CHAPTER 5

NON CHRISTIAN AOS AND CHRISTIANITY

The general argument sketched out in this chapter is developed through the testimonies of the non-Christian Aos. I attempt to bring both the past and the present into focus by exploring Christian conversion in its full complexity. The notion that all Aos are Christians is an accepted common wisdom. Operating with this accepted notion, my research initially focussed only on the Ao Christians and the emancipatory nature of Christian conversion. But as the story of the Ao conversion to Christianity unfolded, I began to struggle with the inherited common sense. I realized that the entire Ao community was not Christian. As I looked at the nature of confrontation that accompanied Ao conversion to Christianity, I began to understand that the history of Christian conversion in Ao land was structured in conflict.

When the process of conversion began in the nineteenth century, the new Christian converts had to settle in a new village away from the hostility of the non-Christians. As conversion proceeded apace, non-Christian Aos became a minority, marginalized within the Ao society. Yet to understand Christianity in Ao land we need to explore how non-Christian Aos look at society, and how they view the converts. This chapter seeks to explore the non-Christian perception of the past as well as the present Christian society.

Interviewing Non Christian Aos:

The interviewing of participants about the events of the past as well as of an existing social system for the purpose of historical construction is
centered on the testimonies of a number of non-Christian Aos. While the experience and perspectives of this group of individuals as the living legacy of the Ao past might otherwise have been hidden, their testimonies have complemented the existing documentary sources. By using oral evidence, history becomes more ‘democratic’ as Paul Thomson would put it, “Oral evidence challenges some of the assumptions and accepted judgements “By bringing recognition to a substantial groups of people who had been ignored, a cumulative process of transformation is set in motion”. But we must remember that using these testimonies is also problematic.

What made the interaction with the non-Christians interesting was their keenness and openness to be interviewed. It has to be mentioned that all of them were informed that their interviews were to be recorded and translated and made fully available to the public. This did not deter them from recounting their story. As a researcher I tried to preserve the spontaneous nature of the exchange within the interview and sought to restrict any imposition of my personal conceptions. Having read my texts on oral history, I tried to make the narrator feel at ease as they recollected their past and explored the complex and conflicting experiences in their lives.

For a variety of reasons, the nonconverts were keen to be interviewed. The interviews provided the narrators an opportunity to tell their story

1 Akangjungshi (Longkhum Village), Arsashi (Sungratsu Village), Imdongmayang (Chungtia Village), Repakokba (Ungma Village), Temjenyanger (Ungma Village), Talimeren (Khensa Village)
in their own terms. In fact they showed a strong sense of history, a fact that even Christian Aos apparently recognized. I was told repeatedly that Ao Christians often interviewed them to learn about their traditional religion. The non-converts consider themselves the bearers of a past that connect them to their forefathers. Recording traditional knowledge, they feel, both rescue it both from oblivion and demonstrates its value to younger generation. They intensely felt about the Ao past and believed that the past contained truths and inspirations.

Clearly each non-convert constructed his life story in a distinct way. The different personalities of the participants inevitably affect their responses. It was clear that while narrating their individual stories, and recollecting the past, each narrator was negotiating the past. Remembering the past is more of a process than a static occasion. The past is not just there to be remembered. It is also discovered in the process of remembering.

Vanguards of Traditional Religion:
Conversion from one faith to another faith assumes a variety of forms because it is influenced largely by an interplay of identity, politics and morality which has mainly to do with one’s religious affiliation. “The most necessary feature of religious conversion, it turns out, is not a deeply systematic reorganization of personal meanings but an adjustment in self identification through at least nominal acceptance of religious actions or beliefs deemed for fitting, useful or true.”

As vanguards and adherents of the traditional Ao religion, the non-converts demonstrated that they need not reformulate their understanding of ultimate condition of existence. They emphasized that it is not necessary for them to commit to a new kind of moral authority and a new reconceptualized social and religious identity.

The non Christians did not hesitate to identify themselves as adherents and upholder of the ancient Ao religion handed down by their forefathers. They seemed to have a clear idea of what they believe and they reaffirmed their commitment further by explaining their worldview: concept of God, life after death, notions of morality and ethics. We need to look at whether the sense of the past held by these non-Christians is consistent or not.

While making an attempt to express their understanding of God as the Supreme Being, the non-converts present God as the one who is organismically related to the whole of creation. "There is a Supreme God who created the earth as well as the living creatures. There is only one God. Faith or religion is a personal choice or matter". The reason cited by this non-convert to stand firm in his religious conviction was that he believed: "Tsungrem" (God) demands full devotion. Anyone who shifts his or her allegiance from one faith to another is not doing the right thing".

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4 Interview, Imdongmayang, Chungtia village, 27.4.2001.
5 Interview, Imdongmayang, Chungtia Village, 27.4.2001.
Repakokba, another non-Christian Ao peasant, explains that God is a protector and provider for mankind. “But it is the duty of the human being to worship God diligently so that he can enjoy the blessing of God”.\textsuperscript{6} He narrates how he invokes God’s blessing in the cultivation of his field, which is his main source of livelihood:

On the first day of cleaning a new field, my wife and I would take an egg to offer to the Tsungrem and pray to him saying “You have blessed our forefathers and you have blessed us too. We are going to be in this field for three years, so please do not reject out labor”. After the field is burnt for sowing seeds, again we kill a hen and offer it to Tsungrem so that no misfortune will come to us. We also ask God to protect us from the wild animals in the jungle. When it is harvest time we offer a hen or pig to Tsungrem saying, “From this field we are going to get our livelihood, so God of fortune bless us”.\textsuperscript{7}

What is emphasized repeatedly is the ultimate connection between God and well being, God and fertility and productivity.

All the non Christian Aos that I had interviewed argued that Tsungerm(God) is not only transcendent or immanent but he is also God of judgement and therefore he is called by the name Meyutsung. “We have been told by our forefathers that there is only one God. If one is true in his faith and deed towards the supreme God who is also called Meyutsung, he will be justified”.\textsuperscript{8} Temjenyanger of Ungma

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{6} Interview, Repakokba, Ungma Village, 29.4.2001.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Interview, Repakokba, Ungma Village, 29.4.2001.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Interview, Akangjungshi, Longkhum Village, 25.4.2001.
\end{itemize}
village lamenting the moral degeneration of the younger generation said, “Our ancestors were morally and ethically more upright because of the inherent moral and ethical values- such as, to lead a sanctified life, not to cheat others or tell lies that accompanied their understanding of God of judgement”.  

The concept of God as the God of judgement or Meyutsung has already been discussed in the second chapter. Imdongmayang’s notion of meyutsung judgement is not so different from that elaborated by the Ao Christian theologians:

After death everyone must pass through the court of Meyutsung and as they pass it, Meyutsung will come to know whether the person has kept his or her life well. If a man is a thief, all that he has stolen in his lifetime will keep coming up on the top of his load, which no one can fail to see. Moreover, all males have to throw their spears at a tree outside Meyutsung’s house. If a man has lived an honest life he will hit the tree to the cheers of one and all, but if he has been a thief he will miss the target and the spectators will jeer at him. Similarly, every woman will have to throw her weaving baton at the tree to see whether she has been honest and truthful.

However for the non-converts the notion of life after death does not go beyond meyutsung court. For them there is no heaven. “We were told by our forefathers about meyutsung judgement but they never

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9 Interview, Temjenyanger, Ungma village, 20.4.2001.
10 Interview, Imdongmayang, Chungtia Village, 27.4.2001.
mentioned about kodak(heaven)".\textsuperscript{11} Arsashi also contends that heaven was never heard of before the intervention of Christianity. "If I live peacefully with others on earth during my life time that’s heaven for me. There is no such place called heaven where a person will go after death"\textsuperscript{12}

The question of the existence of heaven points towards certain contradiction about the concept of life after death as narrated by the Ao Christians and the non converts. The Ao Christians claim that the ancient Aos had an idea about the destiny of man after death beyond Meyutsung’s court. We are told that after the judgement of Meyutsung the wicked shall go to a place called Sangsulim where they will suffer eternally and the righteous are sent through Meyutsung’s door to a place called Tipu Yim (Village of eternal life). According to O.Alem Tipu Yim is a celestial city of bliss and tranquility. The persistent attempt of the Ao Christians is to show that the Christian message of heaven and hell was a confirmation of their ancient concept and belief.

The argument of the non-converts that there is no place called heaven where man will live eternally was possibly due to the fact that in the old Ao worldview, life after death was based on the concept of punishment for the wicked and blessing for the righteous. The interaction with the non-coverts leads to the conclusion that they cannot accept the fact that Jesus has atoned for the sins of mankind.

\textsuperscript{11} Interview, Temjenyanger, Ungma Village, 20.4.2001.
\textsuperscript{12} Interview, Arsashi, Sungratsu Village, 15.4.2001.
They still stick to the notion of life after death without grace, forgiveness or vicarious atonement.

It is interesting to note that except the notion of non existent place called heaven all the other narratives that the non Christian Aos produce regarding the traditional Ao religion do not generally run counter to the way in which the Ao Christian theologians themselves attempt to appropriate the traditional Ago religion in the light of Christianity. But the non-converts strongly feel that the ancient Ao religion has been tainted by Christianity. In their narratives the non-converts continuously draw our attention to their conviction in strictly upholding a tradition that has been handed down by their ancestors. “I still follow the religion of my ancestors because in my opinion the truth gets diluted if an individual shift from one religion to another. Moreover Christianity is an alien religion”.13 More than being a follower of the traditional religion, they take pride as bearers of a heritage, which they see as meaningful representing truth and a belief they cherish.

**Christian and non Christians:**

In chapter three I have discussed the issues of confrontation and conflict within the Ao society during the initial years of conversion to Christianity. The clashes mostly took place between the converts and the non-converts. Interestingly, the inherent contradiction still persists in a supposedly Christian dominated Ao community, which is

13 Interview, Imdongmayang, Chungtia Village, 27.4.2001.
expressed in the clash between the Christians and the followers of the traditional religion.

Into the seemingly ancient world of the Aos came Christianity with its claim of being a universal religion ready to embrace one and all that strike at the root of the then religious and cultural ideals and political institutions. In this section an attempt will be made to look at the tensions as they were seen and experienced by the non converts during the initial years of conversion to Christianity, and also to see how tension entailed by Christian conversion creates problems in the context of a Christian dominated world of the Aos.

In telling stories about the conflict and tensions caused by conversion to Christianity, Temjenyanger constructs the past in particular ways. He places certain issues at the center of important events and tells us about the tensions he witnessed in the politics of the governing body of his village in the initial period of conversion. The number of the members of village council in the yimlang(lower)khel had decreased as the converts decided to stay way from the council. The non converts ran the village council for about a decade. But Temjenyanger maintained that “The non-converts always kept the invitation open for the Christians to join the village council”. He went on to say, “The non converts asked the arogopur(church members) to celebrate the traditional festival Tsungremong together, but the latter decried it as a heathen practice and they went to the extent of stopping animal

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14 Interview, Temjenyanger, Ungma Village, 20.4.2001.
sacrifice and community feast which were the main features of the Tsungremong festival.\textsuperscript{15}

There is a reversal of the story as Temjenyanger talks about what had happened in the yimpang (upper)khel of the same village during the later period of transition to Christianity: “Meanwhile the majority of the yimpang khel became Christians and the village council was run by the Christians. But the church members initiated the celebration of the traditional festival along with the non converts”.\textsuperscript{16} Clearly over the years the converts had given up their early resistance to ancient practices. Ao culture had seeped into Christianity, Christianity had been transformed, a change that allowed a wider acceptance of Christianity amongst the Aos.

The above information points towards a more general process but at the same time contradicts received notion that conversion to Christianity did not allow negotiation between the converts and the non-converts. In the same village but in different khels, the converts as well as the non-converts were actively negotiating certain cultural practices, they struggled to uphold practices they thought were vital in keeping the community together. Possibly the hostility to ancient practices were more marked in the early years of conversion when the identity of the new faith was being defined, and when missionaries were active in proselytizing. Gradually this hostility waned as Christianity gained popularity. But it did not disappear.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview, Temjenyanger, Ungma Village, 20.4.2001.

\textsuperscript{16} Interview, Temjenyanger, Ungma Village, 20.4.2001.
The stories of non-converts repeatedly show how conflicts unfolded around the symbols of cultural practices of the community. Tension was generated whenever Christians questioned ancient cultural practices. This is revealed very starkly in Arsashi's story. Arsashi started his story by narrating how he became a Christian in 1947 when Christianity had made inroad into almost all parts of Nagaland. He admitted that he became a Christian without having any genuine understanding of the Christian religion, but for the fear of being left out by his friends who were all Christians by then. Years after he became Christian, he experienced tension and conflict within the Christian community itself because he used to clean up the surroundings of ansulung.\footnote{Ansulung is a huge rock near Sungatsu village. The Aos in the ancient days offered prayers and sacrifices to Tsungrem in this place.}

The story of Arsashi is about unresolved personal issues that intersected with conflicting religious ideals, making it difficult for him to form a positive vision of a religious community with which he identified himself at one point of time in his life. He went on to say:

Even after I became a Christian I used to go and clean the surroundings of ansulung so that it would be preserved for the younger generation to see how their ancestors worshiped before the intervention of Christianity. Once I took my friend along to do the routine cleaning. Incidentally he got sick and died on 10\textsuperscript{th} October 1987. In his funeral some of the church leaders refused to pray for the deceased and declared that he is a limapur (non believer) since he had disgraced the name of
the church by rendering his service to clean the place which
the Christians now considered as heathen. 18

This incident led him to write a letter to the ABAM (Ao Baptist
Church Mungdang), the main body of Ao churches, questioning and
seeking clarification about the church’s authority to turn a Christian
into a limapur or a non-Christian. “I did not get any reply from them
and got disillusioned by the attitude of the church. I decided to go back
to my ancestors religion and till my last breath I am not going to
embrace Christianity again”. 19

This story contains an implicit challenge to the insensitivity that the
church displayed towards average Christians who did not see anything
wrong in preserving the place of worship of their ancestors. It also
shows the complex interplay within the multiple components of the
self, in which the Christian self and the Ao self could fuse into one as
well as confront each other.

Premises of Criticism:
For years the non-converts have been interacting with the Christians in
their everyday life. They have not remained silent observers to the
events taking place around them. It is in these non-converts that
Christianity in Ao land meets a hostile as well as a keen observer. They
accept that there are certain meeting points between Christianity and

18 Interview, Arsashi, Sungratsu Village, 15.4.2001.
19 Interview, Arsashi, Sungratsu Village, 15.4. 2001.
traditional Ao religion. But they also have a keen eye for the most vulnerable points of Christianity.

Many non-converts have immense respect and admiration for Christian faith. “I enjoy long lasting friendship with Christians in the village. They have amazing self sacrificing spirit and I must also say that the moral teaching of Jesus can promote human conduct for all individuals and societies beyond the boundaries of all the other religion”.

The non-converts freely admit that many of the Christian tenets are good but there was a gap between Christian teaching and Christians living. Converts did not live by the ideals of Christian tenets. “I appreciate the Christian concept of giving and non discriminatory attitude but what I do not understand is why the followers of Christian faith take up arms when the teaching of Christianity is all about peaceful coexistence”. For many of them the problem lies not with the Christian faith but with the Christians. Arsashi who left the Christian faith also admits “Christian teaching is good but the Christians fail to live up to the standard of the teaching of Christianity”.

Another point of resentment expressed by the non-converts is directed towards the messenger of the gospel. “Christianity was presented as a dominant religion and the missionaries decried even cultural institution like arichu(bachelors’ dormitory). They should have been more

20 Interview, Imdongmayang, Imdongmayang, Chungtia village, 27.4.2001.
21 Interview, Repakokba, Ungma Village, 29.4.2001.
22 Interview, Arsashi, Sungratsu Village, 15.4.2001.
sensitive in making a distinction between Ao religion and culture."\textsuperscript{23} The manner in which Christianity was introduced is here read as an attack on traditional practices and institutions, which nonconverts do not wish to give up.

There is a fear amongst non-converts about the changes that conversion would imply. Christianity, they feel, entails a change in the lifestyle that would mean giving up certain practices symbolizing the past. Temjenyanger said: "I am aware of the fact that once I become a Christian I have to undergo water baptism and make a covenant with God to live my life according to the teaching of the Bible. Since the missionaries and the Christians consider drinking rice beer as a sinful habit, I would rather remain a non-Christian because I cannot give up rice beer."\textsuperscript{24} The way the Christians dishonor the covenant they make with God poses a problem for this narrator. "Breaking the covenant with God is the most disgraceful action that a man can attribute to God. But I find many Christians hardly honor the covenant they make. Why should I make a covenant with God if I am not going to honor it?".\textsuperscript{25}

Temjenyanger finds it difficult to accept that Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of mankind. "Each person suffers for his or her sins and not for another. The sinner has to bear the consequences of his action and make retribution for them".\textsuperscript{26} For him, every act must reap its

\textsuperscript{23} Interview, Akangjungshi, Longkhum village, 25.4.2001.
\textsuperscript{24} Interview, Temjenyanger, Ungma village, 20.4.2001.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Interview, Temjenyanger, Ungma village, 20.4.2001.
appropriate retribution by each individual, consequently, for him, any notion of grace, forgiveness or vicarious atonement is unacceptable.

How do the nonconverts assert their identity in a Christian dominated community? In maintaining their religious identity do they feel alienated or do they have a relationship of cordial coexistence with the Christians? Almost all of them now are accepted within the village and they do not really feel alienated as non-Christians. As Akangjungshi said: “I don’t think the Christians are hostile towards me just because I still follow the religion of my ancestors. Within few days the whole village will be celebrating Moatsu(spring festival) and the Christians will also come and join me in the celebration”.27 They have a sense of their rightful place within the community and the way in which certain cultural practices find expression proves their point. “Celebration of festivals is a community affair. The songs and the dances enacted during the celebration have been handed down by our ancestors”.28 Collective rituals continue to bind the community together. Problem arises when these rituals come under question.

However on certain occasions the nonconverts themselves distance themselves while observing the rituals of their religion. For instance, when I went to meet Akangjungshi in Longkhum village he was observing anempong(genna) for six days. During these days of consecration, outsiders are not encouraged to visit his house. “Two days back I cleaned up a new area of land for cultivation and I am

observing anempong for six days. I have kept a bunch of tsungpet leaves at the main door of my house as a sign so that other people will not enter my house unnecessarily. I hesitate to welcome a stranger because I won’t know whether that person is clean or not”.  

29 I reached the village in the morning and I was asked to stay in the village the whole day before going to his house in the evening. I was no longer considered a total stranger. After the day long stay, I was nominally integrated into the community.

The sites of conflict that emerged during Ao conversion to Christianity imply the limits and possibilities of cultural fusion between Christianity and Ao culture. In this chapter, I have tried to see the limits of cultural fusion through the eyes of those who resisted transition from Ao religion to Christianity. On the other hand, over the years the Ao have identified the sites of conflict between Christianity and Ao worldview and attempts are made for a synthesis between the two which has led to a further transformation of Christianity as well as of the local culture in specific ways. For instance, one of the major areas of conflict during the initial years of Ao conversion to Christianity was centered on the traditional festivals that involved sacrifices. The Christian missionaries and the Ao converts decried such practices. But now attempts are made to integrate some of the Ao notions of sacrifice, as discussed in the second chapter into the Christian concept of sacrifice. The Christians now celebrate traditional festivals, which were repressed initially, in a Christianized manner.

29 Interview, Akangjunghshi, Longkhum village, 25.4.2001.
The process of interaction with the nonconverts indicates the manner in which Christianity and the Aos conversed about the problematic issue of conversion. Their life stories epitomize the central concerns around the issue of conversion of the Aos to Christianity and the tensions that persist even today. They are reflective of the way in which traditional Ao religion and Christianity appear in relation to each other, the way they absorb each other even when they are in conflict.