The association of Christianity and Naga identity is so strong that a Naga child grows up to think that all Nagas are Christians by origin. This was the assumption that I as a Naga and a Christian internalized in my childhood. Reflecting back I remember how I could make little or no distinction between Christian practices and Naga culture. The cultural practices I saw as traditional were all influenced by Christianity. Operating with the inherited common wisdom that all Nagas are Christians, initially my research focussed only on the Ao Naga Christians and the emancipatory stories of Christian conversion.

Gradually it occurred to me that the association of Christianity with Naga identity is a part of recent history; I discovered that this history was structured by conflicts. This subsequently led me to look at issues of confrontation and conflict that marked the process of Ao Nagas conversion to Christianity, a history that is so profoundly imprinted on the people.

My research focuses only on the socio cultural aspects of the Aos before and after the intervention of Christianity. It is interesting to note that the Aos were the first among the Naga tribes to be Christianized by the American Baptist missionaries. The Aos occupy a portion of land in Nagaland bounded by Dikhu river on the Southeast, the edge of the plains in the Northwest, the Konyaks on the Northeast and the Semas and Lothas on the Southwest. The Ao country is divided into six administrative ranges: Ongpangkong, Asetkong, Langpangkong, Changkikong, Japukong, and Tzurangkong. The Aos are composed of
at least four linguistic groups representing Mongsen, Chungli, Changki and sangpur.

My thesis is five in chapters. The first chapter focuses on the identity of the Aos before the intervention of Christianity. The purpose of this chapter is to probe into the politics of headhunting through which one can understand their life ways before the intervention of Christianity. This chapter looks at the nature of early encounter between Christian outsiders and the natives; It examines the way Christian outsiders represented the Aos, and discusses the constituent elements of the missionary images of the Ao tribe.

In the second chapter an attempt is made to understand the representation of Ao traditional religion by the Ao Christian themselves. The idea is to explore how they themselves appropriated Ao past and how they legitimized it in the light of Christianity. It also discusses how the Ao Christians identified the central themes in Ao religion; how Ao scholars used oral sources in the task of representing and relocating their traditional religion.

The third chapter focuses on several themes. The nature of confrontation and conflict within the Ao community that followed the intervention of Christianity. Secondly this chapter takes into account the kind of responses conversion generated and how Ao cultural practices negotiated Christianity. In situating the issues of confrontation and conflict between the Ao Christians and non-Christians, I have used the court records involving Christian and non-Christian Aos. These court cases not only shed light on the nature of conflict within Ao society, they also reveal the nature of colonial
intervention in the traditional functioning system of the area within their jurisdiction.

The fourth chapter explores the larger dialogue between the Aos and Christianity. It seeks to understand how the missionaries were locked in debates about the best means of conversion and how they displayed wide variation in their commitment to proselytize. The missionary records tell us about the issues around which the debates were centered. This chapter also addresses the issue of how Christianity initially looked at Ao culture and how in the actual act of evangelizing, Ao practices began to define the notion of ideal Christian practices. This chapter also looks at the problems missionaries faced in following a policy of aggressive proselytization. This leads us to another theme: the link between education and proselytization.

In the fifth chapter I attempt to bring the past and present into focus by exploring Christian conversion in its full complexity. This is done through the testimonies of the non-Christian Aos. The testimonies of the non-convert Aos challenge the accepted notion that all Aos are Christians. Their testimonies open up a new area of inquiry; through them we begin to see the personal meanings of their lived experience of conversion. Through the testimonies we can understand the importance of different events in their lives, and the way they saw the missionaries and the Ao Christians.

The thesis is based on a research into a variety of sources. The letters and records of the missionaries obtained from the Molungyimsen Baptist church, Nagaland gives insight into the early history of success and failures of the mission. Other missionary sources consist of reports
and records of the Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union conferences and the Baptist missionary Magazine. These sources are available at the Eastern Theological College library, Jorhat, and the Council of Baptist Churches of North East India library, Guwahati. These missionary accounts highlights the nature of encounter between the Aos and Christian outsides and gives much information about the different strategies the missionaries employed to proselytize the Aos. In addition to the missionary sources, I have looked at the travel account, official reports of the British administrators. The case records of the colonial administration in Mokokchung district contain much information about the issues of conflict between the Ao Christians and non convert Aos as well as the nature of colonial intervention. Myths and legends form an important source in understanding some aspects of Ao religion. The legends and myths are recovered and recounted by the Christian scholars after the intervention of Christianity, so we need to be careful in reading them. Studies made by the Ao Christians allow us to understand how they attempted to grapple with their past and relate it to the present. The interviews of the non-convert Aos brings the past and present into focus by exploring Ao conversion in its full complexity. The testimonies of these individuals complement the existing documentary sources. The secondary sources for writing the thesis include books, journal, newspapers, and periodical materials.
Sketch map of the AO COUNTRY

Changli villages underlined thus

Mongsen

Villages containing separate Mongsen and Changli "kheta" underlined thus

Villages of Changki group not underlined