CHAPTER 2

APPROPRIATING THE AO PAST IN
A CHRISTIAN PRESENT

This chapter seeks to understand the representation of traditional Ao religion by the Ao Christian themselves. It discusses how Ao Christian scholars appropriate their past and how they legitimize their traditional religion in the light of Christianity. The purpose is to understand Ao religion through the eyes of Ao Christians in which we do not see a complete rejection of the past belief. The idea is to demonstrate how the Ao Christian representation of Ao religion focus first on the themes that conform to Christian ideals then on the concepts missing in the ancient religion, a fact that necessitated the transition from Ao religion to Christianity.

The missionary script inscribed with local belief created a new idiom that expressed both the old and the new elements of the cultural consciousness of the Aos. Much of what is taken as Ao culture has been produced and reproduced through oral tradition, rituals and available artifacts. The immanent pattern of thought manifested in these narratives are to be understood as the attempts of the people to create a universe of significance in which they express their desires and seek refuge in order to give meaning and security to their condition.

The concepts and ideas of Ao religion were passed from generation to generation in the form of myths, legends and songs. These ideas and
concepts were recovered, codified and recounted by the Ao Christians after the intervention of Christianity. Studies made by these theologians and scholars allow us to understand how they attempt to grapple with their past and relate it to the present. My discussion of Ao Christian views on their traditional religion concentrates on the writing of the following Ao Christian scholars:  


Myths and Legends in Ao Religion:

By using oral sources in the task of constructing and relocating their traditional religion which represent their past, the Ao Christian scholars and theologians instead of romanticizing their past grounded on oral tradition, recognize a significant contextual factor that continues to impact on the way the Ao community live out their faith.

These Ao Christians acknowledge the implication of literacy within the oral tradition of the Aos. They argue that writing allows knowledge to be abstracted from an event and reflected upon. And in writing about Ao Christianity the Ao theologians also attempt to find ways in which the Christian message with its dependence on written text is made

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compatible with the Ao worldview. The Ao Christian theologians suggest that the oral value embedded in Ao religion can survive the introduction of reading and writing.

The Ao theologians tap into a rich reservoir of oral tradition sustained through family, clan and community memories. As they set out to uncover and record their meaningful past, they evoke the passion and commitment of their forefathers who were oral historians. In their writings the Ao theologians and scholars depict the relationship between oral tradition and Ao community not as one sided in either direction, but rather as a series of exchanges, a dialectic between information and interpretation across generations.

All the Ao theologians emphasize the importance of Ao myths and legends in relocating and interpreting Ao values, laws and philosophy. Panger Imchen a trained Christian theologian in Missiology tries to explain the essence of socio-cultural values of traditional Naga society and their possible application to the contemporary Naga Christian society argues: “Myths are symbolic features of social and religious reality of human existence. Interpretation of myths is more important than content and historicity. They are like windows into the thought process. Myths contain values, laws and explanation and philosophy of the people, they give insight into what people believe.”

“Folk songs and folk tales and even riddles and proverbs are in fact living history. They are evidence set in the present but relating to some important past event or events in the life of a caste or community. In the use of oral

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tradition, one proceeds from the known to the less known in the task of historical construction”

A. Wati Longchar, one of the Ao Christian theologians who has done extensive research on tribal religion stresses the importance of myths as theological source in studying tribal religion. “The myth is the ground of religion. It contains the religious truth of a particular community. Myth teaches us how the Supreme Being works and reveals his/her mysteries through creation, the place of the human and the animal kingdom in this universe, and their relationship, and so on.”

The ideas of these Ao scholars resonate with that of Marcea Eliade. For Eliade, myth is a true story, which is sacred and significant:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the beginnings ....myths tells how through the deeds of the Supernatural Beings a reality came into existence, be it, the whole of reality, the cosmos or only fragment of realities-an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of creation, it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only what really happened, which manifested itself completely.

3 Vijaya Ramaswamy, “Weaver Folk Tradition as a source of History”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.x1x, No.1, Page 47.


The life of the Aos before the intervention of Christianity was knitted with the threads of a series of ritual practices and myths that sustained and recreated the collective consciousness of the people safeguarding their morality. Ao myths as such do not reflect reality directly but through the prism of thought, which survived in the memory of the people.

**Understanding Ao Religion:**

How do the Ao Christian scholars make sense of their traditional religion? There is no particular name for Ao religion as it was not constricted only to their ritual life but it was the very basis of their existence. O.Alem writes: “The Ao Nagas do not have a proper word for religion...To them, religion means, living in spontaneous awareness of, an encounter with, acknowledgement of, and obedience to the active reality of the presence of God, ‘the wholly other’”  

According to Ao understanding, the concept of religion is understood as ‘Yimsu’. ‘Yim’ means village and its inhabitants and ‘su’ means shawl. So yimsu, means literally ‘village shawl’. This gives rise to the understanding that religion is something which covers the whole village and its inhabitants. This concept, according to the Literature Secretary of the Ao Baptist Church Conference C.Walu Walling,

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comes close to the Latin word for religion meaning to bind fast, that religion for the Aos is the binding factor of the community. 

Panger Imchen in explaining Ao religion takes both the material and political on the one hand and the cultural and the religious on the other as mutually imbricated dimensions of human existence: “It is true that the Ao religion is the guiding principle of the moral, ethical, cultural and social life of its people in terms of an individual’s immediate relation to society and a cohesive force for the whole community.”

Imchen further says that the traditional life of the Aos should not be identified with only aspect of emotional, spiritual or social life and Ao religion should be comprehended in terms of the role it plays in the socio-cultural system of the people.

**Tsungrem (God):**

One of the most significant principles of thought of the traditional Ao religion as presented by these scholars is the idea of ‘Supreme God’ be it animate or inanimate. The principle name for god in Ao religion is ‘Tsungrem’. We may probe into some of the interpretations of Tsungrem as given by the experts on Ao religion. Imtilepden a leading authority on traditional Ao religion says the term Tsungrem conjoins two words, ‘tsung’ which means feet and ‘rem’ which means arem ‘concealment’. Thus Tsungrem denotes ‘tetsungzung nung arem (concealment or disappearance within feet)

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The definition of Tsungrem as given by Rev. E.W. Clark is also important. He writes, “Tsungrem is a general deity, of which Nagas have many. The tsung in Tsungrem may be called to be tsung in mozing and Longkitsungba, the ‘rem’ is probably the stem of the ‘arem’ which means concealed, invisible. It recalls the name of Ram, one of the great Hindu deities”\(^{10}\) Again he points out ‘tsung’ in ‘zingi’ in mongsen dialect suggest an idea of divine, heavenly or supernatural as indicated in ‘tsungi’(thunderbolt) ‘tsungpet’ (lightning) ‘tsungmok’ (thunder) etc.\(^{11}\) However for the most Ao theologians Rev. Clark’s interpretation of ‘Tsungrem’ fall short of the precise meaning of Tsungrem.

The most accepted interpretation of Tsungrem is the one offered by a renowned Ao Christian theologian Rev. Takusangba as recorded by O. Alem in his book *Tsungremology: Ao Naga Christian Theology*. Rev. Takusangba explains ‘tsung’ in Tsungrem means ‘unger’(chief) or ‘tematiba’(supreme) and ‘rem’ is the common name for gods(lesser gods).\(^{12}\) O. Alem elaborates on the different explanations of Tsungrem:

Rev. Takusangba’s interpretation of Tsungrem seems to be derived from sociological and natural understanding. The Ao Society is highly organized and hierarchically ordered. This conceives the deity as a supreme or chief with Tsungrem heavenly ministers appointed over each department of his realm. On the other hand Clark’s interpretation of Tsungrem


\(^{11}\) Ibid, page,361.

seems to be based on monotheistic view of God. Whereas Imtilepden interpretation is from experimental point of view. Each in his own way gives us certain truth about.\textsuperscript{13}

If we consider all the interpretations of Tsungrem together we find that each gives certain clues about Tsungrem (Supreme God). Based on this understanding one may come to the conclusion that for the Aos "Tsungrem literally means concealed chief which is to say that the Ao concept of God introduces a Supreme God who is transcendent, one who cannot be seen with man’s naked eyes. As chief, Tsungrem is the owner of the whole universe by whose power everything exists".\textsuperscript{14}

Hence Tsungrem for the Aos is a hermeneutical language and this explains their attempt to interpret Tsungrem in a language of their own. "Tsugrem conveys the purest expression of the Ao religious thinking and their religious experience".\textsuperscript{15} O.Alem further contends, “The Aos use of the word Tsungrem as the highest possible name they could think of giving to the one who is ‘wholly other’...It was the Aos earliest attempt to give a systematic theological formulation of the existence of the divine”\textsuperscript{16}

Panger Imchen sums up the significance of Tsungrem in Ao religion as follows: “For the Aos, God is always personal, working actively in the nature of the universe. This mysterious and overpowering, Tsungrem, \textsuperscript{13} Ibid, page, 27. 
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, pages,27-28. 
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, page,28. 
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, page, 29.
God, is fascinating and not reducible to any other power. Before Tsungrem, an Ao stands in fear and reverence and yet turns to him for protection, security, well being and blessing”.

Attributes of God in Ao Religion:
While explaining the concepts embedded in the different names attributed to God in Ao religion, the Ao Christians seeks to establish a genuine range of dynamism between Christianity and Ao religion and simultaneously they argue against the early Christian outsiders’ observation on Ao religion.

The Aos attributed several names to Tsungrem. The Ao scholars explain the functional names of God or Tsungrem with a purpose to show how Tsungrem actually reveals to the people His character and His dealings with mankind. In looking at the different names of God in Ao religion, Ao Christians persistently return to the Christian categories of God and find them in the Ao concept of God.

Lijaba:
In order to gain some idea of the meaning of this name of Tsungrem the Ao scholars try to examine its origin and note how generally it is expressed in Ao worldview. Lijaba is one of the functional names of God emphasizing his mundane nature who is believed to be the creator of the earth. “The word Lijaba is derived from the concept of world maker. He is recognized as supreme ruler of the earth, or the word may mean earth walker, the deity that appears on earth and walks as human.

The derivative meaning of Lijaba may be taken as Li-alima,(the earth) and jaba-jajaba,(the walker) or jijiba-the real one”.

There are several Ao myths, which identifies Lijaba’s pivotal place in Ao religion. It is said that Lijaba at first worked steadily to make the plains of Assam smooth and leveled. But as Lijaba started to mould the Naga Hills the sea beetle came from nowhere and warned him saying “enemies, enemies! Hurry! Hurry! Enemies are approaching to destroy the earth”. The story goes on to say that Lijaba molded the Naga Hills in haste leaving it rough, uneven and hilly. Leaving it unfinished, Lijaba went to fight the enemy. The Myth draws a crucial contrast between the Assam plains and the Naga Hills and also suggests that outsiders have been enemies of the Aos, and this fear of the outsiders has been critical in shaping Ao lives.

The presence of evil in the act of creation, is of course a recurring theme in tribal myths. Consider one Australian aborigine’s myth, which implies the essence of evil in the act of creation:

In the beginning the world was in utter darkness with no vegetation waiting for the soft touch of life and light of the sun goddess Yhi who was sleeping. The Great Spirit Baiame stirred Yhi from her sleep and she floated down to the earth and the earth leaped in ecstasy when her feet rested on the ground. Yhi’s tracks crossed and recrossed until the whole earth was clothed with vegetation. “The works of creation is well begun”, Baiame said, “but it has only begun. The world is full of beauty, but it needs dancing life to fulfill its destiny.

Take your light into the cavern of earth and see what will happen... Yhi rose and made her way into the gloomy spaces beneath the surface. Harsh shadows lurked behind the light. Evil spirits shouted, "no, no, no" until the cavern vibrated with voices that boomed and echoed in the darkness. "Sleep, sleep, sleep" the evil spirits wailed, but the shapes had been waiting for the caressing warmth of the sun goddess. Flimsy wings opened, body raised themselves on long legs, and metallic colors began to glow. Soon Yhi was surrounded by myriads of insects, creeping, flying, swarming from dark corner. She retreated slowly. They followed her into the world, into the sunshine, into the embrace of the waiting grass and leaves and flowers. The evil chanting died away and was lost in confusion of vain echoes and Yhi proceeded to finish the act of creation. 19

The notion of evil is quite significant in the Ao myth as well as that of other tribal myths and Australian myths. We find the evil spirit trying to disrupt Yhi's act of creation but with the Great Spirit Baiame on her side, she could overcome the evil spirit. In the Ao myth, in his act of creation, Lijaba is disturbed by the evil force, which he had to combat. From these two myths one can discern again the tussle between the good and the evil, between chaos and order. Ultimately good triumphs over evil, but evil leaves its mark.

The Ao Naga concept of God and ecology and their understanding of the Supreme Being and His relationship to human being and creation are interwoven in another Ao myth about Lijaba:

Lijaba came disguised as an old man, almost naked, having sore all over his body. He went from door to door requesting for shelter but everyone gave their own excuses saying, “Behold we are observing anempong, (genna) because a child is born to us and so we cannot have you here. Again another person said, “We have genna because of the delivery of a calf by our cow today and we cannot allow you to be our guest”. None welcomed him. At the end of the village, there were two orphan sisters living in a small hut... At first they thought of refusing him because of their poverty.... They said, “We do not have enough food to entertain you, grandfather”. “I am carrying enough food for three of us”. The two sisters invited him to their little hut. The old man asked them to set the pot in fire. He took a grain of rice from his head and put it into the pot. To their great amazement, it turned into a pot full of rice. In the same way, he peeled a small piece of skin from his knee and cooked it in another pot. It also turned into a pot full of meat. Three of them had a delicious meal that night. The following morning, the old man casually looked towards the village fields and asked the two sisters to identify the owners of the fields. They named the owners of each field except theirs because their field was so small that they felt ashamed to disclose it to others. But the younger sister disclosed it while the elder sister went to get a comb that had fallen. However her embarrassment was turned into great blessing. The old man cursed all the fields that belonged to the
villagers and blessed the field of the two orphan girls. He said, "Let there be a good harvest". The old man instructed them to cut the string or rope of their basket when they had enough harvest. Having blessed them Lijaba disappeared out of their sight. The two girls kept the old man’s word in their heart. The harvest time came. The field belonging to the two girls had a good harvest where as the others had not. Yarla and Atsula had such rich abundant harvest that they had no place to store their grains. Then, as instructed by the old man, they cut their basket strings and to their surprise the harvest was completed. When the villagers came to know what had happened to their harvest, they realized that the old man who visited them was none other than Lijaba.20

From this myth Wati Longchar discerns some theological meanings in the Ao understanding of the Supreme Being and the mundane nature of God. Lijaba is presented as an old man in the myth and ‘old’ according to Longchar implies qualities like wisdom and patience in Ao world view. Another nature of Lijaba as described by Longchar is that Lijaba is understood as someone who takes care of the needs of mankind. "That is how the Aos understand the Supreme Being. The Aos do not see the Supreme Being as directing the process of cosmos and an unmovable mover, who is absolute up there in heaven. But he comes, dines and stays with us providing and attending to all our needs"21


It is most appropriate to say that Lijaba according to the Ao world view is the general name for God concerned with the creation and preservation of the world, which is His works. He is the God of revelation in the expression of Himself in his essential attributes. “The myth about Lijaba may be interpreted as the hermeneutical language that attempts to express man’s experience of the supernatural power that controls the earth”.22 The use of this name Lijaba in Ao religion plainly reveals the relationship which God sustains towards His creatures and what he expects of them.

Rev. Takatemjen, a trained Christian theologian and principal of the Clark Theological college in Nagaland, emphasizes that the gospel can be more meaningful and relevant to the Ao way of life if the Christological passages of the gospel is read in the light of Lijaba’s story. He argues that in Lijaba’s story the Aos discover that the liberation of the poor was a theme of great significance for the Nagas of the distant past. “The story of Lijaba was an attempt to address the issue of the outcasts and to provide an answer for the same. The listeners to the story understand the nature of Lijaba and what he wills for the society. The idea of sharing and feeding the outcasts appears in the story as intrinsic to the concept of liberation”.23 From the story of Lijaba visiting his people, the Aos developed a theology of humility and humanity, concern and acceptance of the poor and unwanted.

22 O.Alem, page, 57.
23 Takatemjen, Studies on Theology and Naga Culture, ISPCK, Delhi, 1998, page, 66.
Panger Imchen draws two important theological significance from the story of Lijaba, both these are in consonance with the Christian idea of incarnation of God in the form of man. He contends, “The Lijaba’s visit to earth corresponds in some degree with the incarnate Christ and His surpassing act or revelation of truth”. Therefore when the missionaries said God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and God has come into this world, the Aos were not surprised. The Ao Christians argue that the initial acceptance of Christian faith was due to the traditional Ao belief in Lijaba coming to visit the people. Aos welcomed the strange looking missionaries who came with the new religion because of their belief that God comes to visit mankind as a stranger.

Imchen further says in both Ao religion and the Christian idea of incarnation of God, there is a promise of a better future in accepting the incarnate God. “In Christianity, it is a fact that those who accept Christ receive eternal life while in ancient Ao faith it is evident that those who accept the incarnate Lijaba were blessed with plentiful harvest and wealth”. 

**Lungkitsungba:**

The term ‘Lungkitsungba’ is investigated by the Ao theologians to further understand God’s nature. “The root word ‘lungki’ means the ‘house of stone’ and ‘tsung’ means ‘Supreme’ or ‘chief’, thus Lungkitsungba would literally mean tsung who lives in the stone

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25 Ibid.
Alem contends that the term ‘stone’ has religious connotation for the Aos in their worldview. “It represents the qualities of stability, firmness, strength, prominence, wisdom and richness. Hence it is used to describe God’s nature”.27 Since Lungkitsungba is believed to live in the heaven above, he is also called Anungtsungba. ‘Anung’ means sky. Thus Anungtsungba is the ‘tsung’ or chief who lives in the sky. The word ‘anung’ (sky) expresses the idea of God’s infiniteness, changelessness, omnipresence and everlastingness. “The transcendent and all pervading nature of God is expressed through the term Anungtsungba. Just as the sky, covering the whole world, symbolizes mystery and everlastingness, so does God”.28 This is just how the Aos conceived of the eternal nature of God in terms of symbols, analogy and comparison.

During the initial contact with the Aos, when the missionaries saw the Aos addressing God as Lungkitusung or the lord of the sky, they had the impression that the Aos worshipped the sun and the moon. Mary Mead Clark wrote “The sun and the moon are regarded as deities and are occasionally worshipped”.29 The Ao Christians argue against such observation and they seek to explain the symbolic values of the sun and moon in Ao religion. O.Alem contends that the sun and the moon have deep religious meanings because they are symbolic representations of God. His argument is that when the Aos address the sun and moon as God himself, they do not objectify God. “To them

26 Ibid, page, 46.
27 Ibid.
29 Mary Mead Clark, A Corner in India, American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1907, page, 5.
the sun and the moon describe the mysterious nature and quality of God and His relationship with man and nature. Thus God is the all seeing, life giver, protector, dispeller of fear, sustainer of all things, and regulator of life, faithful and good".30 In the interpretation of Ao Christian theologians every Ao symbol, every Ao reference to the divine and supernatural is made compatible with Christianity. Christian meaning is read into all expression of ancient belief.

Modern African theologian John Mbiti offers a religious insight taking the case of the African religion and suggests that the notion of sun was considered to be the manifestation of God himself. In Africa for the people like Aken, Ankore, Igberia, sunshine is one of the expressions of God’s providence. “The Illa, the Baluba and others liken God’s eternal nature to the apparent endurance of the sun, calling Him, ‘He is of the suns’, or ‘He is of the many suns’. God’s eternity is compared to the sun. He endures, and His eternal nature makes Him impervious to change and limitation.”31

Thus according to the Ao theologians, the name Lungkitsungba accords with the characters of God in Ao religion as a Supreme God, who is faithful, and bestows blessings upon His creation. He is looked upon as the almighty who protects and saves Man. The attribute of God as the Supreme chief according to O.Alem is a term easy to grasp than any other attribute. As Lungkitsungba, God is introduced to the Aos as the almighty, all bountiful in the fullness and fruitfulness and assumes

30 O.Alem, Tsungremology, page,39.
a loving character towards all His creation, which is not different from the Christian concept of God.

It is doubtful whether the Aos or the Africans considered sun to be God. At best they both associate God with many natural objects and phenomenon indicating their belief that God is involved in creation. But Ao Christians’ interpretation both reflected and helped the fusion of different conceptual worlds.

**Meyutsung:**

In Ao religion Tsungrem as Meyutsung has still further significance for the people in that it reveals Tsungrem as a God of moral and spiritual attributes. “The name Meyutsung comes from the word ‘meyu’ which means thousands. It is commonly referred to a countless number. The suffix Tsung means chief or supreme. He is the judge of all human beings after their death. His judgement is perfect and final”. The notion that every one will be judged in the court of Meyutsung is told in a popular Ao myth:

At the court of Meyutsung every person will be judged. Every man will throw his spear which should thrust into a tree called tsunchidong (tree of truth) while every woman throws her weaving batten. If it hits tsunchidong they will go through the fireplace of Meyutsungba’s kitchen as a symbol of truthfulness. But those who missed the tree will go another way of Meyutsungba’s house and will roam endlessly in a muddy place full of thistles and thorns.

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33 Walling, *Sacrifice and Salvation*, page 27.
From this myth the Ao christains identify the values of moral and spiritual uprightness in Ao religion. For instance ‘tsunchidong’ is said to be a symbolic tree that stands for truthfulness and righteousness. “He (Meyutsung) judges everyone according to his deeds on earth. He is the silent spectator of man’s activities and judges accordingly…Meyutsung is God of righteousness and so he demands a just life, purity, high moral and ethical standards and humility”.

Based on this philosophy, in the ancient days the Aos are said to be virtuous and truthful.

The story of Meyutsung’s judgement is cited by the Ao Christians to argue against the assumptions made by the Christian outsiders of the Ao religion was devoid of any ethical values. J.P Mills wrote: “The religion of the Aos is not a moral code. It is a system of ceremonies”.

Panger Imchen suggests that the notion of God as Meyutsung is a clear expression of the Aos ethical and moral aspects of life. “Meyutsung is God of righteousness and he demands a just life, purity, high moral and ethical standards, honesty and humility, thus an Ao traditionally is known to be honest and faithful”.

The Aos believed that everyone is accountable in the court of Meyutsung. Often the elders extorted the younger generations: “Be honest in all that you do because no one can escape the court of Meyutsung.” Meyutsung is invoked in all the disputes because he is

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37 Ibid.
known as the God of justice. Since the belief in God as Meyutsung teaches the seriousness and consequences of the failure to recognize the authority of Meyutsung, writes O.Alem, "The Ao understanding of moral life is not passive but active".  

In the readings of Ao Christian theologians, the notion of Meyutsung judgement in Ao religion is substantially identical with the Christian concept of God's judgement. The ancient Aos believed that those who did not live a righteous life would be banished by Meyutsung to a place full of thistles and thorns, where as the righteous will go to Tipu Yim. Tipu Yim, according to O. Alem, is a celestial city of bliss and tranquility incomparable to any place on earth. This theme, O.Alem feels, is not very different from the Christian belief that for everyone whose name is not found in the book of life is to be cast into fire as mentioned in the Bible:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened. Another book was opened which was the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they have done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and the death and hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If any one's name was not written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

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38 O.Alem, page,73.
Since the Aos already had an idea about God’s judgement, it was not strange for the Aos to hear of heaven and hell from the Christian missionaries. “Rather”, as O.Alem says, “it was a confirmation of their concept and belief of their age long traditional belief and value system when the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached”.40

For the Ao Christian theologians it is most appropriate that when Tsungrem is addressed as Meyutsung by the Aos He is seen as God of justice. “One of the important aspects of Meyutsung is the idea of God as the ‘perfect one’ before whom every individual shall give account of their deeds. Meyutsung conveys the nature of God as the God of justice. He demands justice from all men and he respects those who practice justice. He rewards those who live an honest life butpunishes the dishonest. Since He has made each person He counts all as of equal value before Him (God). God is believed to be the ultimate revealer of truth and falsehood. He is the guardian of truth”.41

The Ao Christian scholars do not only identify the themes and concepts of Ao religion that are similar to Christian doctrine. They also point to some Christian concept, which are lacking in Ao religion. And it is this lack in Ao religion that made the people accept Christian faith to fill the void. The Ao christian scholars admit that the notion of forgiveness was absent in Ao religion. It was based on the concept of blessing for righteousness and punishment of the wicked, providing no scope for the assurance of salvation for man on earth:

40 Panger Imchen,Page69.
41 O.Alem,page,74.
It is therefore true that when the gospel of Christ was brought to the Aos with the simple message, Jesus died for your sin or you have been redeemed from your sin, they found in the new religion an alternative that was theologically satisfying as well as economically less expensive because it was a free gift. The ancient Ao religion was devoid of the notion of forgiveness and redemption by a third person, which is the most essential part of the gospel. This is one reason why Christianity had easy access to the old religious system of the Ao Nagas.  

The argument was simple: In Christianity Aos would find all the ideals they valued as well as those they lacked. But this new ideals were acceptable because they were compatible with and not opposed to the ancient religion of the Aos.

The Aos in the Ancient days attributed different names to Tsungrem for which God would reveal himself in some aspect of His character and dealings with mankind. The narratives of Lijaba is concerned with the general account of the entire creation and it is appropriate that by this name God should reveal himself bringing cosmos out of chaos. Here the term Lungkitsungba implies a covenant relationship and assumes a love toward all creation. It is as Meyutsung that God places man under moral obligations with a warning of punishment for disobedience and makes a definite claim upon man’s obedience and service.

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These narratives of God in Ao religion reveal how the appropriation of tradition by the Ao Christians claims an affinity to Christian faith. The missionaries did not confront a faith totally opposed to theirs, or so the Ao Christians argue. The ancient Ao religion according to Panger Imchen “was actually monotheism like Christianity. The names are given at different occasions according to different activities”.43 Dr. Renthy Keitzar, a renowned Ao theologian also observed that the tribal belief in a high God, who is both personal and creator, and its similarity to Biblical thinking, makes it easy for them to accept the Christian idea of God. The point of contention that can be drawn from this view is that since the Aos had a definite concept of a Supreme Being it was not very difficult for the missionaries to present the gospel and Christian idea of God to the Aos. And this Supreme Being was depicted in Ao Christian texts as no different from the Christian God.

**Concept of Divinity in Ao Religion:**

In Ao religion divinity is understood as the objectification or manifestations of Tsungrem (God) through natural phenomenon and objects:

By giving names to these manifestations (“God of such and such manifestation or act”) the Aos specified particular and concrete acts of Tsungrem in ordering the total life of the whole universe and human beings. Any object or natural phenomenon, which was supposed to reveal something supernatural, was considered to be the act of Tsungrem

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irrespective of its usefulness to the community or to the individual.\textsuperscript{44}

Here O.Alem clarifies that this is not to be interpreted as personification of nature. The Aos did not worship nature or natural objects but they worshipped the supernatural power that revealed itself in these. But this again is a Christian reading that seeks to eliminate the difference between Ao and Christian religion.

Panger Imchen further explains the concept of divinity in Ao religion:

As the Aos do not distinguish between religious and secular, the earth is filled with god and other lesser spirits and deities. Deities on earth are regarded as subordinate to Lichaba, and, their respective domains are prescribed by Lichaba. Among them, Lichaba’s confidants are kini tsungrem, house deity, tekong tsungrem, mountain deity, tzuba tsungrem, well deity and along tsungrem, stone deity; as well as other uncountable deities.\textsuperscript{45}

The deities here are all part of everyday life on earth. The Aos performed ceremonies and offered offerings to these deities, as they were believed to have positive influences on man when they are properly propitiated. But if they are not acknowledged they have the power to bring disaster to man. In the Christian representations all local deities were expressions of one Supreme God. In all these worships, it was said, the Aos acknowledged and recognized the power

\textsuperscript{44} O.Alem, \textit{Tsungremology}, page,79.
\textsuperscript{45} Imchen, \textit{Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture}, page,36.
and presence of the Supreme God, the owner of the land. Whenever a field is cultivated they offer invocational prayer for God’s protection, blessings and good harvest. They acknowledged Him as the owner of the land but this does not imply that God is confined to that particular place or field. It simply shows that divinities are but objectification or the manifestation of God who is known to the Aos in descriptive names:

In all these ‘localized worships’ and the names given accordingly we see how the progenitors of the Aos attempted to interpret God who is omnipresent and omniscient, in a language understandable to the people of their own time. These divinities are not different lesser gods but they are manifestations of the Supreme God. The objectified names are nothing but the interpretation of God’s revelation to man.46

The Ao Christian writers conclude that the Ao concept of divinities is one of the many ways to systematize the conception of God and his relationship with human beings as they live in spontaneous awareness of God’s presence acknowledging his ownership an all things and activities.

Concept of Spirits in Ao Religion:
The belief in the existence of impersonal supernatural beings called ‘tanula’ (spirits) occupies an important place in Ao cosmology. The Aos believed in the existence of two kinds of spirits - malevolent spirits who are responsible for causing sickness, sudden death etc and

46 O.Alem, Tsungremology, page,86.
benevolent spirits who help men in various ways. The Aos do not worship the spirits but they are propitiated as and when necessary. Offerings have to be made to appease them.

The Aos belief in the existence of a Supreme god and in spirits is similar to that of the African cosmology. Robin Horton in his essay On the Rationality of Conversion explains the basic African cosmology, which has two-tier structure. The first tier being that of the lesser spirits and the second that of the Supreme Being:

The lesser spirits underpin events and processes in the microcosm of the local community and its environment, the Supreme Being underpins events in the macrocosm i.e. in the world as a whole. As the microcosm forms part of the macrocosm, so the lesser spirits are thought of either manifestation of the Supreme Being, or as entities ultimately driving their power from him.47

Horton explains that as long as the way of a life of a society is dominated by subsistence farming and commerce is poorly developed, the social relations of the people of a particular community is largely confined to the boundaries of their microcosm. In this kind of situation a great deal of attention is paid to the lesser spirits while very little attention is paid to the Supreme Being.

In applying Horton’s theory of lesser spirits and Supreme God in Ao religion, there is a point of similarity as well as a point of deviation. On

the one hand in both African and Ao cosmologies, the lesser spirits were thought of either as manifestation of the Supreme Being or as entities ultimately deriving their power from him. On the other hand unlike the African cosmology greater attention is given to the Supreme Being than to the lesser spirits in Ao cosmology. Though the Aos acknowledged the existence of spirits, they felt that the ultimate answer to man’s need is the Supreme God alone.

One of the major confusions in Ao cosmology is the relationship between the concept of divinity and spirits. O. Alem makes a clear distinction between the two:

- Spirits belong to a separate category in themselves within God’s manifestations. Spirits in general are considered malevolent, while divinities are generally benevolent. While the manifestations of spirits produce ‘fear’ the manifestations of divinities produce ‘awe’ in man...Unlike in the case of spirits where both man and the spirits try to manipulate each other, in the case of the divinities the worshippers surrender themselves before them.  

Another misleading representation of the Ancient Ao religion is of spirit worship. This misleading term is due to the misunderstanding of the Ao usage of the word Tsungrem as spirit. In Ao religion, spirit can be one of the natures of God but spirits are not God. As mentioned earlier, the Aos did not worship spirits but they were propitiated. The Aos took for granted the existence of spirits.

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The fourth chapter of the gospel of John (4:24) reads, “God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in truth and spirit”.\textsuperscript{49} This expression, according to Christian Ao texts, fits precisely with the pattern of the notion of God and Spirit in Ao religion. God as spirit is interpreted as an aspect of God’s nature, which cannot be seen but his presence felt in every aspect of life. When Imchen brings out the theological significance of spirit in Ao religion he again tells us how Aos like him saw the compatibility between Ao religion and Christianity:

When the missionaries taught that it was the Holy Spirit that blesses and protects man, it was not difficult for an Ao convert to recognize such a good spirit in terms of their ancient tradition. They already had a concept of a bad spirit responsible for all ill fortune, and the good spirit.\textsuperscript{50}

\textbf{God and Man: Their Original State and Separation:}

There are several Ao myths which talks about the original state of man and God before they were separated. According to one Ao myth, man, tiger and god lived happily together talking the same language. But three of them separated over differences in diet. The tiger preferred raw meat and man preferred cooked meat and god had a taste for roasted meat of the tender portion. This conflict led to their separation. Man chose to live in light, tiger chose to live in darkness and god chose both darkness and light. God fixed a piece of cotton on the eyeballs of man so that he cannot see him. He asked man to worship him and offer live animals brought in a basket so that he will bless him in return.

\textsuperscript{50} Imchen, \textit{Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture}, page, 39.
With a slight variation, there is another Ao myth which tells us about the separation of God and man. The myth says that God, man and tiger lived together with their mother. There was conflict among them after their mother died. The tiger wanted to eat the dead body of their mother but he was not allowed to do so. The tiger decided to live in the forest. Man chose to live in the house. God decided to live both in the house and in the forest.

What theological insights of the Ao worldview do these myths reveal? The Ao Christian scholars compare the ideas with the Christian idea of 'the fall'. "The tiger represents all creatures except man. Man represents humanity and God represents the Supreme Being. The difference in diet would mean difference in their interest and purpose."51 God fixing the cotton balls in man’s eyes is understood as man losing the original fellowship with God and his knowledge about God:

The Ao myth about the original state of man and the separation suggests that their concept of God is not confined to cause and effect, neither a projection of man nor a result of man’s quest. In Ao traditional religion the question of God’s existence was never raised. They took for granted that God exists, and man was at the mercy of God. The myth also introduces the origin of worship. Worship is willed by God. This talk about the importance of man’s need for support and

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51 O. Alem, Tsungremology, page, 40.
refuge on the one hand and promise of comfort and favor from God on the other.\textsuperscript{52}

The details of the myth fit in well with Wati Longchar’s Interpretation. He explains the myth in terms of chaos between God, human and animals. Since they did not enjoy perfect bliss man’s original life has been interrupted:

The human being here represents humanity of both man and woman. The tiger represents creatures, and God (or spirit) represents the creator, the sustainer and the cosmic power. They all had a mother and that mother represents the land, the nourisher of all living beings and the symbol of unity of life including the Supreme Being. The loss of their mother signifies chaos and separation.\textsuperscript{53}

In their reading of the myth again we see Christian Aos attempting to read Biblical themes into Ao oral tradition and show the similarities between the two traditions.

**Sacrifice in Ao Religion:**

The Ao Christians look at the notion of sacrifice in Ao religion as distinctive, a notion through which the Aos displayed their religiosity and religious commitment. Panger Imchen wrote, “Ceremonies, rites and sacrifices are the carriers of tradition and medium of religious expression. Ceremonies make individual conscious of themselves as a group affirming their belief in common symbols. Rituals maintain

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, pages 40-41.

cohesion protecting their identity as a community."\(^5^4\) So the tradition and the past was embodied in ceremonies. To reject a ceremony would be to disown tradition.

How then were the Ao Christians to view rituals of sacrifice? C. Walu Walling explains the notion of sacrifice in Ao religion as the means of communication between the Aos and the divine world.\(^5^5\) He is of the opinion that the Ao religious ceremonies are incomplete without sacrifice which is an essential act of worship. He further suggests the sacrifices that the Aos offer to God during different agricultural seasons are critical for understanding the Ao approach to sacrifice, which also explains the tribal understanding of the relationship between man and God who is regarded as the owner and sustainer of the earth.

The Aos believe that the practice of sacrifice and worship originated at Chungliyimti, the first Ao village. According to a story:

> When the Ao community of Chungliyimti gathered themselves to ask Tsungrem(God) what they should do, they were instructed to offer a sacrifice first....This command was communicated through Ongangla, a prophetess who was the first person to have acted as a mediator between Tsungrem and human. Offering a pig thus started the first act of sacrifice and in return the community was believed to have received blessings and security from Tsungrem.\(^5^6\)

\(^{5^4}\) Panger Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, page,10.

\(^{5^5}\) Walling, *Sacrifice and Salvation*, page,49.

\(^{5^6}\) Ibid,page,47-48.
Walling underlines some theological meaning from the myth. He says, sacrifice in ancient Ao religious system is to be understood as a free will offering or as a gift that was given to Tsungrem. Walling highlights the religious, political and social significance in Ao sacrifice by explaining the meaning of the song sung by the Aos at Chungliyimti:

O Chungliyimti kong nung
Mungdang ayimer,
Ar salang bang nung;
Nutsung temang sendenang ta,
Nutsung temang sendena yur,
Tsungrem kumer Ongangla dand jagi;
Amto-amsu wali,
Tsuzen tzubu kulemang ta,
Tsuzen tsubu kulemteta yur,
Orong saku agi,
Yimrong sosang tuden-angta.

[In the Hill of Chungliyimti
Announcing all to gather
In the village court;
Assembled everybody,
Having assembled together
They went to God woman Ongangla
For thumin and umin,
To worship at the village well.
Having worshipped there,
By the orong villager skull,
Offer a sacrifice at village sacred place.]$^{57}$

According to Walling the eight line of the song (to worship at the village well) implies the importance of sacrifice in Ao world view. The song suggests that the first sacrifice was offered to Tsungrem in front of the village well which is regarded as sacred. “To offer a sacrifice to Tsungrem at the Tsuzen tzubu as the first act of sacrifice is to be understood in the light of the health and prosperity of the community”.$^{58}$ A good water source is said to have been the foremost consideration for selecting a site for a new village, as water is one of the important sources of life. O.Alem says that the myth about the origin of sacrifice and worship suggests the renewal of one’s relationship with God and secondly it was an act of invoking God’s blessings for the well being of the whole village. Again we return to themes that resonate with Christian ideas. The intense hostility of the early missionaries to sacrifice as a heathen practice disappears in Ao Christian texts.

**Tsungremong:**
Tsungremong is celebrated by the Aos in honor of Tsugrem in all its manifestations. The Tsungremong celebration is an act that seeks to renew the covenant between man and the Supreme God, (Tsungrem). Tsungremong is celebrated in the first week of August. Strict

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$^{57}$ Walling, *Sacrifice and Salvation*, page46-47.

$^{58}$ Ibid, page47.
procedures are to be followed since the Aos believed that any careless observance or lapse in the celebration would bring disaster.

During the period of Tsungremong celebration every household stays under strict anempong (genna). No guest or visitors are entertained. On the first day the village priest kills the pig ceremonially which is offered by each khel in the village. The priest moves the spike from head to the tail six times saying:

Tsukrenpenren agi anok moajang
Shilumanemtsu tarudaktsu
Alu nung tento kokuka rodakjang

[May you bless us with plenteous harvest
Let there be no sickness
May there be such a harvest even to the
Point of breaking the main post of the granary.]\(^{59}\)

After saying this prayer the priest distributes the meat to every household. The following evening every household fixes tsungpet leaves (a kind of shrub with a strong odor) on the lintel of the main door of the house. Tsungpet is used as a sign of genna and act of sanctification to God. The Aos believed that Lijaba comes to the village on that evening and visits each and every house. If any house is found without tsugpet Lijaba sends sickness and misfortune to that household. All the members of the house observe the rituals with awe and reverence till the next morning. The following day every family

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cooks the meat distributed the previous day and all the members eat together saying:

Tetzu tebu nungi nai moaja aruba  
Onok chia jemdi  
Shilumanemtsu tarudaktsu ne  
Asu-ama tarudaktsu  
Nai onok moajang.

[That which you have been blessing us  
Since forefathers, we are feasting together,  
Let no sickness come to us,  
Let no death visit us,  
May you bless us].^{60}

The Christian experts of Ao religion compare this to the ritual to the Jewish Passover feast and Lord’s Supper. In the observance of Tsungremong they discover again the Ao belief in the Supreme God: “There is a sense of immediate awareness of the presence of God. The community meal is an expression of oneness before one God, who is worthy of all praise and honor”.^{61} In the celebration of Tsungremong a sense of collective allegiance, obedience, consecration and awareness of God’s presence is revealed. The fixing of tsungpet leaves is seen as a symbol of their identity and an outward sign of consecration. The Ao belief in the notion of Lijaba bringing disasters to the household without tsungpet represents the Ao concept of God as not only the God

^{60} Ibid  
^{61} Ibid, page,52.
who blesses and protects man but also as the God of justice. For the Aos God punishes those who dishonor him.

Mithun Sacrifice (Su Achiba):
Another important ceremony which is reinterpreted by Ao christians is the Mithun Sacrifice. Mithun Sacrifice or Su Achiba is supposed to be a festival attributed to the supreme God to acknowledge God’s blessing and rededicate Ao lives through the mithun sacrifice. During the period of mithun sacrifice which lasts for nearly two years the family observes strict genna and every step of sacrifice is marked by rituals, offerings, sacrifices and acts of purification. The Aos believed that Su Achiba is a sacred act since Su or mithun is offered as substitute for life. If there is any breach in upholding the religious restrictions and personal purity, blessings will be denied.

Besides the religious dimensions mithun sacrifice has social significance. An Ao who could afford to perform Su Achiba was given a number of social honors such as the right of wearing particular attires, decorating the house in a special way, and the narokum or song of achievement is sung for him. These privileges and honor ascribed the highest status for a man in the society in pre-colonial days. Another important dimension of mithun sacrifice is that the ancient Aos believed that wealth is not acquired, it is not only for individuals alone but it was God’s blessing to be shared with the community. The opening lines of the ceremonial oath of Su Achiba implies the notion of sharing God’s blessing with the community:

Imer nem chia jemdaktsudi,
Ya asen kiya nem moatsuba masu,
Pei nibur anisungzukts moatsur.

[What has been blessed to us is not for our own private benefit,  
But for the good of the people;  
So let us give feast to the villagers].\(^{62}\)

Another prayer was recited during the actual killing of the mithun,  
which indicates the main purpose of mithun sacrifice. First the husband says:

Tsungrem nai temoatsu agatsu nungji,  
Kuna rongsen agi aoahiba kisn agi masu:  
Ita anu-I agatsu, Tsungrem nai moatsu,  
Tasoba tiabai moatsu,  
Anungji kunadi inyaktitba aser temoatsu anguba  
Yangi tenlara ni.  
[God, since you have blessed us,  
Not out of our unfair means of income:  
Moon and sun give us, God you blessed us,  
Tasoba Tiaba, you bless us  
Therefore out of your blessing upon our labour  
Do we make offering].\(^{63}\)

The wife says another prayer while she spray arujang\(^{64}\) at the mithun:

\(^{63}\) Ibid, page55.  
\(^{64}\) O.Alem explains arujang is a kind of mustard seed which symbolizes direct conversation with God, a sign of consecrated action.
Chuba Jongpong (original name of mithun) Tsungrem chir,
Ya alima nung ni na waloker\textsuperscript{65} asu nungji,
Na nuktzu kuna dak tejeblokni.

[King Jongpong, Son of God,
As, on earth, do we use as sacrificial victim,
Let not your tears be upon us].\textsuperscript{66}

How was the Mithun Sacrifice to be incorporated within Christianity? Ao Christians suggest that mithun sacrifice in Ao religion is similar to the sacrifice of Christ to redeem man. O.Alem is of the view that the notion of sacrifice implies a sense of reconciliation between man and god and man with his fellowmen. He draws another point from the idea of sacrifice in Ao religion, which could be compared, to the Christian idea of sacrifice for redemption. He says:

Both in Ao religion and Christianity, when life is given to the will of God to the extent of being sacrificed, relationship with God is restored. In the Mithun killing ceremony, the killing of mithun is considered an offering of life on behalf of the worshipper....Here the primary importance is the richness of good relationship between God and man and between man and man.\textsuperscript{67}

**Sacrifice and Agricultural Seasons:**

\textsuperscript{65} According to O.Alem Ao waloker means offering of animal as substitute for life. The life of Su is offered as substitute for lives of worshippers.

\textsuperscript{66} O.Alem, *Tsungremology* page, 56.

As mentioned earlier, in ancient Ao religion Tsungrem as Lijaba is recognized as the creator and the sustainer of the earth. Starting from the cleaning of the field to he harvest, the Aos offered sacrifice on several occasions to invoke God’s blessing as well as His protection. Imchen describes some of the important ceremonies and sacrifices, which dot the calendar of the Aos according to agricultural seasons.

Merok Mesa or burnt cleansing takes place when a new cultivation site is burnt. It is a one-day ceremony. The next day the priest and the representatives of each clan go to the village altar to offer a pig on behalf of the whole community. The Aos believed that if any wild life is burnt during the burning of the jungle slashing, the grass would outgrow the seeds leading to bad harvest. Thus merok mesa is performed to avert such likelihood.

Tenden mong was the first seed sowing ceremony. Imchen says that this is one of the most interesting and important ceremonies for the Aos. A day before the first sowing takes place, the village observes genna while the chief priest goes to the village gate and sows a handful of paddy seed saying, “Takum kum ka Lijaba Tsungrem ne metsy tesen moko ku sara yangi. Nang jru tanungba ikhula jaio [This year too Lijaba God let the new seeds grow healthy. After you eat we will eat the remainder]. While saying this prayer the priest pulls the feather of the cock in his hand at the end of each syllable. Before he returns to the village he fences the spot with bamboo splits. The next day every household with pigs or chicken or eggs goes to the field and performs sacrifice conducted by the family priest which is followed by a feast.
Jaden Mong (Eat first ceremony): Before harvesting takes place the priest who performed the Tenden mong collect the first fruits and offer them to Lijaba as thanks giving. Imchen says this is performed with two purposes. The fruits offered to God was for thanksgiving as well as to ask His protection against wild animals from eating the fruits.

The sacrifices that were offered to Tsungrem during different agricultural seasons indicate the purpose of sacrifice in Ao worldview. Sacrifice is seen as a medium of communication to maintain communal harmony within the village. In this context Walling says, “Beyond the materials offered in sacrifice, there is a vision of strong rapport to be established. Any person who violates the rhythm of sacrifice incurs the wrath of the village and has to make amends.” 68 Another important point that can be discerned from the Ao concept of sacrifice is the peaceful relationship with God. Tsungrem is acknowledged as the sustainer of the earth and the sacrifice of thanksgiving is an external act of acknowledgement. Walling opines that this notion of sacrifice of thanksgiving enrich the Christian understanding of sacrifice for the Aos. In the Christian Ao writing we find an effort to accommodate local rituals of the community, understand and explain them, and in the process show similarity to Christian ideas.

Sacrifice and Bargaining of Life:

The concept of sacrifice on Ao cosmology is not concerned only with offering thanks giving and invoking blessing. A look at the other forms of sacrifice suggests another dimension of sacrifice in Ao worldview. Panger Imchen suggests that in the absence of modern scientific

68 Walling, *Sacrifice and Salvation*, page 60.
medicine, the Aos believed that sickness is caused by the bad spirits or the malevolent spirits. In times of illness the Aos in the ancient days performed elaborate ceremonies as ransom sacrifice. Ajenchiok is one form of sacrifice in Ao religion in times of sickness, which is the last resort to save the life of the person who is sick. Imchen describe the way Ajencjiok is performed:

The family priest with his assistants would go to the spot where the victim is supposed to have contracted illness and there killed and cooked one cock which was eaten; while the other was set free as the ransom for the victim. If the cock runs away immediately the sickness was said to be over, but if the cock returned to the same spot before the priest left for home, it was a bad omen. The victim was soon to die, it was believed.69

Again Christian parallels are invoked in Ao Christian texts. The Ao Christians compare the anjenchiok sacrifice with the Jewish concept of scapegoat. Imchen contends “As the lamb was the most significant animal for sacrifice with the ancient Jews, a blameless cock of red color was the most essential sacrifice for the Aos; in a last effort when all other means had been exhausted in offerings for severe illness”.70 Walling contends that was a translator of the Bible into Ao tongue, and he translated the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:10 as ajenchiok. O.Alem says that the idea that life of a fowl is released on behalf of the worshippers is embodied in the Christian doctrine of atonement.

69 Imchen, Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture, page,63-64.
70 Ibid, page 63.
The notion of sacrifice in Ao religion as presented by Ao christians suggests sacrifice in ancient Ao religion represented the nature of relationship between the human and the divine world in several ways. On the one hand sacrifice renewed the covenant with God both individually and collectively while man acknowledged the existence of God in all its manifestations. It also represents the collective responsibility of the community for the welfare and prosperity of the village. On the other hand, sacrifice for bargaining for life speaks of the Ao awareness of the evil force causing misfortune and illness. Panger Imchen sees this kind of sacrifice in the ancient days as expensive and oppressive. But Imchen argues that when the gospel of Christ was preached to the Aos, it satisfied the Aos’ desire to overcome evil. Christ was now seen as the savior from the bondage of evil. We may quote Imchen:

The sacrificial act and element in the ancient Ao religion was replaced by the good news of Jesus’ self-sacrificing act in the place of man and indeed this is the greatest relief that Christianity has offered to the Ao. The cock is no more a necessary element in the search for a redemptive act but all is dealt with by the Lamb of God, the one vicarious sacrifice for all men.\(^\text{71}\)

Thus the Ao Christians seek to understand explain the concepts of traditional Ao religion before the Christian theological prism transformed it. They also show that the Ancient Ao religion may have concentrated on a local array of problems rather than address topics of universal relevance, But this did not mean that Ao traditional beliefs

\(^{71}\) Ibid, page 173.
were either irrational or even less rational than the more encompassing canons. But this empathy with tradition also had transformative consequences.

**On the Rationality of Ao religion:**

The ways in which the Ao Christians present Ao religion and the way they refute outsiders’ observations on Ao religion raises some methodological and theoretical issues. According to Ao Christian theologians, in the late 19th century and early 20th century, when western Christian missionaries came into contact with the Aos, Christianity represented a greater intellectual and spiritual coherence and moral rigor. Ancient Ao religion was seen by missionaries as an amalgam of ceremonies and fetish taboos lacking any real system of ethics. It was also seen as piecemeal in the approach to problems of meaning. It was the Christian faith that formulated comprehensive responses to the ethical, emotional and intellectual challenges of life

This notion offers a contrast between traditional religion and world religion, a contrast that sociologists have reflected on. Weber saw traditional religion as “Overwhelmingly instrumental wielded in the interest of mundane, worldly concerns”.\(^72\) For Clifford Geertz the primary difference between traditional and world religions is that the former are organized around a “R rigidly stereotyped...Cluttered arsenal of myth and magic” but the latter are more abstract, more logically coherent, and more generally phrased. World religions show greater

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\(^{72}\) Ibid, page 8.
conceptual generalization, tighter formal integration, and a more explicit sense of doctrine.”

In the texts that we discuss Ao Christian theologians see Christianity as a more rational faith than Ao religion, but they at the same time seeks to understand the rationality of Ao religion. Clifford Geertz has written: “If we limit rationalization to mean the formal systematization and codification of rite, doctrine and authority. With their literate technologies, regularized clerisies, uniform rites, and scared scriptures, world religions show a strong preoccupation with standardizing religious ideas and actions.” But Hefner says that this kind of generalization about cultural form fail to say much about its influence on the life-world or understanding of believers. “On this point we must distinguish cultural rationalization-the enunciation, systematization, and formalization of cultural truths in the light of a particular value or ideal, a quality of sociocultural systems-from the broader concept of rationality, or the effectiveness of certain ideas at making sense of an individual or group’s life-world, again with reference to some underlying value complex.”

An alternative vantagepoint of debate on traditional religion in contest with Christian faith or other world religion on the basis of rationality is sparked by Robin Horton in his essays on African conversion. Horton’s argument is that traditional religions are not necessarily less rational.

74 Hefner, Conversion to Christianity, pages, 14-15.
75 Ibid, page, 15.
than world religion, just narrower in focus. It is a matter of quantitative rather than qualitative a matter of scope or range, not superior rationalization. The traditional beliefs seen as irrational as or less rational than the more encompassing beliefs can be entirely rational in the circumstances they engage. He implies that in a restricted social context the more universalistic dogmas of world religions might be meaningless.

Horton insists that intellectual opportunism or deep-seated irrationality is not indicated by the multiplicity of spirits in traditional religion: “The spiritual beings of the traditional cosmologies are generally thought of as operating in a more or less regular manner, and multiplicity of spiritual agencies is by no means synonymous with confusion, inconsistency, or incoherence.” In Horton’s model on the rationality of conversion, the indigenous people are portrayed as active players in religious change and this model also challenges “the Weberian characterization of traditional religion as intellectually piecemeal or non rational, replacing it with what we might call an ecological appreciation of their logic”.

Horton’s line of argument is that the Africans’ shift to a higher end of cosmological spectrum would have occurred even in the absence of Islam or Christianity. However, the flaw in Horton’s model as pointed out by Hefner is that it neglect political and structural influences on conversion:

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77 Hefner, Conversion to Christianity, page,22.
But one cannot logically conclude from this that the institution of Islam and Christianity were insignificant in the cosmological changes that took place. Influences other than intellectualism ones were at working the transformation of native cosmologies. Horton may be right to insist, then, that Africans exposed to the macrocosm would have adjusted their cosmological horizons without the catalyst of Christianity or Islam. We must add, however, that the timing and content of actual change were profoundly affected by the European presence and the crisis of identity and authority that presence provoked.\textsuperscript{78}

In a similar fashion the Ao Christian scholars echo the acceptance of the power of the Christian faith while they critique the outsider’s view on Ao religion. They interpret Ao religion and bring to light the various hidden theological meanings and rationality embedded in it. Thus making a claim to a meaningful past they argue against the association of Ao religion with primitive nature and spirit worship and present the Ao religion as a coherent body of thought that ensured ethical and moral order.

Rather than over emphasizing the intrinsic or extrinsic variables of rationality of Ao religion and Christian faith, the Ao Christian theologians explore the ways in which the two interact. By accepting the relative importance of how each may agree or contradict, they establish an affinity between Christian faith and Ao religion. Such an

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, page,23.
approach explains why Christianity does not appear as totally alien and Ao conversion to Christianity appears comprehensible.

**Ao Religion: Foundation for Christianity:**

How far can we justify the Ao Christian scholars’ claim that their traditional religious beliefs and concepts served as the foundation for the proclamation of Christianity. In this context we may once again refer to Horton’s theory on the rationality of conversion. “Just what is accepted and what rejected will be largely determined by the structure of basic cosmology.” In his study about the relationship between African cosmology and the people’s conversion to Christianity or Islam, he suggests that the crucial variables are not the external influence of Islam or Christianity, but the pre-existing thought patterns and values. Horton suggests that the Africans understand Christian cosmological notions in terms of what they already knew of the invincible world. The African people characteristically see Christian ideas of God as referring to their Supreme Being and draw freely on such ideas in the process of elaborating their conception of this being.

It is worth mentioning that as the Christian outsiders began to concede that the traditional Ao religion formed the basic foundation for the proclamation of the gospel. “The old religion of these people furnishes a splendid basis for Christianity, the fundamental ideas are there, distorted it is true, but there is much of the needful terms.” In explaining the manner in which the missionaries dealt with the Ao

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80 Rev.E W Clark Letter to Murdock, dated 10 march,1881, Molugnyimsen Baptist Church Record.
religion, Richard M Eaton purports, “For all their condemnation of Naga ritual and social life, the missionaries were extraordinarily accommodating towards Naga doctrine and cosmology, in which and their Naga converts systematically sought points of entry of Christian terms and ideas.”

In presenting the gospel to the Aos the missionaries made deliberate attempts to link the pre existing beliefs with the presentation of the Christian message. Mary Mead Clark was certain that the Aos believed in an individual soul after life, and she also identified that the Aos had a notion of sin and a need of salvation and they were aware of an apocalyptic vision that approximated judgement day. “All the departed spirits must pass to his judgement seat, where by certain tests their characters are determined and their future state assigned... The Aos defined sin as “unclean,” “foul,” “a stain,” “a spot,” and greatly abhor anything that denominate sin. They live in great dread and fear of it and cleansing from sin is costly both in sacrifices and time... Again Mr.Clark, in his Bible translation, has had no difficulty in finding the Ao expression word for the statement: “the fire that shall never be quenched” The idea too is advanced that in the last days men will be filled with all manner of wickedness, and that everything will be consumed in a great world conflagration.”

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82 Mary Mead Clark, *A Corner In India*, page, 57.
84 Ibid, page, 63.
Rev. Clark seems to have understood the susceptibility of using terminology strategically:

In translating God into Ao scripture Clark did not resort to bringing terms like Jehovah. "Rather Clark's Ao New Testament translated both Kyrios, "Lord," "Master", and theos, "god," "God" by the Ao word Tsungrem, which as we have seen denotes a "spirit" not endowed with specific attributes....By using this term for God, then the missionaries effectively pulled together the entire Ao pantheon had in common-its "spiritness", or "tsungremness" and endowed that notion with the power and universality of the biblical supreme deity.\(^\text{85}\)

This explains, for the Aos, "Tsungrem was not an alien deity imposed upon the Aos from outside; it was their own generic term made universal by the Bible's message, and made permanent by the medium of print technology"\(^\text{86}\). Thus the missionaries on their part defined the local manifestations and functions as valuable and positive. They placed emphasis on the supposed organic solidarities of local traditional religion to which the natives claimed to be the heirs.

G.A Oddie in his study about Kartabhaja (Vaisnava) converts to Christianity in Bengal offers a similar argument regarding the view that pre existing beliefs and attitudes facilitate conversion process. The Kartabhaja sect is commonly regarded as an off shoot of the Bengal Vaishva movement and their contact with Christianity started in 1930s.

\(^{85}\) Eaton, "Religious Conversion in Nagaland", page, 17.

\(^{86}\) Ibid, page, 21.
Oddie is of the opinion that because they already shared some basic assumptions, values and beliefs, they were in a better position than most of their Hindu or Muslim neighbors to understand and respond to the Christian message and evangelical claims about God. For instance, the notion of God becoming incarnate or of him being present in the life of a person on earth was a part of Vaishava tradition. “This idea further refined and reexpressed in Kartabhaja theology provided yet another fundamental link and parallel with Christian teachings about the nature of Jesus.” 87

John S Mbiti in his study about the African religions and philosophy recognizes the fact that traditional religious concepts and ideas of the African religion still form the essential background of African peoples conversion to either Islam or Christianity:

Since traditional religion occupy the whole person and the whole of his life, conversion to new religions like Christianity or Islam must embrace his language, thought patterns, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition, if that conversion is to make a lasting impact upon the individual and his community. 88

A range of studies suggest that preexisting local beliefs and practices defined what was accepted and rejected within Christianity. I would like to develop the argument further. It is true that preexisting structures shaped the nature of Christianity, but what was ‘preexistent’

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88 Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, Page, 3.
was also structured by Christian worldview of those who represented
the past. The Ao Christians represent to us the past in a specific form,
it becomes a past that conforms to Christian ideals. It is a christianized
conception of Ao past and of Ao religion.

The Ao Christian scholars who are committed Christians show that
there are indigenous ideas and beliefs which in their essentials are
similar to the Christian concepts. These traditional ideas and beliefs are
modified or colored by changing situation. One is struck not only by
the profusion of details but also by the biblical pattern of the way they
present the traditional Ao religion. They identify some of the
significant meanings embedded in their traditional religion, which
show the openness of Ao society to Christianity. The Ao Christian
theologians present the Ao religion as a well organized and reasonable
religious system, as a world in face to face interaction not only with the
living, but just as vividly with God as the Supreme Being. The
recurring theme in the writings of the Ao theologians is that the
traditional Ao religion was not a stagnant institution mechanically
reproduced by unreflective adherents but rather at times it could be
critically reformed and used to challenge arrangements. The past
religion offered a ground for the acceptance of Christianity, but the
space for fusion was created as much by the specific way the Ao past
was narrated and represented.