

## A Letter for Missing and Disappeared Archives

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Article abstract

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# A Letter for Missing and Disappeared Archives

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## Abstract

In this letter, Elspeth Iralu initiates a time-travelling correspondence with her paternal grandfather, Vichazelhu Iralu, about his dreams for the Naga sovereignty movement. The letter grieves the loss of personal and political archives that were stolen, disappeared, and destroyed through processes of colonization. Iralu offers letter-writing, shaped by Naga modes of storytelling, as an anticolonial epistemology that enacts Naga sovereignty in the here and now.

## Keywords

Nagaland, archive, colonialism and decolonization, sovereignty, storytelling

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Dear Apfütša,<sup>1</sup>

As we have not met, and I have spent many years trying to imagine you, it is high time that I write to you directly. What I want to ask you is: How do we tell stories when the evidence has been destroyed? How does knowledge come to be possessed and claimed? How do we tell our histories if our stories are held hostage? While I can't hope for a letter back, I imagine your letters to me are already written; I just have to find their remnants.<sup>2</sup>

I once brought a cousin to a party where I live in the U.S. Someone asked me what brought me to the city and I responded briefly, saying that I moved for graduate school. "That is not the whole story," my cousin said. "It began eleven generations ago." He narrated the story of our namesake Irlung, the domestic events that led to Iralus belonging to the Meyase clan in Khonoma village (or Khwünoria, in the village dialect), the entanglements of domestic life and the history of British invasion of what is now called northeast India, how that colonization led to you, apfütša, moving to the U.S., and how I came to be one of many in the Naga diaspora, growing up geographically alienated from our home, and yet remaining pukka Khwünomia.<sup>3</sup> In my line of work, we call this storytelling a history of the present, where we excavate the intermingling of past and present as an incomplete project towards our own freedom and that of others. So writing to you now, as a history of the present, is an enactment of our sovereignty.

Here are the events that led to this writing, in time-bending order.

### Possession

2019: Early morning chatter on WhatsApp reports that the home of a Naga elder has been possessed as collateral for an unpaid debt, the locks changed while the elder was visiting relatives in another town. While the loss of a home is serious itself, people whisper that the greatest loss is the personal belongings remaining inside the house, including a collection of archives of the Naga sovereignty movement. There are no institutional archives in Nagaland, so this personal loss is also a community loss.

2019: An American scholar tells me that letters you wrote to Rev. Michael Scott regarding the Naga sovereignty struggle for political recognition are in the Smithsonian Archives, in the papers of an anthropologist who studied Guam and was friends with you and

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<sup>1</sup> Apfütša is the Tenyidie (Angami Naga language) word for grandfather. In this letter, I am using the terms and spellings of our Khonoma village dialect, rather than the formalized Kohima dialect used in most written scholarly work.

<sup>2</sup> I initially rejected the idea of using footnotes in this letter because who uses footnotes in a letter to their grandfather? But I remember handwriting letters and how, upon rereading the letter I had just written, before folding it into an envelope, I often realized that some sentences and words needed further clarification. I used to draw asterisks or one-line five-pointed stars and then write my brief explanation in the margins of the page. Here, the clunky format of the academic footnote stands in for the more graphically pleasing \*\*\*. These footnotes are mostly for the future unknown readers of this letter, in case, like your private letters, it ends up in a colonial archive.

<sup>3</sup> Pukka is British slang adapted from Hindi meaning genuine, the real thing. Khwünoria is "the right way to call the village" and people of Khonoma/Khwünoria village are called Khwünomia. Apfütša Tulie and atsa Christine (see footnote 4) told me that the village Khwünoria and its people Khwünomia are named for khwü, "a bush with white flowers found in plenty in Khonoma." (Iralu and Iralu 2023.)

atsa Tefta.<sup>4</sup> No one in the family has ever heard of this. We do not know how these letters ended up in the possession of the anthropologist or the Smithsonian. A month later, I fly back to the U.S. early because a pandemic has made travel uncertain. The pandemic goes on indefinitely, I am caught up in other projects, and I am not able to go see your papers.<sup>5</sup>

### Taken Away by an Englishman

2016: In "A Reluctant Second Reply to Robert A. Silverstein," published in *Morung Express* on May 18, 2016, apfü<sup>6</sup> Kaka Iralu bemoans the need for a "duel in a public newspaper" and then addresses Robert A. Silverstein's allegations that Kaka Iralu's previously published work on the history of the Naga movement is based on "unconfirmed opinions." Iralu writes:

If you have read my book, you should have come across all these details of our concrete history which is not based on Kaka's "unconfirmed opinions". 2. With regard to our letter of Information to the UN about our declaration of Independence, I am simply stating a fact and not the contents of the UN's reply because I never read it. The actual letter of acknowledgement, I believe, will be in my grandfather A.Z. Phizo's documents which unfortunately have been taken away by an Englishman and kept in Scotland.<sup>7</sup>

2022: The Forum for Naga Reconciliation creates a research team called Recover Restore and Decolonise (RRaD) with the purpose of returning Naga ancestors' remains back to Nagaland after a long possession by the University of Oxford. Our ancestors, too, were taken away by an Englishman.<sup>8</sup>

### DESPAIR

1958-1960s: Documents of the Naga National Council are hidden in caves in Naga territory to protect them from discovery or destruction during the early years of what is called the "low intensity war" between India and Nagaland. When people go back to collect the papers several years later, the papers have all been damaged beyond repair, disintegrated, or disappeared in the humid jungle caves.<sup>9</sup> This is a communal loss. Some of the knowledge that disappeared is protected in memory, but some is likely gone forever.

2003: When I was a teenager, I got a small microscope and prepared slides to look at the world around me. Pollen one day, my own hair the next. Both easily distracted and

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<sup>4</sup> Atsa is a shortened form of the Tenyidie words for grandfather and grandmother. In this instance, it refers to my grandmother.

<sup>5</sup> One of the first readers of this letter, geographer Sneha Krishnan writes: "As a scholar who works in colonial archives frequently, however, what I am struck by is that colonialism itself was and is conducted almost entirely through letters - the colonial archive is rife with letter-writing; in fact the abundance of letters is much of what makes the colonial record a meticulous, detailed collection." (Peer Review for *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 2023.)


<sup>6</sup> In Tenyidie, paternal uncles older than one's father are called apfü, meaning father.

<sup>7</sup> To read the exchange between Iralu and Silverstein, see: <https://morungexpress.com/reluctant-second-reply-robert-silverstein-0>.

<sup>8</sup> The story of the repatriation process can be found in the graphic novel, *A Path Home: A Graphic Novel on Naga Repatriation*. RRaD, Dimapur & North Eastern Research Centre, Guwahati (Longkumer and Imchen 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Zapuvisie Lhousa of Mezoma village told me this over tea by the fireplace in the kitchen at Kerünyü Ki, the House of Listening, in Sechü-Zubza village in January 2020.

enthralled, I would look at one thing after the next, never looking long at anything, always greedy to see more in more detail. But a ritual emerged where I would look at slides from your collection. Peering through the lens, my face inches away from a slim glass slide you had prepared 40 years before, I imagined this was a method for time-traveling closeness, as though seeing what you saw, prepared, cataloged, and preserved would let me know something of you.

2022: Academia.edu, a professional social media site for academic self-promotion, sends me an email with the subject: "Elsbeth Iralu  Did you write "Production of Trypanosoma cruzi Cysts in vitro?" with a link to your publication: Iralu, Vichazelhu. "Production of Trypanosoma cruzi Cysts in vitro." *Nature* 204, no. 4957 (1964): 486-487.

1984: Before pancreatic cancer ends your life early, you despair that you will not be able to return to Nagaland. Bitter at the divisions within the Naga movement and perceived lack of success of the movement, you make a bonfire in your Pennsylvania backyard and burn many of your papers and books. For decades after, the family believes that all your papers were destroyed and we mourn the loss of your stories and ideas that we cannot access. We rely on family and friends' memories to tell stories of you: that you were one of the young Naga National Council members to send a telegram announcing Naga independence and nationhood to the British Monarch and the United Nations on August 14, 1947; that you obtained a Salvadoran passport for your uncle, Naga National Council president Angami Zapu Phizo, who then used the passport to travel from East Pakistan to the United Kingdom; that you remained engaged with the Naga national movement, despite living in the U.S. and working full time running a research laboratory at a small medical school. We hear that, in order to keep up with the deadlines of graduate school during your PhD in parasitology, you inoculated your own forearm with a parasite and took samples from it. For decades afterwards, your siblings wonder if these experiments led to your early death. These personal artifacts loom as large as the political.

## Desire

I want to visit your letters in the Smithsonian archive and comb them for your despair and passion, follow the traces of your political future-dreaming as well as the minute details of your everyday concerns and observations. But I'm afraid of which questions might be answered and which will continue to elude me, or how the archive will tinge my attempt to correspond with you.

In the boxes of the institutional archive, everything is fair game. We like to assume that someone has already "done the needful:"<sup>10</sup> that the archive came by the papers in an official way with consent of the persons implicated. We imagine that archives tell stories that, while open for argument and reading between the lines, are firmly settled in the past.

But what if those archives illuminate the present? What if they open old wounds? What if an archival discovery puts lives at risk in the here and now? Do we slip them back into folders

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<sup>10</sup> "Please do the needful" is a colloquial Indian English phrase that means, as it sounds, to do what needs to be done.

into boxes on a back shelf and hide the knowledge inside? How does our private possession of knowledge contribute to our own collective undoing?

How do we hold this weight for the time being?<sup>11</sup>

With love,

Elspeth

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<sup>11</sup> In the novel *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth Ozeki writes: "A time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be" (p. 3). She later elaborates, quoting Dōgen Zenji: "To grasp this truly, every being that exists in the entire world is linked together as moments in time, and at the same time they exist as individual moments of time. Because all moments are the time being, they are your time being" (p. 259).