

## Naga Stories

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2 Kings 5:1-14  
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*Ken Sehested was invited to participate in negotiations among the Naga people in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in late June. These are his reflections on that amazing encounter and the long effort for peace in that region.*

Thinking back on it now, it's a wonder that I still have all my fingers and both my eyes. Like for most kids, when I was growing up Christmas was always the most anticipated holiday of the year. I can recall waking in the middle of the night on December 24th, pretending to go to the bathroom so I could peer into the dark living room to do a quick assessment of what packages had been added under the tree since I went to bed.

The other two special holidays were Halloween and July 4th. Halloween, because for one night we got the run of the small West Texas town where I lived—the only parents out were those of small children. And then that huge sack of candy, which we would immediately sort when we returned home, putting the really good stuff in one pile, the OK stuff in another, and the stuff we really didn't want in a third. This sorting was prelude to the trading we'd do the next day in school.

But then there was July 4th. It's the only holiday I saved money for . . . in order to buy as large a bag of Black Cat firecrackers as I possibly could. I had several near misses, when a firecracker fuse had become saturated with powder and burned as fast as if it had been soaked in gasoline. But nothing serious. My fingers are still all here.



It's quite a stretch to make a connection between the ancient General Namaan, commander of the kingdom of Aram, and General V.S. Atem, commander of the largest guerilla army among the Naga people of northeast India and northwest Myanmar. But that's my purpose this evening. I'll begin with some stories about how I first got involved with the Naga people's struggle for independence, which has been raging since their first contact with British colonial forces in the early 19th century and culminated in an explicit Naga declaration of independence on August 14, 1947, one day before the government of India declared its independence from Great Britain. Since that time a slow-burning civil war has engulfed the region. At least 200,000 lives have been lost in that struggle, making it the most underreported civil conflict anywhere in the world.

Northeast India is something of a peninsula-shaped, thin strip of land that extends from the Indian subcontinent to just north of Bangladesh and south of Bhutan, bordered at its end by China in the north and Myanmar to the east. One of the demographic oddities of that general area is the fact that a majority of several "hilltribe" peoples (as they're called) are predominantly Christian, because of a unique missionary history to the region. And in several places, including Nagaland, the majority of the Christians are Baptists.

The Nagas have no written history prior to the 19th century. Anthropologists believe they migrated from what is now Mongolia to their current homeland a couple millennia ago, and are ethnically related to the peoples of current-day Nepal, southeastern China, and Bhutan.

I first met Dr. Wati Aier during a meeting of the Baptist World Alliance Human Rights Commission in Harare, Zimbabwe. I was a member of that Commission and had been invited to address the group, which I did by telling a string of short vignettes about Baptists involved in justice, peace, and human rights around the world and in recent history. One of those stories was about Rev. Longri Ao, a Baptist pastor who, in an intense period of conflict in northeast India in the 1960s, had repeatedly risked his life attempting to arbitrate a cease-fire to make room for negotiations.

I had no idea that a Naga was sitting in the room. When the meeting adjourned, Wati met me at the door, introduced himself—he's president of the Oriental Theological Seminary in Nagaland—and asked if we could talk. Later that evening, we spent four hours in the hotel coffee shop, with him telling me the long story of the Naga people and his own efforts to pick up the meditation process begun by Rev. Ao a generation before. He invited me to participate in that process.

Never have I received an invitation that was so interesting and intimidating at the same time. While I knew it was a great compliment to be asked to participate as a third-party mediator among warring

Naga political parties, I also had a feeling I would be in over my head. I'd never done anything like this in my life.

Fools, as they say, walk in where wise ones fear to go. Thinking back on it now, it was far riskier than my childhood flirtation with miniature explosive devices called firecrackers. But you have to keep in mind that risk is always a part of our attempts to follow Jesus.

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The story of our life together, of covenant faithfulness with God, with the earth and with each other, is largely a story of what the author Kathleen Norris calls "quotidian forms of faithfulness." Which is to say, the bulk of our living involves making choices for peace over against violence, mercy over against vengeance, serving others over against self-preoccupation, in thousands of small, mostly unnoticed ways. But we always remain open to dramatic eruptions of the Spirit saying "go," sometimes to far-away places.

It was one of those odd moments that get burned into memory, almost like a mental snapshot. The planes' wheels had just left the ground. I peered out the window at an angry sky, which looked like it could break out in violent thunderstorms, maybe even a tornado, at any moment. I suddenly became aware of how frightened I was. And not because of the weather.

When the plane took off, I didn't know what my final destination would be. I didn't know who, if anyone, would meet me at the Calcutta airport. I didn't know where I would be staying, or with whom I would be talking. Wati had said, "We have to be flexible, since we can't know for certain when 'these guys' will be available." Long ago, he had gotten accustomed to speaking and e-mailing and faxing in vague language, for fear of being monitored by Indian security forces.

"These guys" turned out to be V.S. Atem, the commander of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, the largest Naga guerilla army, along with his security detail. Wati had applied, on my behalf, for a special permit to fly from Calcutta up to northeast India, which, since 1975, has been under martial law. Turns out I wasn't issued such a permit—though it would be granted on my next attempt. So I was profoundly relieved when I spotted Wati's face in the crowd as I cleared customs in Calcutta.

Greeting each other, he said, "follow me." We immediately began walking at a brisk pace, making a wide circle through the airport terminal, stopping frequently when he would casually look around and then continue walking. I was bleary-eyed from the 30-hour trip, but my adrenaline glands had reached deep into the reserves to keep me going.

After a couple of these meandering trips around the terminal, Wati finally explained. "I'm pretty sure an Indian agent was on my flight from Dimapur; but I don't see him now. So let's go."

After a 45-minute taxi ride, I checked into a hotel not far from downtown Calcutta, where Wati briefed me on the coming meeting. "The guys are already in town," Wati said, describing who they were. Then he left for other lodging. After a shower and dinner in the room, I collapsed for a long, dreamless sleep, awakened early the next morning by Wati's knocking at my door. "The guys will be here by 10. Let's order some breakfast and get ready." Then he introduced me to Mr. Yaopay, a prominent civil rights lawyer from Nagaland, who would also be present for the discussions.

Right at 10 a.m., Commander Atem and his security chief arrived at our door. After introductions, Atem got right to business. For the next two days, I listened to a long recitation of Naga history. At the end of each day, Atem and his colleague would leave separately. None of us knew where they were staying, since both had bounties on their heads. Wati and Yaopay would wait at least 10 minutes before making their departure.

This was my first cloak-and-dagger experience, and it was both intriguing and scary—far more so than lighting and throwing Black Cat firecrackers. Between those days and the following year, when I would return, Yaopay would be assassinated, likely by Indian security forces, probably for retaliation for his many attempts to lodge human rights violation charges against the Indian army; and Atem's security chief would be imprisoned.

Following these days of conversations, I holed up in my hotel room to read through a considerable stack of articles, books, and documents they had brought for me. The manifesto statement of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland is by far the oddest political document I have ever read. Much of it is drawn from Maoist political philosophy—NSCN insurgent leaders found refuge in China beginning in 1975. But

the motto of the party is: “Nagaland for Christ.” Indeed, for each of our sessions—each morning, then at our break for lunch, then returning in the afternoon to continue through late afternoon—General Atem insisted that we begin and end each meeting with prayer.



Now let me speed up this story a bit. By early 1997, leaders of the four major political parties agreed to meet. They expressly said that they wanted to come to the United States for this dialogue, partly because of their profound sense of connection with American Baptists, partly because they are great admirers of former President Jimmy Carter. Initially the Carter Center in Atlanta agreed to host the talks; when complications arose, we secured space at Emory University.

Unfortunately, at the last minute, the largest of the groups refused to come. That meeting almost fell apart. But after a day of stewing in anger, the leaders present decided to continue; and a remarkable document, titled “The Atlanta Appeal,” was approved by week’s end. CNN’s Asia news desk was interested in the story, and the group appointed Wati and me to appear on camera.

Shortly after those talks, a cease-fire agreement among the Naga parties was called, and two highly successful nonviolent resistance movements were organized. The cease-fire lasted more than two years before collapsing, in the midst of provocative actions by a variety of folk. Then between 2000 and 2007 the situation on the ground got worse, then better, then worse again, then better again. By 2008 sufficient pressure had mounted to bring the parties back to the table; and from that point until two weeks ago, seven rounds of negotiations were held in the neutral territory of Chiang Mai, Thailand.

After leaving my work with the Baptist Peace Fellowship (meaning, after losing a travel budget), I had only a marginal connection to the continuing diplomatic efforts, occasionally writing letters to key leaders as Wati requested. This past May, Wati called and asked if I could be present for this eighth meeting, in large part because he had hopes that a major breakthrough was possible and reasoning that, since most of these leaders knew me, my presence would add to the momentum. The goal of this meditation work has always been that the Naga parties would establish at least a federated party sufficient to negotiate with the Indian government with a common voice for a different political future for the Naga people.

We didn’t reach that goal two weeks ago in Chiang Mai. At the last minute, one of the parties refused to come, likely because of fractures and disagreements within their own ranks. As we did in 1997, those present stewed in their anger for at least a day before deciding to continue the talks. And as also happened before, some important statements were made—and some important relations were strengthened.

A breakthrough moment came a week ago Monday, when the coordinating team decided to ditch the planned agenda and simply sit in silence for a while, encouraging participants, as they felt led, to speak words from the heart and not simply from the head. One of the religious leaders stated, “Clinging to revenge will only eternalize the power of the perpetrators by haunting us daily. Therefore, as victims, we forgive in order to liberate us from haunting by anger, shame, and revenge. For our own sakes, we understand that we need to forgive, so that our lives can be free from the tormenting power of the past.”

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Those words prompted other penitent comments. By far the most dramatic was an impassioned and impromptu statement by General Atem: “I was born a Naga and I will die a Naga. I am proud to fight for my motherland. I have been a soldier all my life and, directly or indirectly, while fighting for the cause of the right of the Nagas, under my command as the military chief, I have caused untold pain and tears to my fellow Nagas and for this I seek forgiveness from God and from my fellow Naga people...Please! Please! Tell everybody you know about my request for forgiveness.”

In the end, we didn’t get what we hoped for. But the long history of this mediation has been like this: three steps forward, two back. Reconciliation is hard, demanding work. The good news is that the informal cease-fire that’s been in effect the last two years will likely continue to hold. And at this meeting, for the first time, leaders of two of the parties spent considerable time in private conversations of their own. It’s easy to project suspicions on someone whose face you’ve not seen up-close-and-personal, but speaking to an enemy face to face makes that difficult.



Now let's return to that much older story, of Commander Namaan's desperate venture to see the prophet Elisha in hopes of being cured of his leprosy. Against all protocol, Elisha didn't even come out to meet the commander in person, but sent one of his assistants with these instructions: "Go and wash yourself seven times in the Jordan River, and you shall be made whole."

Of all the nerve! This pipsqueak prophet from a two-bit country!

Namaan was furious. He thought the least Elisha could do was come out, engage in a formal ritual of prayer, and wave his hand over Namaan. And why choose the puny, dirty Jordan River for washing? The rivers of Aram are much more prestigious.

There's a lot of grain to be picked in this story, but let me quickly mention only three points.

First, it amazes me to see how important in this story are the roles of underlings— "unimportant" people whose names aren't even recorded. First was Elisha's assistant; then, more dramatically, was Namaan's young servant girl, who dared to confront the commander's rage with the suggestion that, well, isn't washing in the Jordan worth a try? People who do not share history's spotlight often play the most crucial roles. Think about what that means for this congregation.

Second, Namaan assumed that his healing must be associated with some big, famous and far-away river. Maybe, for us, we don't need to go to the Tennessee River, or the Ohio, or even the mighty Mississippi. Maybe Hominy Creek is where the action is.

Finally, this story seems to suggest that healing isn't necessarily prompted by elaborate religious rituals. Namaan at least wanted the Holy Man Elisha to wave his hand over his head to invoke the Lord God Almighty. But the river itself—that puny, dirty, small-time River Jordan—was all that was needed.

The function of our religious practices and disciplines—our meeting for worship, for prayer, for conversation on how we are to shape our common life and invest it in the drama of salvation—these things are not a source of magical power for us, power which we can then wield over others. Rather, we commit ourselves to these habits and disciplines in order to remember that puny rivers like the Jordan, like Hominy Creek and the Swannanoa, are still invested with the healing power of God. Indeed, the Presence of God can be discerned in every part of life, no matter how local, no matter how apparently insignificant and non-prestigious, no matter how unpretentious and homely.

In the end, the overwhelming amount of God's work is "home-ly." Quotidian. Everyday. With no reporters or book publishers lined up to get your photo or offer you a contract.

There surely may come a time when the Spirit bids one or more of us to journey far to the distant rivers of Abana and Pharpar. Or those that flow through Bogota, or through Matanzas or Camagüey; or Dimapur, Nagaland. It's possible that one or more in the Circle could be called to the Amazon or the Nile River; or the Yangtze, or Danube, or Rhine. But far more often the banks that vie for our attention are those of the Bear or Bent Creeks; the Glenn's Creek or the Brushy Creek, or the Reems Creek.

The waters of life flow all around us, even—though not visible—in the desert. And every one of us is invited to wade into their healing wetness, and then lead others there as well.

Amen