

About Flying, Life, and Hope to Get You All Back from Oxford University

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Anzamo Eramo den,¹

Today I received a phone call from Diethono Nakhro, the commissioner of persons with disability, Nagaland government. Her voice was kind. She explained that the Central Industrial Security Forces' (CISF) internal enquiry into my mother's case has been closed. My mother's testimony about how a CISF female security staff ordered her to take off her undergarment and adult diaper at the Guwahati airport could not be "verified." The CISF internal report stated that there are no witnesses. The CISF security staff denied my mother's "allegations." The testimonies of my mother and her caregiver (her granddaughter) are dismissed. The testimony of the CISF security staff is held as the truth.

My mother is well travelled. On 24th March, 2022, a CISF female security staff misbehaved with my 80-year-old mother Mhalo Kikon at Guwahati airport. Fifteen years ago,

¹ In Lotha Naga language, it means dear elders.

my mother had undergone a hip replacement surgery and since then has an artificial titanium hip. She has never been stripped naked in any airport due to her condition.²

This is how we travel through the skies now. We buy a ticket, go to the airport, and deposit our big bags at a counter. A person sits behind the counter and checks our ticket. Next, we walk towards an area for “security check”. This means males and females queue separately and remove all metal devices and electronics from their body. Wait! Liquid products including water are not allowed as well.

The security metal detector beeps when it detects metals on the human body.

Beep

Beep

Beep

The female security staff inside a small booth with curtains drawn to maintain privacy runs their hands all over our body. From head to shoulders, ribs, belly, chest, hips, thighs, knees, calves, and all the way to the ankle. Every part of the human body is scanned and patted when the metal detector goes beep, beep, beep.

What is beep beep beep?

Who is beep beep beep?

Where is beep beep beep?

It is a sound, oh a machine language saying warning, danger, alert. Every single passenger who wants to sit in an aeroplane and fly must go through this metal detector.

As Naga travellers, we must make sure we are not carrying our favourite chilli which we call Naga chilli or King chilli. They are spicy and so airport security considers the chillies as weapons we might use to attack the pilots. Then we wait to board the aeroplane. Wait, don't fear! We are not leaving our homeland and flying away forever. We always return. Yes, we do.

When we leave, we are always carrying memories with us. Food, photographs, songs, and our traditional shawls. That is what home means for those of us who fly away. I leave and return home and then, leave again. I have lived my life like this because there is only one homeland for me, our Naga ancestral homeland.

I wonder if anyone wrote letters to you, Eramo den, in the last 150 years. You have carried the burden of representing the Naga community to the world. Hung and exhibited like strings of dried meat and smoked fish. Colonizers have displayed your shrivelled skin, teeth, hair, bones, and body parts to reiterate their racial and civilisational superiority. There were no interpreters to tell the story of *your* journey on your behalf. How were your corporeal remains removed from your ancestral lands and 'gifted' to museums in foreign lands? Do you feel desolate, and anguish strung on cold gallery walls and packed in dark storage houses?

In comparison to your sorrows, my story about justice denied to my mother appears as an ordinary existence. But what connects us is a thread about journeys away from the homeland and the experiences of return or a desire to return. British's museum of colonialism,

² <https://www.eastmojo.com/nagaland/2022/03/24/guwahati-shocker-disabled-naga-woman-80-made-to-strip-at-airport/>

the Pitt Rivers Museum displayed your corporeal remains to the world—bare bones—and for my mother, the CISF female staff stripped her naked. Colonizers and their administrators continue to derive pleasure from stripping us down. The enthusiasm to investigate our bones and expose what we might be hiding there remains a mission. I wonder why? Our experiences and journeys of leaving our homelands—ancestors hung as savages in the museums of the United Kingdom and living members ridiculed as chinky and ching chong in present India—spell our reality and follows us beyond our graves.

Did I tell you about my experiences as a citizen of India? Again, the airports and their officers standing at the immigration counters constantly ask me to stand in the line for “Foreign Passports.” I have lived my life producing my Indian passport and explaining that I am a Naga. But sometimes I feel that they are right. The Indian officers at immigration counters, the hotel receptionists, the homeowners in India who deny us rooms for rent, and the cab drivers in Delhi who ask the whereabouts of my country are kind and generous souls. Perhaps, there is an ancient spirit that possesses their tongue when they see a Naga. They declare a long, unfulfilled, and broken history. As they swear, sneer, and kill us, the Naga people are forced to reaffirm our past, present, and the future founded on the Indigenous right to self-determination. An incomplete decolonization fills our heart with sorrow.

There are many things I want to tell you about our land, and what happened to us as a people. The villages where you lived, forests you walked about, people you loved, and languages you spoke are still here. When I speak my mother tongue, I feel an ancient connection, one that remains unwritten but present everywhere. In the plant that I eat with my yam curry. The mists that rolls down from Mount Tiyi. The fermented bamboo shoots you tasted too. We still savour the fermented dry fishes and salt you went down to the foothills of Assam to get in exchange for cotton and vegetables.

Many of us continue to connect security with salt. Our tastebuds store the history of our people and land. When I was a child, I saw my grandparents and elders stack up packets of salt, in batches of twenties and thirties. Plastic salt packets were kept near the fireplace. It was considered as security for the family. Salt, dry fish, and plants. We carry their taste in our hearts. Naga food is our soul allowance that help us to order our world, lives, and social relations.

I have lived in different continents and eaten Naga food. I carry Naga fermented food across Asia, North America, Europe, and Australia. The Naga food packets all fly with me on aeroplanes. When the officers check my customs declaration form and ask me “Ma’am, do you have anything to declare?” and I hand them the declaration slip where I write down the herbs and food I am carrying with me. Naga food, our food—smoked, dried and fermented plants. The foods you foraged and relished when you walked through our lands live with us.

Eramo den, I travelled these places with Naga food to work and earn a living. You see, I learnt how to read and write the English language. It was the same language the British administrators spoke among themselves when they colonized us. Once I was able to have command over it, I did not surrender to their ways. Instead, I used language to trace our experiences of horror and what became of us. I used language to resist, protest, and call for healing and justice. Along the way, I became a historian, a lawyer, and an anthropologist. Somewhere in between my sorrow and rage, among a host of oppressors who wrote the script of our people, I slipped and fell on my tears only to be caught and saved by your love and power. Somewhere in between my sorrow and rage, I hitched a ride in a whirling storm

cloud to escape the despair. Language opened my heart to nurture and share with you the possibilities of healing and inheriting a transformative future.

I started my letter by narrating about my mother Mhalo Kikon, and how she was treated by the airport security staff to describe how we still face humiliation and violence. What enables this behaviour towards our people even today is the association of nakedness with savagery. Nakedness equals barbarism, therefore, all violence against Naga people is about taming them. Here, violence is synonymous with impunity. Our appearances and values that we inherited from you are still deemed backward and primitive. How do I know these things, you might wonder. It has to do with realising what colonisation did to our people and our history. Colonisation reveals how our people were broken down and how our villages and elders were condemned as barbaric.

The Naga archives of James Philip Mills and John Henry Hutton, two colonial administrators recognised as the greatest collectors of Naga artefacts, are attentive to faces, breasts, land, village, and children. The images speak of military brutality and conquest of the colonial forces. There is nothing creative or enduring about colonial collections because what marks the relationship between the colonised and the coloniser is fear, power, and violence.

What stories did you carry in your hearts?

What did love mean to you?

How were you carried away from your land?

Did you travel in bags and suitcases?

I wonder about your journey—as bone, teeth, skin, and hair—to museums in Europe.

Was your journey painful? Did you long to come home and rest?

You are packed away in a storage facility. It sounds like a fable, a colonial fable of terror.

But we will bring you back.

And it is only a matter of time.

Until then, rest well and dream of the land you will return one day.

Dolly Sanchopeni Kikon