CHAPTER 1

HEADHUNTING AS A RITUAL PRACTICE

“Headhunters” is the term often used to describe the Aos by the people in the plains. Though headhunting is a thing of the past, probing into the politics and issues of headhunting can serve as a prism through which one can understand how Ao society unfolded through time rather than being frozen as a set of eternal structures. Moreover, this could be one way of exploring their lifeways through cultural forms embedded in the practice of headhunting before the intervention of Christianity. Thus in understanding the identity of the Aos before the intervention of Christianity, the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the central importance of headhunting as an organizing principle of the people as well as a powerful motivating force in Ao individual and group behavior.

To represent the identity of the Aos before the intervention of Christianity, one has to rely on the official sources, colonial ethnographic and professional accounts of the Naga Hills and missionary writings. The use of these sources is however problematic, for these sources define and structure the nature of the encounter between the observers and the natives. The missionary accounts allow us to look at the ways Aos were perceived by Christian outsiders. The missionaries share with us their world of adventure, their delights, shocks and surprises, the variety in their experiences. But through their description they also structure their own conception of tribal society, of headhunting.
The Mythic Origins:

For the Aos the origin of headhunting is interwoven in myths:

In the olden days man and animal lived in peace. In those days there was only one tree in the whole of earth. All of them ate fruits from that tree. One day a fruit slipped from the mouth of a bird and it dropped to the ground. The fruit was picked up and eaten by a lizard. The bird flew down in search of the fruit. The bird saw a lizard on the ground beside the tree. The bird asked the lizard as to what happened to the fruit. The lizard replied that the ant ate the fruit. The case between the lizard and the ant was tried. The lizard was accused. The ant killed the lizard and took it with a loud war cry. Man imitated that incident and started the practice of head hunting.\(^1\)

From this myth what can use discern about the environment in which headhunting originated? The myth implies that there was peace before treachery disturbed that peaceful environment. The fruit tree represents nature, the basis for survival for people within the realm of the jungle. The fight of the creatures over the fruit was similar to human struggles for the limited resources of nature. For hunter-gatherers fruit is doubly symbolic of survival. The trial and judgement refers to the need to restore justice and maintain order to avoid monopolization of nature. The trial of the case between the ant and the lizard before the ant killed the lizard speaks of an attempt to settle scores without resorting to bloodshed. Since the ant was justified at the trial, he had every right to

kill the lizard and cut off its head. Man imitated the ant is to suggest that headhunting was a legitimate act in the case of treachery.

Another mythic explanation attributed to Naga headhunting is that during war and raids the villagers who stayed back in the village anxiously wanted to know the outcome of the war or raid. But those who went to war did not bring anything except the news of the victory or defeat. In order to prove their success, the warriors thought that they must bring some part of the body of the enemy to demonstrate their achievement. They started bringing home the heads of the victims and people started believing in the success stories of their heroes from war. Thus raiding got linked to headhunting.

This myth suggests that headhunting was an act linked to raiding and feuding and it was a consequence of feuding. The story that heads were taken as proof of a successful raid implies that initially raiding was the primary concern, not headhunting.

Politics of Headhunting:
Headhunting epitomized construction of political power in the first place, as all the villages till the mid-nineteenth century were independent and sovereign with no common authority to bring them under one political unit. Therefore, raiding and taking heads were practices through which the authority of other villages was questioned and challenged. It was also a way of demonstrating the superiority of a village that could respond appropriately to challenges of its authority.

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Till the mid nineteenth century a village which boasted of having more skulls on the head tree than the other villages exhibited superior political power. The purpose of displaying the heads was to demonstrate, make visible to the neighboring villages the power and pride that the village had accumulated. Mrs. Clark who served among the Aos gives us an account of how an Ao village called Merangkong credited with an impressive skull house had earned the reputation of a warrior village:

Those who followed us in the early days of our work in the Naga Hills may recall Merangkong as the first village, after our own, Molung, to receive a Christian teacher. It was a large village, much given to war, as the Nagas expressed it, hold as many as wars as there were hairs on a man’s head, in which it took pride; and the decoration of the village skull house testified to its triumphs.3

In the days when head hunting existed as an institutional warfare that engaged villages in interminable feuds, careful and strategic defense system of the village was necessary. The village also had to be secured in a place where the enemies could not have easy access. J.P.Mills one of the Sub Divisional Officers of the Mokokchung district who saw the remnants of the old village structures describes in a graphic way the villages were built on high ridges with additional protection against enemies:

The gate at each end of the village was, in the olden days, closed with a great wooden door hewn out of a single

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3 Mrs. Clark, *The Baptist Missionary Magazine*, vol.LXX1, September 1891, no.9, page 406.
piece of wood and often roughly ornamented with carved circles....in the olden days the fashioning and setting up of one of those huge planks was celebrated by taking a head as soon as possible and carry it with triumph though the new gate. The gate was roofed over like a lych-gate to protect it from weather, and on either side the village fence was built out like a redoubt to enable the defenders to take the attackers in the flank. The fence, which was of wooden stakes, lashed together and bristling it with 'panjis' stretched right round the village except where the precipitous nature of the ground made it unnecessary. 4

Lookout platforms were constructed on trees on strategic places. For this purpose a ficus tree was grown especially by the side of the gate. “The long hanging tendrils were trained down bamboos with the object of securing wide spreading branches stretching right over the path, for look out station on such branches would be particularly well placed for dealing with the hairy pates of the enemy down below”. 5

The 'panjis' filled ditches were another advance line of defense where the ground on either side of the path fell away so steeply that they could not be outflanked. If one of the panjis went right through a man's foot, the wound was always liable to suppurate. There were even more dangerous forms of defense built around the village. Sometimes pieces of bamboos with a sharp knife edges were buried in the soft soil so that men stepping on it would slit the sole of their feet. R.G

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5 Ibid, Page, 73.
Woodthrope who was commissioned in the Royal Engineers, reported in 1874 about his tour from Changki village to Mekula. The panjis filled paths in some areas seemed to have made his tour difficult. He wrote:

The next day's march to Mekula was a most fatiguing one, though only about 9 miles in length. The path ran along the top of a very narrow ridge, following all its natural features, now ascending through long grass interlaced overhead about 4ft from the ground, which annoyed and hindered our coolies greatly, now descending steeply over wet and slippery moss-grown rock, where one false step would have sent us over the precipices into unknown depth of dark jungle below. Again, the path meandered on through tangled breaks of low thorn bushes which obscured it and tore our legs, while, to crown all the path was thickly studded with 'panjis' for two thirds of the way, necessitating continual checks to pull them up, and not withstanding every precaution, many of our number were wounded by them.6

Panjis were critical in the politics of defense. Ao writers describe how panjis (aju or asou) were used to build the defense system of the village:

Panji means spike, a pointed piece of bamboo in times of war around village. Spikes were kept planted in front of the main gate of a village. Spikes planted in the front of

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the main gate of the village under attack must be removed by the commander of the warriors called 'sushir' and he himself cut open the gate, cleared away the massive gate and than led his warriors into the village for scale attacks. The same spikes were used in all cases of headhunting and each and every warrior carried atleast a bundle of them in his soukhipoung to be left planted if and when situation demanded.

Thus in the Ao defense system of a village during headhunting days, spikes came to be imbued with special significance. Spikes around the village signified safety, security and protection from the enemy. When the leader of the raiding party removed the spiked gate, the defense of the village under attack was symbolically breached. Victory over the enemy was asserted by piercing the spikes through their heads.

Ao villages were organized as autonomous political units with no higher authority to regulate their peaceful relations. Though each village was free to run its own affairs there was no guarantee that it would not be attacked. In such a situation it made sense for the weaker villages to forge alliance with the stronger villages. J.P Mills wrote about the high diplomacy that was required to set the tone of solidarity between villages:

In the old headhunting days, loosely knit leagues gave the tribe a certain amount of political cohesion. Ungma used

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7 A small tapering basket usually ornamented that hangs on the back of the Ao man when he is on the warpath.
to receive tribute from, and extended not a very effective protection to the villages of Langbangkong and Asukong ranges, while Lunghum held a similar position with regard to the villages of the Changkikong. Longsa on the one side and Changki, with her daughter villages of Chapu and Nancham, on the other stood out from the leagues, with members of which they were incidentally at war. Ungma and Lungkam had two wholesome affair of each other to fight. As with all Nagas the real political unit of the tribe is the village. The ‘Khels’ are run with separate organizations, but a village usually united for war keeps atleast more important amungs in common.9

There were several ways in which the Aos settled disputes within their own groups and between other groups. They were less tolerant if the dispute crossed the village walls. Then they usually took recourse to raiding where they exchanged more than words and carried home heads. I.Bendangangshi, an Ao writes:

War used to be a constant affair during our forefathers’ time and those were taken as the days of warriors. Usually it was fought between two warring villages or between two or more tribes of the Nagas. Before any war broke out the contending villages tried their best to solve their common problem, without causing bloodshed. They did it through ‘Aolidanger’ emissary or in other words peacemaker, failing which they resorted to war.10

10 I.Bandangangshi, Folk Tales of the Nagas, 1998, page, 158.
Random slaughter of unknown people was neither understood nor appreciated. There had to be a good enough reason to raid and take heads. This logic was respected in most situations. Pitched battles took place occasionally when two villages would meet by arrangement at a certain spot. In a pitched battle, the warriors would turn up in their ceremonial attire. The head count was low in these formal pitched battle.

There were other common forms of attacks. Troops on punitive expedition raided isolated parties working in the field or ambushed paths along which people were likely to pass. The raiders sat behind a thin screen of jungle purposely left uncut with spears ready to strike. At times the raiding party attacked the village at night by first setting the village on fire. As the village under attack was usually taken by surprise, the warring parties mostly resorted to guerilla warfare tactics till either side was forced to submission. According to I.Bendangangshi, such forms of attack took place when the loser in the previous feud failed to pay war indemnity to the victor village.

The feud between Dekhahaimong and Nagoan (Merangkong) in the early 1880s illustrates how feuds were renewed whenever there was a breach of agreement between two villages. Tajenyuba writes:

> When men of Noagoan (Merangkong) while they were going on in a war path and were holding at Dekhahaimong, five of them were killed in cold blood by the men of Dekhahaimong and two with injuries escaped to their village. In January 1885 when Colonel Clarke was visiting the Hatigoria (Ao) country he was informed about
the feud between the two villages. Colonel Clarke made enquiries from both the parties who promised him that they would not renew the feud unless they were attacked. The Nagoan men remained faithful to their promise for about a year.\textsuperscript{11}

Hattie Rivenburg one of the missionaries in the mission field in the Naga Hills reported an instance of the breakdown of the peace agreement and how the Nagoan men avenged the death of their men in the previous year:

Naga wars have broken again. A few weeks ago, while eight men from Dekhahaimong were on their way to the plains, they were attacked by men from Nagoan. The rest ran back to their village, where everyone frantically packed up his possessions to hide in the jungle. The fighters returned to guard their village, but were surprised and outnumbered by their foe, who rushed their defense before daylight. The aggressors carried away the heads of a number of the old men, after burning the village to the ground.\textsuperscript{12}

The renewal of feud between Dekhahaimong village and Nagoan village suggests that revenge for the injury felt by the vanquished party on other occasions constituted a possible ground for headhunting.


Headhunting and Fertility:

Within the Ao perception headhunting was linked to power and fertility. Aos believed that accumulation of heads would ultimately strengthen the soul force of the village. It was a means to tap the power of the supernatural forces. "Under the tree the 'Tir' (commander of the warriors) plucked a chicken alive with a declaration that the heads taken were only a retribution for the sins of the other village and a prayer for more heads, bumper crops and general prosperity in the future. The chicken throat was finally cut with a bamboo knife and the omens from it entrails." 13

In fact after the suppression of headhunting Aos lamented that illness had become rampant, villages had shrunk and crops had started failing. Aos were convinced of a direct connection between prosperity and headhunting. Even after the suppression of headhunting mock raids were carried out; old practices were reenacted in ritualized form, relieved through narratives. Consider the following description of one such mock raid:

There had been a bad harvest before and the village wished to make sure there would not be another year of scarcity. A body of young men, all armed under the leadership of older men, went out through Aliba and Kinunger as if going to raid a Lotha village. After going a short distance they sat down and drank, while the older men held forth at length on excellency of old customs and danger of abandoning them. Some spears were than taken from the younger boys and carried back by the older men.

13 Mills, The Ao Nagas, Page, 204.
when all returned. These spears represented loot from the enemy and their real owners never got them back. All came back singing as if they were carrying heads, and the drum was beaten in the traditional manner. All then had a meal, and gourds were prepared and hung from bamboo against the head tree. The drum was beaten again and an old man held forth at enormous length on old customs and traditions, jabbing the butt of his spear into the ground at each point.14

The crops that year were reported to be excellent. This luck was directly ascribed to the efficacy of the mock raid. Narratization is a way of relieving the past, a past that official laws sought to suppress but a past that was crucial to Ao self-conception which was a part of their entire cosmological world.

**Valor and Potency:**
One way of discerning the cultural shape of Ao headhunting is to look through the cultural forms through which the Ao men represented their lives to themselves and to the community. These cultural forms encompassed the distinctive ways in which their conduct was culturally mediated, patterned, institutionally grounded and historically produced. Taking heads demonstrated their potency — a tangible proof of their valor once they arrived home from war. It was a benchmark of having arrived in life and a sure means of securing all that a man holds close to his heart - respect, pride, honor and woman.

Therefore the youngman’s impulse to raid and take heads was firmly rooted within the complexities of taking heads which entailed the greatest honor for man; it defined his masculinity. Renato Rosaldo writing on the Illongot male life cycle says, “Like all conventions that shape and inform human life, the typification of the male cycle provides an idiom for interpreting life experiences, whether unique or universal, surprising or humdrum, rebellious or conformist”.15 Amongst the Aos headhunting had a similar significance within the life cycle of males.

During the headhunting days the ‘arichu’ or the bachelors’ dormitory stood as a guardhouse of the village. It was an institution in which Ao youngmen represented their lives through culturally and politically mediated forms. The members of the ‘arichu’ were called ‘arichuchanger’. The members were divided according to the age groups each with specific duties to perform.

Initiation into manhood was through ritualized tests of manhood. An Ao youngman could not enter the ‘arichu’ (The Bachelors’ Dormitory) without proving his masculinity. Panger Imchen in his book Ancient Ao Religion and Culture records the Story of Immangdangba of Khare village who went through ritualized tests of manhood. He writes:

The arichu life was a life almost of military discipline. The elders of the arichu taught us war tactics, such as throwing at us with husking poles, ‘six to seven feet long’ while we stood hiding behind the bamboo made shield, and tested

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our courage by giving us difficult tasks. They used to send us to the most strategic jungles at night to collect fruits, flowers and daos they left behind. They used to threaten us by telling on our way through the jungle we might be attacked by wild animals or evil spirits.¹⁶

The Ao youth were held over the fire to see whether they could endure the heat without a cry. They were made to show their pluck by being sent alone on a dark night to fetch a bamboo from a certain clump. The boy sent was allowed no torch or weapon, and he had to gnaw the bamboo through his teeth or hack it off with a sharp stone. Or, a boy again would be send to lit a torch at some particular spot far away in the jungle and come back alone in the dark without a light. In the morning the older boys would go and see if the burnt remains of the torch were in the proper place. To establish their initiation into manhood, young men to conquer darkness, overcome fear and demonstrate their courage. Such ordeals initiated the youngmen of the tribe into manhood and prepared them for extreme endurance and enabled their seniors to decide upon their comparative stamina and strength and ability to endure extreme privations that often fell on the Ao warriors.

The older men egged on their juniors as they themselves had done in their youth. The young men were energized by the pressure of rivalry among peers and hence they had to prove their worth by taking heads in succession. Regarded as a prelude to marriage, each Ao young man

usually hoped to take one head atleast. A man who had taken a head became at once more attractive to women and was better able to defend himself through the ordeal of wooing a woman. Taking head for the Ao man was to advance from novice status and adorn himself with war medals. It allowed them to answer back when other men taunted. It was a means to enhance his personality, and to avoid the scorn of others. The desire to marry without taking a head was the subject of ridicule.

Ao youngmen were supposed to be competent in the game of feuding and raiding but the ‘quick one’ with the ability to lead his warriors and track down enemies were celebrated in ritual, story, songs and oratory. He was the ‘sushir’ or commander of the contingent. The sushir was selected for one battle but a good sushir was appointed again if he proved his worth and if he was willing to retain the title. Selection was done by the village rulers on behalf of the whole village community. Ao writers explain how the sushir was under the twin pressure of leading his contingent to victory and retaining his position as a commander:

If a war was declared between two villages first of all a day must be fixed by both warring parties and each side must select its commander or sushir. On the day fixed for the battle all the able bodied men of the village must present themselves compulsorily in the battlefield and the sushir or the commander is the leader over all the people of his village who go to the battlefield… he must take the lead in the front while going to the battle front, act as the
advance guard and while coming back after the battle he must act as the rear guard.\textsuperscript{17}

A successful warrior who had hunted the most heads was entitled ‘Tir’ and he was appointed as the commander in chief. He was the source of energy and power. His house became the center of power, the place where raids were planned. Again Ao writers describe in detail the role and responsibilities of the Tir as:

The village on a permanent basis appoints the Tir. His residence is the only place from where the warriors make necessary preparations for going to war and whenever they come back from war they must first come to his house with the war trophies of heads. Also each and every victory must be celebrated in the village from his house. The tir himself may or may not go to a war or a battlefront, but everything connected with warfare must be done in his house under his leadership...He must be a courageous man who killed either one or more enemies before he is appointed.\textsuperscript{18}

The complex orchestratisation of rituals of headhunting in which the Ao man represented himself symbolized the way in which he as warrior strove towards a culturally idealized life. A warrior’s grave also stood as a monument of his heroic deed. A special kind of decoration made of bamboo in the grave of a warrior who had gathered heads as trophies was called ‘jidong’. Jidong is semicircle fencing

\textsuperscript{17} I. Bendangangshi and I.T Apok Jamir, \textit{The Religion of the Ao Nogas}, Page, 158.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, page, 159.
erected on an elevated ground beside the coffin of a warrior. Bamboos size had to be cut of uniform in about half a meter length. These were decorated and fixed to form the fencing.

**Solidarity:**
Celebration of a successful raid was an enactment of collective solidarity. The rituals that were to be followed before and after headhunting were mediums through which collective solidarity came into force. While several dances and rituals were enacted to honor the returning warriors even old men, children and women joined the liveliest demonstrations of joy at the announcement of joyful tidings that their tribe has overpowered the village they sought to strike down. "Young maidens instigated their betrothed to this bloody work, and it was the women’s voice that thrilled the cry of victory when these prizes reeking in blood were brought into the village".  

Ao women were to rejoice seeing the bleeding heads brought into the village. If we piece together the Ao past told in stories and songs, then the Ao women are seen not as mere spectators of the politics of raiding and headhunting. A woman whose husband was on war path had to remain chaste. If the fire in her house went out she had to light it with a tong and she was not supposed to bring fire from another house. Stories are told about women planning war strategies as well as forging alliances. In one such story, two young women of Lungkhum village who went to sell hornbill feathers were killed by the young men of

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Nokpoyimchen. The hornbill belonged to the chief of Nokpoyimchen. It is said that a small bird brought news of the killing of the two women of Lungkhum. Mills recorded the story of the feud that ensued between Lungkhum and Nokpoyimchen:

A war party set out to avenge them. But the warriors of Nokpoyimchen aided by fierce war dogs, not only repulsed every raid but succeeded in annihilating one party. In despair Lungkhum sent men to Langbangkong to ask advice of soothsayers, who replied that only a childless old couple of Waromung Longyangbong and his wife Akangla could help them. So they went to Waromung and approached Akangla who consented to return with them to Lungkum. There she bade another raiding party set out and gave to each warrior a ball of cold rice mixed with hair and thorns. The raiders took these rice balls with them and threw them to the Nokpoyimchen war dogs, which got the hair and thorns, got wedged in their teeth that they could not bite and were killed. The masters fled in dismay, and Nokpoyimchen was taken and its inhabitants slain or driven down to the plains. Because of the help given by Akangla lungkum has never gone to war with Waromung. 20

The Image of the Marauder:
The persistent image of the Aos represented by the Christian outsiders is that of a group of people living in isolated geographical conditions with customs and a mode of life that was distinctly primitive and

characteristic of a true savage and visibly barbaric. For years the Aos existed in the writings of missionaries and colonial administrators as hordes of wild blood thirsty marauders fiercely resisting the advancing colonist and as ceaseless menace to the people in the plains. Thus it is pertinent to examine the constituent elements of these perpetual categories and see how they become a part of the missionary image of the Ao tribe.

Mrs. Clark paints a characteristically lucid account of her first encounter with the Aos at her residence in Assam. The Aos had come from the hills for trade and Mrs. Clark tells us how she was persuaded into buying goats by the Aos:

I don't want the goat! I don't want it! I will not have it!
Take it away, was reiterated again and again; yet these strange uncivilized men down from their mountain fastness still persisted in dragging up the steps of veranda of our bungalow a large, long homed goat, hoping to receive from us double or quadruple its value, and nothing short if landing it inside the house would satisfy them. Thus I was introduced to these stalwart, robust warriors, dressed mostly in their war medals, each man grasping his spear decorated with goat's hair dyed red and yellow, and also fringed with the long black hair of woman, telling the story of bloody deeds.  

The entire description is saturated with the fear of warrior Aos. Every action of theirs signified blood thirst. The general horror of war was

\[\text{21 M.M Clark, } A \text{ Corner in India, American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1907, page, 1.}\]
magnified by the fact that women and children - the western symbol of innocence were killed just as men, and women themselves, instead of restraining the act of savagery, goaded men into killing the enemy. A.W. Davis says he found it strange that women who were unarmed as easy targets of headhunting should mock at men who had not taken a head. "The desire for heads is still very strong amongst youth of all the tribes in this district: that this should be so is more the fault of the women than of anyone else; these are given to laugh at young bucks at the village festivals when they turn out without such decorations as mark of the successful warrior". 22 Again the Christian outsider alerts us to the legitimacy of headhunting and its convention that perpetuated the practice. Mrs. Clark wrote:

> He is ready to sacrifice to the utmost that his praises may be sung and his name perpetuated. The highest type of glory of which he formerly had any conception was bravery and success in war.... The heads of women and children were counted as much as that of men, the long black hair of women being especially prized for decorations. It was not uncommon for a company of young men to bind themselves with an oath to refrain from the gratification of some coveted pleasure untill they had brought the head of an enemy into the village. 23

This kind of description underlines the various aspects of the politics of headhunting and the circumstance in which the Christian outsiders

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made their initial contact with the Aos. The fact that Ao men were ready to sacrifice even his life in the warpath so that his name would be perpetuated implies that headhunting entailed honor and privilege that a man desired.

Let me refer to another incident that made Aos appear as warlike to Mrs. Clark. When she was at Molung, the village where she first lived in the Naga Hills, one day a group of warriors on their warpath had entered the village. Listen to Mrs. Clark describing entry of warriors with all paraphernalia of war:

Just as evening, coming up through the village gate and passing our bungalow, were twenty men dressed in all the habiliments of war, bamboo split hats trimmed with wild boar tusks, the red band, and an unmistakable insignia of bloody deeds, battle axes, spears and shields highly embellished and the feathers of the favorite bird indicated of their victory.24

Rev. E. W. Clark gives a vivid description of how a village could be alerted by the sight of warriors approaching the territory. Clark tells us that one evening he was explaining the gospel to the young men of the village when there was an interruption caused by something that was happening at the village gate. He says:

The quiet at one of the gates had been broken by the sudden, loud challenge of the guard. Someone was coming up the hill! Everyone in the village was instantly alert. The men rose and grasped their spears, which were never far

24 M. M. Clark, A Corner in India, page, 74.
from their hands ready to rush to the defense if necessary. They loosened up their battle-axes and stood listening intently.\textsuperscript{25}

To understand the identity of the Aos as headhunters as conceived by the Christian outsiders, it is important to see how the Ao themselves projected the image of headhunters. This opens up another line of inquiry into the accounts of Christian outsiders' accounts of the Aos.

In the missionary accounts as well as in the colonial records we find that the most inevitable question the Aos were asked was about headhunting. The queries on headhunting by the Christian outsiders produced a variety of responses from the Aos, which convinced the white men of the universal prevalence of the practice in the Naga Hills before the intervention of Christianity. In the discourses recorded, the Aos are projected as headhunters by themselves. Rev. Clark describes how an entire delegation of the Aos led by the head chief came to meet him when he was still in Assam:

\begin{quote}
One day an exceptionally large delegation called at the bungalow some of them I knew, but others had come for the first time. Among the faces was one that specially impressed me. He seemed to show intelligence and power above the ordinary, and I found that he was the head chief of this powerful village. Sturdy, upstanding and fearless, in the dignity of manhood he stood out from his followers.

"Sir, we are men from the town of thousand warriors. We
\end{quote}

came to request you to return with us in order to teach our
children the way of knowledge.\textsuperscript{26}

The Christian outsider acknowledges the native as a warrior with the
qualities of fearlessness and the dignity of manhood. Against the
image of the Aos as headcutters, Rev. Clark projects himself as
someone who offered the power of literacy. The warriors
acknowledged this power and persuaded Rev. Clark to come to the
village. The critique of headhunting legitimized the missionary
activity.

The Aos admitted their association with the practice of headhunting
but sometimes over emphasized and exaggerated it and they seemed to
enjoy the white man's reaction of disgust and fascination. This was
compounded by the ludic and seriousness. It was a weapon to terrify
the outsider in the context of unequal power. They seemed to enjoy the
discomfiture of the people who were curious about their way of life
and fearful of their practices. On the other hand, in the missionary
descriptions the two worlds are continuously contrasted: learning
against ignorance, the power of word against the art of headhunting,
civilization against barbarism. A look at one of the missionary account
tells us how his query on headhunting was confirmed by a virtual
demonstration. But the Aos are again projected as being attracted by
the power of the word and knowledge:

As each cold season came around hill men came in for
trade and sight seeing. Our press building with its
typesetting, printing and binding of books was for them

the wonder of wonders. Some of the great men dressed in their military costume, came one day to our school house door and manifesting much interest in what we were doing asked, 'wouldn't you like us to come up to your village and teach your children as you see these being taught?' A chief replied "yes and we will send our children to learn." But we hear you take heads up there". "Oh, yes we do", he replied and seizing a boy by the head gave us in quite a harmless way an object–lesson of how they did it.27

In emphasizing how the practice of headhunting was linked to power, the Aos declaration suggest that headhunting epitomized the construction of political power. Their projection as warriors and headhunters was one way in which they presented themselves as terror. At the same time through such declaration reciprocal relations were forged between the natives and the Christian outsiders. On another occasion when the Aos extended their invitation to Rev. Clark to come to their village he replied: "I pray that my skull should grin from my shoulder than my skull should grin in the front of a house! You know that you live in a headhunters paradise, and a white man's head would be such a special prize that mine would desert me in a short time". Hearing this the Aos promised the missionary protection, assuring him that no harm would come to him. The chief of the warriors replied to Rev. Clark:

In the great council of all the warriors, we considered carefully your fear, my young men reported to me, that on account of the many wars among the villages you fear that

27 Ibid.
your head might be taken in some raid by an enemy. 'Sir'.
He spoke with a dignity of power and assurance, we, the
men of thousand warriors guarantees to protect you.28

In all such descriptions missionary activities was legitimized by
representing it as non-coercive. The message is simple: Aos persuaded
the missionary to teach their children, the missionary proceeded
through the art of persuasion. The Aos are projected as the protector of
the missionary. However the story implies that along with wonder and
fascination there was acknowledgement of the power of the word and
knowledge by the Aos.

**Stereotype Images of the Aos:**
Other perceptual features of the Aos as wild, savage, uncivilized and
primitive and dirty may be glimpsed as categories that became part of
the missionary representation of the Aos. A.C. Bowers recorded the
reminiscences of Rev. Clark of his initial encounter with the Aos when
they had come down for trade:

> At this time there was a boys school being conducted for
the children and for any other who would come. One day I
was there examining the classes, some wild Nagas came to
the door. They were short, sturdy men, naked but for a
small apron, and to our eyes exceedingly dirty...as they
crowded the door their odor from their sweaty bodies and
the reek of their short-stemmed pipes which several
continued to smoke was anything but sweet.29

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid, page,197.
To the western eyes, the Aos were exceedingly dirty and repulsive. Their odor was foul, even their smoking pipes were ‘anything but sweet’. Even the spaces they inhabited violated the western sensibility of order and cleanliness. The squalid surroundings of the Ao houses seemed to be an evident enough for Mrs. Clark to categorize them as dirty. She wrote:

The houses were built long and narrow steep roofs, which project in front several feet beyond the outside walls, thus forming somewhat spacious verandah, where guests were entertained. Numerous pigs, dogs, and fowls enjoy the shade and much work is done there. The first room, answering to a front hall, extending cross wire, has an earth floor, and is furnished with a large wooden mortar for hulling rice. The pig trough is there, and here the domestic animals pass the night, although mr.cock and mrs hen usually perch further on in the family room. There is never a chimmney.\(^{30}\)

Mrs. Clark found that the most conspicuous thing about the house of the Naga was the upturned cooking pots, bound on the gable symbolizing hospitality. Within the Ao world the normal seemed to be upside down. It was as if the Aos had not acquired human sensibilities, they were yet to define their distance and difference from animals.

Another perceptual feature of the Aos in the missionary image was that the Aos were barbaric. In another entry in her book, *A corner in India*,

\(^{30}\) M.M. Clark, *A corner in India*, page, 43.
Mrs. Clark describes the evidences of barbarism and uncivilized according to the various images she saw in the bachelors' dormitory. She said:

Close by the village gate, and high up in the nearby tree, with or without the stockade, lookout houses were built, and occupied by sentinels. Within and near the gates were the 'barracks' for unmarried warriors, abounding in unmistakable evidences of an uncivilized and barbarous people. On the great central post were carved very good representations of men, elephants, lizards, snakes, and skulls, human and imitation found a place in the various decorations. The young warriors slept with spears close at hand. Extra spear shafts and large quantities of torch materials were kept in readiness.\(^\text{31}\)

The problem in this kind of projection is that what stood as a symbol of social, political and cultural significance for the Aos was read as evidence for barbarism. For the Aos the barracks or the place where unmarried warriors slept represented security and pride for the village.

According to the variations in their experiences and pre pondered tendencies of their temperaments, the Christian outsiders' beliefs were confirmed or assailed, their sensibilities enriched or bruised, their mind broaden or saddened. We also find a series of reactions ranging from appreciation, enthusiasm and delight. They were contemptuous of Ao savagery while they eulogized the Aos for their love for beauty and color and present them as exotic host to the missionary. Their

\(^\text{31}\) Ibid, page, 41.
sensibilities already molded to an extent by their own cultural traditions and discourses received further affirmation in an alien and exotic environment. The savage was also exotized in missionary imagination. Aos appear as embodiment of the quaint and the picturesque:

The bright cold season days are frequently enlivened too by hunting and fishing, but the great civil event is the dress parade, when the military march through the main village streets and on an open space at either end of the village go through their drill, dance and perform many feats of athletics. Dressed in the gayest colored clothes, caps or bear skins and bamboo splints decorated with feathers, quills, boar tusks, tufts, and tussles of bamboo shavings and monkey tails, their appearance for the occasion and glittering in the sun, the newly decorated war shields add much to the picturesque of the scene.32

The exotic is here the object visual delight. But the exotic here is also unmistakably savage and barbaric, unquestionably primitive. This kind of depiction shows the dilemma of the observer who wishes to see a pure and unalloyed ‘other’ as well was present the natives as exotic and colorful host.

Rev. Clark seemed to be particularly impressed by some of the virtues exhibited by the natives. Writing about the Aos he said, “These Nagas have a good name for truthfulness and for general purity of life”.33

32 Ibid, page, 55.
33 E. W. Clark’s letter to Dr. Warren, dated 5 December 1871, Molungyimsen Baptist Church Record, Nagaland.
Their nobility was evident in their honesty and simplicity. In spite of their primitiveness, the Aos in the eyes of the missionaries were not only hardworking but cheerful:

The Nagas, although a busy, hardworking people subject to privation, exposure and pestilence are not generally melancholy or morose, rather the reverse. Even their village sacrificial offerings are seasons of more or less merriment and at their springtime and after harvest feasts the blood of bulls and goats flow freely and the supply of rice beer is unlimited.34

Here the Christian outsider constructs another domain of the Aos beyond the confines of sordid, savage and barbaric village life and endows the native with character to be revered. While the Christian outsiders construct a new ethnographic portrait of the Aos and present them as cheerful, pure and simple coupled with physical stamina and strength, these might be the characteristics that, as Mary Louise Pratt says, “that the powerful commonly find in those they subjugated”.35

The portrayal of the Aos as wild, savage and barbaric legitimized the nature of the missionary representation. Ironically, no matter how much the white man was intrigued by the Aos way of life and even when he catalogued the traits such as purity, bravery vigor and expressed his admiration for the virtue and courage exhibited by the native, these representations reaffirmed the discourses of savagery and

34 M.M.Clark, A Corner in India, page, 29.
barbarism as Henry Balfour puts it “the dances and ceremonial ritual of this people are vastly intriguing to the ethnologist and lack nothing in the picturesqueness of their barbaric splendor”.\textsuperscript{36} This image is strengthened by another description:

> Amid these exhibitions of taste so degrading and repulsive, we observe with encouragement and delight the slightest evidence of some innate refinement. Men as well was women and children are often seen coming from the jungle from the days work with pretty flowers, or even with a twig of fresh green drawn from the orifice in the ear.\textsuperscript{37}

In the eyes of modernity the tribal always appear to belong to nature. The missionaries and the western travelers in the northeast continuously describe the tribal as living within wild nature, being close to nature.

We see stereo types being formed, problematic generalization being shaped in the investigations of phenomena alien to the observer. It is difficult to separate what may be regarded as reliable, realistic description and what was the product of stereotypes. What is significant is the attitude underlining their description, which reveals the representational structure within which the Christian outsiders approached the natives. Their attitude asserted an idea of western dominion over non western race which is in part consistent with the western attitude towards all the third world societies as argued by

\textsuperscript{36} Henry Balfour, Quoted in J.P. Mills, \textit{The Ao Nogas}, page,xxiv.

\textsuperscript{37} M.M.Clark, \textit{A Corner in India}, page,54.
Michael Palmica-Roth in “Cannibalism and the New Man of Latin America in the 15th and 16th Century Imagination”, “European notions of the new man as savage, the barbarian, the exotic and the unknowable other”.

Civilizational Dialogue:
The representation of the Aos as the savage, barbarian, primitive, and exotic leads into a broader spectrum of representational structure within which the Christian outsiders depict the non-Christian world.

If taken from the natives’ perspective, headhunting seemed to be inextricably part of the enactment of wildness by Ao men, which was central to their identity. In the colonial discourse, it is often claimed that the natives declared themselves as such. On the question being put to the Nagas whether they would like to become the subjects of the company, they replied, “No; we could not cut off heads of men and attain renown as warriors, bearing the honorable marks of our valor on our bodies and faces”. Colonial officials picked on this kind of assertion because it fitted in well with their own notions of wildness, barbaric and savage that came along with the practice of headhunting and raiding. To reject this colonial understanding is not to rule out the possibility that the Aos in different ways affirmed their identity as headhunters since the celebration of raids and headhunting are known in motifs such as songs, ballads and stories.


Both the evangelicals and the colonial administrators saw in the Aos as hopelessly decadent society in urgent need of reform which is evident from the way Henry Balfour represented the Nagas as:

My main point is that the Nagas, with their fine physique, intelligence and considerable personalities are worth preserving and are capable of improvement if a process of gradual successive changes could be adopted, and if they are allowed to absorb the ideas of higher culture in small doses, whose effects may be cumulative.\(^{40}\)

In a period marked by the gradual spread of proselytizing propaganda of the American Baptist missionaries, such portrayal assumed greater significance. When such portrayal was placed in the specific context of the Naga Hills the colonial rule benefited by the methods adopted by the missionaries in their ‘civilizing missions’.

The British officials and the missionaries remained resolutely Christian in their outlook, the embodiment of civilization. The Ao society they saw was primitive because the natives neither possessed the art of writing nor did they know about Jesus. The missionary was always the evangelizing Christian and he labored to save. The fierce proselytizing zeal of the missionary is very clear in their narratives. In the opening page of her book *A corner in India* Mary Mead Clark wrote:

Mine album is the savage breast,
Where darkness broods and tempests rests
Without any ray of light;

To write the name of Jesus there,
And to point to the worlds all bright and fair,
And see the savage bow in prayer,
Is my supreme delight. 41

This kind of dominant theme is in part consistent with the nature of the Christian outsiders' attitude towards the non-Christian world and headhunting societies in many parts of the world. Always marked by the proselytizing propaganda, even those evangelicals who were most likely to understand and sympathize with the natives remained always the evangelizing Christians laboring to save the heathen. Palmica-Roth gives an instance in Bartolome de Las Casas, the indefatigable champion of Indian rights who “even as he violently castigated his own country men for their cruelty and rapacity, remained resolutely Christian and Spanish in his outlook”. 42 He might have tried to prove other things, the rationality and hence the fundamental humanity of the American Indian, but concludes by classifying him as ‘barbarian’ because he neither possessed the art of writing nor recognized Jesus as the Messiah. For the Spanish priest, the barbarian is the non-literate and non-Christian.

Excerpt from the missionary sources as well as the colonial records suggests that the nature of contact between the Aos and the Christian outsiders was set within a running argument about conditions of human empowerment according to Christian and western terms. This is

41 Mary Mead Clark, *A Corner in India*.

evident from the narrative implications of the Christian mission, which always sought to save the non-Christian world. For instance A.C. Bowers said, “Christianity has never remained satisfied to permit the men of wild places of the earth who perished in their savagery”. 43

The question arises about what they saw and reported and what they wrote affected the aims and objectives of the Christian missionaries as well as the colonial officials in making social comments about the Aos. Almost everywhere they went they observed, took notes and commented on the nature of socio, cultural and religious conditions and particular incident which claimed their attention from time to time. While the coverage and the number of topics is impressive and informative, their narratives were always positioned from a particular point of view. “The earliest accounts seem often to include attitude towards the Nagas. On the other hand there is evident paternalistic attitude of superiority, coupled with condemnation of supposedly habits”. 44 According to Julian Jacob this was “an attitude built on fascination in the discovery of a society that seemed wholly opposite to that of Europe. Once safely defeated, the Nagas as exotic alter ego could prevail over the Nagas as stereotype”. 45

The colonial records and the ethnographic writings of that period viewed the people of the Naga Hills as ‘primitive and backward’. These characteristics according to Sanghamitra Mishra are located

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45 Ibid.
within the framework that allowed for a process of heirachization. She says, "The observation on tribal societal life thus conferred the tribes with a distinct identity, placing them in temporal, spatial and biological scale of forms in which the western man emerged as the perfect embodiment of mankind". Through a complex process of simultaneous representation by the Christian outsiders and self-representation by the Aos themselves, both the colonial state and the missionary effectively secured the necessary legitimacy of Christianity and the authority of the western mind over the natives.

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