



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### THE LAST HEADHUNTERS: CULTURAL MEMORIES OF THE OLLO PEOPLE

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the traditional practices of head-hunting among the Olo community of Tirap District, Arunachal Pradesh, with particular focus on the Paang, the male dormitory that served as both social institutions and rituals space. Based on oral narratives collected from the research field, the study reconstructs the sequence of events from the act of taking an enemy's head to the ceremonial rituals performed in the Paang (Dormitory). Drawing from oral narratives, the study traces how head-hunting functions as both a martial traditions, deeply connected to their notions of honor, bravery, and social cohesion. After a successful head-hunt, the severed head was brought to the Paang, where warriors and community members gathered and celebrate in the Paang while praising the Kahang which mean the great warriors. The study adopts an ethnographic, utilizing oral narratives, in-depth interviews, and participant observation to gather data. The key findings reveal that head-hunting was not merely an act of warfare but a ritualized practice. The research documents oral heritage of the Olo community, preserving narratives that have never been recorded in written form. It analyse the transformation of socio-political and religious institutions under the influence of Christianity and modern governance.

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## INTRODUCTION

The mountain stands like a tower in the centre of the two great Indian civilization, namely Brahmaputra valley and the Irravatee valley. A civilization to the areas would not have perhaps been brought, but for these two rivals which called the messages of the Vedas even to the remotest wilderness. Both are, therefore, religiously held esteem to this day and generations more to come. It is the bay of ancient Purva Samudra where the religious discharge of both, with the religious discharge of the Ganga; mingle. In the ancient and the mediaeval times the mountain range divided the kingdoms of South China, Pagan or Bhamo, Maguang or Pong, Pegu, Ava, Arakan, in one side and those of India on the other. It was forming the inter-provincial boundary between Assam and Burma of the British Empire (Barua, 1991). Tirap District is divided into four sub-divisions, Khonsa, Changlang, Mio, and Longding. The Nocte lives in two sub-divisions in Tirap district namely Khonsa and Canglang. (Lowang, 2006). The Noctes lives in Tirap District, within Patkai range on the north-eastern border of the country. The territory is situated at the altitude ranging from 150 to 1500, metres approximately (Lowang, 2006). The Noctes may now classified into five groups on the basis of dialects being spoken by them i.e. Hawakhun, Photung, Oloh, Joaro and Khapa (Lowang, 2006).

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The ancient history of the Olo people are unclear due to lack of documented historical records. However, their oral traditions made it possible for them to gain this profound understanding of the universe and their place within it, which has been passed down through generations. Their special nature originated from the memory of their successive generations. Oral traditions is very vital part for those tribes who did not have their own written records of their past.

## DISCUSSION

**Head-hunting traditions among the Olo:** In the rich cultural heritage of Olo society, the title "kahang" holds a revered place. Bestowed upon brave and great warriors, this captivating title recognizes exceptional courage and skill in battle. Specifically, the Kahang was celebrated for their prowess in headhunting, a practice deeply ingrained in Olo tradition. This ancient custom held significant cultural and spiritual importance, with the number of heads taken serving as a measure of warrior's greatness. In Olo culture, success in headhunting was considered the principle of achievement for an individual. The more heads taken, the greater the warrior for their bravery, and their name became synonymous with honor and respect. This recognition transcended mere personal achievement, as the Kahang's valor reflected positively on their entire Community. The title served as a badge of honor, inspiring admiration and reverence among fellow villagers. Beyond its significant symbolic, head-hunting played a

practical role in Ollo society. Human heads were required for important ceremonies, such as dedication of the Lowang's Paang, serving as a tangible reminder of victory and strength. Upon returning from battle, victorious Kahang warriors wouldn't immediately go home. Instead, they would head straight to the Paang, a communal hub of social and cultural repository, and symbol of collective identity (Mangyut,2023). Upon arrival, the warriors were greeted with a joyful ceremony. Villagers gathered to celebrate their bravery, singing traditional songs and performing dances to honor the Kahang. The community recounted the warrior's exploits, highlighting their skill and valor, and showered praise and admiration upon them. Following the celebration, the warriors performed sacred rites to ensure spiritual balance. The enemy's head was preserved, often smoked or dried, and displayed under a sacred stick and kept it in the Lowang's or chief paang. This ritualistic strength served as a symbol of community strength and reinforced social bonds. The Kahang's achievement was commemorated in oral tradition, honored through ceremonies and ritual. Today, the legacy of the kahang endures. Despite the passage of time, the people of the Ollo community continues to remember and respect these brave great warriors. Their name invoked with reverence, serving as a testament to the enduring importance of Ollo cultural traditions. The title "KAHANG" remains an inspiration, embodying the values of courage, strength, and community that define Ollo identity (Wangdong, 2024).

According to the Ollo people, reason of the headhunting was spiritual, for protective reason, cultural reason, and historical reason. They don't know the exact date and the origin of the headhunting. Here are the possible reasons of headhunting in the Ollo community. Headhunting was an integral part of the Ollo cultural heritage and tradition. The practice reflected the Ollo people's resilience and adaptability. Headhunting played a role in maintaining community and identity. The Ollo practiced headhunting before the colonialism and Christianity arrived in the region. Geographical isolation contributed to the development of unique cultural practices. Head-hunting was a response to external challenges and threats. The Ollo people practiced head-hunting to established their social status and prestige within their community. Successful Kahang's earned respect and recognition, elevating their position in society. Headhunting was the pride and identity of the Ollo men and to prove their bravery and strength he has to chop the heads of their enemy, to prove his bravery and worth. Headhunting served as a deterrent to protect Ollo villagers and the villages from neighboring threats. The practice helped to establish territorial control and secure resources.. Heads were taken as trophies to symbolize victory and strength(Mophuk,2023).

**Role of Kahang:** In the Ollo community, the title of Kahang is not given lightly; it carries immense respect and honor. The Kahang were regarded as the bravest protectors of their people, warriors whose courage and strength were celebrated by the entire village. To be called Kahang meant you had proven your valor by bringing home an enemy's head as a symbol of not only bravery but also of service to community's safety and prestige(Wangdong,2024). The night a warrior returned with a head was marked by great celebration. The village would come alive with cheers and songs praising the Kahang for their strength and courage. This was not merely a feast but a communal event that reinforced social bonds and honored the protector's role in safeguarding the tribe (Mophuk, 2023). Receiving the title of Kahang also involved ritual significance.

During the sacred head boiling ceremony, the Kahang's role was central. The head would be kept in the chief's dormitory, symbolizing power and victory, and only those who had earned the title through their deeds could participate in these rites. The honor extended beyond words. Warriors who become kahang bore tattoos marking their achievement. These tattoos were visible signs of the bravery and status, proudly displayed as lifelong badges of honor(Rumsu,2024). For the Ollo people, Kahang was much more than a name; it was a mark of identity, courage, and social responsibility. Not everyone could claim it, and only those who truly earned it through their actions could carry this revered title. The Kahang were the living symbols of strength and protection, forever woven into cultural fabric and memories of the community. There is story of the Kahang, the great Kina minyang. The story was narrated by the Gaon bura; of Laju village sina Mophuk, Story goes like this: "As the British forces approached the Ollo region, intent on negotiation and change, the Ollo people resisted, fearing exploitation. They had already sent word to the neighboring Nocte messenger sent by the Nocte chief and Britishers. Expressing their disapproval, but the Nocte chief had agreed to British terms. The Ollo people were determined to protect their way of life. With the region shrouded in rain and fog, they prepared for battle. The warriors hid their women and children, readying themselves for guerrilla warfare. However, Kina Minyang, a revered headhunter, devised a bold plan. To safeguard his people, he decided to solo-charge into battle, determined to mislead the British and Nocte forces. The Ollo villagers warned him of dangers, but Kina Minyang's stood resolute. With his weapon in hand, he charged forward, fighting valiantly against overwhelming odds. Though vastly outnumbered, Kina Minyang's bravery and cunning led the enemy forces astray, Buying precious time for his villagers. In the end, Kina Minyang gave his life to protect his people. His selfless act saved the Ollo village from destruction, ensuring the survival of his community. His name became etched in Ollo history as a legendary head-hunter and champion on his people's freedom" (Mophuk, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

This study of the Ollo community's cultural memories, particularly the practice of headhunting and the revered role of the Kahang, reveals a rich tapestry of tradition, identity, and social structure deeply embedded in the community's history. Through oral narratives passed down from generations to generations, the Ollo people have preserved not only the facts of their past but also the values, beliefs, and meanings that give these traditions life and significance. Headhunting was more than a physical act of bravery; it was a complex cultural practice intertwined with spirituality, social orders, and community protections. The kahang, as the honored headhunters, symbolized courage and responsibility, embodying ideals that were essential for the survival and cohesion of the tribe. Their stories, rituals, and the respect they command continue to resonate in the collective memory of the Ollo's serving as a reminder of their ancestor's strength and resilience. However, with the arrival Christianity and the gradual influence of modernization, the practice of headhunting has disappeared from daily life. These changes brought new values and social norms, leading to the transformation of traditional practices. Despite this, the memories and stories of headhunting continue to be preserved through oral narratives as all the severed skulls were burnt by villagers after converting into Christians.

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