

## TOUGH AND KIND LEADERSHIP AMONG THE KONYAKS OF NAGALAND

### Abstract

#### *Design/methodology/approach*

For centuries, the villages of the principal Konyak kingdoms in Nagaland raided each other to take the heads of men, women and children in ritualised hostilities.

Originally to bring fertility and good harvests, this practice evolved almost exclusively into an expression of power and success. One of the authors spent three weeks in January 2020 living in a Konyak village learning about leadership from the last surviving face-tattooed warriors, once successful headhunters.

#### *Purpose*

The paper looks at the practices within the principal Konyak kingdoms in Nagaland, and how leaders in other cultural contexts can learn from reconciling tough and kind forms of leadership.

#### *Findings*

We found a servant leadership culture based on kindness and collaboration, in some ways at odds with the brutal tradition associated with their society. Framing this compassionate leader and follower relationship is the concept of *matkapu*, or standing for the truth of things.

#### *Practical implications*

We explore whether contemporary organisations looking to sustain operational excellence and wellbeing, and often seeking to balance the needs of different stakeholders, can learn from the Konyaks based on centuries of continual conflict and volatility.



### Caption 1: Akhao and her granddaughter

*“I remember we were always scared of enemy attack. Some times were worse than others, especially when we had just taken some heads. Attacks would not come every day, even though we might be worried about them all the time but we might be attacked three or four times in a month, particularly if we were at war with a village that was close to us. Attacks could come anywhere, when we were in the fields, even in the heart of the village and we would shut ourselves in each night, just in case.”*

These are the words of Akhao, a Konyak woman who remembers the last days of headhunting among the Lower Konyak hills in Nagaland in the 1930s and 1940s.

In January 2020, the first author spent three weeks living in the village of Sheahagh Chingnyu in the Mon district of Nagaland, conducting a short ethnographic field study (O'Reilly, 2009). His purpose was to research the leadership insights of the Konyak ethnic group, including those of the last surviving face-tattooed warriors, men who had taken heads before the cessation of this practice in the 1950s. Over the course of his time living with the

Konyaks, the first author would speak at length with thirteen face-tattooed warriors, four women who remembered the headhunting times and nineteen members of the Sheahagh community of different ages. There was a genuine richness of ethnographic research into the tribes<sup>1</sup> of Nagaland under British colonial rule, although the material today would be considered written from an ideologically flawed framework (Jacobs, 2012, 17). The Indo-Naga conflict that followed after 1947 heavily restricted fieldwork due to the difficulty of access, especially the Naga Hills area. This led to the scarcity of primary research until the Indo-Naga ceasefire of 1997. The cessation of hostilities marked a new era of research as the state was gradually opened to outsiders, tourism was encouraged and there was a rise in 'native anthropology' (Wouters & Heneise, 2017, 5-6). This interruption to primary research explains the comparable lack of literature about the Konyaks between 1947 and 2010. To put this relative isolation into perspective, the subject area was never formally incorporated into the British 'administered area' and one of the warriors, Penlung, reported that the first "red men" he saw were British soldiers towards the end of the Second World War. He referred to these men as "red like fruit" because of their apparent sunburn.

**Caption 2: Penjum and his granddaughter from Longwa village, a former neighbouring hostile kingdom**



**Context**

Until around 1950, headhunting was integral to Konyak life, although isolated attacks were still recorded in the area as late as the 1970s (Chaudhuri, 2019). Even in the final decade before peace, the subject village lost between thirty to forty people in one month, through attacks, and their own raids on enemy villages, although this was considered exceptional. Even higher losses were possible and the contemporary British

observer, W.G. Archer, noted two occasions where whole villages were massacred in 1939 and 1948, with each attack leaving around 400 dead (Jacobs, 2012, 142). Historically, the purpose was to capture the power held in a human skull to secure good harvests and fertility, but this belief appeared to have become secondary in the last century of its existence. The warriors interviewed explained that in their time, taking heads had been almost solely about conferring status and reputation upon individuals, families and communities, as well as a statement of power over other communities. The outward expression of status, reputation and power was the facial tattooing of warriors who had taken part in successful headhunting parties by their anghya, or queen.

The culture in the Lower Konyak area is distinct, with seven kingdoms being ruled by hereditary kings from established royal lines, known as chief anghs. Anghs were traditionally the embodiment of a community's "life principle" (Hutton, 1965, 23), with their spirit animal usually described as a supernaturally powerful tiger or lion. Below them is a system of deputy anghs, who rule constituent villages and discharge specific functions on their behalf. Fürer-Haimendorf also identified the angh system among what he termed the *Thendu* or *Sheangtu*, or "face-tattoo" Konyaks of the Naga Hills

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<sup>1</sup> Tribe is used as opposed to ethnic group as it is a legal designation under Indian federal law.

and described this power system as unique among the Nagas (1938, 349-50). Like most other Naga groups, Konyak society is patrilineal and exogamous to sub-clans (Hutton, 1965, 20), with each kingdom possessing its own dialect, which may vary from village to village within the territories. This linguistic variation among the Nagas, noted by Hutton (1965,19), remains present today. Although the angh system endures, practical power now lies in the hands of the elected chairman and the Village Council, who discharge their duties in a highly consensual and collaborative manner. This form of governance is not new, and was evident in other Naga tribes, over a century ago, as recorded by Davis while conducting a census among the Ao tribe in 1892:

“each village amongst the Aos is a small republic, and each man [sic] as good as his neighbour...indeed it would be hard to find anywhere else more thoroughly democratic communitiies” (Godden, 1897, 172).

The chief angh of the subject village rules over between 9,000-10,000 people across four principal villages, whereas the neighbouring kingdom of Longwa stretches across two states and an international border, encompassing around 70 villages. Anghs are traditionally polygamous, although there is only ever one anghya and an angh is not considered ready for royal duties until he is married to his future queen.

The morung system provided the traditional social structure for Konyak society. A morung is a ceremonial longhouse and there are multiple morungs in any substantial village. Each morung has a foot drum at the entrance (Hutton, 1965, 27) and would have traditionally had a large stone upon which haeds would have been displayed. In the past, each morung was the hub for local community leadership, dispute resolution, traditional animist beliefs and clan representation, with some of these roles persisting today. There are two principal clans in Lower Konyak villages, the Royal clan and the commoner clan, although von Fürer-Haimendorf notes the occasional evidence of a third clan in his field work (1938a, 353). These clans are then further sub-divided into a series of nuanced sub-clans, with their distinctions being less evident as historically much of their identity was due to the rituals each was charged with performing. Individual morungs have significant autonomy and historically have been known to broker treaties with a morung from a neighbouring village, while maintaining hostilities with another from the same community. In the past, there have even been hostilities between morungs in the same village (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1938a, 366-370) (Hutton, 1965, 24).

The morungs also formed the village martial organisation by providing bachelor dormitories and training academies for single boys and young men. Boys usually entered the morung at between ten and twelve years of age and they would graduate as an active contributor to their community between fifteen and eighteen, an occasion usually marked by the young men joining their first headhunting party. It has been proposed that headhunting is evidence of enduring social relationships between villages and to the Naga tribes: “cooperation and hostility are not very different” (Jacobs, 2012, 138). These raids were part of complex feuds between Konyak villages and a ritualised system of debt, in which claims were redressed through reciprocal violence. This also meant that villages might find peace, however temporary, through marriage relations, treaties and very occasionally, a total military defeat. Like other Nagas, this aggression was kept principally within the Konyak tribe, with villages often

maintaining communication and trading channels with both the British administration and neighbouring Nagas, where it was considered beneficial.

According to those warriors interviewed, headhunting raids were conducted by parties of between thirty and forty warriors against targets normally up to one night and occasionally two nights march away. The party would arrive under the cover of darkness and split into a cover group and the *shondrongpalam* (attack group). The former would infiltrate the village at first light, isolating groups of enemy, before pairs would advance on individuals. The cover warrior would shoot and kill the target with a musket made by the tribe, before his partner would rush forward and decapitate the victim with his dao<sup>2</sup>. Heads were taken from men, women and children alike, as there was no concept of non-combatants. Each raid was a race against time, with heads being rapidly taken before the *shondrongpalam* were counter-attacked by the weight of the enemy's warriors. As soon as the raid was considered complete, the party would then run back to safety, often laying an ambush for any pursuing enemy. The heads were paraded through the village and were subject to a series of rituals, some of these were witnessed by von Fürer-Haimendorf during his field work between 1936 and 1937 (1938b, 25).

According to Anyam Konyak's family and others in the village, peace came to the Sheahagh Chingnyu and Mon District over time through a combination of factors: a more robust control of headhunting in the neighbouring British administered areas; increased access to school education from the 1930s and the rise of Christianity through the 1950s and 1960s, although conversion of the Nagas, largely through the Baptist Church up until 1950 (Joshi, 2012), had been occurring elsewhere since 1872 (Thong, 2011, 896). Conversion in Sheahagh Chingnyu was not smooth and the previous chief angh did not convert until 1991 and refused to remove the village's skulls from display. A significant factor in the arrival of peace at Sheahagh Chingnyu was the creation of schools by the British administration in the 1930s, often seen as part of a pacification policy. As school children socialised with traditional enemies, the status quo was challenged and village Students' Unions began to question age-old practices. The Students' Unions remain powerful leadership organs today and the president retains an automatic seat on the Village Council. This significant societal shift, led to the change in function of the morungs. Today, they are no longer male-only spaces and act as cultural archives and learning centres, while retaining traditional leadership roles alongside more modern institutions such as schools and churches.

The arrival of Christianity created tensions with the old belief systems, many of which were made taboo, on the basis of their association with headhunting. Some neighbouring villages destroyed all of their jewelry and any artefacts associated with this practice, losing centuries of heritage as a result. There is a movement among many of the Nagas to reclaim "good culture" and to maintain this link with the past (Angelova, 2017, 35).

### **Leadership with toughness and kindness**

This backdrop of a martial patriarchy may conjure-up negative forms of autocratic leadership where leaders exert control over decisions and rarely seek out input from

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<sup>2</sup> Long thin-bladed axe-like implement used as the primary tool and weapon of the Nagas

group members, and where they score particularly lowly on consideration and respect towards others (Judge et al., 2004; De Hoogh et al., 2015). Counter-intuitively, we find that this seemingly tough leadership environment is underpinned by a leadership ethos that emphasises kindness. In the words of Ngampe, who was a young woman in the last years of headhunting: “Kindness makes people think that someone has something to say that is worth listening to.” Kindness marks the interactions of leaders and followers today, spanning three generations from face-tattooed warriors to children, who know of headhunting only as recent history.

Robust assessment played a significant part in the historical morung system used to prepare boys and young men to become ‘active contributors’ to their village. High jump, dao chopping and wrestling competitions all had their place in preparing men for the life of a farmer, hunter and warrior. The boys would often initiate ad hoc competitions themselves, as securing a strong reputation among peers in the morung was seen as so important. Some of these activities are described by von Fürer-Haimendorf from his time living in the Wakching community in 1937 (1938a, 366). These tests have now been replaced by collaborative games such as football which are played at school but the need to be robust and athletic remains just as important for those who continue to hunt and farm, before, during and after their education has been completed. One previously central practice, the use of tattooing to mark significant events in the lives of Konyak men and women, has vanished because of its association with headhunting (Hutton, 1965, 26). Such events included becoming an economic contributor as a young man and being considered ready for marriage as a young woman.

Toughness is still evident in regular activities such as catching buffalo for slaughter. The buffalo are left feral in the forest and surrounding hills, which is a hazardous task that remains a display of strength and courage. Children will trap and hunt rats and small game from a very young age. This appetite for hunting has lessened somewhat but still remains a commonplace part of life in every Konyak village. Every home is decorated by the skulls of buffalo and mithun (traditional cattle), as a display of wealth, alongside the skulls of hunted animals, from tigers and bears to hornbills and wild cats. These adornments were strongly encouraged by colonial administrators and missionaries, largely as substitutes for the display of enemy human heads.

What is noticeable is how kindness prevails over the value placed on strength and resilience. It is the Angh’s responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of his people, a responsibility supported by the adherence to practices supported by a clear understanding of what is considered the right thing to do (Paulraj & Andharia, 2015). The community also expects to look after those who are struggling and this might mean fostering an orphan, sharing rice and other crops following a poor harvest or providing labour for the fields of a family affected by illness or death. When someone dies, the majority of the community will come to mourn with the grieving family, taking it in turns over a twenty-four hour period. During this time, the village and surrounding valleys and hills are filled with haunting lamentations, accompanied by the softly resonating ceremonial gongs. One woman described this as “crying from our bones.” It is the everyday thoughtfulness and kindness that is most noticeable, which is even evident in the infrastructure. The paths that connect each village with its fields and land have nolaks every few hundred metres. These are resting spots where people can relax and chat during casual encounters. At each nolak, seats are made from

stone or stumps and a tree is planted to give both shade and fruit. The nolaks are a strong symbol of the purposeful human connection that informs the Konyak ethos.

Authority is respected and people are expected to follow the direction of the Village Council once consultation and deliberation are over, although this differs from the ritual authority commanded by the angh in previous times. Those who fail to do so face summary fines, which are often delivered on the day of the transgression, a system that was also observed in 1936 and 1937 (Furer-Haimendorf, 1938a, 355). However, decisions are usually made in a collaborative manner, with families within the community being given the chance to represent their views through the morung system and leaders are expected to listen purposefully to all perspectives.

A reflective understanding of the culture that leaders should represent varies little across generations, despite such disparate experiences and educational backgrounds. This congruent connection from past to future implies an alignment with the practices of Identity Leadership (Haslam et al., 2011). Leadership practice has not remained static and women occupy leadership positions in religious and educational establishments, and there is an official voice through the Women's Self-Help Group. There are no formal barriers to prevent women from becoming members of the Village Council, but this has yet to materialise in any of the Lower Konyak villages. All of the interviewees agreed that it is only a matter of time before this becomes a reality.

The central tension of Konyak society, with a bloody history of continuous ritualised warfare, and identifying kindness as central to its ability to function, is represented in the following table from the field interviews, which highlights some of the paradoxes of toughness and kindness.

**Table 1: The paradox of Konyak leadership: tough and kind**

Celebration of toughness	Celebration of kindness
<p><b>Headhunting compulsion</b>  <i>“A great warrior has lots of heads and is always hungry to take more heads. A great warrior is very attractive and outwardly kind to all but underneath he will always have a hunger to take more heads. No one can expect great kindness from a warrior, no matter whether they are in their own village or on a headhunting party.”</i>                      Shengang</p>	<p><b>Care and love</b>  <i>“Leaders who lack the quality of kindness cannot build the true relationships that ensure the success of a community. If they don’t speak softly, they will only create difficulties.”</i> Tonpah  <i>“...do everything together, in teams, don’t try to work alone. Love each other, as without love, nothing is possible. Trust comes from treating each other with love, respect and care and with trust you will have success.”</i> Angap</p>
<p><b>Warrior mindset</b>  <i>“I am a real man, a warrior, and there was no place for such pity in me. (He laughs.) I am a warrior and the enemy would as soon as take my head, so this is what I do (did).”</i> Tonpah  <i>“A leader has to be able to give strength and courage to those around them ...good leaders are never alone and always have good friends in the background.”</i> Penjum</p>	<p><b>Serving others</b>  <i>“A good leader will always serve those he or she looks after. A good leader always has the deepest of compassion and the strongest feelings for their people. They will always share whatever they have with those around them, particularly in hard times; food, care, anything...”</i> Ngampe</p>
<p><b>Toughness to express power</b>  <i>“We taught them to obey their elders by treating them like slaves. We made them collect water and firewood and if one made a mistake, all were beaten...”</i> Bhoowang, deputy angh Hong Phoi  <i>“Headhunting was all about trophies in my time. Taking heads was about building status and reputation as a warrior, as a morung and as a village; it was an expression of power.”</i> Tonpah</p>	<p><b>Comfort and kindness</b>  <i>“Crying is not a sign of weakness, it is natural. Men may seek to control their emotions more than women but it is not expected by Konyaks...an outward expression of grief or sorrow is part of our culture.”</i> Toingam  <i>“A good leader never hurts others but only comforts them.”</i> Likhao, deputy anghya  <i>“(Leaders) must have the kindness to share what they have; they must listen to what other people are saying.”</i> Panglem, Commander of Village Guard  <i>“Kindness is an essential quality in any leader. It is a leader’s responsibility to identify the people who are bearing heavy loads in their lives, those who are troubled, and to give help and care and to show them compassion.”</i> Penjum</p>
<p><b>Inflicting pain on others</b>  <i>“One traditional punishment for the anghya or any other of the ahng’s concubines, was to bind their hands behind their back and then throw them on a pile of stacked stinging nettles.”</i>                      Anyam</p>	<p><b>Helping others in a selfless manner</b>  <i>“This might mean helping a family work their fields when someone has died or is sick, or coordinating the effort for collective morung activities. Collaboration and a selfless attitude are essential to getting things done and the morungs are all about these things.”</i> Panglem</p>
<p><b>Fierce reputation</b>  <i>“I never felt scared. I was always confident that not only would I return but we would return with heads...Maybe some other warriors were scared but not me. We had a fierce reputation and a good location high on the hill and that meant fewer villages had the guts to attack us.”</i>                      Tonpah</p>	<p><b>Considering those most in need</b>  <i>“We never ignore those who are poor or orphaned, or those worse off than the rest of us. We will not leave people in trouble or suffering; we will always help each other. When other people are in difficulty, such as when a member of their family has died, we will share those difficulties with them.”</i> Angap</p>

### **Reconciling toughness with kindness**

When scratching below the surface of this martial society, Konyak leadership culture exemplifies servant leadership where the core emphasis is on leaders serving others (Stone et al., 2004). For example, care and love, comfort and kindness, helping others in a selfless manner, and considering those most in need, capture some core elements of servant leadership such as serving as a mission of responsibility to others, recognising that others are most important, instilling trust and honesty (Winston et al., 2015). Konyak leadership seems to exemplify the concept of ‘tough empathy’ (Goffee & Jones, 2000, 68), an exchange of care for commitment, also found in another martial community, The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, where the British Army trains its young officers. The motto of this institution explicitly defines its servant leadership culture: ‘Serve to lead’, which could equally be applied to the Konyaks.

A potential reconciliation between these two superficially conflicting expressions of cultural identity (toughness and kindness) may be found in the idea of *matkapu*. The crude translation of this word is ‘standing for the truth of things’ and it is one of the strongest influences on Konyak societal ethos; it requires each person to think through the consequences of any potential action in a reflective process, simply known as ‘doing matkap.’ Matkap is done in the spirit that the original creator figure is ever watchful and this leads to a deepness of deliberation, which is typically highly collaborative. The need to be both perceived as matkapu (your reputation) and to know yourself as matkapu (your identity), drives an integrity of behaviour that manifests as kindness in many forms. By examining the socio-material practices (Ladkin, 2015) that surround matkapu, improved personal and systemic interactions to embed ethical behaviour within organisations can be identified, as momentum increases for organisations and their leaders to shift from focusing on the demands of one stakeholder to the needs of a wider set of constituents (Bower and Paine, 2017).

A new leadership discourse is required to meet the needs of a volatile, changing, interconnected world in which ethical and environmental responsibility are increasingly considered an integral part of how success is to be measured at every level of an organisation (Western, 2013). The literature on responsible leadership emphasises the importance of leaders interacting with different stakeholders, particularly in contexts of failing states, necessitating responsible leadership within organisations and communities (Maak et al., 2016). Eco-leadership (Western, 2013) proposes leadership spirit as one its qualities and this partly intangible concept is defined by its organic systems of relationships; those between people and the natural world. This purposeful connectedness is demonstrated in Konyak leadership practice, which promote understanding of how to develop eco-leadership in contemporary organisations, along with the corresponding will to exercise increased global responsibility to a much broader set of constituents and issues beyond financial stakeholders and the financial health of organisations. This view of leadership brings in to focus the core concept of worldly leadership, community, and the corresponding tensions. By viewing community through the lens of Konyak leadership relationships, it may be possible to reconcile the concept of community as both something local, rooted and specific, as well as something universal (Edwards, 2012, 86), opening further understanding to how communities can be developed across complex networks in order to address issues such as integrated global responsibility.



Organisations are increasingly examining how best to respond to the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) of the current environment in which they operate. Purpose, clarity and agility are often cited, but resilience ultimately rests in the wellbeing of an organisation's people, which is linked closely to the relationship between leaders and followers (Robertson & Cooper, 2011). Levey and Levey (2019, 739) proposes that leaders should inspire a "deeper wisdom and care" in order to develop the mental capital that lies at the heart of resilience and wellbeing. Mindful presence might equally be attributed to the Konyak's balancing of toughness with kindness to meet the requirements of every member of the community. This intentional engagement leads to a level of resilience that has seen this group endure centuries of conflict and navigate the arrival of modernity over the last seventy years. These Konyak leadership principles, framed by *matkapu*, have enabled this tribe to secure their future largely on their terms. Those of us who are living and working in very different cultural contexts can draw valuable lessons from the practices of the Konyaks who are balancing both tough and kind forms of leadership.

**Caption 3: Fields are burnt on one day each year, in preparation for sowing**



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