

Jelle J. P. Wouters, *In the Shadows of the Naga Insurgency: Tribes, State, and Violence in Northeast India*

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Amid the extensive scholarship the Indo-Naga war has generated, this is the first book that offers an ethnographic account of how this struggle unfolds at the level of “the everyday.” It foregrounds the embodied and emplaced experiences of ordinary Naga men and women living in villages and tells and theorizes the manifold ways in which the politics of insurgency and counterinsurgency have shaped their lives. It further looks at the ways in which the Naga armed conflict, and the Indian state’s response to it, imbricate into the domains of governance, development, and the democratic process, showing how “underground” and “overground” politics have merged into a single political field.

This monograph is based on two years of fieldwork in two villages, one in western and one in eastern Nagaland, and in its approach and style is resolutely ethnographic. As such, this book indicates a return to the voluminous and rich scholarship the Nagas were once known by, especially, if also problematically, during the colonial epoch.

While evidently sympathizing with the Nagas, Wouters does not refrain from being critical in his analysis of the Naga Movement, as he is of the Indian state’s varied responses to it, but in particular of an institutionalized policy of “seduction,” in which

India's central government applies state largesse to create and co-opt a Naga administrative and political class tied to Delhi. Turning back and forth between historical accounts and contemporary ethnography, Wouters starts the book with an insightful sketch of Naga political history as it moved from the pre-colonial to the colonial period, and subsequently culminated in the declaration of Naga independence, which was declared one day ahead of India's independence.

Central to the book, however, is what the author conceptualizes as the "insurgency complex," which captures how the Indo-Naga conflict "has long flooded the banks of political conflict and washes through all fields of social life" (10). The "insurgency complex" runs through all the chapters of the book, in which it unravels itself variously in relation to identity, ceasefire economics and politics, governance and administration, corruption and moral reasoning, and democratic politics.

Particularly powerful and pertinent is the argument that the Indo-Naga ceasefire, which was inked in 1997 and has existed ever since without it leading to a political settlement, manifests itself on the ground not as a period of relative political stasis and the cessation of violence, the way ceasefires are usually understood, but "as a complex and contentious social reality that saw the continuation of conflict by other forms and means" (29). This reveals itself particularly in the reigniting of a pre-existent and volatile struggle fought out within the wider Indo-Naga conflict and between now-rival Naga underground factions over historical legitimacy; leadership contests; ideological differences; and territorial, tribal, and taxation domination. The issue of "taxation," in turn, Wouters shows, has become particularly charged, as many Nagas have grown somewhat disillusioned with the Naga Movement, not necessarily of what it stands for (Nagas' right to self-determination), but because especially after the ceasefire they noted a change in the motivations and behavior of many "national workers," as cadres of Naga underground groups are referred to locally. As opposed to earlier generations of Naga fighters, these "post-ceasefire recruits" do not have the embodied experiences of suffering and sacrifice, and they are now perceived to be increasingly driven by self-interest and pecuniary motives, and this is widely resented.

Chapters 4–6 engage the ways in which Naga villagers have experienced and consequently "see" the Indian state and its development programs and projects. They show how the initial state approach of "coercion," through state violence, became over time complemented by a "policy of seduction," through state largesse, with the clear aim of weaning Nagas away from the politics of insurgency. While this policy was successful to an extent, it came with varied societal consequences. One such consequence was the emergence of a "class society," whose origins can be traced to a "neo-tribal developmentalism" (159), which was put in place, and on political purpose, by the post-colonial Indian state. Another major fallout of the policy of seduction is the emergence of a distinct moral economy of state resources, which creates a "conducive" atmosphere for the pilfering of state resources, or what is conventionally called corruption. Abstaining, however, from any simplistic explanations of Nagaland's contemporary crisis of corruption, Wouters argues that corrupt practices, and the absence of outright local moral condemnation of those who engage in them, need to be "situated in relation to Nagas' embodied experiences of state violence, the continuity of Naga insurgency, and the ambiguities of a now long-standing policy of seduction" (199).

Chapter 6, in particular, focuses on the contemporary demand for "Frontier Nagaland," which insists on the bifurcation of the Nagaland state through the creation of a

separate state for so-called eastern Nagas, a demand that goes against the grain of the wider Naga Movement. This demand traces its origins to the colonial encounter, or the absence thereof on the part of the eastern Nagas, who were never formally administrated by the colonial government, as opposed to the western Nagas. The contemporary moment, however, is spurred by an experienced neglect on the part of the Nagaland government, which eastern Nagas see as being controlled and dominated by western Nagas, a sentiment Wouters illustrates through a series of ethnographic narratives. He thus argues “how the demand for Frontier Nagaland, while tracing back to the colonial era, implies that the creation and subsequent functioning of Nagaland state produced new constellations of power, new fault-lines, and new axes of differentiation” (209).

The last chapter, “Performing Democracy in Nagaland,” offers ethnographic entries both into how what is locally called “the underground factor” interferes in “overground” elections, and into the ways Naga villagers apply their agency to appropriate and rework the Indian democracy process, which they perceive as alien to their own cultural lifeworlds and uses, particularly in struggling over pre-existing divisions over status, standing, and dominance, both between villages and between clans within villages.

Culminating with an epilogue, Wouters reflects on the possibility of Naga society moving beyond the insurgency complex, a massive and arduous task that will well surpass the signing of a now-anticipated political agreement but whose success will be crucially dependent on it. One could have perhaps hoped for a chapter on the role of Christianity and church associations, which also have a role to play in the “insurgency complex.” It might also be pointed out that this book predominantly focuses on the manifold experiences of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Nagaland. The experiences of Naga communities in neighboring Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and across the border into Myanmar continue to await their ethnography. On the whole, this monograph is an excellent treatise and the most comprehensive and original work that has emerged on social and political life as it unfolds in the shadows of Naga insurgency. Particularly, Wouters must be applauded for staying close to his ethnography in his analysis, which leads him to not romanticize the Naga struggle, something many other books on the Naga Movement are guilty of. This book will be of great benefit for anthropologists, sociologists, and South Asia and Southeast Asia scholars, in addition to those interested in the Naga. But not only should this book be of interest to scholars, it should equally be of interest to a non-academic audience, including Nagas themselves, as this monograph is written in engaging and lucid prose, often in narrative form, and is very relatable and accessible to the very community the author is writing about, which is not something all anthropological monographs achieve.

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