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Research Article

# Vkur Nukuj (Let Us Return): Taking Ancestral Photographs Home

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## Abstract

This article explores the complexities of colonial photography, archival ownership, and visual repatriation within the context of Arunachal Pradesh, India, focusing on historic Nyishi photographs from the Pitt Rivers Museum. By reconnecting the families of Nyishi interpreters Bath Heli and Kop Temi with photographs taken by colonial administrators Ursula Graham Bower and Charles Robert Stonor, the study examines the power dynamics embedded in the archival process. Using an autoethnographic approach, the research situates visual repatriation as a medium for restoring Nyishi cultural memory and examining tribal identity. The findings reveal how photographs, once decontextualized in the colonial archive, carry distinct meanings when reintegrated into their communities—challenging colonial narratives locked within museum spaces and enabling cultural resurgence.

## Keywords

visual repatriation, colonial photography, Arunachal Pradesh, Nyishi, indigenous memory, autoethnography, archival decolonization

## Recommended Citation

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## Introduction

This work delves into the intricate relationship between institutions, colonial history, visual documentation, and local memory in Arunachal Pradesh, a remote frontier region of India. The study develops a provenance-research and visual-repatriation approach by uncovering the "present" of Pitt Rivers Museum–archived photographs of Bath Heli and Kop Temi, taken by Ursula Graham Bower and Charles Robert Stonor, among Temi's and Heli's direct kin in Arunachal Pradesh.

As stated by Mooren et al. (2022), provenance research sheds light on the "microhistory" of photo collections housed in institutions such as the Pitt Rivers Museum, providing insight not only into their successive ownerships but, above all, into the entanglement of Nyishi history within the larger colonial history of India. This approach emphasizes critical analysis of the acquisition, appropriation, colonial intention, and ongoing ownership of the photo collections depicting Nyishi individuals. It aims to uncover the significance of these photographs within their original context, as Peers and Brown (2009) put it: "We seldom know much about their other realities, about the quite different sets of meanings attached to them within their source communities, about who the people in such photographs are to their relatives."

Visual repatriation—fundamental to this study—focuses specifically on viewing colonial photographs through an Indigenous lens. As Edwards (2003) notes, visual repatriation entails a conscious shifting of photographs from "public," "outsider" spaces to "private" and "appropriate" ones. These photographs, once considered colonial documents or "ethnographic" records, through their entanglement with specific institutional structures, become family history, clan history, and tribal history. This shift in photographic narrative is activated through the repatriation of images—a process described by Dudding (2005) as the return of photographic copies held in museum or institutional collections to their original communities or sites.

With the return and photograph's meaning-making, this study seeks to revitalize the photo life[1] by deconstructing the archive of Pitt Rivers Museum and visually repatriating the archived photographs from Ursula Graham Bower and Charles Robert Stonor collections. It will be navigated through my experience as a native Nyishi, taking a narrative auto-ethnographical framework in the words of Linda Smith (1999) from "the vantage point of the colonized". I put my experience at the center of this research on visual repatriation, and situate myself as a "key informant", a "consummate insider" (Houstan, 2007), transforming my experience as both an insider and outsider of the Nyishi community throughout the process of repatriating the photographs of community elders and oscillating to and fro within the scientific and Nyishi social realm.

## A Note on Methodologies

I worked with a set of 24 photographs of Kop Temi and 9 photographs of Bath Heli taken by Ursula Graham Bower and Charles Robert Stonor. The photographs were primarily selected and identified through a keyword search for "Kop Temi" and "Bath Heli" in the Pitt Rivers Museum's online photo collection. These were enlarged to A4 size and printed directly from the laser scanner in both TIF and JPG formats to make the image content more visible for group viewing. Two clear files contained the photographs of Bath Heli and Kop Temi, respectively. Each photograph was marked with its PRM accession number in pencil on the back, to allow cross-referencing with the PRM dataset.

These printed photographs did not carry any captions. Instead, PRM data—including the year the photo was taken, location, photographer, year of accession, and caption—were printed on A4 sheets and compiled in a clear file alongside the photographic prints. As distributing hard copies to every kin member was not feasible, digital copies in both JPG and TIF formats, along with an Excel sheet containing metadata from the Pitt Rivers Museum, were placed on two external drives—one for Bath

Heli and one for Kop Temi—and handed over to their kin. The digital files were also shared via WhatsApp and email with other family members.

Understanding the position of these photographs within the frameworks of anthropology, colonial power, and the archive was guided by a provenance research approach. The journey began within the colonial context of touring governance in the Subansiri Hills of Arunachal Pradesh and proceeded with a critical analysis of the photographs' current archival domicile in the Pitt Rivers Museum. This entailed a deconstruction of the archive as an imperial epistemic institution and an effort to untangle the layered meanings of the photographs.

The return of these images to the kin of Kop Temi and Bath Heli in Papumpare and Keyi Panyor districts, Arunachal Pradesh, aimed to understand the process of engagement and recontextualization of these visual documents, including their sensorial and corporeal impact. "Observant Participation" was employed as a method to grasp the phenomenology of visual repatriation. Unlike the traditional participant-observer role, I adopted a more active and embodied stance, aligning with Wacquant's (2002, 2006) notion of *habitus*, immersing myself in the Nyishi social world and the lived reality attached to these photographs through an inward gaze.

## Situating in the Archive

Following the notion of the contested presence of photographs in museum space by Edwards (2005)[2], the archived photographs of Kop Temi and Bath Heli in the Pitt Rivers Museum, with their "knotted" colonial history, have formed as a site of intersecting histories, a visual legacy, and colonial historical deposits. These photographs by Bower and Stonor of Bath Heli and Kop Temi now stand as a mnemonic of the 'colonial gaze' of the British colonial infiltration in the Nyishi settlements in the Subansiri region. The photographs currently housed in the Museum, as stated by Edwards (2000), also closed the space between the site of observation of the colonial periphery in the frontier hills and the site of metropolitan interpretation in the United Kingdom. In their current domiciliation in the archive, the photographs have thus turned into a representational machine, a mnemonic, and a contested space that is spatially and contextually divorced from the hills of Subansiri and the Nyishi social interpretation. To closely examine the current position of the photographs in the Pitt Rivers Museum archive, it is necessary, as suggested by Derrida, to deconstruct the archive. In deconstructing the archive, as argued by Clifford (1997), it is needed to critically understand and consider the circuits and the practices within the archive and not only the place. This understanding requires the exploration of the structuring of forms of accession, the processes of collecting and description, the context of collecting and use, and the range of social practices associated with them.

## An Imperial Reality Woven Within the Archive

The ethnographic photographs of the Subansiri region that Haimendorf, Bower, and Stonor took were brought back to the United Kingdom and decontextualized from their original setting. The photographs were donated to different institutions and became part of archival collections. Bower donated the films and photographs from the Subansiri region to the Pitt Rivers Museum, and Charles Robert Stonor donated his photograph collection of the Nyishi to the same institution. With varied micro-intentions, the photographs arriving in the archives were transformed into public photographs. The public reading of the photographs, as in the traditional constitution of 'The Archive,' is open to different meanings about the culture while also operating within a disciplinary paradigm that reifies and objectifies the subject matter as both 'data' and archetype (Edwards, 2005). In this case, Bath Heli and Kop Temi as photo referents turned into scientific data, open to different interpretations for public reading. Within Western colonial scholarly modes of thought and institutional settings,

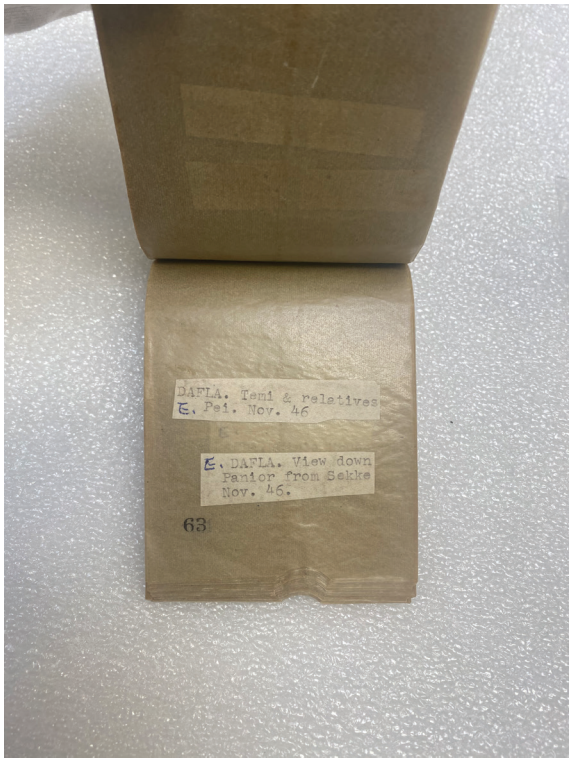


Figure 1: Charles Robert Stonor's album containing nitrate film negatives, stored in Stonor's file at the Pitt Rivers Museum. (Photo by the author)

the visual appropriation of the Nyishi included distorted identities of Bath Heli and Kop Temi, who now became Bower's or Stonor's photographs—or currently, the Pitt Rivers Museum's.

To examine more deeply the displacement of the original context and the silencing of the Nyishi interpretation of the photographs, I borrow the framework of visual economy by Poole of the thirty-three photographs, confined within the Western epistemic sphere and the imperial institution of the Archive. The production of the photographs of Kop Temi and Bath Heli could be understood in the colonial administrative and scientific context of looking at these photographs as documents of Frederick Nicholson (Tim) Betts, Ursula Graham Bower, and Stonor's activities in the periphery of the colonized territory. In this context, both Stonor and Bower took an interest in the ethnographic context of the Nyishi and its society by categorizing them in the late Neolithic phase.[3] The circulation and accessibility of these photographs within colonial institutions remained restricted and isolated from the source community. Under ongoing institutional ownership, the photographs continued to remain locked. The photographs dwelled permanently in the Pitt Rivers Museum archive and, as maintained by Derrida, this marked the institutional passage from the private to the public. The photographs travelled from the private collection of Stonor and Bower, which was donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum by Stonor in 1969 and by Bower in 1985. The Bower collection of Kop Temi and Bath Heli photographs in Agfa negative film was later digitized in November 2010, and the Stonor collection of Kop Temi photographs in nitrate negative film was recently digitized in January 2023.[4] The archive, although a dead space for the photographs, is an active space within the imperial context; in the words of Linda Smith (1999), it represents and perpetuates the imperialist collective experience. A similar position and the imperial narrative and representation can be observed in Bower's and Stonor's photograph collections in the archive of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

## The Politics of Representation in the Archive and Captioning

As Edwards argued, understanding the archive requires not only a conceptualization of the ideological meta-levels but also critical engagement with the content of the images themselves. Following this notion, the theme of the images sheds light on the critical representation of the Nyishi by Bower and Stonor. Many of the photographs of Kop Temi and Bath Heli were taken as snapshots of engaging or performing traditional activities now in the museum archive, stirring the knowledge creation of the Nyishi and salvaging the 'tribal-like' activities through colonial imagination. It depicts Bath Heli with the bow and arrow and Kop Temi's active engagement in traditional peace treaty meetings called *Mel* and the rites of installing *Dapo*, mainly symbolizing the settlement of inter-tribal and inter-clan disputes among the Nyishi and Apatani of the Subansiri region.

The themes of the images shed light on the colonial and the possible intentions of the photographer more than the subjects that were photographed. The indexical truth in this sense has been an open space in the archive narrated through the experience and eyes of the colonial authorities. These archived photographs, circulated and exchanged within the colonial institutional setting, have transformed with free-floating meaning and context construction. With the free interpretation of the photographs within the archive, they are also heavily recontextualized through text attached to their indexicality.

As Edkins Jenny (2013) argues, usually a photograph comes with a context. Often this is a caption: words that frame the location, name the individual—signifying signs. The image does not often stand alone. The caption pins the photograph down, limiting or coloring our interpretation of its meaning—"taming it." It inserts the image into a textual milieu and demands it be understood in those terms.

Stating Edwards' (2005) emphasis on anthropological photographs in the museological setting creating parallel realities, an imperial reality with the continued colonial gaze walled within colonial domiciliation is woven in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Besides the dominant colonial narrative of the photograph collection, what other parallel reality subsists outside the museum—particularly a reality woven by the source community? This reality is explored through visual repatriation in returning the photographs back to kin of Bath Heli and Kop Temi in Arunachal Pradesh, India.

## *Vkur Nam* (The Return)

Growing up in the Subansiri hills, modernity and modern amenities were more of a recent arrival—much like they are often associated with the present young generation. With the abrupt introduction of technological development and modernity, the culture of oral knowledge-keeping has diminished in recent decades. This disappearing tradition is also partly due to the endangerment of the Nyishi language and, overall, the Nyishi identity, which has come to be regarded as a pressing issue. In this social scene, the images recorded of Bath Heli and Kop Temi from the 1940s were unique in Nyishi history. These individuals are also regarded with utmost respect within their native locality, lineage, and clan communities. They held the socially respected position of the first local *Kotoki* (political interpreter), a role generally held by influential individuals believed to be gifted with intellect and diplomatic skill among the clan and village communities.

Figure 2: Bath Dopum (left) and Bath Khilling (right) viewing a photograph of Bath Heli. (Photo by the author)

Taking this cultural context, the experience of visual repatriation will be understood. The photographs of Bath Heli and Kop Temi that were held in the Pitt Rivers Museum archive were brought back to the insiders and into the private sphere. The photographs returned home, and another reality was formed. In a society where oral storytelling and the passing down of keepsakes have dwindled across generations due to time and societal changes, I couldn't help but deliberate on the significance of these photographs as a memoryscape, a repository of history, and a foreign tradition—entering the Nyishi cultural realm of remembering the ancestors and storytelling, and an eventual way of restoring the endangered past. In returning the photographs to the family, I let the research unfold its journey where the photographs

anchored me. The interaction with the photographs was empirically observed and audio recorded. No questionnaires or interview schedules were utilized during the interaction, and strict adherence to photo-elicitation was not observed.

## The Stories Within

Sontag (2004) states, "All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability." Such mutability is apparent in the archival domiciliation of the photographs, and the silencing of alternate narration is brought out in the language of the Indigenous. In the words of Linda Smith (1999), it is an alternative story: the history of Western research through the eyes of the colonized. The repatriated photographs in this scenario became a window to the hushed history and the past of the Nyishi. Drawing on the experiences of the Nyishi interpreters Bath Heli and Kop Temi for the foreign officials took on a different resonance through their eyes and the camera lens. This perspective was notably distinct from the inscribed captions and representations found in the archival records. The photographs led to the opening of stories of the past, which were narrated through the memories and traditional oral narrations passed down across generations—on social geography, identity and lineage, clan, and interpersonal relations.

In Papumpare district, Kop Saul, son of Kop Temi, carefully examined the photographs taken of Kop Temi. Despite having a print of PRM data along with descriptions of the photographs, he took his time to study and recognize the faces in the images—touching the subjects' faces, bringing the images closer for clearer vision, or requesting me to zoom in on the faces of every individual on the laptop screen, while sometimes pausing and trying to remember the time, place, and identification of the people in the photographic images. The identification extended for hours as our tea got cold. Upon finding a photograph of his father standing with Rajani Kale, he exclaimed, "Oh! This is Rajani, an Ahom from North Lakhimpur.

Figure 3: Kop Temi with Rajani Kale. Photograph by Charles Robert Stonor. Pitt Rivers Museum Collections Online. © Pitt Rivers Museum.

I met him before he fell gravely ill, and he shed tears when he saw me. It was years after my father passed away, and they had a very good relationship. I believe this is one of those occasions when they worked together—they appear healthy and young here." It has been over fifty years since Kop Temi passed away, and it remained a distant memory for Saul to see his father healthy and young. He said, "Aab (father) was very sick and struggled in his final days. Looking at him healthy and as a Yapa (young adult male) here, I feel very happy."

The reading of the photographs was not only confined to the image content; it went beyond what was in the photograph. The images prompted stories that navigated clan and lineage migration—fundamental elements of Nyishi oral culture within the context of a semi-nomadic, traditionally sustainable lifestyle and social memory.

Kop Saul, while looking at the photographs of Kop Temi, reminisced about a story often narrated by Kop Temi to his children:

> "The village where my father lived has a long story. Before the Mai and Kop were separated, they were one clan—KopMai—and inhabited parts of present-day Yachuli. There was once

> an epidemic of Iss Dolyi (dysentery), and many people died in the village. With the growing deaths, both the Kop and Mai blamed each other for the epidemic, which resulted in a bloody clash. Some Kop migrated north, and the other group south, toward present-day Itanagar, while some settled farther south in the plains around Ranghajan seeking refuge... The Mai stayed in Yachuli. My father used to tell us about the vibrant community of Kop people living together in our village when it was part of the North East Frontier Agency. Later, the village became part of Assam, our neighboring state. My father was born in that village and was the first in our family and the Kop clan to attend school. He was smart and studious, so he got himself into an American Baptist School in Jorhat, Assam. Fluent in the languages of the plains people, Assamese, Nyishi, and Apatani, my father was appointed as a P.I. (Political Interpreter) under the Sarkar (government) and used to move around with the Sahabs (officials)."

Every photograph was examined for identification, tracing remnants of their existence in Nyishi society today through lineage and village affiliations. Beyond the faces, attention was paid to the locations where the photographs were taken—was it in the neighboring Apatani region, or the forests and steep hills of the Nyishi? These reflections indirectly shed light on the administration of the region through the practice of touring from one tribal territory to another, by both the photographer and the photographed.

While Kop Temi and Bath Heli worked together with Bower, both families also maintained friendly relations. Looking at the photographs of Bath Heli, Bath Dopum (Heli's oldest son) mentioned that Kop Temi was regarded as the first local interpreter from Arunachal Pradesh, who assisted as a translator for the Helyi ("outsiders," here referring to the British administrators). He said, "Kop Temi was the first to work as an interpreter with the Helyi. He was from Ranghajan and later got appointed as Head Interpreter, while my father was also working with him as an interpreter."

With such reference to the past, there was a similar approach in engaging with photographs and lineage and clan history, as retold by Bath Dopum, now close to 80, while viewing Bath Heli's photographs on the front porch of their house. While looking for their old village and their old house, he narrated:

> "We came to Tago village from Selsemchi. I was about 15 years old. My father had two to three wives by then, and there was my younger brother, and my mother was pregnant with my other brother. I remember my father told us that we had to leave Selsemchi because there was a Dolyi (epidemic) and many people died. It was a village where the Bath lived. We started moving with my father, grandfather, and my paternal uncle to a nearby settlement called Sel. By the time we reached there, we heard the news that the Dolyi had wiped out Selsemchi, and after a few days, my paternal uncle and my grandfather also passed away with the same illness in Sel village. So we had to look for another place and we eventually settled on this hill. We were the first ones to arrive here at Tago. It was a dense forest—and look now, we also have a primary school here!"

This memory, narrated by the oldest member in the lineage, was a story that will be passed down. With Bath Heli's family being the only remaining family of the clan, it was a story of heroic survival. Bath Heli is often remembered as an influential individual, known for his impressive oratory skills and for being one of the prominent Nyishi men who married seventeen wives from different clans.[5]

The ontological status of the photographs here is more than visual imagery—they are repositories of traditional knowledge. Here, photographs functioned, as stated by

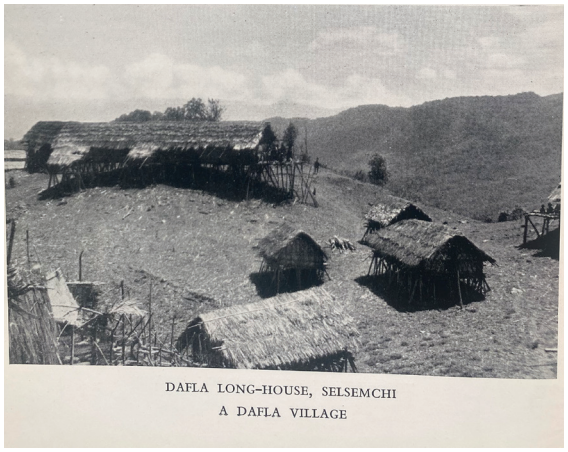


Figure 4: The longhouse in the background was identified by Bath Heli's children as their family home. Image from *The Hidden Land* by Ursula Graham Bower.

Edwards (2003), as memory-salvaging tools. The photographs, in this sense, worked as interlocutors in the process of telling histories. The photograph becomes a vessel filled with meanings, narrations, and networks, consequently embedding social roles and equated with surviving heirlooms—passed-down heritage from the ancestor's existence.

The story of clan migration and the placement of each lineage within this context is a common medium of revisiting ancestral history. Village settlements are often based on clan affiliation. Commonly, such narration is observed to understand the people and their affiliation to a village settlement and community. It is a fundamental part of social geography that connects a Nyishi to their land and to their origin as an identity marker within the tribe. The photographs were examined and embraced within the ontological setting of traditional oral culture.

As stated by Edwards (2001), the visual performativity of the photographs here had an affective tone, creating a phenomenological relationship with the viewer—not of content as such, but as active social objects. These photographs, as noted by Bell (2005), acted like ancestral heirlooms—as proof of the past—supplementing and stimulating oral narratives.

The story not only included clan migration but also changes in the spelling of clan names, as noted when family members read the captions of the photographs. Bath Khilling (Bath Heli's second son) remarked, "It should have been 'Baat', but the Helyi (outsiders, referring here to Stonor and Bower) started writing 'Bat', and that was the first time our clan names were written on paper and recorded. Eventually, we changed it by putting 'H' at the end after years of writing 'Bat'." In a similar tone, Kop Saul also commented while looking at the captions, "They wrote my father's name as 'Kop Temi', whereas it should have been 'Kup' if we pronounce it correctly. But we had to accept this written record given by the Sarkar, and our clan people still use the same spelling—'Kop'—now."

These captions and the letters provided by colonial officers had a lasting impact on clan identity and have contributed to ongoing confusion over standardized clan spellings. In the multi-clan Nyishi context—one of the largest tribes in Arunachal Pradesh—clan population and history are central to personal identity and harmonious relations with neighboring clans. In contemporary society, formal affiliation to a clan often requires adherence to officially recognized spellings using consistent English alphabetic letters. This formalization, introduced through the colonial recording of clan names, has sparked enduring discussion and confusion among members regarding the correct or unified form of their clan identities.

The photographs sparked conversations about the survival of the two clans and the migration narratives of two different lineages—narratives that remain central to identity in Nyishi society.

The image content, along with the captions, was carefully and repeatedly examined by the kin. The locations depicted in the photographs also became a common theme of active discussion. Images were socially read before captions were consulted; captions were typically only referenced to determine the identity of the subjects or the location. While the photographs opened

up a dialogue on tribal and clan historical experiences, the arrival of British authorities was not the main focus of discussion. Many family members were unclear about the identity of the Sahab—whether they were British, Indian, or even American—as expressed during conversations in Tago Village. They also did not know why these individuals had come, or why they had enlisted the services of Kop Temi and Bath Heli.

## On the Elements and the Materiality of the Photographs

The major emphasis in the photographic interaction and the phenomenological relationship of the viewers with the photographs was centrally laid on the image content. This also included the performativity and materiality of the photographs. Following Edwards' (2012) notion of the materiality of photographs, this can be understood through what people do with photographs.

While looking at the images, many dialogues focused on their content—particularly on the clarity and color. Requests were frequently made for clearer photographs, and there was a desire for colored versions. Viewers expressed that seeing the clothes in color would make the photographs appear more authentic and easier to interpret. Although the primary interest lay in the image content and a visual reading of the photographs, this often overlooked other sensorial and embodied engagements.

The photographs were not merely visual; they were sensorially experienced. They were passed from one person to another and handled with care. Individuals brought the images close to their faces, inspecting the facial details of the subjects attentively, touching the laptop screen or the printed A4 sheets for a closer look. Rather than remaining static, two-dimensional image content, the photographs became active social objects.

The printed images were passed down from the oldest member of the family to the grandchildren. While the oldest members

Figure 5: Kop Saul studying the faces of individuals photographed with Kop Temi by Ursula Graham Bower. (Photo by the author)

were seated at the center, the younger family members stood around and read the images through vision and touch. They often remarked how happy they were to see the youthful appearance of their grandfather, as he was very sick and old in his final days, which was what remained in many of their last memories of Bath Heli. To zoom in on the image and see the details, I used the digital images on a laptop, which were viewed in smaller groups of two to five individuals. As they saw the photos of Bath Heli with other people, they requested me to enlarge the faces of the other people photographed. We looked through the photographs; Bath Dopum looked at the photograph of Bath Heli sitting with his friends and asked me to zoom in on the face of an individual. He said, "This person looks like Jorum Kulu. He was from Pei village. I was young when I saw him, but I remember his face if I see it close enough."

In this visual performativity, the photograph of Bath Heli was also enlarged on a laptop screen in the digital format. The faces of the individuals were closely inspected by every elder of the family as they were trying to find the missing identity of the person. The photograph was corporeally engaged, as stated by Pinney (2020), on the sensorial and physical engagement with images. As Edwards (2004) states, these material characteristics have a profound impact on the way images are "read." The image content was examined via vision and by touching the screen and the prints. After the face of the subjects, other themes such as their draped traditional clothing, hair styled in topknots and how they were tied, and how the traditional way of clothing and styling hair has massively changed, were constantly discussed.

Kop Temi's twenty-four photographs, along with the pen drive, were handed over to Kop Saul, who is the only surviving direct kin of Kop Temi. The keeping of Bath Heli's nine photographs, both in printed and digital formats, was decided among the family members and handed over to Bath Vicky, grandson of Bath Heli. Some members also photographed the printed photographs and shared them with different family members through WhatsApp groups. Although the images were shared in another digital format, the focus lay on the image content of the photographs. The photographs were shared and posted on WhatsApp without the Pitt Rivers Museum accession number and were separated from the inscribed captions. These photographs were now set into different narratives with different life stages outside the archive. The photographs of Bath Heli weren't only confined to their representation or indexicality, but to how they were getting phenomenologically enmeshed within the Nyishi social world. Here, I take forth the argument of Brietbach (2011:39), noting the material elements of digital images, as they went through similar stages as analogue photographs: they are cut, pasted, cropped, zoomed, and physically handled through the screens of modern devices. These material elements of the photographs became an inherent part of the visual experiences.

Figure 6: Bath Tadh taking photographs of the archival prints to share with family members via WhatsApp. (Photo by the author)

## The Invisible and Absent Subjects of the Photographs

Barthes (1982) refers to the photograph's relationship to its subject matter as indissoluble: "A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent." Apart from the common interest in Bath Heli among the Bath kin in Tago village and Kop Temi with Kop Saul, a recurrent question was often directed at me—the person who had brought the photographs—about the absence of identity of those who were also photographed with Bath Heli and Kop Temi. These questions were persistent: "Who are they? Why are their names not recorded?"

Standing in the farthest corner, Bath Heli's great-granddaughter, who was busy serving us tea and standing behind the seated elders, remarked while looking at the photographs of Bath Heli standing with a group of women: "Who must have been these people, whose wife, daughter, or mother?"

In the discussion, the identity and the village affiliation even the surviving members of the subjects that became part of the photograph with their involvement with Bath Heli and Kop Temi were greatly discussed in detail. Such discussions of tracing members of a lineage was a common practice is a community set up of Nyishi society, throwing light on the inter-personal relationships maintained inter generationally.

Another subject that was greatly discussed among the elders of the Bath family was the particular image of Bath Heli seated in the center, and the identity of the person seated facing Heli on the extreme right of the image (figure 8). Bath Dopum exclaimed, while pointing to the unidentified subject, "This looks like Taba Tath; he is Tedir's and Yedir's father."

Bath Khilling joined in, "Yes, look at his eyes — they do look like Tedir's father."

When I asked who Tedir was, Bath Tadh answered, "He is the current minister of our constituency; he is known by many people."

Figure 7: Bath Heli standing with women, photographed by Ursula Violet Graham Bower. Pitt Rivers Museum Collections Online. © Pitt Rivers Museum.

Figure 8: Bath Heli (left) with companion. Photograph by Ursula Violet Graham. Pitt Rivers Museum Collections Online. © Pitt Rivers Museum.

Bath Tadh also added to their discussion, "He does look like Tedir. I have never seen him myself, but he was our father's friend from the neighbouring village."

To this, Dopum further responded, "This photo also looks like it was taken when they had to carry around luggage and loads for the Sahabs (officers of high status, referring here to Betts and Haimendorfs), together with Father. And when they were resting, they must have been photographed… but they should have added their names with the photos."

Many nodded with frustration and agreed that the individuals in the photographs should have been identified by name, which would make it easier to trace the ancestors

of people even from different villages. These individuals, although photographed alongside Kop Temi and Bath Heli, remain invisible subjects—unnamed, often unrecognized by the camera of Bower and Stonor.

There was also a general observation made by both families about the absence of Bower or Stonor within the image frame. Many had never seen their faces until I showed them through a quick Google search. While Bower was still known among the local population by her localised name of Yapar, the same wasn't true for Stonor, who stayed only briefly and did not build a close relationship with the locals.

Their absence can be termed a punctum, borrowing from Barthes' conception, which centres on the subject of the photograph. The absence of Bower, F.N. (Tim) Betts, and Charles Robert Stonor in any photographs was a repeated question posed to me—often in the hope that some images might exist which included both the photographed and the photographer. These absences could be sensed ocularly.

With the constant search for photographs depicting Bower and Stonor alongside Kop Temi and Bath Heli, I was asked to search for any such images that may exist in archives—even beyond the Pitt Rivers Museum, anywhere in the United Kingdom. Additionally, there were requests to look for photographs not only of the Nyishi but also of neighbouring tribes such as the Adi and Apatani. These requests continued even after I returned to the University of Oxford, through calls and texts.

Although many of the photographs in the archives are already digitised and available for public access—especially following the digital turn of the museum in the spirit of Malraux's dream of "museums without walls"—museums in the West, including the Pitt Rivers Museum, have not fully considered the technological gap and the persistence of the digital divide. This pertains both to the availability of photographs and the technical literacy required to use a web browser—still a challenge for many individuals hoping I might help locate photographs of their ancestors.

Consequently, the digitised archival photographs remain effectively inaccessible. For many Indigenous communities from remote corners of the world, access to heritage materials locked away in Western archives remains a distant dream. As I was leaving, family members asked me to write down the steps for searching the archived photographs in PRM in bold letters on a sheet of paper, which they carefully folded and kept alongside the photographs in a clear file.

## Colonial Historiography of the Photographs

Having hours of discussion on the photograph collections in Arunachal Pradesh with Bath Heli and Kop Temi's kin, the question of why the photographs were taken by Stonor and Bower, their nationalities, and what was the motive of their tour were greatly absent, and this complex yet simple question is entangled in the web of active political history between China and colonized India in the mid-twentieth century. Taken at the end of the colonial regime in India in the 1940s, the photographs were colonial products and artefacts of imperial science. To understand the colonial entanglement, a narrative context of Bower and Stonor's photographic collection is situated through the temporal narration setting, shedding light on the creation of Barthes's *studium*[6] of Kop Temi and Bath Heli's archived photographs. Within this narrative context of the photographs of Bath Heli and Kop Temi, I examine the spatio-temporal history of the Subansiri region in Arunachal Pradesh, where the indexicality lies. Taking Barthes's (1982) notion of the camera as an instrument of evidence and an assertion of the overwhelming truth, this stance of the "evidential force" of the Bower's and Stonor's photograph collection can be traced as the colonial historical outcome.

Arunachal Pradesh is located in the Eastern Himalayas, bordered by the Assam plains to the south, the Chinese Tibetan Autonomous Region to the north, Bhutan to the west, and Burma to the east. Owing to its strategic


Figure 9: Map indicating the location of Arunachal Pradesh in India. Source: https://arunachal-pradesh-district-map. Retrieved July 2024.

geographical location, the state remained relatively historically insulated from extensive external control, both from the Indian empires and beyond. According to Scott (2009), Arunachal Pradesh is under the "shatter zone" and a part of "Zomia," which is the largest region of the world across seven different countries whose people have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states. With its prolonged historical isolation and political confusion, the state consequently became part of greater India with the later involvement of British colonial rule in the early 19th century and the administrator-anthropologists penetrating to take control of the hills.

When the British assumed control of the Assam Valley from the Ahom kingdom in the early 19th century, they inadvertently gained control of the surrounding hill areas. In 1909, Arunachal Pradesh—then part of Assam—was subjected to the British Raj's policy of "non-interference." During the early phase of British control over Arunachal Pradesh, the region was marked by continuous raids and tensions between the colonial government and the tribes of the Northeast Indian hills, including those residing in what is now Arunachal Pradesh.[7]

The Second World War catalyzed a revival of British colonial interest in expanding administrative control over the hill regions of Northeast India. Arunachal Pradesh, owing to its strategic location along the Tibetan frontier, assumed renewed geopolitical significance. This shift in strategic priorities—particularly in light of emerging Sino-Indian tensions—prompted a reassessment of earlier colonial governance models. Consequently, the previously upheld policy of non-interference in tribal affairs was progressively dismantled during the latter half of the 20th century, paving the way for more direct political intervention and territorial integration in the frontier region.

The practice of touring and exploration expanded significantly following the establishment of new administrative positions. The bureaucratic practice of touring became an activity associated with the frontier—as a space of state expansion and uneven rule. Many tours in the initial decades of colonial

rule had a punitive element; some were "pacification campaigns," others flag-carrying "promenades" intended to impress and intimidate (Guyot, 2017). Tours were thus essential to the incipient information order that Raj officials strove to establish on their northeastern frontier (Bayly, 1996; Misra, 1998).

Arunachal Pradesh, lying on the frontiers, became a space for intensive touring under colonial governance. The tours of British administrative officers, accompanied by Assam Rifles regiments, produced tour diaries recording ethnographic data on the tribal population. This documentation was aided by photographs and films taken of tribal inhabitants, serving as visual data and records of colonial subjects. This touring government paved the way for Bower and Stonor to enter the Subansiri hills. The touring governance in Subansiri aimed to ascertain the Chinese threat in 1943 concerning the delineation of Tibetan frontiers, which ran hundreds of miles south of the McMahon Line—thus claiming parts of British Indian territory.

Ursula Graham Bower, in her 1953 book *The Hidden Land*, noted the urgency of establishing colonial governance in Subansiri:

> "The invasion of Burma and the Naga Hills by the Japanese had taught the Indian Government that undeveloped territory, however difficult the terrain, could no longer be reckoned on as a defence and the Chinese threat made it desirable that a firm claim to the Subansiri region be established."

The implementation of touring administration was to be accompanied by closer observation of cultural aspects, primarily the political sphere of the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly the frontier tribes. This observation was to be carried out in an anthropological manner through participant observation during extended stays with the tribal communities, with particular emphasis on building rapport in the context of the Subansiri with the Nyishis and the Apatani.

Alongside the administrative intent, there was a parallel shift in Indian social anthropology. Although countering the direct colonial administrative utility employed by the administrator-anthropologists, there was growing interest in studying small-scale tribal societies in India, rather than focusing on anthropometric details of the amorphous caste society, with an emphasis on a strict fieldwork tradition. Fieldwork, as the sine qua non in anthropology, shifted toward the "quick and the living" as opposed to the "still and silent" (Tayler, 1992).

The method of intensive fieldwork with extended stays was carried out by Von Fürer-Haimendorf, an Austrian anthropologist on his administrative tour in the Subansiri hills in 1944-45, appointed as the first Special Officer of the region. This approach was later adopted by Political Officer Major Frederick Nicholson Betts and his wife Ursula Graham Bower from 1946 to 1948.

According to Tarr and Blackburn (2008), such extended stays in the hills allowed an officer with a camera to observe local culture and record a wide range of activities in depth. This opportunity enabled the capturing of aspects of life that others—such as the leader of a military expedition or a tea estate manager in the plains—could not. For instance, for the first time, a ritual was captured unfolding over a sequence of six or eight shots. Alongside this, depictions of year-round agricultural practices and other everyday activities were recorded—details that could only be discerned by a long-term visitor. Notably, these long-term visitors were often the touring administrators.

The transformation in colonial touring and the surge in visual documentation were accompanied by advancements in camera technology. Heavy tripods were replaced by smaller, more portable cameras, resulting in increased visual documentation during tours. This shift also sparked changes in scholarly discussions in anthropology by emphasizing the study of culture beyond physical categorization. Together, these factors ushered in a new era of ethnographic photography in Northeast India.

The change in visual data collection during tours extended from the Naga Hills to the hills of Arunachal Pradesh, capturing the diverse and rich cultural heritage.

As Sbriccoli (2016) notes, photography has been one of the primary tools through which objective knowledge about Indigenous subjects was produced. In such a way, within this scholarly and bureaucratic environment of ethnographic photography and colonial touring, Nyishi interpreters Kop Temi and Bath Heli were captured and subjected through the lens of Bower and Stonor's cameras.

The arrival of the new wave of ethnographic photography was paved by James Philip Mills in Arunachal Pradesh, particularly among the Nyishi and Apatani of the Subansiri region. According to Tarr and Blackburn (2008), "Mills, when he took charge of the entire Northeast, sent anthropologist Fürer-Haimendorf to the Subansiri region to investigate the extent of Tibetan influence and establish friendly relations with the tribes." During his eight-month tenure administering the Subansiri region between 1944 and 1945, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf collected over 1,600 photographs. His work was later extended by another anthropologist who continued the photographic documentation he had begun.

Ursula Graham Bower, like Fürer-Haimendorf, began her ethnographic work among the Nagas in the 1930s. She arrived in the Apatani Valley in 1946, accompanying her husband, Major Frederick Nicholson Betts, who was appointed Political Officer of the Subansiri area (ibid.).

These administrative anthropological tours also gave way to an expedition of cryptozoologists. Haimendorf shared his notes on the legendary reptile in the Subansiri region, called *Buru*, with English anthropologist and naturalist Charles Robert Stonor and J.P. Mills. Stonor, who was also appointed as the Agricultural Officer, visited the territory with Mills in late 1945 and again with Ralph Izzard, a *Daily Mail* journalist, in 1946 to find out more about the Buru. The

**Figure 10: Ursula Violet Graham Betts (née Bower). Pitt Rivers Museum Collections Online. © Pitt Rivers Museum.**

expedition was supported with adequate funding and equipped with optical instruments and cameras (Beggiora, 2018).

The combined photographic collections of Haimendorf, Betts, and Stonor—comprising over 3,000 images—offer a comprehensive view of life in the Subansiri region, particularly of the Apatanis, Nyishis, and Hill Miris, just prior to the imposition of a new political order (Tarr and Blackburn, 2008). Dealing with local Nyishi and Apatani interpreters and porters presented a significant challenge during these tours. It was common for the same tribal individuals to be recommended by tour officials. Prominent Apatani interpreters included Chiging Nime and Kago Bida, while Nyishi interpreters Kop Temi and Bath Heli were actively sought by colonial officers upon their arrival in the Subansiri hills. These notable Nyishi and Apatani individuals accompanied the Haimendorfs, the Betts, and Stonor in their expeditions, including the exploration of Buru.

The long-term stays of Haimendorf and the Betts in the 1940s in the Subansiri region among the Nyishi and the Apatani formed a significant chapter in local regional history.[8] Their extended interactions with the British *Sahab* (officer) during prolonged tours led to the publication of ethnographies as well as the creation of extensive collections of photographs and films.[9] Kop Temi and Bath Heli were notable individuals who spoke Assamese, the language of the neighbouring plains. As Nyishi, they were often pursued for their assistance in dealing with the supposedly 'unruly' Nyishi of the hills, known for their sustained resistance to governance.

While Heli was living in Selsemchi village in the Subansiri region during their visit, Temi travelled from a distant region to the south. His village, Rangajan, lay between the hills and the intersection of the Assam plains. Temi and Heli accompanied the colonial officers on their tours and expeditions.[10] During the tour with the Betts and Stonor from 1946 to 1948, they provided extensive services in resolving inter-tribal conflicts—mostly between the Nyishi and the neighbouring Apatani—as well as inter-clan clashes, while also leading the touring team to other tribal settlements. During this period of colonial tours and scientific expeditions in the search for the legendary Buru, Kop Temi and Bath Heli were themselves drawn into the colonial lens. They became subjects of ethnographic visual documentation by Ursula Graham Bower and Stonor.

By observing the image content of the photographs taken by both Bower and Stonor, the friendly smiling faces and poses for the camera establish the interpersonal relations between the photographers and Kop Temi and Bath Heli. As they spent days working and hiking the hills together, it was apparent that the friendly relationship — which was a prerequisite for prolonged administrative touring with local interpreters, as per the instruction on rapport-building with locals — was efficiently executed by both Bower and Stonor.

These ethnographic tour photographs, including Bath Heli and Kop Temi, were a form of, as stated by Edwards (2000), "virtual witness," translating "what I saw, you too will see" by attesting the truth value of observation during their touring experience. These photographs by Stonor and Bower, as Edwards (2001) also argues, functioned as a way of amassing raw data on Nyishi society and the Nyishi people in analogical or metonymic form, and re-presenting material for interpretation in visual form.

As amalgamated into the practice of administrative touring, and taking the words of Sontag (1978), photography in this form of documentation—of administrative touring and scientific engagement—became one of the principal devices for experiencing something, while giving an appearance of participation for both Stonor and Bower. Within this supposedly secondary experience, the two Nyishi interpreters were also included as part of the administrative record.

Although the intentions behind taking the photographs were nuanced with "micro intentions," as termed by Edwards (2001),

Figure 11: Bat Heli, interpreter. Photograph by Ursula Graham Bower. Pitt Rivers Museum Collections Online. © Pitt Rivers Museum.

Figure 12: Temi. Photograph by Charles Robert Stonor. Pitt Rivers Museum Collections Online. © Pitt Rivers Museum.

these were later collectively transferred to the spatial setting of the archive at the Pitt Rivers Museum. These photographs by Stonor and Bower, taken as part of touring documentation, functioned as colonial epistemic tools aimed at salvaging the "savage." When freed from their frozen state in the archive and returned to the source community, they were revived with plural frames of history, recuperating historical knowledge and Nyishi identity. Visual repatriation, in a way, assisted in weaving a Nyishi reality in the present society; these photographs now circulate among tribal community members, gaining new narration by every reader of the image, separated from colonial representations.

## Conclusion

These photographs are dual-natured: they function both as instruments of colonial documentation, locked within the institutional archive, and as living cultural artifacts for the Nyishi, re-engaged through their original context. Upon their return, these images transcended their colonial origins, invoking narratives that resonate deeply with the Nyishi people. The return of these photographs reconnects them with the Nyishi community's collective memory and family histories. As families engaged with these images, they recalled ancestral memories and cultural practices that were often at risk of fading, re-weaving local memory. This interaction enriches both personal and communal identities, demonstrating how photographs serve as "memoryscapes" that bridge contemporary Nyishi individuals with their heritage. The colonial archives fail to capture the full significance of Indigenous artifacts, necessitating community-driven interpretations.

Originally, these photographs supported colonial narratives of exoticism and "otherness," as intended by Ursula Graham Bower and Charles Robert Stonor—narratives stripped of cultural context. By returning these images, new narratives emerge that reflect Nyishi perspectives and cultural values, transforming them from mere representations of Indigenous subjects into meaningful family mementos. Visual repatriation, in this process, stands as an act of empowerment for the Nyishi people, rekindling connections to the past and allowing them to shape their own histories through oral tradition. The photographs become

agents of cultural renewal, facilitating the recovery of ancestral identities and reaffirming the importance of Indigenous storytelling.

Ultimately, this study highlights the collaborative potential of visual repatriation in reshaping the roles of museums and archives. Institutions are urged to respect the connections source communities have with their cultural artifacts, viewing themselves as custodians of heritage rather than owners of material culture. By fostering ongoing dialogue with Indigenous communities, archives and museums of imperial origin can create a living relationship with cultural objects, ensuring they remain rooted in the traditions of the people they represent.

In this way, visual repatriation encourages a reimagination of the archive, promoting collaboration and valuing Indigenous voices. As the Nyishi people reclaim their cultural images, they exemplify the transformative potential of repatriation in redefining historical narratives, restoring cultural identity, and advancing decolonization efforts.

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## Endnotes

1. Here I take the idea of Appadurai, 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999 and Edwards, 2001/2002, Photographs as active entities in social relations created through the web of production, exchange, consumption and meaning-making that shapes the biography of photographs.

2. Edwards (2005) describes public photographs when the subject matter of the image is removed from its context and the meaning turns free floating within the free interpretation of symbol and metaphor.

3. Ursula Graham Bower made reference to the civilization stage of the Nyishi from Haimendorf's reports and works, mentioned in 'The Hidden Land' as late Neolithic stage in pg. xv. Charles Robert Stonor also positioned the Nyishi and the overall inhabitants of the hills in the Neolithic stage of culture in pg.2

of 'Notes on Religion and Ritual among the Dafla Tribes of the Assam Himalayas'.

4. As per the database of Pitt Rivers Museum.

5. In the Nyishi polygynous setting number of wives determines the social influence and wealth owned by the individual.

6. Here I borrow the notion of Studium of Roland Barthes (1982) as a contextual intent of the photographers in the production of the photographs of Kop Temi and Bath Heli.

7. Chakravarty (1995) writes about the continuous raids in the Assam Valley by the tribal hill inhabitants.

8. "Their arrival was a point for us to be governed later by the Indian Government and eventually becoming part of India", Interview with Kop Saul, Papumpare, March 2024.

9. Haimendorf published 'Himalayan Barbary' in 1955, 'The Apatanis and their Neighbors' 1962, 'A Himalayan tribe from cattle to cash' 1980, Bower published 'The Hidden Land' 1953.

10. In Ursula Graham Bower's tour diary "The Hidden Land",1953, Bath Heli and Kop Temi were mentioned as a part of the tour group along with Assam rifle regiment. The same was repeated by Bath Heli and Kop Temi's family during the photograph viewing session.

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