

The Ao Naga Traditional Indigenous and Religious Beliefs

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Abstract

Like all societies and groups of people in the world and particularly tribal people, the Aos were no different in their practice of beliefs and worship of different gods. It is an outlet to take refuge in times of need and so evolved into a set pattern over a long period of time, and so traditional roots took place and it has served its purpose during those days, and still sways and linger on as time goes by.

Key words: Ao, Traditional, Indigenous, Religion

Introduction

Tradition: Originally the concept of tradition according to the Oxford dictionary is the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being so passed on. The word is from the Latin word "tradition" from "tradere" which means to deliver (Pearsall, 1999). Tradition was the name given to those cultural features which, in situations of change, were to be continued to be handed on, thought about, preserved and to be retained. Tradition was the means of making a living and the symbols, stories and memories which gave one both identity and status. So, we can say that even in situations where society stayed almost the same, from generation to generation, tradition was something central or important. So, when the word itself is to transmit on to deliver, tradition can be said to be a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. It is also to be understood that the word tradition is often associated in people's memory as ancient history but many traditions have been invented on purpose, whether that be political or cultural, over short period of time.

Tradition is also the passing down of elements of a culture from generation to generation, especially by oral communication,

and it is also a mode of thought or behavior followed by a people continuously over a long period of time. It can also be understood as a rule regulating a group of people for whom there is no written laws but as the oral precepts are followed from generation to generation, it is considered to be true or holy (Graburn, 2001).

The word "Indigenous" refers to anything that is native to a particular geographical region. This includes people, cultures, languages or species of plants and animals. The aborigines of Australia, for example, are an indigenous people, in contrast to the European settlers who arrived on the continent long after. Similarly, the Nagas of Nagaland are also an indigenous people. The term could also incorporate the concept that it is a cultural group and their descendants who have a historical continuity or an association with a given region or parts of a region and who formerly or currently inhabit the region either independently or largely isolated from the influence of other cultures. In many parts of the world, the original owners/inhabitants of the land are considered as indigenous people and they have natural birth rights of citizenship. Indigenous people hold a unique spirituality which is the way of looking at nature, land and its bounty, which are for all people of the world with regard to race, religion, creed,

ethnicity, class or gender. Land is the continuity between the collective memory of their ancestors and their longing for survival now and in the future. Indigenous people all over the world tend to see the whole cosmos as one integrated and interlinked experience. Everything in the created and natural order is essential and critical to the existence and survival of the other. For indigenous people, religion is closely connected with the land for it is the basis of all realities- human self hood and identity. The earth is the focal point of all reference and all religious activities are centered on the soil, for from it comes his sustenance and survival, so he instinctively clings to the soil and recognizes it as sacred and attach religious significance to it. The sacred truth is contained in their folklore, myths, dances and songs and in time, the spirits or the gods manifest themselves in all the things like the trees, rocks, rivers, places and thus the world itself is the great God (Longchar, 2008).

Scholars often distinguish between two types of indigenous religions. The first, an unshakable or rooted indigenous religion is practiced by tribes of people that have lived in the same region of the world for perhaps thousands of years. These religions would be indigenous to that region of the world. The second criteria of indigenous religion are associated with that of being carried by people to other region of the world. The migrated indigenous people continue to those religions often in combination with more dominant religion such as Christianity but as the indigenous beliefs are too deep rooted, so they assimilated and blend in their religion with their new found religion (Encyclopedia, 2015). Unlike other great religions of the world, the indigenous/tribal religion does not have any founder(s) or reformer(s) or guide(s) nor do people dance and sing adoring a divine historical person(s). They too have traditions of divine births and manifestations, but they are not worshipped. Instead, people dance and sing along

with the cycle of land. A unique feature of the indigenous/tribal religion is that the whole religious systems, ceremonies, rituals, festivals and dances are centered and deeply rooted on the land itself. Further, indigenous/tribal people maintain a close kinship between people and ecological needs in such a way that both are protected and preserved. Such a balance was essential to protect nature from the danger of over-exploitation. This kinship balance was maintained through the practice of taboo and totem. These controls were legitimized by giving a religious basis through myths. For example, taboo, covered the whole activity of the tribal society, be it sex or liaisons of the same clan, sanctified on certain important occasions like sowing rice, clearing of the forest, harvest time and these taboos were imprinted with authority as it touched their survival and therefore, is the sign that the whole world is interrelated and interconnected¹. Similarly, totem is another practice which ensures balance and harmony in society as well as with the environment. The indigenous/tribal people restricted certain animals and plants from being exploited by maintaining a totemic relation with natural objects. A common phenomenon of totem belief is that the clan which traces its origin to such a totem sometimes name after the totem and attribute as supernatural power. The practice of totem has a great ecological manifestation. For example, while some clans kill certain animals and consume it, other do not as it would be a curse for them or some natural calamities would fall upon them if they do not respect and pay their reverence to their totemic symbols. Therefore, each clan considered it an obligation to protect their totem and in this way, the whole natural resources were protected and preserved from being over-exploited (Longchar, 2012). Citing an example, all members of the "Wozukamr" clan and the children and grandchildren of the women of the clan must avoid the flesh of the Great Hornbill, for

¹ Totem: The term "totem" is derived from the language of the Ojibway tribe of the North America which simply means "brother- sister kin"

it was from a tail feather of this bird that the ancestors of the clan conceived a son² (Mills, 1973).

Characteristics of Indigenous Religions:

While the world's indigenous religions show remarkable variety, they also tend to show important similarities. These similarities appear not in the specifics of the belief system but rather in its overall nature. Some features that characterize indigenous religions include the following- geographic location, the use of ritual and artifacts, community participation, a fluid structure, and belief in a supreme god or other divinities (gods).

An indigenous religious group tends to live within a specific bioregion or a region with a relatively uniform environment and ecology (mountain, desert, rain forest or plains). Because of characteristics of this environment (For example a short growing season in mountainous region, drought in the desert, heavy rain in the rain forest region, and so on), indigenous regions developed explanations of the world and its origins based on the characteristics of their region. Such religions have strong ecological belief as people try to live in harmony with the natural order.

Indigenous religions rarely have written sacred texts. Rather, their belief focuses on dances, costumes, masks, rituals, traditions, and sacred artifacts (material objects). These practices are part of a people's cultural identity and help them forge a sense of connection with their world. Indigenous religions transmit wisdom, cultural values, and history, not through formal education but through myths, storytelling, drama and art.

They tend not to rely on silent meditation or individualized experiences but on ritual activities that bind people to the community. Many of these rituals mark important occasions, such as planting or gathering a harvest. Yet in many indigenous re-

ligious traditions, people seek wisdom of their own through vision quest and similar private rituals.

Belief is the state of mind in which a person thinks something to be the case, with or without these being empirical evidence to prove that something is the case with factual certainty. In other words, belief is when someone thinks something true, when they have no absolute verified foundations for their certainty of the truth or realness of something. Another way of defining belief is, it is a mental representation of an attitude positively oriented towards the likelihood of something true (Durkheim, 1912).

The Aos certainly had these characteristic as they accepted and that too with conviction and put their trust and confidence that they were governed by some or many gods and with blind faith gave their due to the gods in the form of sacrifices, rituals and believed that the gods would reciprocate their offerings. The following conversation between Sakchimtuba of Merangkong village and Haimendorf (2004), enunciate the simplicity and belief of the Aos, as can be clearly seen as the definition of god and the after-life. "Why should we not pray to Lungkizungba? Wondered Sakchimtuba. Is not he Lord overall? Even our life belongs to him'. 'But when you invoke him does he really help you? I asked carefully'. 'Certainly, Sahib; He sees all and help everybody. If we asked something of him, we receive it. Of course, he added with a smile, we cannot become rich when we want'... Sakchimtuba became pensive and was silent for a while; then, as with a sudden resolution, he turned again to me and asked almost timidly. 'Sahib, I should like to ask you something, the white man say that Lunkizungba is an evil spirit to whom we should not pray, they say that all who do not believe what they believe are cast into a great fire³. I had a wife-she was a good woman and gave me many children, never

²Wozukamr: This a Ao clan

³Lungkizungba: Called a diety of fate.

did she stop working; then she died-it must have been five years ago. Do you think, Sahib that she, too, was thrown into a fire? Our fathers, who all sacrificed to Lunkizungba, have they all been thrown into the fire?". No, Sakchimtuba, you must not worry about your wife. I am sure that she went to the same place where all honest people go. Lungkizungba is the same as the God of the Christians; only the names are different. But Lungkizungba, who knows everything, does not care about the name we give him. He looks after you, and he is looking after your wife in the land of the dead, where you will meet her again". Haimendorf noted that Nagas were like from the stone-age era people, as in his own words "entering the Naga Hills one leaves behind the twentieth century and is surrounded by people who follow a mode of life not essentially different from the style in which some 5000 years ago Neolithic man lived in Southwest China, Indo-China and probably also in good many part of India. Whereas he came from the civilized and advanced part of the world, yet, there is universalism in all religion based on a universal human quality, defined as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a super human agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs (Haimendorf 2004).

Ao Traditional Beliefs:

Ao tradition states quite definitely that the ancestors of the tribe came out of the earth at Longterok (Six stones), lying on the top of a spur on the right bank of the Dikhu river at the present Sangtam village, Chungliyimti in Nagaland. As with all tribes of the world and also so in Nagaland, the chief pursuit for sustenance is cultivation, and so it is the concern of everyone, all members of the

village community to join in the celebration of annual festivals connected with the cycle of agricultural activities, the festivities last one to six days. They are largely of a religious character and are called "genna". It refers to a great number of prohibitions, which are important features of social and religious life not only of the Ao Nagas but also of other related hill tribes. The prohibitions apply to individuals or groups such as a family, clan or even the whole village community. All religious festivals are connected with certain prohibitions therefore are classified under the term "genna"⁴. The most usual prohibition takes the form of abstinence from work. At the time of "genna" all daily activities must be stopped or limited, so that the deities which are worshipped at that time may grant welfare and success to the inhabitants of the village and protect them from all calamities and misfortune. With the exception of fetching water and cooking no other housework must be done. As a rule, however, the prohibitions are limited to work in the fields. People stay in the village and observe a day of rest.

Haimendorf observed about the uniqueness of the Naga people and the mode of conduct in these words "Neither Hindu culture nor the Buddhism of Burma has ever spread into these hills, where primitive races have persisted up to this day in ancient types of culture. It is for this reason that the Nagas are of supreme interest to the anthropologist. Among them we find an economic order, social customs and religious beliefs, which once prevailed over large areas of Southeastern Asia, but which have elsewhere been long replaced by the civilization of more dynamic races" (Haimendorf, 2004).

The Ao Nagas, in common with other hill people, have a simple religion. To them the universe is filled with multitudes of spirits with whom

⁴Genna: The word "genna" is used in the Assamese lingua franca to convey chiefly the meaning of "forbidden" or "a non- working day".

they must deal with, some benevolent and some malevolent, according to their nature and sometimes even to their whims and fancies. It sums up the life of the Ao people from wakefulness till sleep and so he devised ways and means to appease the gods and demons and to make peace with them, treading cautiously lest he should displease them and incur their wraths on themselves, their families and also on the whole village.

The effort to placate these malicious spirits find expression in a variety of ways and all the rites and ceremonies are directed to this one end. While some do have a slight feeling of comfort, as they have done their full duty and others have seen signs indicative of an appeased spirit. Among the people, "to be religious means to be true to the tradition of the tribe", and everything in the routine of life is bound up with some beliefs, tradition, which is an integral part of the religion (Smith, 2002).

The religion of the Aos was intensely practical, for they dealt with practical gods, who were either good or bad and they felt that it was the duty of man to pay homage to his gods for without their aid, their lives would be miserable. He performed his rites lest the mysterious power about them brought calamities to his door; he refrained from work on certain days that he may have good crops. He went through the appropriate ceremonies that he might have water in the spring; and he made sacrifices at the village gate lest the dreaded pestilence come stalking boldly in and ruthlessly claim both young and old as his victims. It was the physical necessity of protecting men from bodily harm and of getting food in abundance that dictated in large measure in regard to the religious observances. The observances to this end were not dependent upon some individual, but the entire social unit, the village, joined in it. Those various activities were for the benefit of the village in its entirety, and so all had to contribute their share.

J.P. Mills (1973) wrote "The religion of the Aos is not a moral code. It is a system of ceremonies, and strives as he may to do that which is lawful and right in the moral sphere, he will not prosper if he omits the sacrifices due to the deities around him who, unappeased are ever ready to blight his crops and bring illness upon him and his". It is to be understood that inspite of the constraints and the numerous ceremonies, yet, it did not mean that the Ao people were devil-ridden, terrified wretches, unable to distinguish right from wrong. He cheerfully performed the necessary sacrifices, and hoped for the best, when the inevitable happened at last on which no offerings for sickness availed any hope, he met his end with resignation and, unafraid, went to join his forefathers.

Among the gods called "tsungrem" the god "Lichaba" is regarded as the greatest of the tsungrems and to him the creation of the world is attributed. As Lichaba is the creator of the world, by rights he asked the people for gifts, usually in the form of pork and his mediums were selected individuals, who were gifted to see dreams. These individuals would then proclaim to the village the message and the whole village would then observe the "genna". Apart from the occasional tribute, a yearly "amung" or "Sabbath" called "Lichabamung" the day of Lichaba was held in his honour in all villages around the month of June. The observation of the day prevented landslides, for since Lichaba made the world, it was he who could firmly keep it held together. He was the creator, the designer of the world and so it was deemed fit to honour him as he was the owner of the earth and everything in it belonged to him. On that day, "Lichabamung", a pig was sacrificed outside the village fence and eaten by the village councillors, and the day very strictly observed. The spilling of the blood and small token pieces of the pig were given to him on selected places (around the village) by the priests "arasentsur" and it was generally held that he was appeased and gratified by the offerings. The major

portion of the sacrifices were consumed by the village councilors, yet, people believed that in spirit form, the gods ate the whole offering (s). No one in the village was to husk rice or fetch firewood from the stocks outside the village. All people retired to their houses early, and late in the evening each householder threw an old pot out of his door, asking Lichaba to accept it as poor though the gifts was, as it was all he had left in his house. At night Lichaba came with a basket and collected those meager offerings. Sexual intercourse was forbidden that night. Should anyone transgress, the wind would wreak his house or flatten his crops. Next day every man offered an egg in front of his field house.

A yearly ceremony was performed in every Ao village in honor of all "tsungrem(s)" in general. It took place in July or August. Longsa performed it first, followed by Ungma and from then onwards it spread along the Ao ranges. On the first day a pig was scarified outside the "Tatar Ungr's" (village council leader) house, and a piece of the meat was given to the house at each end of the main village street. It was a present for Lichaba, the chief of the "tsungrem(s)".

Among the lesser gods, the most important was the house spirit or god. A house-site, no matter who occupied it, was always haunted by the same "Kimungtsungrem", that is "Kimung" house-site god. An offering had to be made to the "Kimungtsungrem" when a house was built as a onetime offering to appease the god. When a man died, it was generally believed that the man has gone to the "Land of the Dead". Yet, opinion differed as to the location of the Land of Dead. Some said that it was in the sky, which was plausible and more to be believed for to reach for the skies would be impossible and unless one died; there was no way to experience the Land of the Dead and thus unattainable for the living and mortal man. Others

said that it was under Wokha Hill, and some were of the view that death approached via the plains and by Longkhum village, each taking the path his ancestor took before him. No one could however, say why any family originally took that particular route. But people were convinced that when they reached the end of their journey on earth, they would begin another on the other side and see their friends and relatives when they crossed into that part of the world.

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the Ao people and also the Nagas as a whole. So, it was serious business, not to be taken lightly but to start with great precaution and appropriate sacrifices. Usually a whole village cultivated in one block, though in the case of a very big village, such as Ungma, each "Khel" or section might select a different area⁵. The whole village combined to keep the path clean. A man must remain chaste the night before clearing the forest for cultivation; and the most auspicious days for burning the forest were the seventh or ninth-day after the full moon. The next day after the burning of the forest is known as "Alurongmung" that is field-burning among or Sabbath. After the forest is cleared and burnt, the village initiates the sowing of the new fields with a formal sowing by a village priest. One of the village priests goes about half-way down to the new fields with a fowl of either sex or some seed rice. He clears a little space and sows the rice and fences it around. Then he kills the fowl by cutting its throat with a sharp bamboo and take the omens from the killed fowl, whether it be a good year for harvest or a lean period for the village. The fowl he cooks and eats, except for one leg which he put in his basket and carries home. The leg would be required as he would complain of his heavy load, which signifies a heavy load and therefore plenty at the ensuing harvest and he would sit and rest at least once on the way. So, whether it

⁵Khel: A geographical division of a Naga village.

be for cultivation, rain making, weeding time, ceremonies for fine weather, live stock, hunting, fishing etc, all appropriate rituals and sacrifices had to be performed and in strict accordance prevalent in a particular village, so that all the village could reap the benefits bestowed upon them by the gods.

The Ao people believed that the earth was flat and above it is a series of other flat surfaces, the bottom of the nearest one being our sky. Under the earth was another world in which the dead, according to the most generally accepted belief, lived; and to light it up, which the sun and moon went every day when they set. The sky was supported by a post at the end of the world which was held in position by a being (God) called "Ningtangr" holder of the sky. Sometimes he felt hungry and let go for a moment to pluck and eat leaves. The post then shakes and there is an earthquake. During an earthquake the rice basket "Changbong", should be held steady by some member of the household in every house, or the "aren" blessings of the rice would be frightened and flee away. After an earthquake one day's "among" rest should be observed (Mills, 2002).

To sum up, is the religious beliefs followed and practiced by the Ao tribe of Nagaland too primitive, too superstitious, that to talk of it evoke laughter and cynicism, or is it the sum total or starting point and comes full circle with all that is called nature; what all humanity have gone through and still traces of it remain in all the nooks and corners of the world. Haimendorf poetically philosophies after his long encounter and interaction with the naked Nagas as to the universality of man on earth, the seemingly crass and the immaculate civilized man in the following words "... Is it the betel which holds in abeyance the tiredness and aching of arms and knees, or is it the suggested strength and endurance of the rhythm?... This rhythm is more than art; it is the voice of man's primeval instinct, the revelation of the all-embracing rhythm of growth

and decay, of love, battle, and death... Is it only man who seems suddenly possessed by this all-overpowering rhythm? Are not the white clouds, sweeping over the moon's face before a mighty wind; is not this play of light and shade in the heavens, a part of this same rhythm? Song and dance have become one, and they are one, too, with the rustle of the dark tops of the palms, the wild flaming fire, and the distant outlines of the mountain peaks". Can more words explain the concept of man and nature and the equi-closeness between them? So, also, then it is but natural for man to seek refuge and shelter from it and the least he can do is to bow down to nature and with the lapse of time, the homage to nature becomes a ritual and tradition, modified and sanctified with more elaborate flair and who is to blame him for he thirsts for it and becomes one with it. The Ao people's rituals, traditions and beliefs had served their purpose, as with all people of the world, they had to have their totem, as their confluences, to unite as a village, a tribe and for their identity. If not religion and beliefs, what will bind them together as a people and a race and serve as a common platform which all recognized (Haimendorf, 2004).

The religion was pure and undiluted indigenous religion for it was based on oral doctrines propitiating deities and spirits, conscious calculation and practical in nature. The AOs performed their rites lest the mysterious powers about him brought calamities to his door, he refrained from work on certain days that he might have good crops. It was the physical necessity of protecting men from bodily harm and of getting food in abundance that dictated all his religious observances. They did not delve very deeply to find out neither underlying causes, nor asked questions but as it was with their forefathers so also, it was to be with them to follow their rituals and traditions. It was this belief that united them as a unit or a village or as a tribe.

Before Christianity came to the Naga Hills, the Aos were animist in nature. Hence, the Aos saw the Supreme Being from the soil, from a more human approach. People saw the gods in the trees, flowers, rocks, the fields and the exegesis of the gods were not historical but the Supreme Being

appeared in many reincarnations. They thought that the spirits dwelt in the forest, the rivers and hills and paid their homage to them; in the process evolved a respect for nature itself, not to be polluted but to be revered, for in it their existence revolved.

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