

## MERGING MYTH AND CONTEMPORARY REALITY: A READING OF SOME MYTHICAL BELIEFS OF AO-NAGA CULTURE

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### Abstract

*The corpus of myths and rituals with its roots in the oral traditions and folklores has always been a source of fascination to the fertile imagination of writers around the world. By juxtaposing the present and the past, scholars have used myths and mythology to depict the predicament of man and explore the mythicity of his existence. This unceasing engagement of interdisciplinary scholarships has immensely enriched the study of myth and mythical beliefs of a culture. Timeless and unfettered, by scaling across borders and boundaries, myths and mythical beliefs has travelled, just as language and people have travelled. This paper is an attempt to study some myths and beliefs of the Ao-Naga community and discuss how those beliefs are still re-enacted today.*

**Keywords:** *Myth, beliefsystem, re-enacted, borders and boundaries, cultural dreams.*

### Introduction

Myths belong to a primordial time. It is as old as human civilization. It has always held great fascination for all since the beginning of human civilization. Human civilization can be categorized into different historical periods and ages. On the other hand, "Mythological events cannot be judged historically" (Baynes 1969, 790) because the power of myth resides in a "more-than-historical reality" (Ransom 1965, 65). Myths try to rationalize the unspeakable by coding what is not embodied. Myths become an embodiment of early men's own understanding of their cosmology.

Theodore Reik says that myth is "not a story told as history but history told as story...In other words it is a narrative of a real experience in the past. What we call myth today is not an imaginary tale but a real life experience of the primordial society" (Reik 1957, 9).

The Oxford dictionary defines Myth as "a story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of a people". This definition shows that a myth usually originates in an ancient and oral tradition. Myths or mythic stories can be considered as the most basic expressions of a defining aspect of the human species- the need and ability to understand and to tell stories to reflect our understanding whether or not we know the real facts. Myths again can be looked at as that which reflects human nature, with its needs and desires, hopes and fears. Myths reveal human condition. Creation myths satisfy human need to have roots, fertility myths respond to the need for economic stability in an unpredictable world and hero myths provide a model for human behavior. Thus we see that myths reveal cultural responses to the ever-important question: who am I? How should I lead my life?

A study of myths of different cultures will show that myths are for the most part religious narratives which transcend the possibilities of common experience and express any given culture's literal or metaphorical understanding of various aspects of reality. "Mythic narratives are the sacred stories that are central to cultural identity because, for the cultures to which they belong, these religious myths convey some significant truth about the relationship between human beings and the source of being" (Leeming 2005, XI). Just as myths are literally or symbolically true to particular cultures, they may also contain elements in which outsiders can discern some kind of truth. This is evident in the following stories "...King Arthur pulled the sword from the rock or that Athena was born from Zeus' head, ...Jesus born of a virgin, but we can both recognize a universal significance in these stories, all of which point to the importance of crossing initiatory boundaries and nurturing a higher state of being within Ourselves" (Leeming 2005, XII). The origin myth of Ao-Nagas says that "the fountain-head of everything in Ao folklore is the belief that the ancestors of the Aos emerged out of the earth at Longterok (literally, six stones). Some of these stones are to be seen above a village called Chungliyimti on the South bank of the river Dikhu" (Ao 2012, 1). Myths can be considered as the cultural vehicles for an understanding of people in all corners of the world. The different mythical stories when studied "mytho-logically, they take on an importance, a truth, without which we would lose our very identity as cultures and as humans" (Leeming *ibid*, XII).

During the Renaissance, myths were seen as a symbolic representation of profound truth. Twentieth century modernist writers such as Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence, Pound, Graves and Yeats

have used myths extensively and their works in different ways fulfilled the philosophical ambition invested in myth by German Romantic and idealist thinkers. Whether in literature or anthropology, myths received varying evaluation as a model of psychological wholeness in relation to the self and the world, rather than as a scientific truth.

In tribal or indigenous society, there rarely exists any written or sacred text because their belief system is purely based on various cultural practices. This forges a sense of connection between the people and the world they live in. These beliefs are further legitimized by giving a religious basis through myths.

According to the views of Malinowski, there are certain distinguishing features between folktales, legends and myths. He writes:

"I maintain that there exists a special class of stories, regarded as sacred, embodied in ritual, morals, and social organization, and which form an integral and active part of primitive culture. These stories live not by idle interest, not as fictitious or even as true narratives; but are to the natives a statement of a primeval, greater, and more relevant reality, by which the present life, fates, and activities of mankind are determined, the knowledge of which supplies man with the motive for ritual and moral actions, as well as with indications as to how to perform them" (Strenski 1992, 87).

Re-presentation of myth, orality and folklore for a discussion of contemporary reality helps us into a deeper understanding of the world-order, human relationships and interrelationships of man, nature and universe. It is for this reason that in present academia, especially of interdisciplinary studies, scholars are inclined to represent myths and folklores of their culture in

the contemporary perspective. Discussing the relevance of myth, P. Lal comments:

“Myth feeds or nourishes the pagan outlook; myth holds communities and races more strongly than language, territory and government; myth provides insights into the mysteries of life and death with a poetic richness that has startling truth and immediacy. There is no secular substitute for myth” (Lal 1979, 15).

This paper is an attempt to study some myths and mythical beliefs of the Ao-Naga and show how even today certain beliefs still continues to be re-enacted and the people's life impacted by it. The ancestors of the Ao people were primarily governed by a set of religious beliefs, and running parallel to it, there exists certain other beliefs which do not come under the parameters of religious beliefs. One such belief was the possession of certain extraordinary powers by people “who could act as 'mediums' between the living and the dead” (Ao 2012, 69). People with such powers were common people and accepted by society in general. The village folks would seek the guidance and help of such people when the need arises. Such kind of a belief is encapsulated in a story by Temsula Ao in her book; *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* entitled “Marriage in the land of the Dead”.

### **Acts and Enactments of the Supernatural Turn Natural**

In the story there is a character that possesses the extraordinary power to communicate with the dead. The story recounts how two unlucky young people, after their engagement, met with a tragedy when the young boy died suddenly plunging the two families from rejoicing to mourning. After the death of the young boy, for many years, the young girl remained steadfast in her loyalty to the dead boy and his parents by

remaining unmarried. There were many eligible young men who wanted the hand of the girl in marriage, but the mutual interdependence between the girl and the boy's parents remained strong. With the passage of time, the girl's parents could not bear to see their daughter fade away into an old maid and decided to seek the help of a person in possession of some extraordinary power-the soothsayer. Initial reluctance having been overcome, and the boy's parents finally convinced, it was agreed to take the instruction of the soothsayer. On an appointed day, the two set of parents accompanied by the girl went to the soothsayer's house to communicate with the dead boy. The girl sang a song as a way of conveying her message to the dead boy:

(Song)

Many moons have passed,  
Since you left me  
To go beyond the river,  
And I am growing old  
Waiting for your return.

But now there is a new feeling,  
New leaves on trees,  
New rains in the skies  
And a new man  
Offering new comfort.

If you can come back,  
Tell me  
And I will wait for you,  
But otherwise  
Send me a message,  
So that I can cease  
Mourning and waiting.

(Ao 2012,135-136)

After listening to this song of the girl, the soothsayer started chanting his magical incantations, lay on the floor unconscious and finally fell into a deep trance. During this trance, the spirit of the soothsayer was transported into the land of the dead. Here in the underworld, he encountered the dead boy and sang the song of the girl as a form of message. After listening to the song the dead boy gave his reply in the form of another song:

(Song)

Many moons have passed indeed,  
Since I travelled  
Beyond the river,  
And I sojourn now

Among my kind,  
For, between us  
The river now intervenes

But now  
The fairest among the living  
Cannot be left waiting,  
For she cannot be mine.

Tell her to seek another,  
As I am building a new home  
For my bride of this land  
(Ao 2012,136)

When the soothsayer regained his consciousness, he repeated the song of the boy and everyone understood that they were holding on to a baseless hope. The girl finally was married off to a young man and lived a happy life.

Through the mode of orality, the song was able to communicate an important message between the living and the dead. The object of discussing the song is to emphasis on the importance of “the river now intervenes”. The

'river' in the story alludes to “the stream called *LONGRITSÜ*”(Ao 2012, 59). This stream is “called the stream of bitterness, the inevitable dividing line between the living and the dead” (Ao *ibid*, 59). It is the belief of the Aos that the dead weep bitter tears of regret for themselves and nostalgia for the loved ones they left behind on earth because crossing the river brings about a transformation in their physical body. The boy in the story too might have wept bitter tears of regret for a life not lived with “the fairest among the living” and deeply misses the loved ones in the land of the living. But due to the inevitable dividing water, there is no provision for a way back to the land of living. To the Aos just like the ancient Greeks, water of the stream separates the world of the living from the world of the dead. For a people to whom myths are symbolic, every belief has multiple meanings. It is never unilinear, but multilinear, and it is not a fact but an experience of the self, of his culture and the universe. Therefore to such a people, mythical narratives are the repository of their dreams and desires and fears, of a longing for meaning and justice and redemption. The mythical representation of water offers a metaphor through which humans attempt to have a better understanding of their own lives. That, images of water should play a prominent and recurrent role as a metaphor in mythical beliefs is hardly surprising, given the indispensable place of water in life. Water is mutable and sublime, sustaining and destructive and it serves not only as a representation of birth but of dead or barrier. If water holds the promise of freedom or act as a cleansing agent as could be seen in many religious beliefs, it is also an agent that fetters or enslaves one. It also becomes a barrier or boundary as is seen in the above story where the

stream of bitterness confines the boy in the land of the dead away from his beloved.

The story relates how water becomes a metaphorical marker to represent the border between two different worlds. In the land of the living, water of a river is a marker of boundary between nations, between states, between villages which could be traversed to and fro. In the land of the dead, water is a symbolic passageway from the mundane world into the abyss of spirit beings from where none can return back.

Thus we see that water becomes a metaphorical boundary dividing the living and the dead. The symbolic significance of water in the belief system of the Aos does not end here because at times it assumes a potent element possessing great healing power. This is manifested in the belief of the people that it can cure certain inexplicable sufferings. To illustrate further on this particular belief, mention is made about a certain term called “Amu<sup>1</sup> aki ashi<sup>2</sup>”. In some cases the person who is suffering from 'Amu' may start to vomit. This kind of sudden sickness should not be confused with problems such as hypertension though the symptoms may seem similar in many ways. This is because a case of hypertension can never be controlled by drinking a cup of water previously half drunk by another person. In case of such a sickness, if the person who is suspected to have inflicted the suffering or 'Amu' is correctly detected, then a request is made to 'the implicated' person to take a sip of water from a cup. The remaining water is then given to the sick person. After drinking the water, within some time the sickness is cured. To the scientific or the skeptical mind, such a practice or belief may sound fantastic or far-fetched but drinking the water previously tasted by another person gets equated with medication and it is to be understood metaphorically.

Myths have therapeutic value in a religious society. The ancestors of the Aos, being governed by a religious system, lend themselves happily to such therapies. Religion implies faith and a willing suspension of disbelief, as such; the acceptance of the metaphysical is the acceptance of truth itself. Therapy in the religious sense is not just considered necessary for those who have lost their faith but also for those who are possessed by it to make them much more devout:

“When we use the word ‘therapy’ we can refer to treatment not only of the body or psyche but of something more “religious” suggested by the word “soul”. “Religious” as used here assumes the recognition of a universal entity that, as indicated by etymology, somehow binds things back to itself. This binding back provides the religious with his or her reason for being, and traditionally the point of connection between the divine and the individual is the soul.

If the soul is “sick”, if connection with the reason for being is lost, therapy is called for”(Leeming 2001,115). Myths require cultural clothes to take on life; to become concrete and such beliefs gets incorporated into the cultural practices of a society. Every society preserves its myths because the beliefs and world view found within them are crucial to the survival of that culture. Therefore it is undeniable that “there are people both within given cultures and outside of them who see myths as important metaphorical constructs reflecting understandings that cannot be expressed in any other way” (Leeming 2005, XII).

Certain practice which is associated with death still finds a strong hold in the life of the Aos though with some modifications. Before the advent of Christianity, when a death occurs in a family, a mourning period of six days for men

and five for women was observed. Today, it is reduced to three days for all. This period of mourning is called “Nokhomong”. On the last day of mourning, the mourners would go to a ‘Tsüti’ meaning a big river, for the “ceremonial bathing and cleansing” (Ao 2012, 67). In the river, the mourners would probably take a bath or wash their body. This ceremonial bathing in the river becomes metaphorical because the act is less of a bodily bathing or physical cleaning, but more of a creating of the ‘barrier’ or ‘border’ in between the living and the dead. Thus the symbolic significance of the intervening river continues in this part of the cultural narrative too and shows how “the sacred products of the human imaginations are in some sense true in ways that history cannot be” (Leeming 2005, XII). It is these beliefs that give a direction to the present generation to delve deep into the past of a people struggling to cope with a confused present where we have lost the simplicity and honesty of our world-view.

To further develop on the significance of water and the belief embedded therewith, another instance is brought forward which is again closely associated with the ritual of death. The Aos believe that every person has a number of souls; six for men and five for women. When a person dies, one of the souls is believed to turn into a hawk. Mills writes “ Two days later the soul in the form of a hawk will appear over the house ( there are plenty of hawks in the Naga Hills and one always appears at or near the proper time). As soon as it is seen water from the “Chunga” is poured on the ground with the words: “Drink this water. Do not be angry. Go. Do not seek us. You have become different and we have become different”. Thus abjured the bird is supposed to take its departure”. (Mills

2003 281-282). The religious framework that governs the spiritual aspect of Ao folk life is founded on the belief in the existence of soul or souls and therefore during the mourning period “no members of the household may kill anything, in case it should be the soul of the departed” (Mills *ibid*, 281-282). Again in a family, where a death has occurred recently, if some members dream of the dead person continuously, it is believed that the dead person is trying “to ‘take’ that person too to the Land of the Dead” (Ao 2012, 62). In case of such happenings, the family members would keep a vessel filled with water at night “near the person's head in order to ‘tell’ the dead that now the ‘water’ divides the living from the dead and that no one can cross this water before his/her time has come”(Ao *ibid*, 62). Such actions and beliefs show how the ancestors’ belief system is continually re-enacted and that the past is still a part of the present. Simple though it may seem, they are acts of acknowledgement of the people to certain mysterious and unknown forces which controls their life. Water becomes symbolic in all these religious beliefs, it symbolically represents the flow of life of the living, and it portends a mysterious power of life saving property in such cases. Such beliefs show recognition of power inside water. Thus we see that water is firmly established as a mysterious sacred source of life and its substance and symbolism deeply woven into the fabric of the religious beliefs and practices of the Ao people. Not only this, the space and place that water occupies are discernible in the folklore of the people. Water is vital to the physical life, it also sustains the mental and spiritual lives of the people. What can be understood from the above discussion shows that water assumes a dual metaphorical

signification: firstly it is a symbol of boundary and secondly, it is a symbol of life saving agent.

### Destabilizing Fixities

A study of the traditional religion of the Ao ancestors will show that it is based on the fundamental belief of the existence of many gods or '*Tsüngrems*' as is called in the Ao vocabulary. The existence of an all powerful deity or a malevolent god was non-existent. Temsula Ao says "In the pantheon of the Aos, no spirit or *Tsüngrem* is singled out as evil or Malevolent" (Ao 2012, 52). The term *Tsüngrem* is used to denote several gods- *Lijaba*, is the creator of the earth, *Meyutsüngba*<sup>3</sup> is the god of the Land of Dead and several gods are associated with mountains, big stones, rivers, forests etc. Of the numerous gods, *Meyutsüngba* was considered as the god of justice and his judgment was considered as "final and at his gate there is no scope for forgiveness or redemption. He is implacable and therefore there is no form of worship which is offered to him" (Ao 2021, 53). However, contrary to this religious belief, there exists certain utterance in the form of songs which tells a different story about the 'implacable' nature of the god of death.

(Song)

O Lata, Yonü  
Yutongdar zükangni  
Limalemba teba na  
Tsüpong temjen tsür oer  
Tebu Meyular na  
Meyutsüngbar Salang ko  
Mongdang ajemjokangni

(translation)

O Moon, Sun  
Depute/send a messenger

Limalemba's father is offering  
A perfect/sturdy male Mithun

Therefore, in the Land of Dead, let the female dwellers

In Meyutsüng's courtyard Summon a meeting and urge him to defer any pronouncement of death to the feast giver.

J.P.Mills writes:

"The religion of the Ao is not a moral code. It is a system of ceremonies"(Mills 2003, 215). To a people whose life and beliefs were very closely associated with orality, their forms of worship were performed in the form of songs. A similar view is also seen in what Temsula Ao has said "No account of the Oral tradition among the Aos would be complete without a reference to its poetic form. Singing either of ballads.....formed an integral part of any narrative account.... always delivered in the form of a poem sung by the narrator"(Ao 2012, 13).

Mills further writes "what are these spirits whose goodwill the Aos so untiringly seek? At big sacrifices, prayers begin with an invocation to the moon and Sun"(Mills, ibid, 215).

A close reading of the clanswomen's song especially the last line will show that it contains a fervent appeal to *Meyutsüngba*. Though considered to be implacable, one could trace the deep faith of the people upon him that he too may be pacified if duly worshipped, that the call of 'Death' may be deferred. The invocation upon the god of death for a delay of his call shows the dependence of a pagan people upon unseen forces, that even a primitive society was aware of the fragility of human life. Therefore, the clanswomen represent every helpless mortal. Their song becomes an utterance of appeal and also shows that the ceremony of feasting rises

above festivity. It was not an act done to showcase the wealth of a person, but it was an invocation for blessing from god/gods for abundance and most importantly it was an imploration for a long life.

Of all the living creatures, man is one species endowed with consciousness, especially the consciousness of plot-beginnings, middles and ends. This consciousness enables us to wonder, therefore we wonder individually, we wonder culturally and as a species about our origins, the significance of our present and we continually ponder of our future. It means that the human species is constantly conscious of the journey aspect of our existence. Therefore, it is such utterances such as the song which impels us to re-think and directs us into a different perspective contrary to the conventional and traditional belief of *Meyutsingba* as being a callous keeper of the Land of Dead.

The sudden transformation from an oral tradition to modernity and written script tradition renders mythical beliefs as useless, false and outmoded and places myth into an unstable, shaky ground. This happens because scientific study give an objective explanation of how the world around us works, the rational thought being based on empirical knowledge, the way of thinking being based on facts. Mythology is regarded by the skeptical minds as tales of darkness without any reason. But it is a completely different form of knowledge, it is an ideology, a set of belief system, and belief is a state of mind in which a person thinks something to be the case, in the absence of any empirical evidence to prove that something is real or true. A deeper reading of myth will make us acknowledge that “mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is

metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth-penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words” (Campell 1988, 163).

### **Conclusion**

Mythology encompasses the cultural dreams of a human race and the study of myths proves that human beings no matter how primitive their technology, are not mentally inferior. Their myths demonstrate that they possess the intellectual capacity to understand the world in which they live. Myths are therefore the “direct expression of the collective unconscious. They are factual tales produced, treasured and controlled by a collective working and thinking of the religious community. Thus myths are the treasure houses of our recorded values of the past”. (Progoff, 1972. 89).

In the Ao-Naga culture, myths are never marginalized, it is always an alternative mode of understanding the belief system of a people and alternative is not to be understood as something opposite. Myth is neither the residue of the past, nor the behavior of the uncivilized, but it is the continuity of a rich culture and also a process of making the present more meaningful thereby giving a complete picture of our culture and thought.

To conclude, it is true that flux is the way of life and everything in the universe is subjected to constant creation and recreation. Even scientific 'truth', which is proven and can be analyzed logically, undergoes change with new inventions or discoveries. Nothing is 'sacrosanct' in life. Therefore, myth which encompasses the belief system of a people cannot be denied the right of their logic.



### Notes

1. *Amu*- Unusual, unknown power.
2. *Amu aki ashi*- This is a physical state of a person when he becomes very weak, he feels nausea, all his bodily joints become very weak. Again there is the belief that is a person with amu goes near fresh crops and they wither and dies within some time was believed to be the work of the malevolent force.
3. *Meyutsüngba* - Meyutsüngba is believed to be the lord of the land of dead. (Ao, Temsula, *The Ao-Naga Oral tradition*).
4. *Mongdang ajemjokangni*- This song was sang at Longjang village og Mokokchung District During a feast of merit by the clanswomen of the feast giver whose name was Rongdentemshi Longkumer. He later became a Christian

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