

The Rengma Nagas: A Changing Tribe

The Rengma Nagas:

By J. P. Mills. (Published by direction of the Government of Assam.) Pp. x + 381 + 17 plates. (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1937.) 25s. net.

MORE than fifteen years ago, the reviewer in NATURE of an earlier monograph in this series expressed the hope that it might be followed up by monographs on other Naga tribes including the Rengma, and Mr. J. P. Mills, honorary director of ethnography for Assam, in dealing with that tribe, has now filled in one gap in our existing knowledge, so that we have a series of works dealing with all the tribes occupying the middle of the major portion of the administered area of the Naga Hills.

The gaps in our knowledge have been filled in more ways than one, for while Mr. Mills has found less to say about the social organization, for example, of the Rengma, than he had to say about the Ao in his last monograph, he has given even greater details of minor observances, formulæ and superstitions of daily life. Thus we are told exactly what a man should do when he is going out to snare hornbills, or precisely what misfortunes befall a man who remarks how good a wild yam tastes.

The author is, by the way, perhaps too sweeping in describing the Great Indian hornbill as feeding "exclusively on fruits and berries"; at any rate, a tame one, which belonged to the reviewer and lived unopinioned in his garden, spent much time in searching for spiders in the thatch, and preferred butter even to mulberries. Incidentally, also, the Angami dye referred to in a footnote on p. 66 is made from the leaves not, strictly speaking, of an oak tree, but of the *Macaranga denticulata*, and, in order to obtain the true black, a cloth must first be boiled with macaranga leaves and then steeped in black mud, the iron salts in which act on the gallic acid from the tree to make a fast black.

Particularly interesting are the details which Mr. Mills gives of a purificatory ceremony of a kind not previously described, the reviewer believes, in any monograph of this series.

The Rengma are a tribe now split into three groups; one of these migrated westwards to the Mikir Hills in the first quarter of the nineteenth century; the other two remained in the Naga Hills, but have become widely separated by the northward migration of the Sema tribe. It is with the last two sections that Mr. Mills's monograph deals, and he speaks of them throughout with reference to the Naga Hills administrative district as the

Western and the Eastern Rengma, but the Middle, or Central, and Eastern would be more precise terms. It is unfortunate that official duties made it impossible for him to deal with all three groups, since the changes which have taken place in the westernmost group, everywhere in contact with other peoples, have been very great, and would have afforded an interesting, if depressing, example of the effects of cultural contact and subsequent sophistication.

Even so, Mr. Mills has some very important reflections to make on certain aspects of missionary teaching, particularly as to the policy sometimes pursued of discouraging the payment of marriage prices. The tendency of the mission has been, if not actually to discourage, at best to refrain from encouraging the practice of paying a substantial sum for the privilege of marrying a man's daughter. The practice is a healthy one, as it provides some economic insurance for proper treatment of the bride by her husband, who stands to lose the sum paid if his wife leave him under provocation, and for the good behaviour and fidelity of the wife, who in turn must refund the payment if she give good ground for divorce. In some Sema villages where the custom had been dropped on conversion to Christianity, a tendency was manifested towards a quite uncalled-for and unjustifiable putting away of wives, or desertion of husbands, since the unfaithful party stood to lose nothing by the change.

Mr. Mills defends the payment of marriage prices among the Rengma on similar grounds, and it might be added that the retention of the custom is particularly desirable in the interests of the bride where there has been a recent change from polygyny to Christian monogamy, and where the tendency towards marrying more than one wife is likely to show itself in divorce and re-marriage if there be no serious obstacle.

The Government of Assam is the one administration in the Indian Empire that has the wisdom, the foresight and the interest in good governance to produce a series of detailed accounts of the customs and lives of the peoples of primitive culture surviving in the wilder parts of its province. This one is more than worthy of its precursors; it is well produced, well illustrated and well indexed. Two misprints only (on pp. 69 and 92) were detected by the reviewer, but he badly missed a map. Both Mr. Mills and the Assam Government are to be congratulated on this addition to their unrivalled series of tribal monographs.