to attend a village council meeting on that day, though possibly, his choice of clothing was also connected to the purpose of our visit. With him, he brought a framed print of Vikhepu Ayemi's portrait from Hutton's monograph *The Sema Nagas* (Hutton 1921b) (Fig. 5).

For the listening sessions that followed, we set up a laptop for playing back Hutton's recordings through headphones and a camcorder for filming the reactions of participants. We began Qheniho's listening session with Hutton's cylinder recording No. 14 (Fig. 6).¹⁸ We informed him beforehand that he would listen to a recording featuring the voice of his granduncle Vikhepu and four other Sumi interpreters of Hutton. Although Qheniho initially seemed confused by the crackling background noise of the recording, he soon began to nod, as if recognizing something familiar. After taking off the headphones, he explained to us that the song on the recording was an *aza'shü'le*, a type of song that is performed to express honour or respect, and that it is performed in Surumi till today. Although Hutton's note from the cylinder insert suggests that the recorded song was connected to a ritual *mithun* sacrifice at a Sumi harvest festival, Qheniho

16. Qheniho is the grandson of Vikhepu's brother Vihoto.

17. In 2017, the Sumi Kukami Hoho ("Council of Sumi Village Chiefs") substituted the title *gaonbura* with the title *akükau* ("village chief") as the official designation of hereditary village leaders to distinguish them clearly from government-appointed *gaonbura*-s. Correspondingly, the title of Head GB was replaced with the title *akükatou* (head of the village chiefs) (<https://morungexpress.com/sumis-replace-usage-gb-akukau>, accessed 19.12.2022).

18. <https://soundcloud.com/pittriversound-1/mithan-cutting-song-from>, accessed 18.8.2022.



Figure 5: Qheniho Jakhalu with print of Vikhepu’s portrait from *The Sema Nagas* (Hutton 1921b) The title of the print reads: “Vikhepu G.B.,¹⁹ Chief of the Ayemi Clan in Surumi” (Surumi, 19.2.2022; photo: author)

could not associate the piece with any ritual or festival but said that it could have been performed on any festive occasion.²⁰



Figure 6: Qheniho Jakhalu listening to Hutton’s cylinder recordings The name badge on the red vest reads: “Qheniho Jakhalu, Head G.B. Surumi” (Surumi, 19.2.2022; photo: author)

19. The abbreviation “G.B.” stands for *gaonbura* (“village headman”), a post given to Vikhepu by the British administration.

20. During the subsequent interview, Qheniho speculated that the honoured person could have been Hutton himself. Later, he suggested that this type of song was also related to warfare. The exact meaning of the song remains unclear.

In the interview that followed the listening session, I asked Qheniho about the connection of his granduncle Vikhepu Ayemi to Hutton. After outlining the ancestry of his family, Qheniho pointed out that Vikhepu himself did not have any direct descendants because his only son died as an infant from the Spanish Flu, as did Vikhepu's wife and eventually he himself.²¹ Qheniho then told us that Vikhepu assisted the British administration as an interpreter from 1909-10 to 1919, which suggests that he had held the post already before Hutton's tenure in Nagaland began. Furthermore, Qheniho pointed out that in his capacity as interpreter, Vikhepu was not in charge of collecting taxes but acted as a spokesperson for his people because he could speak Nagamese and Hindi, apart from his mother tongue, the Sumi language. Moreover, he told us that Vikhepu did not join the British army to fight in Europe during World War One, like many Sumi men did, because of his post as an interpreter for the British administration.

During the interview, we handed over to Qheniho a printout of the photograph that had served as a template for Vikhepu's portrait in *The Sema Nagas* (1921b), a gesture that was appreciated by him because he was unaware of the fact that the portrait was based on a photograph. When we went through the names of the other four interpreters who also participated in the recording, as the cylinder inlay suggests, Qheniho recognized one of the names but was unfamiliar with the other three. Moreover, he expressed his gratitude for Hutton's anthropological research because of the knowledge his family has gained from his works, a comment that broadly seemed to refer to the information on Sumi culture that Hutton provides in his monograph *The Sema Nagas* (1921b). Qheniho then explained how the right to the post of village headman was passed down through hereditary kinship from Vikhepu's father Hekshe via Vikhepu and Vikhepu's younger brother Vihoto to himself.²² At one point, Qheniho asked for permission to make a remark, and then shared the following anecdote:

Hutton was [British] and he was so brave... After J. H. Hutton came here, he came to notice that Vikhepu was so brave among the Sumis [...], so courageous, and then [...] he tried to become good friend with Vikhepu. Sir J. H. Hutton, after knowing [Vikhepu] properly [...], he told Vikhepu not to [address] him as "Sir", but to [address] him as a friend. In 1916, Hutton appointed Vikhepu as a chief [gaonbura] and then opened his own [i.e., Vikhepu's] private office for the village. [...] Red blanket was issued. I am sure you know what the red blanket means? Red blanket is all about the people who... [At this point, Vikishe pointed to the red vest that Qheniho wore and said "Yes, this is the one... during that time, it was like a blanket, na?"] That blanket was issued from here, [the one] which was given by J. H. Hutton to Vikhepu, and [Vikhepu] was told to issue that blanket [...]. [T]hat blanket was worn only by the chiefs, the G.B.s. Four to five tribes [from] Nagaland, they came [to] this very place and took that red blanket. (interview with Qheniho Jakhalu, Surumi, 19.2.2022)

After the interview, Qheniho and Vikishe led us to a tree in front of the family's kitchen and dining room (Fig. 7), where we were told that J. H. Hutton and Vikhepu Ayemi had planted it together as a symbol of their friendship before Vikhepu's death. According to the family, Hutton came to Surumi to hold a speech at Vikhepu's funeral. Qheniho then excused himself, as he had to leave for a village council meeting that took place that day.

During the lunch break, Vikishe showed me a copy of the booklet *Sürü Xülhe* ("The History of Surumi") (Shikhu et al. 2021), written in the Sumi language and published by the village council in 2021. Apart from details on previous and current administrative organizations and cultural activities of the village,

21. After the death of his wife, Vikhepu planned to remarry but passed away before he could do so (personal conversation with Qheniho Jakhalu, 19.2.2022).

22. Qheniho pointed out that like Vikhepu, Hekshe and Vihoto had been *dobashi-s* and *gaonbura-s*.



Figure 7: Branchless tree (right), planted by J. H. Hutton and Vikhepu Ayemi, in front of the *achükaki* (kitchen and dining room, centre left) (Surumi, 19.2.2022; photo: author)

the booklet features a section on notable historical events, which includes a half page displaying Vikhepu Ayemi's portrait from *The Sema Nagas* with a reference to the monograph.²³

After the lunch break, I held a listening session with Heshevi Awomi (b. 1945 or 1946), the widow of Vikhepu's nephew Hokiye.²⁴ We first played to her Hutton's cylinder recording No. 14, the same recording that her son Qheniho had just heard. After taking off the headphones, she said that she could not understand the song because it was sung in the *tuku* dialect, and that this was a dialect of Sumi music that differed considerably from their vernacular. Nevertheless, she was familiar enough with this type of song to state that it was traditional, performed by men only, and still practised today. Like Qheniho, she associated the song with festivals.

Subsequently, I played to her two other Sumi songs recorded by Hutton, an agricultural work song (cylinder recording No. 9: "Ishi no ghi sholu"; Hutton 1921b, 116) and a song praising a warrior (cylinder recording No. 13: "Inato-no Likelio i-pfu-ghe"; Hutton 1921b, 177-78, 363, 370). After listening to these, she said that the melodies reminded her of songs she had heard in her childhood when working in the fields. I then returned to the topic of cylinder recording No. 14, interested in her thoughts on Vikhepu's participation. I asked her how she felt about the fact that Hutton had recorded the voice of her uncle. She politely replied that she was grateful to have the opportunity to listen to the recordings. Unsatisfied with this reply, I enquired if she thought that it was a good thing that Hutton had recorded Vikhepu, which induced her to share two anecdotes with me. After hearing the first one, Vikishe laughed and hesitated to speak, seemingly embarrassed to translate what he had just heard from his grandmother. He then translated her anecdote:

Vikhepu was the *dobashi*.. who worked under J. H. Hutton. So, whenever they [were] in the office together, whatever dispute it [was]..., whenever they [were] together, J. H. Hutton, whenever he was about to write, whenever [Vikhepu] was in the office, he used to shake, out of nervousness maybe,

23. The inclusion of the portrait in the booklet is significant because it illustrates how a visual representation of Sumi Naga culture from one of Hutton's monographs has become a means for a Sumi village community to represent itself to others.

24. Hokiye was the son of Vikhepu's younger brother Vihoto.

but we are not sure..., maybe out of nervousness. In the presence of Vikhepu, he used to shiver. [That is], at first, before they became close friend[s], because Vikhepu... worked under him, right? [...] J. H. Hutton, he was so confused, because whenever he [was] in the presence of Vikhepu, when they [were] in the same office, [at] the same table, he used to shiver. (Interview with Heshevi Awomi, Surumi, 19.2.2022)

She then told another anecdote about a dream that Hutton once had. When she described how Hutton saw Vikhepu high above him in his dream, she gesticulated excitedly with her hands (Fig. 8):

One fine day, J. H. Hutton got a dream... [In] his dream, he saw Vikhepu in a three-storey building on the third [storey], and [Hutton] was just on the ground floor, watching him... In his dream, [Hutton] saw [it] like that. So, he came to [the] realization, in his own realization...[that] under the government rule, he is the head, but [in] this very area, in this very location...,²⁵ he realized that he is never above Vikhepu. That's what he assumed after his dream.... So, after that [...], on that very day, [Vikhepu] was given the power of kingship in this very area.²⁶ [...] After that, J. H. Hutton [gave] permission, and then gave his power to Vikhepu.²⁷ [...] He was given the power to rule, and he was told that he [i.e., Hutton] wouldn't be interrupting. (ibid.)



Figure 8: Heshevi Awomi narrating the anecdote of Hutton's dream (Surumi, 19.2.2022; photo: Suneplong Imchen)

25. Here, Heshevi presumably referred to the wider Surumi region.

26. Perhaps, the phrase "was given the power of kingship in this very area" referred to the village community's act of bestowing the post of *akükatou* (village headman) to Vikhepu. According to Vikishe, the village of Surumi was founded by nine Sumi clans and only two of these, the Ayemi and Awomi clans, are eligible to nominate candidates for the post of the *akükatou*, which they occupy in turns (personal conversation with Vikishe Jakhlu, 10.12.2022).

27. The phrase "[Hutton] gave his power to Vikhepu" could refer to Hutton's act of bestowing the post of *gaonbura* to Vikhepu. Formally, the District Magistrate was in charge of appointing *gaonbura*-s, but Hutton was only Subdivisional Officer in 1916. Therefore, Hutton must have conferred the title upon Vikhepu in the name of the District Magistrate.

When I asked Heshevi how she came to know about the story and the dream, she replied that she had learned about them from her forefathers, and that she thought Hutton probably had not told the dream to Vikhepu, but rather to someone else. This implies that her forefathers got to know about Hutton's dream narration indirectly through an intermediary, possibly one of their family members. I contented myself with these details and refrained from asking further questions about the origin of her anecdotes, to avoid raising the impression of questioning their authenticity. Satisfied with these surprising responses to Hutton's recordings, I concluded the listening session shortly after.

After another meeting with Qheniho in the afternoon, we thanked our hosts for their participation in our project, packed up, and left for Mokokchung. The following day, we travelled back to Kohima. After our return, I realized that I had heard two dream narrations within the span of three days, which seemed remarkable. Was it possible that Lanuakum's dream experience had foreshadowed future events, just like Hutton's dream had done? A few weeks later, when I began to catalogue my field recordings at home in Kolkata, I started to evaluate the accounts of Qheniho and Heshevi.

Interpreting the oral accounts of Vikhepu's descendants

In what follows, I offer an interpretation of the anecdotes on Hutton and Vikhepu that I heard in Surumi, paying particular attention to how the anecdote of Hutton's dream is related to traditional Naga practices of dream narration and interpretation. In doing so, I largely disregard the question of whether their oral accounts are based on real historical events or not, as it is not my intention to judge the veracity of the accounts that Qheniho and Heshevi shared with me. Rather, I try to arrive at an understanding of what meaning the anecdotes carry for the family, and, in a wider sense, consider what deductions this allows about how contemporary Naga society might process its colonial past.

It is important to bear in mind that Hutton had a considerable interest in Naga practices of dream narration and interpretation because this fact may help us understand why and how Sumi community members got to know about one of his dream experiences. In his first monograph, he speaks of the Angami "science of dreaming" and explains Angami practices of dream interpretation (Hutton 1921a, 246-47), recounting a premonitory dream that one of his Angami interpreters shared with him on one of his tours through the Naga Hills district (247). His second monograph includes some details on dream interpretation as practised in Sumi culture. Amongst others, Hutton discusses the role of *thumomi*-s, individuals that he characterizes as "seers" or "witches" (Hutton 1921b, 213). According to Hutton, a *thumomi* is "an intermediary between private persons and the spirits" and a "dreamer of dreams and skilled in the interpretation thereof, a curer of illness, and a discoverer of stolen property" (Hutton 1921b, 232). The monograph includes two photographs of *thumomi*-s, both of them women (plate facing page 232). On the topic of dream interpretation, Hutton also held correspondence with the British physician and anthropologist Charles Gabriel Seligman (1873-1940), who was influenced by the theory of "dream types", developed by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).²⁸ In one of his letters to Seligman, Hutton thus describes a dream he once had at a government bungalow in Baimho, which led him to empirically test the villagers' claim that the place was haunted (Heneise 2018, 14-15). These references to Naga dream culture in Hutton's publications and correspondence suggest that he spoke about dreams and dream interpretation with his Naga interpreters from time to time, and perhaps even shared some of his own dream experiences with them.

28. The Hutton Collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum includes a comparative chart of Naga dream symbols, compiled by Hutton, arguably for C. G. Seligman. The chart includes numerous examples of Angami and Sumi dream symbols with interpretation and informants' names (Hutton Collection, Pitt Rivers Museum, box 3). The chart includes the names of two Sumi informants, Inzhevi and Viyito. Apparently, Inzhevi was one of Hutton's Sumi interpreters (Hutton 1921b, viii). The chart also includes comparisons to dream symbolism in Irish legends and literature. Hutton came from a family with Irish ancestry.

Although the traditional practices of dream narration and interpretation continue to play an important role in Naga society today, there is only one monograph on the topic yet, which focuses on dream narration and interpretation as practised in Angami society (Heneise 2018). With his study, Heneise demonstrates that Angami dream culture is “fundamentally social in nature”, as “[d]reams are understood as messages for the community” (50). He reports that “daily dream sharing is a practice most common among women, and particularly among married women, mothers and their daughters, and among female neighbours” (43). Furthermore, Heneise points out that “[d]ream narratives connected to significant family events are remembered and passed down through several generations, sometimes achieving mythical status within the clan. Such narratives, in turn, become important elements in shaping group identity [and] give a sense of divine purpose to clan members...” (5-6). Considering the continued transmission of the anecdote of Hutton's dream within Heshevi's family, we can surmise that much of this holds true in the context of Sumi society, too.

Furthermore, we need to consider the fact that the Nagaland region witnessed profound social and cultural change in the British period and after Indian independence, which raises the question of why Naga practices of dream narration and interpretation continue to endure till the present day. In her study of dream interpretation in modern Egypt, Almira Mittermaier points out that dreams may “matter even (and maybe especially) in a time of war, emergency laws, and social disintegration *not* because they provide dreamers with a protective blanket of false consciousness or hallucinatory wish fulfillment, but because they insert the dreamer into a wider network of symbolic debts, relationships, and meanings” (Mittermaier 2011, 2-3). As Vikhepu was an associate of the British colonial administration in a time of rapid social and cultural change, this statement provides a possible angle for understanding why the anecdote of Hutton's dream has become so relevant amongst Vikhepu's descendants that it has been orally transmitted till today.

Regarding my fieldwork, one of the questions that come to mind is what influence my identity and positionality as a Western researcher had on my interview participants. Was it my cultural background that had triggered Qheniho and Heshevi to share with me anecdotes questioning British colonial narratives on the power relations that existed between Hutton and Vikhepu? Would they have given the same answers to a Naga researcher? Although I was assisted by two Ao Nagas in Surumi, the fact that I was the principal investigator and interviewer must have had some effect on Qheniho and Heshevi – at least it did on Vikishe, who appeared somewhat intimidated by our recording set-up. I was the interviewer, and they were the respondents. Despite the well-crafted project outline and elaborately formulated information sheets and consent forms that I used to avoid possible ethical concerns, this fact was an uncomfortable reminder that some of my project aims were of a similarly extractive nature like Hutton's research: Nagas shared with me elements of their intangible cultural heritage that I would evaluate for academic publications to advance my career. Yet the unidirectional nature of my questioning was interrupted once during the two interviews, namely when Qheniho and Heshevi told me anecdotes about Hutton and Vikhepu. In some way, this act of unsolicited speaking seemed to question the power relations between us, just as the narrative content of their anecdotes questioned the existence of a top-bottom hierarchy between Hutton and Vikhepu. While this parallel may have been a coincidence, it certainly reminds us that thoughts of colonial injustice reverberate into the present in the collective memory of cultural heritage communities and that these may influence their reactions and responses to questions about their history.

Another important point to consider is the spatial setting of the interviews. We held both interviews in the kitchen and dining room of the family, which has a hearth on the kitchen side (Fig. 9). This setting is significant because, in Naga households, the hearth constitutes not only a place of domestic labour and food production but also of social interaction and conversation, including acts of dream narration and interpretation. Referring to Angami society, Heneise writes:

Secondly, the hearth is the centre of omen interpretation, whether those omens are observed in waketime or in dreams. The hearth is where they are shared and discussed before they circulate beyond the household. Here new information obtained in dreams can often override the clan laws, and thus is a form of emergent authoritative knowledge that does not necessarily correspond

with clan genealogical knowledge. The alternatives that new forms of knowledge and information contribute form a dialectic to the conservatism of patriarchy, and this back-and-forth dynamic plays out daily in community life. (Heneise 2018, 80-81)

Considering Surumi, we can discern that indeed, patriarchal hierarchies seem to have played a role in the way how the two interviews were arranged: Qheniho, the male head of the family and headman of the village council, was our first participant, whereas Heshevi's interview took place later. Arguably, sharing the dream anecdote was a means for her to propagate her perspective on Hutton's interactions with her uncle Vikhepu.²⁹



Figure 9: Heshevi Awomi with relatives in front of the kitchen hearth (Surumi, 19.2.2022; photo: Suneplong Imchen)

Let us now consider the meaning of the narrative content of the anecdotes. Qheniho's anecdote portrayed Vikhepu and Hutton as close friends, an assumption supported by the existence of the tree planted by them that outlasted their lives. Notably, Qheniho's account characterizes Hutton as the person seeking to be associated with Vikhepu, rather than vice versa, implying that Vikhepu had a higher social status than Hutton – at least from the viewpoint of the Sumi community. Similarly, his account of Vikhepu formally appointing other village chiefs as *gaonbura-s* in Surumi suggests that his granduncle had a high social status in Sumi society and was an influential associate of the British administration. If we consider the facts that Qheniho owns a print of Vikhepu's portrait from Hutton's monograph *The Sema Nagas* with an added abbreviation signifying his granduncle's post ("G.B.") and that the portrait features in the booklet *Sürü Xülhe*, we can surmise that Qheniho uses these historical references to support his administrative leadership claims in the village today. In this context, it is important to note that in the personality of Qheniho, Sumi hereditary and governmental leadership roles converge, as was the case with

29. Hokishe Sema characterizes the Awomis as the priest clan of the Sumi community, perhaps one of the reasons why it was Heshevi who narrated the anecdote of Hutton's dream. Under the heading "Awomi the priests", Sema writes: "[Naga] priests performed rites in all ceremonies and festivals of the village. They are highly respected in societies and they are placed second to the chiefs in societies. They also foretell the future events and thus guide the life of the village." (Sema 1986, 169).

his granduncle Vikhepu, his great-grandfather Hekshe, and his grandfather Vihoto, all of whom were hereditary Sumi leaders as well as *dobashi*-s and *gaonbura*-s appointed by the British administration.³⁰

Heshevi's anecdotes, on the other hand, focussed more on the psychological aspects of Vikhepu's interactions with Hutton. The first anecdote portrayed Vikhepu as a personality exuding an overwhelming charisma on his surroundings, causing Hutton to shiver in his presence, an image standing in striking contrast to Pawsey's description of Hutton's dominant and violent conduct with his Naga subjects. To decipher the more complex meaning of the dream anecdote, it is helpful to recapitulate its basic outline: Hutton experiences a dream in his sleep and then interprets it. Prompted by his interpretation, he adjusts his actions in the waking world, based on the insights that his dream has offered him. This sequence of experiences and actions is reminiscent of Naga dream culture, which is characterized by the pattern of dream experience, narration, interpretation, and adjustment of actions in the waking world (Heneise 2018, 5). The only notable difference is that Heshevi's anecdote skipped the part of Hutton narrating his dream,³¹ which was substituted by Heshevi's re-narration of its content. This raises questions about the agency of Hutton. Perhaps, the dream experience originated not from him but from someone else? Thus, a possible trajectory could have been that one of Heshevi's ancestors had the dream and then narrated it to their relatives, who ascribed it to Hutton at a later point in time through processes of projection (Franz 1980). While this seems like a plausible possibility, we need to keep in mind that dream interpretation occurs in many cultures, including the Irish (Ettlinger 1948), to which Hutton was connected through his ancestry. Thence, he may have been familiar with Irish traditional practices of dream interpretation before his tenure in Nagaland, where he then experienced and interpreted one of his dreams, as described in Heshevi's anecdote.

Like Qheniho's account, Heshevi's anecdote of Hutton's dream concerns acts of power bestowal. Yet there is a significant difference: in Qheniho's anecdote, Vikhepu bestows power on behalf of the British administration, while in Heshevi's anecdote, power is bestowed upon Vikhepu by the Sumi community and the British administration. In her anecdote, Hutton's dream experience appears to foreshadow the village community's action of appointing Vikhepu as a chief. Retrospectively recognizing the connection between his dream experience and this action of the village community, Hutton bestows special administrative powers upon Vikhepu and allows him to rule over the Surumi region without British interference as a quasi-autonomous leader. Thereby, the dream anecdote portrays the Sumi people, embodied in the personality of Vikhepu, as able to withstand the dominant forces of British colonialism on account of their inherent character strength and moral superiority - at least in the Surumi region. The dream symbolism supports this interpretation, with the difference in elevation between the two men suggesting that Vikhepu's social status as village headman of Surumi and Sumi clan leader surpassed Hutton's rank as Subdivisional Officer of the British colonial administration by far. Arguably, Vikhepu's appearance on the third floor of a multi-storey building connotes his involvement in the affairs of the British administration, as traditional Naga architecture is characterized by single-storey constructions (Hutton 1921a, 50ff.; 1921b, 38ff.).

Linguistically, my interviews with Qheniho and Heshevi were hampered by my inability to speak the Sumi language and by Vikishe's limited English vocabulary, which constrained his choice of words during the interpretation of our interviews. Nevertheless, his usage of the term "kingship" appears peculiar, which he seemed to employ to denote Vikhepu's position as the headman of the village of Surumi, or perhaps as the leader of the wider Surumi region, in any case, a small geographical expanse hardly justifying use of the expression "kingship", a concept that is strictly speaking not part of traditional Sumi society,³² and, moreover, usually understood as referring to the leadership of larger polities. We can surmise, then, that

30. Personal conversation with Qheniho Jakhalu, 19.2.2022.

31. Arguably, Hutton must have narrated his dream to someone, as otherwise knowledge of the dream could not have been transmitted within Heshevi's family.

32. Traditional Sumi culture does not know the concept of kingship as such but is characterized by hereditary aristocratic leadership structures that provide the foundation for village chieftainship (Wouters 2018, 127-28; Hutton 1921b, 150).

Vikishe chose the term “kingship” not only for want of a more suitable English word but also because he wanted to express that Vikhepu’s exceptional prestige and social standing transcended cultural barriers and hence overrode the social hierarchies of British India.

The fact that Qheniho’s and Heshevi’s anecdotes have been transmitted orally within the family since the early 20th century suggests that they have considerable relevance to the family because they contribute to their self-understanding of their social and cultural identity. Specifically, the anecdotes seem to contribute to the family’s self-understanding of their social status in the village of Surumi and within Sumi society, and to the ways how they remember the relations of their ancestors to the British colonial administration. In this regard, the anecdote of Hutton’s dream appears particularly relevant, not only because it highlights Vikhepu’s high social status in Sumi society and his association with the British administration, but even more so because it presents a counter-perspective to Hutton’s implicit statements on the power relations between him and his Naga subjects: Hutton represents them as subordinates, but the dream anecdote inverts this relation and elevates Vikhepu to a higher social standing.

Although it remains unclear to what extent the family has engaged with Hutton’s publications, some of them are certainly aware of Hutton’s second monograph, as Qheniho’s ownership of a print of Vikhepu’s portrait indicates. This and the portrait’s inclusion in the booklet *Sürü Xülhe* illustrate that there is a sense of pride among him and his family members about the fact that Hutton included a portrait of their ancestor in a monograph that has become a reference work on Sumi culture. Yet in a more subtle sense, they may perceive the existence of the portrait as testifying a subordinating act of human objectification because Vikhepu makes his appearance as a human exhibit, captured on paper and devoid of agency. Possibly, this notion has contributed to the family’s sense that their perspectives on the two men’s interactions need to be conveyed to future generations as a counter-perspective to Hutton’s publications, which may have led to the continued transmission of the anecdotes within the family. We can surmise that for them, the same dichotomy of meaning may apply to Hutton’s sound recording of Vikhepu, which immortalized his voice and made him an object of research at the same time.

Are the family’s oral accounts, then, a manifestation of a revisionist perspective on the colonial history of Nagaland that challenges Hutton’s representation of colonial hierarchies in the Naga Hills district? Are their accounts just the expression of an inferiority complex that has led to wishful thinking about an ancestor who withstood the subjugating forces of the British Empire? This interpretation would certainly perpetuate colonial patterns of thinking by presuming that Western written sources are automatically more credible than the oral accounts of an indigenous community. After all, many details about the day-to-day realities of British rule over the Naga Hills district remain unclear, including the question of to what extent the workings of the colonial administration pervaded into the lives of village communities. We know for a fact that in this period, British rule over the Naga Hills district was characterized by a system of indirect rule, in which leading Naga figures took on administrative roles on behalf of the British administration. This raises the possibility that in some cases, administrators like Hutton may have bestowed far-reaching powers upon Naga associates they held in high esteem, perhaps sometimes to the extent that these powers resembled privileges of autonomous rulership.

Mittermaier’s statement about the relevance of dream interpretation to the framing of “symbolic debts, relationships, and meanings” (Mittermaier 2011, 2-3) provides perhaps the most useful model for the interpretation of the Sumi family’s oral accounts, though not all of them concerned dreams. Certainly, their accounts bear testimony to the fact that British colonial rule over the Nagaland region was not a straightforward matter but required constant negotiation with indigenous concepts of cultural and social hierarchy. Therefore, it is a futile endeavour to search for an answer to the question of whether British or Sumi Naga hierarchies ultimately prevailed in Hutton’s interactions with Vikhepu. Perhaps more aptly, we can regard the accounts of Vikhepu’s descendants as a testimony to the complex workings of the British colonial administration, which did not seek to abolish indigenous hierarchies and substitute them with societal structures imported from the West, but rather to work with these hierarchies and employ them as a tool to achieve administrative aims. Thus, we can argue that both British colonial sources and the family’s oral accounts are correct, as they reflect two different opinions about social hierarchies arrived at from

different cultural vantage points: for the British, Vikhepu and other Nagas were quite simply subordinates of the colonial administration, notwithstanding their social status in Naga society. For the Nagas, on the other hand, the actions of the colonial administration certainly had some influence on their lives, yet British notions of social hierarchy were something that remained abstract, superficial, and ultimately of little relevance to village communities, where traditional structures of social order remained much more tangible and relevant to daily lives than the power structures superimposed by the administration.

Conclusion

What, then, can we conclude from the oral accounts of the family? From an ethnomusicological perspective, they demonstrate the powerful effects that reconnecting cultural heritage communities with historical sound recordings can have, as illustrated by the emotional responses of Qheniho and Heshevi. Although we had never met before, they shared with me personal anecdotes about one of their ancestors in an informal manner after listening to Hutton's recordings, inspired by the mental associations the recordings had evoked in their minds. In this sense, their oral accounts illustrate that the domain of Naga oral tradition, including their performing arts, is deeply connected to the domain of Naga oral history, as both inform each other and contribute to shaping the collective memory of communities on their past.

Furthermore, we can recapitulate that Hutton's publications continue to inform the family's understanding of their genealogy, the history of their village, and Sumi culture, together with orally transmitted accounts about the connections of their ancestors to the British colonial administration. In this dual mode of knowledge production through written and oral sources, Hutton's publications play an important role. Arguably, his favourable representations of Vikhepu contributed to the family's perception that Vikhepu was perhaps the most important historical figure among their ancestors, which promoted the uninterrupted intergenerational transmission of their oral accounts of the two men's interactions through acts of narration, listening, and re-narration till the present day. This, in turn, illustrates how British colonial publications continue to inform not only the self-perception but also the discursive modes of Naga communities till today.

At this point, it is hard to assess the consequences of my fieldwork in Surumi with Hutton's recordings, which constituted an external intervention in these forms of knowledge production that have taken place in the family over generations. Will Hutton's recording of Vikhepu's voice become another stone in the mosaic of the family's collective memory of their ancestry, increasing Vikhepu's significance in their eyes even further? In the coming months, I will deposit the video recordings of my fieldwork with Hutton's cylinder recordings at the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology in Gurgaon, as permanent archival documentation of the project outcomes. In this way, the video recordings of the family's oral accounts will become accessible to the wider public and remain preserved for future generations, as an archival resource offering a counter-perspective to the racially biased representations of Naga interpreters that proliferated in the Western world during the colonial period. In this sense, I hope that my documentation of the family's perspectives on the two men's interactions will become useful as a resource for further research on the complex social and cultural dynamics that shaped the encounters of the British with the Nagas.

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