

An Anthropologist and Baptist Missions.

DR. VON FÜRER-HAIMENDORF is an Austrian anthropologist who went out to India in 1936 to spend a year among the Nagas, on the north-eastern frontier of Assam and Burma, and who has published in *The Naked Nagas* (Methuen, 1939) an account of his experiences, and of the life and customs of the people. The author states in the Preface that this is not a scientific book, and that his scientific material is being published elsewhere. One of its chapters consists of an attack on the work of the American Baptist Mission among these hill folk, away beyond our own Lushai Mission. This appears to have been the only Mission with which the author came into direct contact, and his complaints are against things which are not peculiar to the outlook of the missionaries of a single station or mission. His chapter is headed "Heathens and Baptists," and is embellished with some sneers against Baptists and baptism.

A more modest man would have hesitated before launching this attack against men who, instead of spending a short time amongst these people in the pursuit of their own private interests, had made their home amongst them with the single desire to serve them. Dr. von Fürer-Haimendorf professes a deep affection for these primitive people, but he has no word of tribute for these missionaries, who have given clearer evidence of a lasting affection for them. He prefers to leave them to their self-sacrificing service, while he pours scorn on them in another land, where they cannot even reply. Happily he has provided the reply to his own strictures, and the pages of his own book are sufficient to expose the hollowness of his attack.

In the old days, he tells us, the older boys and girls were not allowed to sleep in the houses of their parents, lest it led to incest; the boys were educated in the *morungs*, and there they slept. Now, however, the Christians condemn these institutions, and where the Mission works the *morungs* are falling into decay, with the consequent disintegration of the social life of the community.

The nature of this social life the author describes with great frankness. It is marked by utter immorality, and his gentle suggestion that the missionaries were removing a check on incest offers a grossly unfair implication that they were relaxing the control of sexual purity. Amongst the Nagas, we are told, a

woman first goes to the house of her husband when she has borne a child. Prior to that, even after her marriage, she remains in her father's house. There, both before she is married and after, she receives the favours of her lovers, and even after marriage is by no means limited to her husband. When her child is born, and she goes to her husband's house, he must receive her child as his, even though he knows it is the fruit of an illicit union. In his Preface the author refers to "their promiscuous love affairs," and he tells how the boys steal off at nights to the granaries to dally with the girls, and how, in one district, the girls put glowing ash under their beds as a sign that their lovers may share them. These are the charming customs that are being undermined by the missionaries.

To an anthropologist, perhaps, it is of importance that these customs should be preserved in the world, but scarcely to a lover of men. For the author gives us glimpses into the bitter pain that these customs bring. He tells us of one Shankok, of whom he became very fond. When still a boy he was married to a pretty girl, who did not lack lovers while she lived at home. She came into his house when she had borne a daughter, who was not his child. Shankok had no interest in her, or in her child, and treated her with studied contempt. He already had two children of his own, who were growing up in other homes as the children of other men, and now he had a love affair with another married girl, named Shikna. When Shikna was about to become a mother by him he knew that she would have to go to her husband's home, and be lost to him for ever, and he was filled with deep sorrow at the prospect. "His heart aches for his love, Shikna," says the author, "and his spirit revolts against a fate which, I must admit, is in no way enviable." That unenviable lot, and the yet more unenviable lot of his despised wife, are the fruit of the customs the anthropologist finds so full of charm, and the missionaries who are seeking to liberate the people from those customs are working to spare the Shankoks of another generation this needless suffering.

The missionaries are also attacked because they forbid their converts to drink rice-beer, which refreshes on hot days, encourages to carry harvest-baskets, and loosens the tongue. The author tells us how, in the harvest fields, boys and girls work together, the girls being, more often than not, the mistresses of the boys, who take a pride in making their companions so drunk that they must carry them home. "One evening," he writes, "as I was coming home with Shankok through the ripening fields, we heard peals of laughter coming from one of the field-houses. Shankok whispered to me, it must be an 'end-of-the-weeding feast.' Sure enough, the next moment out tottered a girl, who

subsided almost at once on the ground. Boys tumbled screaming out of the hut, and with roars of laughter tried to drag the fallen girl to her feet; but they were not very successful, for she only stayed weakly where she was, and seemed incapable of making any effort herself. The six other girls, who one after the other appeared in the doorway, did not seem to me any more sober than the first, the pretty Meniu, of Shankok's clan, by now hanging helplessly round the neck of a Bala boy. He made short work of it, and taking the half-unconscious girl laughingly on his back, walked triumphantly ahead, while the other tottering girls followed, very much with the support of their friends. The light of the deep yellow moon creeping over the mountains shone full on this rollicking bacchanal, and the evening stillness was rent by shrill, drunken laughter. 'Look, Sahib,' whispered Shankok, 'the boy there with Meniu on his back is Henyong. Until a few weeks ago he went with Liphung, the daughter of Yona, every night; but she has married, and now he runs after Meniu. The poor girl, she has had too much rice-beer to-night. Only look! now she is being sick—oh, look! all that beer on Henyong's shoulder. He will be proud of that!'" It takes an anthropologist to lament that missionaries are working to bring to an end such disgusting scenes.

Dr. von Fürer-Haimendorf reinforces his criticism here, however, by venturing into the field of economics. The missionaries are displacing rice-beer by tea, he tells us, and this disturbs the economic balance of the village. "Rice-beer is brewed from the superfluous rice," he says, "while tea and sugar must be bought in the plains with hard cash. . . . The disturbance of a well-balanced economic system often induces the Naga to seek employment in the plains as a coolie, so that he may be able to buy those 'cultural goods' the missionary has taught him to covet."

The author takes a different view of trade with the plains when it suits his purpose, however. He describes a great head-hunting feast, whose preparation takes some weeks. Much that belongs to the ceremonial dress worn on the occasion has to be imported into the district, and for this money has to be found. Hence the people carry their "pan" leaves and plaited mats to the markets of the plains. "Thus," we are told, "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. In fact, the prohibition of head-hunting deprives the Nagas, not only of an exciting sport, but also of a stimulation to increased economic efforts." Apparently, therefore, the author thinks trade is an economic evil if it brings imports of tea, but an economic boon if it brings

the materials for a head-hunting feast. He rightly confesses that his book is not scientific. It is not even consistent.

It is clear from the last quotation that Dr. von Furer-Haimendorf laments the passing of head-hunting. He tells us how some of the Nagas hold the prohibition of head-hunting responsible for many evils, and declares that they are right. "Since head-hunting has been forbidden," he says, "the intercourse between villages has become safer and more frequent, and disease, so easily carried from one village to another, takes greater toll than any of the old wars." Yet with fine inconsistency we find that when the author goes with a Government punitive expedition to Pangsha, and shares in the burning and plundering of the village, he takes a different view of head-hunting. "All these heads," he says, "convince me that we do no wrong to Pangsha in plundering the village, for what, after all, is the plundering of an evacuated village to the massacre of Saochu and Kejok? For every pig our coolies spear to-day, five human heads at least can be reckoned on that infamous raid." Apparently he did not reflect on the great stimulus trade must have had!

The Pangsha men were slave-raiders as well as head-hunters, and we are told that "the slave-raider horrifies the head-hunter just as much as the head-hunter horrifies his more peaceful neighbours." The victims of these slave raids do not work for their captors, however; they are destined to provide human sacrifices. Here, once more, Dr. von Furer-Haimendorf displays his catholicity. "It is difficult to distinguish clearly between head-hunting and human sacrifice," he says, "for the main importance of taking a head is not the glory of war, but the gain of the magical forces inherent in the skull. Why, therefore, should these forces not be acquired in a less dangerous way?" It will be observed that these practices of head-hunting and human sacrifice are directly associated with the religion of the people—that religion which the learned author finds so superior to that of the Baptist missionaries. He even describes the human sacrifices, and tells us, "The worst fate awaits those slaves who are sacrificed at the sowing of the rice, for it is said that the victim is bound to a stake, from where he must watch the flames creeping up the dry, felled jungle, roaring as the wind fans them. The spirit which leaves the poor charred body is believed to fertilise the crops." And so this diabolical cruelty springs directly out of their religion.

We are told that the converts to Christianity wear sullen faces, and that they are mere shadows of Nagas, and that where the Mission is, the radiant crowd and merry feast have gone, perhaps never to return. It is perhaps a pity Dr. von Furer-

Haimendorf was not able to look on the faces of those victims of human sacrifice, to describe the radiance he found there. He did, however, look on the faces of some slaves destined for such a fate, who were released by the Government expedition to Pangsha. Of these he says, "I have never seen more miserable creatures than these five slaves." He tells us of a slave boy who was bought from the Chongwe people. "A few old men went to Chongwe," we are told, "to fetch the slave; it was a small boy, and he had no idea what was going to happen. They put a feather head-dress on his head, and led him away with friendly words, for they felt sorry for the boy. There below, near the river, our young men lay in hiding; when they saw the boy they rushed up to him and cut him into pieces." Even heathen pity is stirred by the victims of customs whose passing a scientist deploras. For heathenism means sadder scenes than the faces that seemed to this author sullen.

Again, the missionaries are criticised because they oppose the "feasts of merit." At these, he tells us, the rich give from their plenty to entertain the whole community, and this should be recognised as the fulfilment of very Christian teaching. Now, however, the rice of the wealthy does not serve as food for the poor, but is either sold, or rots in the granaries; and one convert boasted to the author of the fullness of his granaries with blackened rice. He would seem not to allow the possibility that this rice might have been saved from the rice-beer, since the Christians do not make it; he will only have it that it was selfishly taken from the mouths of the poor, through the suppression of the truly Christian "feasts of merit." Yet the author describes one of these "feasts of merit," when rice-beer flowed freely "in enormous quantities," and "a fortune in animals" was slaughtered, and when a fertility ritual was observed in connection with the erection of two stone menhirs. Later in the book he recognises an association between these menhirs and some other stone monuments, also of fertility significance, which he saw. These were very realistic phalli, with symbols of the female complement. One would suppose that an anthropologist would be able here to see evidence that in the "feasts of merit" there is something not quite characteristic of Christianity, and that he would understand why the missionaries opposed them.

The author complains that boys who attend the school of the Mission often leave the village and go to Kohima to find work as clerks or teachers—posts that his brother-Nagas describe as "eat-and-sit work." It is surprising, therefore, to find that when Dr. von Fürer-Haimendorf was in Kohima, he was glad to find one of these Mission products, though from a different Naga district, and to engage him as his teacher. The Nagas, he

tells us, can neither read nor write; but this young man of twenty spoke, in addition to his mother tongue, Assamese, English, Hindustani, Bengali, Ao Naga, and a few words of Gurkhali. Moreover, he was a thoroughly competent teacher, "a hundred times more efficient than my learned Bengali." Here is excellent testimony to the effectiveness of Mission schools, and it may occur to fair-minded readers to wonder why the author should so dislike missions for providing what he was so glad to find. It may also seem surprising that a scientist should lament that minds so capable of learning should not be left in ignorance and stagnation.

Finally, Dr. von Fürer-Haimendorf tells us how he did not hesitate to set himself up as an authority on theology, and to advise the natives not to listen to what the missionaries told them. Perhaps it was because he carried an Oxford Bible about with him, which he used, he tells us, as a kind of book-rest to Goethe's *Faust*, that he felt able to do this. At any rate, his incursion into the realm of theology only led him into the crudest syncretism. "Lunkizungba," he told them, "is the same as the God of the Christians; only the names are different." If *The Naked Nagas* gives any fair impression of the religion of the Nagas, much more than the names are different.

Much more might be added to show how baseless are the complaints, on the evidence of this book itself, against the missionaries. They are held responsible for the prospective disappearance of the native art, which again is associated with the religious and moral ideas of heathenism. They are, admittedly, working for the extension of the Christian faith and its expression in Christian standards of life. Head-hunting, and all that is associated with it, fertility ritual and sexual licence, obscene symbolism and rollicking bacchanals, are necessarily and inevitably undermined by the success of their work. If they were not, they would be unworthy of the name of Christian missionaries. It is no dishonour to American Baptist missionaries to be scorned by an anthropologist for their loyalty to their mission.

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