Nagas as a 'Society against Voting?'

Consensus-Building, Party-less Politics and a Culturalist Critique of Elections in Northeast India

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Abstract

Interrogating the normative notion of 'man the voter', this article draws on ethnography among the Chakhesang Naga in Northeast India to communicate a cosmopolitan, culturalist critique – and an answer to this critique – of liberal democracy's hallmark of party-based elections, individual autonomy and equal voting rights. While Nagas have been decorated as 'traditional democrats', their sense of the good political life is shaped by values of communal harmony, consensus-building and complimentary coexistence. However, these are threatened by practices and principles of liberal democracy, which led Phugwumi villagers to attempt a procedural adaptation of elections by substituting individual voting for consensus-building and the *selection* of a leader. I use this ethnographic case to provincialize the sprawling contemporary sense of 'liberal universalism', and to postulate that, in their political sociality, Nagas are a 'society against voting', an adaptation of Pierre Clastres' (1977) *Society against the State*.

Keywords: communitarian ethics, consensus-building, elections, India, liberal democracy, Nagas, voting

It was potentially scandalous that while voters lined up behind polling booths in the village of Phugwumi, someone wrote the following phrase in the dusty rear window of a nearby parked car: 'Election is an insult to each other by vote'. Phugwumi is a Chakhesang Naga hilltop village located in the tribal highlands of Nagaland in India's 'remote' Northeast.[1] It was polling day for the 2013 Nagaland State Legislative Assembly elections, marking the final episode of weeks and months of frenzied and ferocious electoral politicking in the village. *Athe* (a Chokri term for 'grandfather') expressed his relief that the election season was finally coming to a close. Seated on the portico of his bamboo-walled house, he told me as we sat down for an interview:

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> During elections people stop talking to each other, not even saying so much as 'telezüme?' ['roaming?'[2]] when they pass each other by. Money, greed, whiskies, and no one willing to listen and think what's best for our village. It is shameful. Elections have made our villagers worse!

For Athe, as for most Phugwumi elders, the amoral and self-centred activities of political life, especially in times of elections, were a cause of great concern and frustration. With nostalgic yearning, elders spoke about a time before political parties and elections, when village life was less divided, cooperation more commonplace, and village leaders mature, wise and selfless (*müphrümüvo*).

The pre-electoral era was one that could be remembered vividly because formal democracy arrived comparatively late in the Naga uplands. Seeing the state of India as an invading and colonizing force, the Naga National Council (NNC) resisted and rebelled against incorporation into postcolonial India from the mid 1950s onwards, and successfully boycotted India's first general elections in 1952 and then again in 1957.[3] Earlier, during the colonial era, the (then) Naga Hills District was designated first as a 'backward tract' and then as an 'excluded area'; the 'privileges' of voting for the Imperial Legislative Council and Provincial Council were not extended to either such territories. Consequently, it was only in 1964 – a year after the establishment of the Nagaland state as an envisaged (but failed) political compromise to the NNC demand for independence – that political parties, voting slips and ballot boxes came to impact Naga villages.[4]

But although elections became both regular and participatory in the years following statehood, their societal effects were deemed to be destructive to a pre-existent, culturally inflected 'moral society'. Akio Tanabe (2007: 560) describes such a 'moral society' as a vernacular space 'in which morally desirable human relationships rather than individual rights or political gains are at issue'. What legal and procedural codes of representative democracy and party politics disrupted was the communitarian and political commensality of village life, whose ideals of communal harmony, consensus-building and complimentary coexistence (while not always achieved in practice) were seen as foundational of the good social and political life. Party politics and elections divided and unsettled this traditional *Gemeinschaft* – of the village as a reciprocal community with shared concerns and ends. This experienced societal downfall, at the hands of electoral politics, led a Nagaland minister to propose, on the floor of the State Assembly, that the election system be reformed, since it undermined 'the Naga way of life' (cited in Ao 1993: 211). It also led at least two Nagaland Chief Ministers to espouse that elections would best be done away with altogether, while Naga intellectuals widely agreed that 'party politics has destroyed the harmony of Naga society' (Nuh 1986: 201).

Similar critiques surfaced in the wake of the 2013 state elections, with the locally commanding Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) singling out elections as 'the biggest force that is eroding the moral foundations as well as the future of the Naga people' (NBCC 2012), and the Chakhesang Public Organisation (CPO), the tribe's apex body of which Phugwumi is a constituent village, warning:

> It is time to realise that evil practices associated with electoral politics are destroying the good traditional system of our Naga Democracy, the system, which would regard the opponents as worthy and the integrity of everyone would be safeguarded as the rival groups disagree with one another. (*Morung Express* 2013)

This so-declared 'good traditional system' of 'Naga Democracy' invoked the communitarian ethos and ethics of the pre-state Naga village (Bendangjungshi 2012: 124; Biswas and Suklabaidya 2008: 184; Thong 2014: 158) where 'the collective life took precedence over the individual' (Sema 1986: 10). Any such submission of individual autonomy to village collective life was not generally experienced as forced or repressive, but was part of the ontology of a moral society, and its embedded individual self.

However, this Naga moral society was nonetheless also a 'democratic' one. Naga villages, British civil and military officers observed, 'are thoroughly democratic communities' (Davis [1851] 1969: 324), 'decidedly democratical' (Moffatt-Mills [1854] 1980: xclii), a democracy in its 'extreme' (Hutton 1965: 23), constituting 'a form of the purest democracy' (John Butler, cited in Hutton 1921: 143). Postcolonial scholars similarly characterize the prototypical 'Naga village' as a 'republic' (Vashum 2000: 59), 'ultra-republican' (Kumar 2005: 12), even as the very 'symbol of the republic' (Singh 2004: 12). This home-grown 'Naga democracy', the argument goes, became ruptured and shattered by the arrival of formal, liberal democracy. Udayon Misra (1987: 2193) wrote, 'Nagas always prided themselves as honest and straightforward people', then quoting A. Z. Phizo (who had captained the NNC in its struggle for Naga independence): 'We believe in that form of democratic government which permits the rule not of the majority but of the people as a whole'.[5] Misra continued: 'Anyone even marginally acquainted with the politics of Nagaland would agree that this idyllic picture has undergone a radical transformation'(ibid).

Even allowing for romanticized flagrancies, what remains is that among Nagas, the arrival of political parties, competitive elections and individual and equal voting rights is widely experienced as corrosive and corruptive of an earlier political sociality and moral society that was at once cherished and conceived of as decidedly democratic. Both empirically and theoretically, especially in the light of (normative) democratic theory, this is where the apprehension lies.

The making (and unmaking) of 'man the voter'

If the local equation between voting and levying insults is potentially a scandalous one, it is because the act of voting in free and competitive elections is seen as the epitome of political maturity and modernity. Most liberal political theorists contend that casting one's vote is not a mere technicality, which constructs democratic knowledge and authority (cf. Coles 2004), but is rather an emancipatory performance. Voting is seen as 'the most signal emblem of full citizenhood in the modern age' (Anderson 1996: 13), and connotative of a universalistic philosophy

of individual autonomy and choice, political equality, freedom and rightful self-expression (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997). Competitive elections are further conceived as the only process from which a representative and accountable government can emerge, while they simultaneously serve as a potent reminder that 'power' ultimately resides with 'the people'.

Ideally, in a clean and neatly orchestrated election campaign, contesting parties and candidates clearly articulate their visions, public policies and ideological positions. Electors then individually and autonomously evaluate the merits and demerits of the various positions, propositions and promises made, and on polling day, one may then freely cast a secret ballot. Even as classical anthropological scholarship has long shown how personhood is always and everywhere tied up in social relations (Carrithers et al. 1985; Mauss [1938] 1985), the modern 'man the voter' is superficially stripped from such sociality as he or she is expected to behave as an 'enlightened' and '"enchanted" individual self' (Gilmartin 2012: 411), well adept and ever desirous to deliberate political life in a rational, reflexive and detached manner, as though 'living within society yet standing outside it' (ibid.: 417).

Of course, individual voting based on political parties is just one aspect of a well-oiled democracy, yet competitive elections are 'what most people understand by democracy' (Nash 2004: 194), and in today's global promenade of liberal democracies, free, regular and participatory elections have become the benchmark for most evaluations about how far any democracy flourishes or falters. The contemporary sprawling of liberal democracies notwithstanding, authoritative configurations of 'man the voter' have not been deemed universal for very long. But whereas earlier political theorists and politicians could discuss whether a particular country or place was equipped for democracy and elections, in consideration of varying cultures, historical trajectories and economic conditions, the biggest achievement of the twentieth century, says Amartya Sen, is that a country no longer needs 'to be deemed *fit* for democracy: rather, it has to become fit *through* democracy (1999: 3–4, emphases in original). Consequently, in places whose governments or peoples do not inherently subscribe to norms of elections, or fail to behave as rational and detached voters, such standards presumably ought to be fostered by investing in their *civic culture* (Almond and Verba 1963) and 'political cultural orientation' (Tessler and Gao 2009: 197), based on the liberal maxim that 'politics can change a culture and save it from itself' (Daniel Patrick Moynihan, cited in Huntington 2000: xiv).

Among democratic projects worldwide, India draws special attention, not just because it is the world's largest democracy, but for the democratic and electoral enthusiasm reported all across the nation. Nonetheless, rather than seeing such enthusiasm as the internalization of liberal values, scholars increasingly perceive India's electoral effervescence as evidence of the socially enmeshed, 'territorial' (Witsoe 2009) and 'vernacular' (Michelutti 2007) character of Indian democracy. Across India, democratic practices, Lucia Michelutti (2007: 642) writes, 'have been gradually moulded by folk understandings of "the political" which in turn energize

popular politics'. However, India too has its liberalist guards, even as their arguments allow for contextual and cultural frames. Mukulika Banerjee (2014), in *Why India Votes*, explains that Indians vote in large numbers, not because they necessarily expect that an elected government will significantly improve their material welfare, but because elections emerged as 'aesthetic and ritual moments' that promote 'egalitarianism' and 'communitas' as they transcend, even if only momentarily, the deep everyday divisions of caste, class and gender (ibid.: 172). The meaning that ordinary people attach to voting, and the often festive manner in which votes are cast, Banerjee continues, is because voting itself has become understood as a sacrosanct act that encodes 'principles of equality, fairness, efficiency, rights, and duties, all of which are valued ideals' (ibid.: 169).

The remainder of this article reflects on a very different political context and culture. Most Nagas do not perceive of voting as a celebration of liberalist values, or see it as a sacred duty, but experience it as corrosive of culturalist projections of the good civil and political life. Drawing on ethnography and historical research among Chakhesang Nagas, I postulate that competitive, party-based elections, individual autonomy and equal voting rights are not culturally neutral exercises, but, among Chakhesangs, dissipate and disserve a pre-existent communitarian and democratic heritage. The analysis of this article does not undermine democracy as an ideal, a spirit or an aspiration, but I do see as provincial – as a reflection (and reflective) of the Enlightenment project (Sahlins 1999) – its current working model: liberal, electoral democracy. Despite its universalistic pretensions, John Dunn (2014: 3) writes, 'liberal democracy does not offer all things to all persons, since all human beings continue to vary widely in their tastes and prejudices and no set of arrangements could satisfy all of them all the time'.

What I offer, in the pages that follow, is neither a grand communitarian theory, as a counter-discourse to liberalism, nor a rustic 'arcadian space' (Shah 2010: 190), but a cosmopolitan culturalist critique against the universalization of a particular and provincial moral and democratic sense. To do so, I situate Phugwumi villagers' political reasoning and attempt to substitute individual voting with collective consensus-making in both the ethnographic *longue durée* and the vernacular, by approaching the form and substance of the enduring political ethos of the prototypical Naga 'village republic' (Wouters 2017a). Next, I focus more broadly on how such past political practices and principles resurfaced as a culturalist critique – and an answer to this critique – of competitive elections. In the process, I reason alongside those Naga elders, intellectuals and even some career politicians 'who have come to realise the evils of the party system and are seriously considering how best to salvage the traditional village unity' (Dev 1988: 27). What they envisage, I will illustrate, is an operational, culturally modulated democracy shaped by consensus-building and selecting leaders. This leads me, in the conclusion, to postulate Nagas as a 'society against voting', an adaptation of Pierre Clastres' (1977) *Society against the State.*

The quest for a pre-polling consensus candidate

Polling day was still several months away, but Phugwumi was already humming with talk about politics and politicians. State-wise, the Naga People's Front (NPF), which had ruled the state since 2003, sought to complete a hat-trick of electoral victories. The constituency's sitting Member of the Legislative Assembly belonged to the ruling government but with two former ministers and a promising political newcomer also joining the election fray, the constituency's seat was spoken of as especially competitive, and in the wake of polling day, supporters of all four candidates had reasons to believe they were in the driving seat.

While the theme of politics frequently cropped up in the everyday conversations of the villagers, what they discussed and shared did not usually concern party manifestos, public policies or left-centre-right political ideologies. These were not the substance of electoral politics locally. In Phugwumi, akin to places across the subcontinent, 'party ideology was more often than not trumped by social relations' (David Holmberg, cited in Gellner 2009: 127). At stake in Phugwumi, in terms of social binds and divides, was that for the first time two villagers had entered the same election contest. Worse still, the two candidates belonged to precisely the two clans, out of a total six, that had long struggled over standing, dominance and property within the village. While such rivalries and divisions remained mostly dormant in ordinary times, elections, everyone knew, carried the social venom to re-inflate such resentments and grievances with them becoming brooded over aloud. As both candidates were certain to invoke the affective realities of clan and would apply any means (including offerings of monies, feasts and favours) to win over other villagers, the otherwise frisk upland air, so it was feared, would soon thicken. With polling day drawing closer, norms of village cohesion and cooperation – even if occasionally fragile – would then be replaced by competition and the polarization of clan and interpersonal differences, whose after-effects were certain to linger until long after the last ballot was cast.[6]

The same problem had been experienced, years earlier, with the delegation of development projects, policies and budgets from the lower ranks of the bureaucracy down to the village. Phugwumi, akin to all Nagaland villages, was instructed to enact a Village Development Board (VDB) and voting was suggested as the mode to elect those villagers apt to the task. The development monies that poured into the village, however, were substantial, and so became opportunities for profitable (albeit illegal) cuts and commissions. No sooner had this occurred than VDB membership became widely sought after and VDB elections began to appear like state elections, including heated campaigns between villagers, rivalling camps, conflicts and the social production of resentment. Discordance became such that the *Razu Kuhu*, Phugwumi's apex body, intervened and decreed that, henceforward, VDB membership was to be adjudicated through a clan-wise *selection* system in which, every three years, the elders of the six village clans would confer and among themselves – based on intra-clan deliberation and consensus-building – select the most suitable clan member for the post.

It was such lived experiences – the notion that elections and voting create divisions, deepen rivalries and lead to exaggerated individualism – that now informed the villagers' apprehension about having two of their own contesting the election. Well into his eighties, Athe lived through all of Nagaland's elections and he was vocal about the societal and moral destruction they had brought. 'Our memories are long. If a fellow villager contests and we do not wish to support him, he and his relatives, even his entire clan, take it as betrayal and grudges grow.' Another elder agreed:

> In the past we discussed our matters and differences. We had our problems and conflicts, but we also had our own ways of dealing with them. But now villagers say: 'You wait! We'll face each other during the next election' and they then support rivalling parties and politicians. But every election makes both winners and losers. As a result, differences are no longer settled. They just linger.

In the wake of the 2013 elections, Phugwumi's Razu Kuhu called for a village-wide consultative meeting in which it was resolved that only one candidate should contest and that the villagers would therefore select a 'village consensus-candidate' through public deliberation. The resolution was declared binding, suggesting that if the politician asked to withdraw by village consensus were to refuse to obey – according to India's Constitution and Election Commission he could not be legally barred from contesting – it would be interpreted as disrespecting the will of the village (*müthidzü* or *müthikülü*, which translate as 'the community's voice' or 'the community's thought'), a serious transgression that would impede his, and his relatives', future standing and participation in village life.[7]

While the selection of a consensus-candidate was deemed a necessary procedural adaptation to safeguard the spirit of community, the 'cultural' and 'material' are everywhere closely intertwined. Several theorists have shown how, across India, democratic politics is 'substantially about access to state resources' (Prasad 2010: 142; see also Chandra 2004; Piliavsky 2014). Naga politicians, too, have a long track record of privileging their own natal villages, clans and tribes in the dispensing of state resources. On the part of Naga electors, this makes it beneficial for a village to act as a 'voting unit' and particularly to see one among their own capture the constituency. With Phugwumi's constituency counting fewer than twenty-two thousand votes, and with Phugwumi alone possessing close to 25% of these, basic maths suggested that were the village to unite behind a single candidate he would instantly be placed ahead in the polls. However, if both village candidates were to contest, then the village 'vote bank' would certainly end up divided, providing a much-needed village majority to neither. Even if no fellow-villager stood for elections, it had long been common practice for Naga villages to unite behind a particular politician, rather than individual villagers voting for competing candidates. From the beginning of post-statehood democratic politics, village elders often traded the village's collective vote in return, for instance, for

the construction of a church, community hall, school building or a bundle of corrugated galvanised iron sheets per house (Aram 1974: 198).

Even though both cultural and material considerations clearly favoured the selection of a consensus-candidate, the resolution failed to materialize. Multiple meetings took place, but it proved impossible to bridge the divisions between the two candidates and their loyalists. With just a few days until election day, the resolution was declared unsuccessful. This failure was to the dismay of many, but especially to Phugwumi elders, who took it as further evidence that the divisive forces of party politics and elections had moved beyond redemption. They were often explicit in criticizing the exaggerated individualism, open contests and competitive self-advancement they witnessed among younger generations during election seasons, and they blamed this on the principle of individual balloting and equal voting rights.

In the past, clan and village elders had been ascribed with special wisdom and acumen – accumulated over a lifetime – and their views, often wrapped in fine speeches and oratorical skills, were respected. While their words never carried the force of law, it was in elders that the maturity and foresight to transcend the mundane and to deliberate village protection and welfare was thought to lie. Elections and equal voting rights had corroded this respect and reverence for the opinions of village elders. Athe reflected thus: 'Whereas in the past our youth would whisper, and were eager to listen and learn from elders, nowadays they shout and will not listen. This is why our village could not agree on a consensus-candidate'. It indicated a social transformation Phugwumi elders felt deeply upset about: 'It is because nowadays the village is ruled by the youth', as was commented frequently when contemporary problems and issues within the village were discussed. Athe again:

> Nobody would dare to voice his aspiration to be recognized as a leader in the past. Such a person would be ridiculed as proud, and not listened to. Young people least of all. But see what is happening today; everyone wants to be a leader, even our youths. They speak loudly, but refuse to think and talk over what is best for the village, instead of what profits them personally. This was not how we used to think earlier.

While Phugwumi failed to pre-select a consensus-candidate, several other Naga villages succeeded as 'a pre-arranged agreement [took] place between village elders and political parties to select the consensus-candidate to be supported by the entire village' (Along Longkumer, cited in Amer 2014: 10). When polling day arrived, with no consensus-candidate agreed upon, Phugwumi fractured as feared into rival groups, to the extent that the Nagaland government declared Phugwumi to be 'hyper-sensitive' and dispatched armed forces to oversee the smooth conduct of polling. Amidst the rising frenzy, some village elders took it upon themselves to mediate differences, by lecturing: 'Soon this election will be over. We will still be neighbours then'.

The political ethos and moral society of the Naga 'village republic'

Here I turn to traditional home-grown Naga political theory and praxis, in whose inner logic, intricacies and ethos I suggest we find answers to Nagas' generally negative evaluation of elections, equal voting rights and party politics. I further suggest that the same body of values and logics helps to explain the attempted procedural adaptation in Phugwumi, which was intended to replace elections with consensus-building and the selection of a leader.

The Naga inhabited hills are usually said to be made up of disparate tribes. Prior to their (partial) incorporation into the British Raj, these were political communities with a fierce history of self-governance. In actual practice, however, both the locus and ethos of political organization was vested not in the tribe but in the prototypical Naga 'village republic' (Wouters 2017a). 'As with all Nagas', wrote the colonial administrator J. P. Mills (1926: 176), 'the political unit of the tribe is the village'. However, this observation must be qualified with a caveat. Namely, that while it was always evident that the centre of political gravity lay (and continues to lie) in the village, Naga 'traditional' politics was diverse, with political systems and sentiments often diverging from one village and tribe to the next. As a general principle, however, 'the commonest system of traditional governance is that there are no real chiefs at all' (Mills 1926: 28). While concurring with this view, political differences, as they existed (and persist), make Naga-wide generalizations a tricky affair, and my characterization of the political sociality inside Phugwumi may therefore be better attuned to certain Naga villages and tribes compared to others.

Much changed after Nagas' enclosure into the colonial and later postcolonial state, but the 'Naga village' found itself remapped at the centre of governance. Through a constitutional amendment, and several others acts, extraordinary judicial and executive powers were delegated to village councils and committees, while, on principle, 'the government tries not to interfere with the village administration' (Horam 1988: 18). One such act is the Nagaland Communitisation of Public Services Act (2001), which entailed the transfer of selected state functions and assets to village-based committees. Its designer, the award-winning bureaucrat Raghaw Sharan Pandey (2010: 22–23), was inspired by the 'rich social capital' inside Naga villages, which, to him, appeared an organic antidote to malgovernance and corruption:

> [The Naga village] is blessed with admirable community bonds reflecting dense and rich social capital, available in amazing abundance … The cohesion … within the villages is of ancient vintage, continuing through generations … The manner in which a village community conducts its affairs in times of sorrow or mirth, adversity or merriment, is reflective of its genius and to an observer from the outside, is remarkably fascinating. The social capital is clearly seen as performing a governance function.

This sense of community also permeates the early documentary accounts we have of Angami Nagas, of which the Chakhesang Nagas were part until they made a tribe of their own in 1946 (Wouters 2017b). John Henry Hutton (1921: 143)

characterized their political form and functioning as a 'debating society'. In addition to political decision-making, 'disputes', Hutton explained, 'when settled at all, were probably settled by a sort of informal council of elders, who would discuss matters at great length, until some sort of agreement was arrived at'. There existed, in days gone by, ritual offices called *Kümvo* (male) and *Imshopüh* (female) in Phugwumi, but their powers were limited and by and large constricted to overseeing village festivals, the observance of *gennas*[8] and agricultural rites. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1936: 923) wrote: 'the privileges of a Tevo [*Kümvo* in Phugwumi] are neither numerous nor important. He works in his fields as any ordinary villager does, and in council his voice has no more weight than that of any other man of equal wealth and moral influence'. The *Kümvo* and *Imshopüh* were thus not kings, chiefs, aristocrats or headmen, of which, indeed, Phugwumi had none.

Saying so is not to paint an anarchist history of Phugwumi. Social hierarchies existed, and mattered. For an aspirant villager to climb the social ladder, to expand his personal sway and to increase the sonority of his political voice, the throwing of successive 'feasts of merit' (*zhotho müza*) was a powerful device, a ritualized institution now known in anthropological annals as the Naga Feast of Merit (Fürer-Haimendorf [1939] 1976). Feast-givers were respected as their wealth and generosity revealed their virtue, and their views demanded attention. Bravery and physical strength, in offering protection and through ritually fertilizing the village by bringing in the 'soul matter' (Hutton 1928: 403) of decapitated enemy heads, provided another axis of social differentiation (Tinyi 2017), and in times of battle Phugwumi would usually unite behind one, or multiple, veteran warriors.

Perhaps most importantly, it was the wisdom and acumen associated with ageing that demanded listening ears. 'Age, among the Nagas', Mashangthei Horam (1988: 18) writes, 'has both prestige and power'. In Phugwumi, elders were revered, and their words commanded a respectful audience.[9] Accomplishments in terms of wealth and generosity, physical prowess and especially ageing could therefore result in positions of political prominence. However, Charles Chasie (2005: 102) stresses, 'Certainly no leader was accepted on a permanent basis. The moment the person starts boasting, his downfall would begin'. Village authority, where it existed, remained mostly nominal and resolutions were 'obeyed so far only as they accord with the wishes and conveniences of the community' (Hutton 1921: 143).

With the absence of permanent village chiefs and formal councils, how, then, were decisions ever made? In Phugwumi, it was practices and principles of consensus-building (*küdzükhoküyi*) that governed both political life and moral society. In the village, everyone was allowed to raise their voice in public, at any time, on any topic, proposing any resolution, although it must be emphasized that not everyone's voice was given equal weight. The sonority of one's political voice was set by one's antecedents and achievements, by the merit, virtue and wisdom a person had accumulated over a lifetime. This so-defined 'purest democracy' (Butler, cited in Hutton 1921: 143) of the Naga village was therefore not a 'direct democracy', as a consensus-based, fully and equally participatory and decentralized politics is sometimes imagined (cf. Graeber 2009).

In Phugwumi, the views of the village elderly, as a general political norm, superseded the voices of younger generations whose opportunism and naiveties had to be kept in check. In the cultural etiquette of the past, village youth, while never silenced, were expected to show deference by acknowledging, before speaking in public, the incomplete understanding and limited knowledge that came with being young and unmarried, the absence of fields and cattle in one's possession, and their overall still limited experience of the perils and complications of life. Women, in turn, generally spoke less than men, at least in public, and while Naga women, in general terms, have been thought of as traditionally empowered compared to women in most parts of India (Elwin 1961: 104), their involvement in political decision-making remained, and remains, marginal (Amer 2013).[10] If this 'debating society' or 'purest democracy' now connotes a patriarchal autocracy centred on the old and meritorious, the relations of reliance this produced were not enforced, but entrusted, and ever legitimized by the cultural and communitarian understanding that they had accumulated the merit and maturity to transcend purely personal and clan interests for the protection and welfare of the village at large.

Achieving village-wise consensus, hence, did not rely on the equal participation, or equal weight, of all village voices. It was also often not easy, and could entail lengthy and contentious discussions, but whereas in certain Marxist circles consensus is seen as a euphemism for ideology, or false consciousness, in Phugwumi consensus-building itself constituted the political ideology. Crucially, the essence of consensus-building in Phugwumi was not that all villagers had to endorse the same view, unanimously agree on the settlement of a dispute or wholeheartedly accept the selection of a leader or spokesperson. Often, the decision taken was not the one that could count on the support of the majority, but the one to which the least numbers of villagers strongly disagreed. As such, it was a political system antithetical to the domination of the majority (Wouters 2015: 140–141). It is in this realization that the above-cited statement, 'We believe in that form of democratic government which permits the rule not of the majority but of the people as a whole', reaches full circle.

This principle continues to guide Phugwumi's realm of customary law. To adjudicate decisions, in village council meetings, the principle of voting is never applied.[11] In an interview I had with him, Phugwumi's chairperson explained: 'Voting would only lead to more politics, more competition, and more rivalries. And this would not benefit our village'. Instead, the council prefers to deliberate until they reach an agreement that is acceptable to all its members, even if this means council meetings often become lengthy affairs. In instances where consensus-building proves impossible, the council declares an issue as unresolved or pending, which is preferred over forcing a decision through the divisive practice of voting.

Towards a democracy without parties and elections

In boycotting newly independent India's first general elections, the Phizo-led NNC not only rejected Nagas' inclusion into the Indian Union but also communicated the

cultural incongruity of political parties and elections with Naga life-worlds. 'There is no political party in Nagaland. We don't need it', said Phizo (1951). 'Nagaland need not imitate or adopt foreign institutions [political parties and elections] in matters of political organisation.' In Phizo's view, Nagaland was already democratic by traditional design: '[it] is the very spirit of our country'. The NNC's manifesto thus read: 'In a country like Nagaland, particularly at the present time, [a] party system could never accomplish anything except leading to ruination' (cited in Horam 1988: 321–322).

Phizo instead proposed the continuation of consensus-making as the prime political practice and principle, or what he captured as *mechü medo zotuo* ('the binding will of the community'). As a case in point, Phizo referred to himself as a spokesman, not a leader. 'I can only say what my people want and what they have decided,' he explained. 'The position of a spokesman and a leader is often confused. Like a pilot, a spokesman shall have to follow direction' (cited in Nuh 1986: 95). And when a former Indian Chief Justice once asked him how the NNC elected its leaders, Phizo replied: 'We do not elect leaders, we select them':

> The selection process goes on for several years beginning from the village level where people know each other thoroughly and only people with virtue of integrity and character are accepted to become leaders. Then on the basis of these observations the leaders of the various villages select the most competent person to be the leader. The same is followed through to the national level. Thus a national leader emerges after so many years. (Cited in Mishra 2004: 4)

This traditional and moral vision of selecting leaders was also adopted by the Naga People's Convention (NPC), which brokered Nagaland statehood in 1963. When an interim government had to be constituted, Naga tribes and villages chose their representatives not through elections but 'by their own traditional methods' (Ramunny 1993: 162). When, in 1964, the first post-statehood elections were scheduled, Hokishe Sema (1986: 104), a later Chief Minister, appealed for cultural wisdom: 'I strongly felt that it was too early for the Nagas to fight elections on the basis of political parties … The system of Tribal Representatives was doing very well and could have continued'. But even as the first elections were fought along party lines, many Naga villages turned inward, applied consensus-building and selected their leaders. In fourteen out of the (then) forty constituencies, candidates were returned unopposed as 'village leaders had met earlier and by consensus had decided who would be their representative' (Ramunny 1993: 161).

Moreover, the six additional seats 'reserved' for Nagaland's Tuensang District were filled without a single vote being cast. Perceived as especially 'backward', Tuensang District was – through a constitutional amendment – given ten years 'respite' from voting. Instead, the Tuensang Regional Council, made up of clan and tribal leaders, *selected* from among its ranks six members for the Legislative Assembly.[12] It was the Naga Nationalist Organisation (NNO) that won the first elections. However, the political discussions that followed saw the resignation of

all members of the opposition, by-elections and the manoeuvring of independent candidates, resulting, finally, in all elected representatives joining the NNO government. This made Nagaland's first Legislative Assembly a house without opposition, functioning, indeed, on the basis of internal deliberation and consensus-making.[13]

The following decades witnessed the rise and fall of multiple Nagaland political parties, but their ideological positions were not always clear. This, coupled with frequent party-hopping and the absence of stigma attached to this, led Moamenla Amer (2014: 6) to characterize Nagaland political parties as staunchly 'non-ideological'. This absence of party ideology, in the conventional sense of a left-centre-right political spectrum, showed itself once more in 2015 when all benches of Nagaland's opposition resolved to merge with the ruling Democratic Alliance of Nagaland. 'It will now be a party-less government in Nagaland', the Chief Minister concluded with delight (*Asian Tribune* 2015), adding that with party divisions done away with, the government would work collectively and through consensus-making to bring peace and development.[14]

If the abolishment of party division is constructed, by some, as a first step towards restoring 'Naga community', given that 'contemporary politics and the party-system … have done great damage to the village unity, dividing many villages along party lines' (Dev 1988: 27), a further culturalist critique propagates the discontinuation of elections altogether. 'Traditionally', writes Charles Chasie (2005: 102), 'we did not elect our leaders … the notion itself would have been a scandal':

> When you 'go to the people' [as politicians must] you are telling them that you are the best person they could possibly have as their leader! This in a society where even a majority or consensus nomination, to be part of a delegation, is often refused several times by the persons concerned, pleading that they are unworthy. In traditional society, such arrogance and absence of fear of God could result in immediate beatings and social ostracism.

As recently as 2011, the (then) Nagaland Chief Minister declared: 'election is not suited for Nagas'. He then elucidated: 'selection of leader[s] would best suit Nagas' (cited in Solo 2011: 67), thus recognizing that the idea of an '"elected leader" was not in the scheme of life in the Nagas' (Solo 2011: 68). In the 1980s, a former Chief Minister, similarly concerned, had already published a political treatise that advocated the abolishment of political parties and elections, not to undermine Nagaland democracy but to strengthen it. Hokishe Sema (1986: 171–172) envisaged a state-wide selection system, based on multiple levels – village, area and region – of consensus-making. He explained:

> In Nagaland, even the members of the State Assembly, which is the final level, can be selected by the Regional Councils. This system will reduce the increasing expenses of elections and minimize the corruptions. This is necessary for a good society based on faith in each other and in common values. This does not in any way hamper the

> power of the State Government, [but] rather helps the progress and thereby good government.

Critics may well argue that much has changed since Naga life-worlds were first and foremost centred in 'village republics', or that ideologies of communal harmony and consensus-making conceal conflicts and power hierarchies within (Nader 1990). Yet many with whom I spoke across Nagaland argued along the lines of Nuh's (1986: 184) evaluation that, 'Unless the present election system is changed, it will not serve the [Naga] people well', and that this change must be in accordance with 'traditional and customary practices'.

Nagas as a society against voting

Far from a stand-alone case, Nagas' attempt to reintegrate cultural wisdom and moral society into the superficially asocial realm of liberal democracy corresponds to a wider postcolonial critique that perceives liberal democracy and competitive elections as democratically and culturally damaging, rather than liberating. The Comaroffs (1997: 126) elaborate on this as follows: 'democracy through much of the world has increasingly been reduced from the substantive to the procedural, from social movement to electoral process …; has come to connote little more than the rightful exercise of choice, the satisfying of desire, the physics of pure interests'. For South Africa, Jason Hickel (2015: 2) shows how the values of liberal democracy are experienced as 'morally repulsive and socially destructive'. South Africans draw a connection between democracy and (social) 'death' because the egalitarian projections of liberal democracy corrode age-old kinship hierarchies that are seen as culturally and morally imperative for a desired ritual and lifelong process of what Hickel calls 'fruition'. Their experiences tell them that liberal democracy works to undo 'the ritual work of differentiating persons', dismantle the 'hierarchical structure of kinship' and, in the upshot, returns 'the world to a sterile sameness' (2015: 10).

This narrowing horizon of 'the political' was also part of a deeper culturalist critique that informed the slogan in Phugwumi: 'Election is an insult to each other by vote'. They are an insult because villagers today talk and argue with their voting slips rather than deliberate and build consensus collectively, they now privilege self-advancement over communal welfare, end up selecting self-serving career politicians, and because equal voting rights and participation wrongly equates the experiences, wisdom and foresight of village elders, accumulated over a lifetime, with the immaturities and naiveties of younger generations. It is these social transformations that for many Phugwumi villagers – but especially village elders – reveal the immoralities of party-based elections and individual balloting based on equal voting rights.

This culturalist critique, and the attempted procedural answer to this critique by replacing elections with consensus-building, illustrates a blind spot, not just in political theory but in modern political thinking at large. That is: how do peoples here, there and everywhere themselves imagine the good democratic life? And

what if their own cultural and customary theories of arranging their political life diverge from the superficially standard versions of liberal, electoral democracy? And what, moreover, if instead of adjusting themselves to modern democratic ideals and procedures, they wish to apply their agency and cultural creativity to adjust democracy and elections to suit themselves? Can we, in short, imagine culturalist democracies? Most liberal political theorists would not think so. They find the existence of varied cultural interpretations and expressions of the democratic life difficult to accept, even to perceive. They insist that democracy is quintessentially a liberating and transformative force (Bose 2013; Khilnani 2009) that must emancipate individuals from the fetters of traditional cultures and past political authorities.

In a classic treatise, Clastres (1977) established as *Society against the State* those Amazonian tribes, so-called 'primitive', that existed without hierarchical and authoritative leadership, but were nevertheless affluent, cohesive and complex. Because they flourished, they were not *lacking* state structures, Clastres argued, but in their political sociality and cultural proclivities were intrinsically adversarial to the idea of a coercive state. What Clastres critiqued was the universalization of a particular and normative political system, style and sociality, and the subsequent judgement of any society's political position and prestige on precisely those terms.

Nagas' engagement with elections embodies a similar critique; it questions the universalization of a particularistic, political and moral sense of democratic life reliant on competitive elections, individual autonomy and equal voting rights. In voicing their cultural critique and in attempting (and occasionally achieving) procedural adaptations to democratic elections, Nagas communicate an alternative vision and sense of the good democratic life. They are trying, with various degrees of success, to curtail the social havoc they experienced at the liberal hands of democratic elections on their own, home-spun cultural and communitarian theories and praxis of moral society and 'Naga democracy'. If Nagas' traditional political practices, penchants and proclivities make them a 'society against voting', this article has demonstrated that they are nonetheless a society still premised on democratic principle.

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Notes

1. 'Naga' is a generic term denoting a conglomeration of tribes (currently spread out, in addition to Nagaland, over the adjacent Indian states of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as across the border into Myanmar), and of which the Chakhesang Naga is one.
2. 'Telezüme' is a phatic expression, in the sense coined by Malinowski (1923), that serves to recognize bonds of sociality in the village, but which is not communicative in the sense of communicating relevant information.
3. On the still lingering Naga Movement, see Gundevia (1975), Horam (1988) and Franke (2011), among others.
4. For an account of the creation of Nagaland, see Sema (1986). On the relationship between political conflict and democracy in Nagaland, see Sen (1974), Singh (2004) and Kikon (2005).
5. This statement, however, is usually not attributed to Phizo, as Misra claims, but to T. Sakhrie, another early Naga nationalist leader (see Nuh 1986: 56).
6. In abridged form, I have discussed this predicament elsewhere (Wouters 2015).
7. For some comparative cases of consensus-making as a democratic form, see Wiredu (1995) and Snellinger (2009).
8. *Genna* connoted taboos, festivals and ritual observances, and generally meant traditional 'no work days' (see Joshi 2012: 84–85).
9. In line with this reverence for the village 'old', today inventories circulate in the village listing the twenty oldest villagers in descending order, starting with the oldest person alive.
10. To date, not a single woman has been elected into the Nagaland Assembly, and but a handful have tried to contest. This absence of women voices in Naga politics is now increasingly critiqued among Nagas, and condemned, by some, as evidence of a patriarchal cultural set-up (Kikon 2002, see also: Kuotsu and Walling 2018).
11. Members of Phugwumi's village council were – akin to the VDB – *selected* clan-wise with the added precondition that each member had to be over forty-five years of age (it is forty years for membership of the VDB) in continuation with the cultural conviction that wisdom and maturity come with age.
12. This number increased to twelve in 1969 and to twenty in 1974, the year voting was first introduced in Tuensang District, bringing the total number of Nagaland Assembly seats up to sixty.
13. The absence of opposition should not be equated with the absence of political debate. Murry (2007: 31) writes: 'Though it was a unique feature in a party system [to have a single party occupy all the assembly seats] of a parliamentary democracy, the House witnessed lively, heated, and intense debates and discussions on issues of public concern'.
14. In this case, too, this creation of a party-less government should not be read as the absence of divisions within. In fact, this 'coming together' of all parties was preceded by intense bickering and disagreements over positions of leadership and ministerial berths within the ruling government, and some accused the Chief Minister of engaging in 'power politics', of inviting other parties into his government to strengthen his own position, which some of his own party men had started to undermine.

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