



Phejin with a Konyak elder

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PATHFINDER

TEXT BY LAURIGE BOYER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER BOSOVER A
CUP OF
KONYAK
TEAA SIP OF KONYAK TRADITION WITH THE
WOMAN BEHIND THE TEA PLANTATION IN
THE LAND OF THE HEADHUNTERS

FIRST met Phejin at her farm in Shiyong, in Nagaland's Mon district, a few hours' drive on a (really) bumpy road from the Assamese border. It was pitch dark when we arrived, but Phejin welcomed us with the hospitality that only people who have travelled to Nagaland are privileged to know. As soon as we entered her house, we felt at home. She had already started cooking—but I am not going to talk about the food, as that would lead to another story altogether.

After dinner, we spent hours discussing her background, her projects and travel stories. What first struck me about Phejin is that she is a one-woman army. Managing a farm/tea plantation in such a remote area is already a full-time job, especially since it is not really feasible to use machines in the region. Beyond that, she converted her house into a homestay where people can volunteer at the Konyak Tea Retreat. Surrounded by 250 acres of tea plantations, the gorgeous orchard and farm is a veritable Eden (the orange yield alone in 2015 was around 5 lakh). The farm also grows guavas, limes, ginger, chilies and seasonal vegetables, apart, of course, from tea. Had we stayed longer, we could have helped locals in the paddy fields, milked cows and goats and learned how the Konyak tribe smokes its meat. (If you do decide to volunteer here, you could also hike to the nearby waterfalls in your free time.)

As if managing a farm and a homestay were not enough work, Phejin has also spent the last four years scouting the Konyak territo-



↑→ A view of the tea plantation at sunset; (below): the Konyak Tea Retreat

Hoshner Reporter



ries, documenting the vanishing tattoo tradition of her tribe. She is retracing the steps of her famous great grandfather and Konyak warrior Ahon. He was among the first interpreters from the region to travel with expeditions of Western researchers in this part of the world. His story, as well as her own curiosity, are what Phejin says drove her to document her culture and to fight to preserve her roots and cultural heritage.

Before the 1900s, the Nagas had been pretty isolated from the outside world due to their practice of headhunting—outsiders rarely dared to venture into their territory. But in the first half of the 1900s, after the arrival of the first British expeditions of ethnographers and administrative officers,

the Konyak territory became open to the outside world. At the time, there were sweeping changes taking place across the world, thanks to material and technological evolution—and just like any other society, the Konyak society went through a transition in order to adapt. And in this transition, tradition suffered.

In order to embellish her research, Phejin teamed up with Peter Bos, a photographer from the Netherlands. Together, they travelled the region—walking from village to village on jungle paths, through the rains and humidity, taking public (shared) transportation and even hiring private vehicles to reach every nook and corner of the territory—to get all the tattoo patterns and design

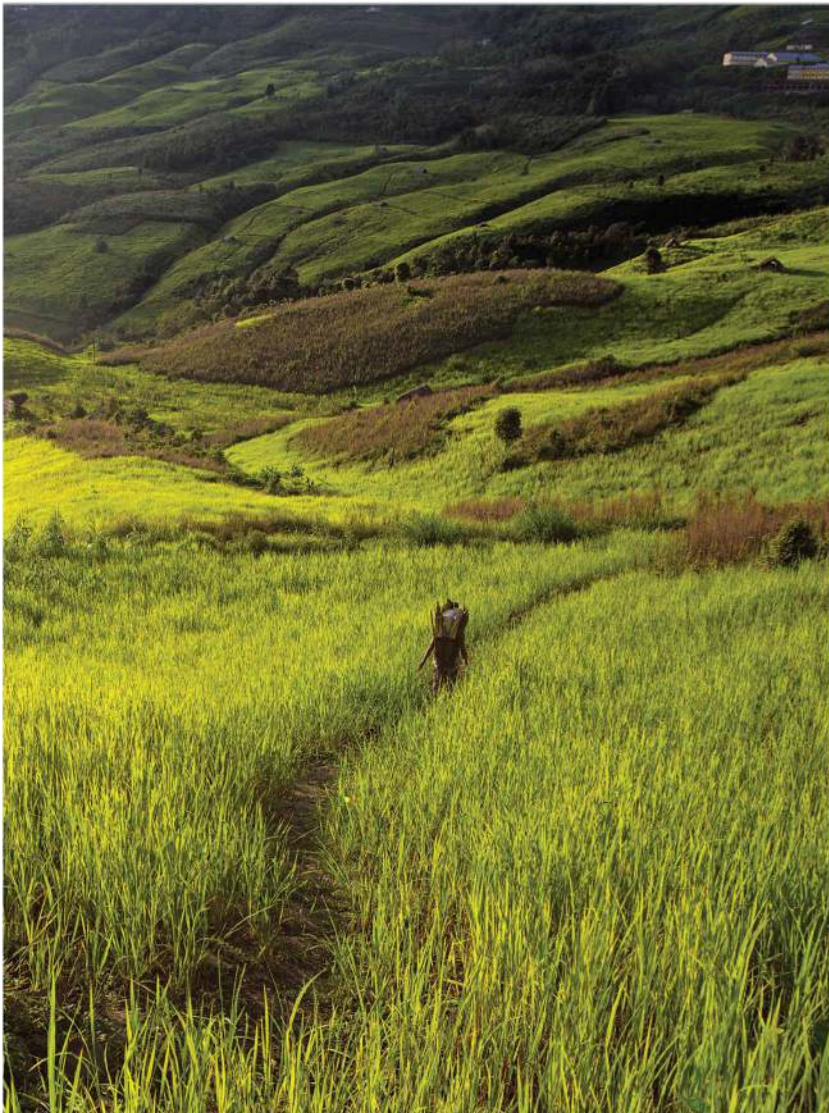
variations right.

Through their travel and interviews, they realised how fragile the Konyak tattoo tradition has become. There are only a few hundred people still living who wear such tattoos—and of those few hundred, only ten or fifteen people have a complete set of designs.

When the local tradition of headhunting was ended (the last major reported outbreak was in 1990, following a land dispute between two tribes), the art of tattooing dwindled along with it. That aside, young people today also seem more into Korean movies and how to get the latest trendy jeans than in tradition. In earlier times, tattoos were compulsory—there was no escape from them. Per

the Konyak belief, certain tattoos also ensured safe passage in the afterlife. It was believed that when a person died and journeyed from the physical world into the other world, the tattoos they wore would be recognised by their ancestors. There is deep tradition behind all the markings—each tattoo has a name, and they all call back to traditional stories and folk tales. These designs also distinguish the people of one clan from the people of another, and sometimes also indicate a person's level in their tribe's hierarchy.

Another reason that the tradition has faded is that the traditional process of tattooing is very painful—many of the elder people Phejin spoke to say that they wouldn't want anyone to experience



←→Greenery all around—paddy fields and tea plantation

SURROUNDED BY 250 ACRES OF TEA PLANTATIONS, THE ORCHARD AND FARM IS A **VERITABLE EDEN. THE FARM GROWS SEASONAL VEGETABLES**

the pain of getting one like they did at that time. Even so, Phejin went through the painful traditional process herself, and got one on her forearm from Ngon-Am, tattoo artist and a queen in the Konyak tribe. Phejin had to put a lot of effort into persuading Ngon-Am to do one last traditional tattoo for her—before that, Ngon-Am had done her last tattoo in 1958, when tattooing was banned by the missionaries. Six decades later, the Queen was holding her tattooing tools once again. The ink used for the tattoo is the sap collected from the bark of the “Kong-tree”; and for the needle, she used the thorns of the rattan palm plant.

After speaking to Phejin that evening, it didn't take us long to see why she was fearful of what was already happening to the cultural heritage of her people. The day after we arrived at her homestay,

we headed to Longwa. As we entered the village, we stopped at a beautiful traditional house ornamented with a stunning wood carved door. The house was so well maintained that I thought it was a museum. I was heart-broken when I understood that it was not—the beautiful antique artifacts on display were being sold to tourists for a few hundred rupees. What will happen when the traditions of the fierce headhunters have disappeared, and all the thatch-roof houses have turned into concrete buildings? Will the Konyak territories also fade, and no longer attract travelers from all over the world? This is what people like Phejin are fighting against—to create awareness among the youth of the district, to keep alive the traditions of the community.

Back at her farm, Phejin has started a coffee

KONYAK TEA RETREAT

The stone walled farmhouse is cradled in a 250 hectares tea plantation with its own flower and vegetable garden. The beautiful house has an open-plan kitchen, dining area and a living room with comfortable couches, rugs and plenty of books. During the day, pick tea at the family owned tea estate, milk cows and goats at the dairy farm, work with locals in their paddy fields, hike to nearby waterfalls and forests or plant trees, flowers and vegetables in the farm itself.

Discover more about the Konyaks by visiting traditional villages nearby. In the evening, learn how to smoke meat in the time-honoured traditions of the Konyak tribe and indulge in some amazing homemade Naga delicacies, including Naga pork curry with bamboo shoot; boiled squash; roasted fish; and beef chutney.

The Konyak Tea Retreat is located in Mon district in north Nagaland and is a five to six-hour drive from Dibrugarh airport in Assam. One night stay per person including all meals is Rs 2,500.

plantation project in partnership with Peter Bos, the Dutch photographer of their book *The Konyaks: Last of the Tattooed Headhunters*. As for a taste of their Naga coffee, we will need to wait four long years to let the collaboration of mother Nature and Phejin's effort bear fruit. 🌱

People can connect with Phejin Konyak through:
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Laurige is a French national currently living in Meghalaya. Over the last 10 years, he developed an eco camp in Ladakh, a boat cruise in Varanasi and an eco-conscious travel agency in the Northeast (Eastern Routes).