CHAPTER 3

CONFRONTATION AND CONFLICT

The intervention of Christianity in Ao land was followed by an age of confrontation, conflict and negotiations in various ways. The best way to look into these issues is to locate conversion within a larger story of a general clash, which affected the whole Ao community. The conflict was expressed in the confrontations between the Ao converts and the non-Christian Aos.

Several themes run through this chapter. What kind of responses did conversion generate in the Ao community and how were cultural practices negotiated in situated interaction emphasizing local understanding and individual roles. The tensions that marked the process of conversion in Ao community was played out in the interaction of social and individual processes overtime. Rather than focus only on individual experience of conversion, this chapter seeks to examine the various ways in which conversion had bearing on social structures and institutions.

In an embattled encounter between a small but disproportionately powerful group of missionaries and Ao community, we need to look at various questions from the natives’ perspective. How was conversion viewed since it was a journey from one faith to another and not necessarily from one culture to another? What did the clashes between the converts and the non-Christians imply and what did they mean for the community? Did the traditional institutions survive? Although
these are broad questions to which comprehensive answers are not possible, we can sketch out some ways in which the problem of Ao response to conversion may be approached.

Historical studies of Naga Christians mostly focus on the foreign missions rather than on the experience and sensibility of the natives. The mission reports and records solicit and maintain the stories of missionary adventures, their trials, tribulations or triumphs. One way of situating the Ao transition to Christianity by placing the Ao community at centerstage is to draw upon sources from the detailed accounts of court petitions and cases involving the non-converts and the Christian Aos during the initial years of conversion. These court records shed light on the nature of confrontation, conflict and negotiation within the Ao society.

The cases were decided at the court of the Sub Divisional Officer in Mokokchung. The British sought to retain the practice of customary law in this region and all the judgements produced by the S.D.O court were said to be based on the ancient laws of the Aos. The British declared that Nagas would continue to administer their villages according to their respective customs and traditions. But this native system of administration functioned under British paramountcy. Another important agency of the British administration was the institution of Dobashis. "As native administrative assistants, the Dobashis were the right hand men of the colonial administration in the
They were also employed as native judges and as experts on customary laws they assisted the colonial officers in the settlement of cases at the court of S.D.O. In this sense, the customary law was interpreted and authenticated by Dobashis.

The Time of Confrontation:

In 1871 Rev.E.W. Clark wrote, “Tribes upon tribes of Nagas are accessible to the Gospel. It is certainly painful for us at Sibsagar to be unable to lift our eyes without seeing these hills and thinking of men on them who have no knowledge of Christ.”

The missionary soon realized that the Naga Hills offered one of the most promising areas for evangelization. “I deemed the Naga field one of the most promising for missionary labor and abounding in inhabited situations among the healthiest in the world a combination of two most important considerations probably not found in any other field of the missionary union.”

Rev. Clark started a church on 23rd December 1872 at Molungkimong village. This venture typically produced intense and acrimonious debates among the Ao community members who favored accepting the missionary and those who were ambivalent or opposed to the missionary and his mission of evangelization. The natives were divided


2 Rev. E. W Clark to Rev. Murdock, dated, 21, July, 1871, Molungyimsen Baptist Church Record.

3 Rev. Clark to the Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Union, Dated, 21, June, 1876, Molungyimsen Baptist Church Record.
in their attitudes and responses, which ranged from enthusiastic acceptance through accommodation to near total rejection.

The neighboring villages too were deeply suspicious. They said, “You will find sooner or later that this rajah preacher is a disguised agent of the company. Has he not the same face?” Whiteness linked the missionary to company officials, and their motives were always suspected. Godhula, the Assamese assistant of Rev. Clark faced similar hostility from the natives and his motive of coming to the village was also questioned. “What do we want of this man’s new religion? Exclaimed one of the chief men, among the first to espouse the cause later on. Godhula heard them say, “Send him away, get him out of the way, “A spy, doubtless of the company.”

The non-Christians’ opposition to the new religion may be attributed to a number of factors. The Christian outsider represented the Aos as savage and their religion as primitive. The Aos saw the intervention of Christianity as a threat to their traditional socio-cultural and political system. The non-Christian Aos found the Christian teaching opposed to their ideals and practice of warfare or headhunting and raiding through which each village asserted their political superiority over the other village. Non-Christian Aos persistently pressed the Christians to take part in head hunting. Mary Mead Clark gives a vivid description

4 Mary Mead Clark, A Corner in India, American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1907, page, 17.
5 Ibid.
of how the non-Christians taunted the converts for their refusal to take part in head hunting:

Hostility to the new religion waxed stronger and stronger. There was division in the village council, repeated efforts were made by the opponents of Christianity to entangle their village into war with other villages, and thus to overwhelm by a strong war spirit the influence of few Christians whose teachings were so antagonistic to their military ambition. Without the realization of which there could be for them no social or political standing in the community and for which they would willingly imperil life. To intimidate the missionary, a war party of young men ambushed one whole week for human heads which they intended to throw before him as symbolic of what he might expect in case he did not retreat to the plains.⁶

Elsewhere in India, when the existing social and political systems were threatened by the missionary activities, it provoked reaction from the natives. Stephen Neil writes about the Brahman’s opposition to Robert Nobili’s acquisition of a residence in Mathurai:

In Mathurai, that central point of Hindu orthodoxy, many were disturbed by the fact that a foreigner had managed to acquire a residence in a high caste quarter of the city. When it became known that the same foreigner had obtained access to the secrets of Brahma’s lore, anxiety deepened. With the baptism of his first converts, many must have felt that their whole position as leaders in

society and in the intellectual and religious life of Mathurai was threatened. Fierce reactions were sooner or later to be expected.\(^7\)

Refusal to take part in head hunting was not the only factor which led to the division of the village. To test the commitment of the converts to Ao culture, they were forced to support the rites and sacrifices that were considered unchristian. They were also persuaded to take part on the drinking bouts that accompanied the feast. The Christians attitude towards these traditional practices agitated the non-Christians since all the rites and ceremonies were communal affairs. The non-converts felt that the withdrawal of the Ao converts from these practices had adverse impact on the whole community and weakened the basis of their ancient culture. They protested that their failure to propitiate the spirits as a collective community led to illness and bad harvest.

Rev. Clark in A.C Bowers book *Under Head Hunters Eyes* says, "When those who had not become Christian saw that the new faith was opposed to the old demon worship, they feared that the failure of the new village to do the devils honor might cause them to break forth and destroy them."\(^8\) It appears that the right to one’s personal religious convictions was really not the issue. Rather it was a question of one’s relation to the religious authority that represented the collective identity of the community. Conversion threatened the sense of

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collectivity and the sanctity of a tradition on which Ao identity was founded.

In this context we need to look into the importance of rites, sacrifice and ceremonies of the non-Christians from the socio cultural point of view in defining the notion of Aoness

K.W. Harl in his essay “Sacrifice and Pagan Belief in Fifth and Sixth Century Byzantium” suggests, “Christian refusal to participate in such ceremonies and their denial of the efficacy of sacrifice (and thus of belief in the gods) provoked the persecutions.” Harl is of the opinion that the aim was not to execute or persecute the Christians but rather to compel the Christians to participate in the rituals in the sacrifice and other collective rites.

The rituals and sacrifices with their own symbols were a dynamic religious experience that bound the members of the community in a common participation with the divine. They helped maintain cohesion of and allegiance to community. Harl further suggests that the difference in the way the supernatural (i.e Christians versus non-Christians) was understood fostered hostility between the Christians and non-Christians. The Christians universally denounced the rites and sacrifices of the non-believers as magic and demonology rather than as a true demonstration of religious ideals. The nature of conflicts in Ao

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community, I suggest, was similar. What non-converts feared was the threat to Ao cultural practices, not to Ao religion.

The non-Christian Aos thus directed their anger and agitation towards the converts when they saw their socio-cultural, religious and political systems were being undermined. Conversion also had financial implications. The non-participation of the converts in the rites and sacrifices meant that the non-Christians had to bear all the ceremonial and sacrificial expenses. G.A. Oddie writes of a similar case of conflict between the converts and non-Christians:

To say the least, all these changes caused the caste people a certain degree of inconvenience. If Christians refused to pay taxes towards the cost of festivals or the upkeep of temples who would make up the deficit? If Madigas refused to sacrifice animals or make and beat drums to propitiate evil spirits, who would perform those functions.  

Founding a Christian Village:

The non-Christian Aos were agitated when the break down of village cohesion began to interfere with the conduct of rituals. In keeping with the tradition of first founder religious authority a handful of converts established a village called Molungyimsen on 24th October 1876. Mary Mead Clark describes the way in which the Christians decided to form the new community:

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So on the appointed day the missionary with fifteen families, bearing on their backs all of their own and the missionary’s household goods, marched down through the gateway of Dekhaimong stock amid the jeers, taunts, scoops and threats of the villagers who shouted, ‘Go now, but you will soon come back,’ and one man posing astride the gateway of the stockade indicated to them the humility and greater subjection under which they would return.11

The Christian village was founded without the customary ceremonies that involved sacrificial offerings and rites. “In establishing a new village it is customary to sacrifice a cow and make quite ado of heathen religious ceremonies. Here there has been nothing of the kind.”12 The new Christian village was to symbolize the determination to abandon warfare and be known as a peaceable.

The separation of the non Christian Aos and the converts offered by Richard Eaton in his essay “Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971” is attributed to the assault on the socio cultural and religious life of the Aos:

The very emergence of a Christian community caused difficulties, which called for a drastic remedy. By insisting that his tiny band of fifteen followers observe Sunday as a ‘day of rest’, Clark directly interfered with the rhythm and routine of the Naga village life for nearly all work in Ao

villages—hunting, sowing, harvesting was done on a communal basis, and any interference with that rhythm naturally undermined a village's economic functioning not to mention its ritual solidarity... Hostility mounted, and the village council became divided as to which action to take, since it was faced with what was surely an unprecedented sort of assault on its religious and social life.\textsuperscript{13}

The non-compromising attitude of both the Christians and the non-Christians led to the formation of the new village that reflects the breakdown of the cohesion of the village. In retrospect, Rev. Clark under whose leadership the new village was formed, himself questioned the wisdom of the move. He wrote: "Their village government is a government much higher than the civilized nations. To build another village separate from the others for the sake of gospel creates division. This new religion should not disturb their village system had I known it I would never have built a new (Molungyimsen) Village."\textsuperscript{14} In another letter Rev. Clark admitted his mistake in separating the Christians and the non-Christians into two villages. "To build a new village with the believers separate from non believers will not be fair to the gospel. What I have done may have been a mistake."\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{13} Richard Eaton, "Conversion to Christianity Among the Nagas, 1876-1971," IESHR,21,1,(1980), page,8.
\textsuperscript{14} Centennial of Two Centuries, Molungkimong Baptist Church, Molungkimong, Rev. Clark quoted, Page,15.
\textsuperscript{15} L.Kijung Ao, Nokinketer Mungchen, Christian Literature Centre, Gauhati, 1972,E.W.Clark quoted, Page,48.
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Separation and Conflict:
Not surprisingly in the years that followed the formation of the first Christian village, the Ao community experienced spatial separation, for the converts and the non-Christians could not live together in peace. The dynamics of this crisis is illustrated by some of the court cases that the non-converts had put up against the Christians.

In a case that appeared at the court on 29th September 1924, Banger Lalzan and other Christians of Ungma village were accused of leaving the village without orders of building a new village. It was further charged that Banger lalzan called himself a Christian only because he wanted to start a new village and establish his authority within it. Earlier the Ungma Christians had come to the court asking for a new site for hundred houses. But the village chiefs objected to the site the Christians wanted on the ground that it was in the middle of cultivated fields, and that it would entail encroachment on cultivated land. After hearing the story from both sides the English S.D.O gave the final order that the Christians would leave the new site on which five houses had been built. It was also decided that the Christians could build houses in Chitanga and the village was to help the Christians build these houses. Those moving to the new village, Chitanga, was to give up property – houses and land of equivalent value in the old village, or pay the estimated value of the land taken by them at Chitanga. All those who went to Chitanga were exempted from all duties except those owed to the government. They were not to observe genna

16 Gaonbura versus Banger Lalzan and other Christians of Ungma village, Case Records, dated, 29.8.1924, Additional Commissioner Office, Mokokchung, Nagaland.
according to the ancient customs. But all Christians who stayed back in the old village were to conform to Ao customs in the observation of amung or genna though they were exempted from the contributions for religious purpose.

This case throws light on how individual interest might have fused with the religious question in the formation of the new village. Banger Lalzan was accused of calling himself a Christian primarily for the purpose of starting a new village. Does this imply that sometimes individuals might have identified with the new faith so that they could enjoy power within the new community? In this case, the court sought to negotiate in such a way that neither the rights of the Christians nor of those of the non-Christians were denied. The decision given by the court suggests that both the Christians and the non-Christians were given the freedom to choose where they wanted to live, provided that they conformed to certain rules and demands of the village.

Whenever there was a breach in the court order regarding the formation of the new village, the court intervened. On December 1935 the court received a petition from K.E.(sic) against Rangakaba and Samlemyiak pastor of Changtongya village accusing the latter of disobeying the standing order no.18 of 17 October 1932. In the case it was stated that according to the order no.18 of 27 October 1932, with the consent of the chiefs, the Christians of Changtongya village were allotted a new site outside the village with a warning that they would not carry out any Baptist propaganda and practices. Rangakakba who was a Christian remained in old village and gave up Christianity and retained the position of the village chief. But this man again embraced
Christianity to sing and pray in the old khel, which was against the agreement made earlier. He was deposed from the gaonburaship, the Christians had to furnish one hundred coolies when called for, and the pastor was fined Rs.30.17

The government made it clear that the party or the individual who deliberately disobeyed the order was liable to pay the price. State patronage and support was to be extended to the party that did not breach previous orders. The government thus dealt with the cases in different ways to minimize conflict in a community that was under its jurisdiction.

Coexistence and Distance:
Spatial separation of Christian and non-Christian Aos was only one attempt at confronting conflict between faiths. This affected only a small area. Elsewhere in Ao land, the spread of Christianity was accompanied by an everyday experience of conflict in a situation where the Christian and non-Christian co existed. It is worthwhile exploring the nature of conflict and confrontation within the Ao community during the initial years of conversion to Christianity. These conflicts show the conversion process challenged the old village domain which had once held the Ao community together.

One of the major areas of conflict between the converts and the non-converts was the observation of Amung. Traditionally the Aos kept

certain days in a year as Amung. On such days the villagers were to abstain from entering and going out of the village. They were also to avoid engaging in any kind of work. It was said that the Aos in the ancient times believed that if there was any kind of neglect in keeping the Amung, it would result in bad luck for the community and bad harvest. Rev. Longwell who served among the Aos observed in 1910:

The Amung is a day of enforced rest. It may and frequently does not include the sacrifice, but not always. No one is permitted to go to his cultivation on any day of Amung. The minimum number of Amungs that may occur in any given year is 21 and there is no upper limit. The average is probably about equal in number yearly to the Christian Sabbaths. The result of all this is that the Christians are taxed in kind for the heathen sacrifices and taxed in time for the heathen Sabbaths.\textsuperscript{18}

Just as the non-Christians observed strict Amungs, The Ao converts had to follow the Christian teaching that enjoined strict observance of the Sabbath:

On such a day, if he is a Christian, he does no work at all. If it happened that on a Sunday, a herd of wild pig is located in favorable position, and a chance, which may not occur again, is seen of surrounding and wiping out pests and so of saving the growing rice, the Christians in variably remained at home

\textsuperscript{18} Rev. Longwell, Impur, Assam Baptist Missionary Conference of the American Baptist Missionary Union, Gauhati, Jan.8-17, 1910, page, 87.
Inscribing the key events in the Ao sacred calendar represented the collective identity of the community in the village. On the other hand, for the converts observing and keeping Sabbaths according to Christian teaching played a key role in sustaining a sense of distinctive identity on the basis of their commitment to the new faith. In old villages, converts were forced to conform to sacred calendar of the community. Whenever the converts refused to keep the Amung, they were either fined or they had to render labor for the community. In the village where the converts were more in majority, the non-Christians had to observe Christian Sabbath or Sunday. “In one village, where the Christians were in majority and had the whip hand, they fined some non-Christians and on one occasion for going down on a Sunday to look at the traps.”

Conflict related to Amung between the Christians and non-Christians were settled at the court. The petitions that appeared in the court tell us how the Christians and the non-Christians negotiated the ongoing tension around ritual practices. As was often to be the case in these conflicts, the non-Christians came up with well-judged arguments to counter the Christians’ protest against Amungs. We may consider some of the cases that appeared in the court against the Christians for not observing the key events in the Ao sacred calendar.

20 Ibid.
In a petition the heathens of Aliba village accused the Christians of breaking the Lichaba mong\(^{21}\) by pounding rice. Thus they demanded that the Christians should keep four Amungs. After discussing the matter in the presence of the S.D.O. it was decided that the Christians would have to pay a pig (value Rs.10) to the barracks for breaking the Lichaba mong and in future the Christians were to keep four Amungs only: Tsungrem mong, Moatsu mong, Takung kulem mong and Lichaba mong.\(^{22}\)

In a similar fashion the ancients of Asangma village accused the Christians of breaking the Amung at sowing time. The ancients said that all the Christians in the village except eight houses observed the Amung. The accused stated that they went to cut firewood. The ancients argued in the court saying that the fact that the majority in the village observed the Amung is sufficient proof that the custom was well known. The eight Christian houses had to pay a fine of Rs.3 each to the village chief and Re.1 to the government.\(^{23}\)

The cases reveal the importance of traditional practices of an essentially agricultural community. The conflicts around the gennas to be observed were mainly related to agricultural cycles. After the

\(^{21}\) Lichaba mong comes once in a year. Having conceived of Lichaba as the creator of the world, on the day of Lichaba mong Aos paid tribute and honoured him by giving sacrifices and observing Sabbath.

\(^{22}\) Heathens versus Christians of Aliba village, Case no.80, dated 22.8.1919, Case Records, A.D.C. Office, Mokokchung, Nagaland.

intervention of Christianity in Ao Land the dynamics of the everyday life such as the observance of genna was disturbed, leading to the breakdown in the collective responsibility of the community. On several occasions the Christians ended up paying fines for the breach of Amungs. The non-Christians seemed to have the support of the government since the judgement usually went in favor of them.

Peaceful coexistence of the non Christians and Christians could be disturbed in the village when the Christians refused to subscribe to the rituals that came along with the keeping of genna. For instance on 15th September 1914, the gaonburas of Mokokchung claimed at the court that the Christians were allowed to remain in the village on the agreement that they would observe the village genna. But the Christians broke the gennas for wind and fire. The gaonburas strongly opposed the action of the Christians saying that the Christians’ objection to these gennas was due to the fact that the gennas involved sacrifice. In this particular case, Chungsichiba, a Christian was accused of instigating the other Christians to break the genna by going to the field. According to the final order given by the court, Yabangba, one of the accused, was fined Rs.40 to be paid to the village barricks within ten days. Chungsichiba was warned that in the event of future breaches he will be held responsible and would be turned out of the village.24

In the early 20th century, there were repeated clashes between the Christians and the ancients over the observance of their sacred

24 G.B. Barricks of Mokokchung versus Yapangba of Mokok, Christians, Chungsichiba Master of Mokok, Case no.86, dated, 15.9.1914, Case Record, A.D.C.Office,Mokokchung Nagaland.
calendars as well as over questions of ritual precedence. The court judgements firmly declared that individuals as well as groups responsible for disruption of peaceful coexistence of the village should be punished. The intention of the government was to prevent any conflict within the community, and to ensure the smooth functioning of the village system in a supposedly non Christian dominated community at that time.

While the converts as well as the non-Christians wanted to regularize the key events in their respective sacred calendar, the court was under pressure to distance itself from either groups and mediate in the conflict. But the Christians were obliged to conform to certain minimal ancient Ao traditional stricture during the initial year of conversion. In a case filed by the barricks of Ungma village against the Christians, the latter was accused of going to their fields during Waraleptang amung. The barricks said in the court that according to a previous court order issued by Hutton in 1914, the Christians had agreed to remain in the village and they were to observe all the amungs. The order included a list of amungs to be observed by the Christians. But Waraleptang amung was left out of this list which was the cause of the conflict. The final order given by the S.D.O read as:

I take no cognize of the list and have told the barricks that Hutton’s order stand. If they wish they can insist on all amungs being kept. I agree to modify the orders in

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25 Barricks versus Christians of Ungma village, Case no.79, Case Records, A.D.C. Office, Mokokchung, Nagaland.

26 Waraleptang mung was observed by the whole community when epidemic diseases spread and claimed lives in the village.
accordance with it. Offer the site at Chitangya is still open, but any Christians who remain in the village must observe every amung except those mentioned in the recent conference are to be kept. They must keep all the observances laid down by Hutton.27

The effort of the SDO clearly was to maintain a semblance of order. If the concerned groups had agreed to observe certain rituals, and if the agreement was sealed through a court order, then everyone had to submit to the declared norm.

For the Aos, what was at issue was that the converts and the non-Christians were at loggerheads over observance of community practices. However these conflicts were followed by complex transformative processes. Missionaries and Christian converts pressurized the court to exempt the Christians from the ancient Ao traditional Amungs. Gradually after the whole Ao tribe was Christianized the traditional Amungs began to be celebrated in a Christian manner. The non-Christian past was both repressed and appropriated by Christianity.

**Battles for Privilege:**
The Christian mission campaign worked to erode the functioning of village authority. The breakdown of the system and non-observance of community rituals also affected the schemes of ceremonial and political rank and precedence. The social organization of an Ao village,

27 Ibid.
write Tajen Ao, "is of a modest democracy formed by clan representations called samen/tatar. They rule the village for a number of years and on their retirement another set of representative are chosen to run the government."\textsuperscript{28} The expense of the village government and payment for the service was collected from the village inhabitants.

During the initial years of conversion to Christianity, a majority of the leaders of the village government were non-converts. When the new barracks were to be installed, a pig sacrifice called Sungu Chumsuk and cow sacrifice called Nashipongchilepok were to be made. The outgoing barracks had to give a pig to sanctify the initiation of the new barracks. The converts refused to subscribe to these practices and they also declined to take their share of meat of the animal that was sacrificed for the initiation ceremony of the new barracks. When the Christians withdrew from the barracks their claim to the privileges of the barracks were taken away and they had to render community labor as ordinary members of the village community.

An extract from the tour diary of J.P.Mills explains the intensity of the reaction of the converts against the preexisting functioning of the village government in one of the Ao villages:

The Christians and non-Christians of Longjang have been at loggerheads lately. Two of the Christian barracks have refused to work as barracks anymore. I have passed the following orders. The Christian barracks must resume their duties and

take share of miscellaneous work. They need not administer oath according to the Ao custom. Their turn will be taken on this duty by the non-Christian barricks. The Christian barricks will accordingly get no share of meat to which barricks are entitled for administering oaths. In case where one party is a Christian and the other not, oath will not be administered. No extra gaonbura will be appointed but when a post falls vacant their claims will be considered, though no promise is given that a Christian goanbura will be appointed even then.29

This war between converts and non converts over privilege and power was carried on through politics of petitions. The district officials received a floor of petitions requesting government intervention in deciding claims to positions.

In 1927, the S.D.O of Mokokchung received a petition from the Christians of Chuchuyimlang village against the non-converts with regard to the disputes over the appointment of the members of the barricks. The Christians wanted to appoint a person called Temjenchiba among the barricks, but the non-converts refused to have him on the ground that he had previously been a barrick before he became a Christian. The barricks demanded that the Christians appoint someone else in place of Temjenchiba. The decision given by the court was that since the Christians resigned from the barricks on becoming

29 Case Files, A.D.C Office, Mokokchung, Nagaland.
Christians, non-Christians filled their places and they were not to be reinstated in the higher rank.  

For the non-converts upholding the traditional norms of the village community meant keeping the village as a political unit. But Ao conversion to Christianity involved a radical change in the settled pattern of political relations and meant a rescheduling of daily community life. The Christians were not seen as aliens to the village government but their conversion to Christianity was seen as a token of allegiance to a new religious authority. This generated a modality of internal conversion in which people had to make adjustments in the existing system.

**Rituals and Collective Identity:**

Besides a rethinking of one's understanding of the ultimate conditions of existence, conversion involved a commitment to a new kind of moral authority and a new reconceptualized social and religious identity. The socio cultural and religious aspects of Ao society were closely connected. All religious sacrifices and ceremonies were expression of the collective identity of the whole community. The breakdown in the sacred network was reflected in the collapse of the systems of ceremonial exchange and precedence within the locality. Thus when the Ao were thrust into a larger macrocosm sometimes against their will conflicts developed around old rituals and ceremonies. The missionaries carried on propaganda against traditional 

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Ao religious practices. Rev. Longwell gives a report on confrontation between the Christians and non-Christians:

The effect of this upon the villagers is inevitable. The unbelieving headman will seek occasion to fine the Christians, partly because they want the feast at the Christians expense, and partly because they can’t quite resist the temptation to lord it over their fellow villagers. Unbaptized believers on the other hand will hesitate a long time before declaring it in open symbolic way their affiliation to the persecuted sect.31

Ancient Ao religious ceremonies and rituals emphasized the great value of social collectiveness and the incorporation of the individual within them. In contrast to this Christianity was seen by the non-converts as ritually unmediated individualized religiosity which had no precedent in traditional Ao religious system. The religious bond which held the community together proved vulnerable to dislocation as the Christians refused to comply with their ancient religious practices. Such moves provoked fears and deep resentment in the minds of the vanguards of the traditional Ao religion. They submitted numerous grievances in the court against the Christians. In 1919, the Christians of Mopungchukit village killed a leopard but they buried it instead of handing it over to the village. The pastor said that the leopard was not handed to the ‘heathens’ because they would put on all their finery and dance and sing songs. The non-converts filed a case against the converts. They claimed that the leopard was for a while causing destruction, so its killing should have been an occasion of rejoicing.

They further claimed that elsewhere when the Christians killed such a menacing animal the whole village celebrated. The final order given by the court went in favor of the non-converts:

There is no sacrifice involved in the rejoicing which take place after the death of a leopard or a tiger. If there should be any further disputes it is hereby ordered that Christians must keep the custom usually recognized throughout the Ao country hitherto and give up to their heathen fellows villagers if they demand it, the body of any leopard or tiger killed by them. They need not take part in the subsequent rejoicing if they do not want to. This order is to be followed throughout the country.\(^{32}\)

The Christians were also under pressure to comply with directions from the court though special dispensations were accorded to them. The court decisions were usually on the side of the non-converts since they formed a numerical majority. The government seemed to have recognized the importance of complying to the demands of the majority in order to avoid further confrontation. In one of such cases that the court dealt in 1905, the Christians of Changki village, ten houses in all, were accused of refusing to subscribe to their share of customary expenses in connection with the propitiation of the deities. The village chief said that since the Christians no longer worshipped the deities in question, could pay half the expenses, which the Christians refused. The village chief clearly made it known that if the Christians wanted to remain in the village they had to conform to the

\(^{32}\) Heathen versus Christians of Mopungchukit, dated, 23.10.1919, Case Records, A.D.C. Office, Mokokchung Nagaland.
Ao custom. The court found that the village acted fairly in demanding only half a share to be paid by the Christians to propitiate the deities.³³

In these clashes the Christians sought to distance themselves as much as possible from traditional rituals and celebrations. This enraged the non-Christians. By forcing the Christians to take part in the ancient rites the non-Christians attempted to exhibit their power, and deter the others from becoming Christian. The Christians in conformity with the doctrine of Christian monotheism protested against their own traditional religious practices. The non-Christians’ hostility to Christians followed from the fear that their traditional socio cultural religious system was under threat. Without conformity to traditional beliefs the bond which held the village community collectively was likely to disintegrate. The government regulated the affairs of the village in various ways to ensure peaceful coexistence by upholding certain practices.

**Institutions of the Community:**

To sustain their life ways, the Aos had to respect institutions capable of inspiring or imposing a sense of identification with those life ways. But after they came into contact with Christianity old institutions, once vital for the sustenance of indigenous identities were abolished or subverted.

The Morung (Arichu) which was also called the bachelors’ dormitory served as a guard house and club house for the unmarried Ao

³³ Changki village versus Christians in Changki, Case no.153, Dated, 15.10.1905, Case Records, A.D.C. Office, Mokokchung, Nagaland.
youngmen. Before the intervention of Christianity it played an important role in the social life of the Aos. The youngmen in the Arichu were divided according to their age group. In the ancient days the Morung had to be rebuilt every six years. J.P. Mills gives a description of the procedure of the rebuilding of Morung:

The old men of all the clans using the ‘Morung’ in question kill the animals, each saying as he does so ‘may my son in this ‘Morung’ flourish, and grow like cane shoots and like the shoots of ficus tree, and may they be wise in all things’. For this the old men receive a share of meat and are ‘genna’ for six days. The oldest of them, after the animals have been killed, digs a hole for the left hand post. Two men from each clan then go off to the main center post which is lying ready felled in the jungle, and set to work to carve it. It is set up the next day, and on the carving on it and any other carvings which require freshening up one of the senior inmates puts a mixture of soot and blood from the slaughtered animals.\(^{34}\)

The missionaries decried the Morung as a heathen institution since the functioning of the Morung involved sacrifices. During headhunting war strategies were planned in the Morung. The converts also stopped rendering community services for the building of the Morung. For instance, instead of contributing towards the stocking of wood to be used in the Morung, the Christians stocked their wood and torches in the church premises. We are told: “Attempts are made to avoid little act of social service on the most trivial excuses; for instance there is an

\(^{34}\) Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, Page, 75.
old custom by which in every ‘Morung’ there are kept torches which can be taken of grits by benighted travelers, I have known Christian boys refuse to help in collecting the materials on the plea that the Morung was a heathen institution.”

When the Christians stayed away from the Morung, the institution tended to break down. However at times the court intervened so that both the converts and the non-Christians would compromise. For instance the boys of Sungratsu village stopped rendering community services to the Morung. The ancients filed a case against the Christians of Sungratsu in this regard. The court decided that all the boys of Sungratsu were to carry out all Morung customs except those involving sacrifice or praying to spirits, which the Christians cannot undertake owing to their religion. There was no objection to the boys sleeping in a room provided followed all customs of in the Morung. The court recognized that it was important to retain certain cultural practices in the Morung for the upkeep of the community. Inspite of the fact that the Christians were exempted from certain practices they had to continue to be a part of the social and cultural functions so that the solidarity of the members of the institution would not disappear.

Clashes and conflict are part of conversion history. Conversion inevitably distances the new faith from the old even when they continue to interact. We need to understand what happens during

conversion. “Conversion in the more technical psychological sense means the reorientation of the soul of the individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old is wrong and the new is right.”37 R.E. Frykenberg writes, “Conversion normally involves or is claimed as the experience of one single individual person or perhaps one small group persons. Conversion normally involves changes in beliefs, group identifications, and characteristics of personality. Conversion normally leads to complete reorganization and reorientation in a person’s emotional condition and intellectual outlook.”38 He adds, “Conversion while in the economic, social, political and philosophical views of an individual, has generally and traditionally and most often been applied as a term to describe changed ‘religious’ belief or ‘ideological’ position.”39

In such conceptions of conversion, the focus is often on the transformation that takes place within the individual. I would suggest that conversion critically reorients group identity, and the structures and practices that define local collectivity.

39 Ibid.
Since conversion means rejection of old beliefs, it leads to conflict and confrontation in several ways. Sometimes conflicts during conversion arise as a result of the upper section of the society losing their grip over the lower section:

Group conversion introduced new and severe tensions into the village community and often aroused strong reactions from the dominant castes. As converts sometimes refused to continue in occupations they considered degrading, so they disassociated themselves, sometimes gradually, sometimes abruptly from performing their traditional role in the traditional village festivals.\(^\text{40}\)

G.A. Oddie illustrates the conflict and inconvenience that was caused when the Malas and Madigas of the Telugu country were converted to Christianity. Their move to convert to Christianity and refusal to carry on with their traditional tasks provoked active opposition:

In some case people simply ceased to offer various types of remuneration and services, since the Christians themselves had ceased to carry out at least some of their traditional obligations. In Raghapuram the dhobi refused to wash the Christians' clothes and the komati refused to sell them corn and oil. In villages further north, Christians were denied their traditional rights of gathering firewood on government wasteland and of digging for fresh water in the bed of tanks during drought.\(^\text{41}\)

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When conversion took place among the Nadars of Tamilnad, their aspiration for upward mobility was met with opposition and soon gave rise to the ‘breast cloth controversy’. In Travancore the breast was bared as a symbol of respect to those of higher class. The Nairs bared their breast before the Namudiri Brahmins, and the Brahmins did so only before the deity, the Nadars like all other lower castes were categorically forbidden to cover their breast at any time.

The dress code prescribed for the Nadars consisted of a single cloth of coarse texture to be worn by females and males alike, no lower than the knee or no higher than the waist. The missionaries objected to this dress code on the ground that it was incompatible with the modesty and decorum of Christian women. In 1814, the government of Travancore issued a circular order permitting the female converts of the lower caste to cover their bodies with a short bodice or just as worn by the women of the Syrian Christian and Muslim Mopla communities. But this proclamation did not meet the social aspirations of the Christian Nadar women. “The Nadars of Tinnevelly wore the breast cloth freely, and the women of Travancore would have nothing less. Thus in addition to the prescribed jacket, or often instead of it the Nadar women increasingly adopted the use of the upper cloth which was worn by the women of higher class.”

By October 1828, the feelings against the Nadars were rapidly rising and the Nairs in southern Travancore began terrorizing the Christian converts. Such behavioral changes according to Duncan Forrester

42 Ibid, Page, 60.
"were often met with straight repulsion from the higher castes, who quite correctly understood that their traditional position was being threatened, and the solidarity of the village as a sacred community destroyed."\textsuperscript{43}

The clashes that the Ao community experienced during the course of conversion to Christianity explain the intensity of reaction of the people and illustrate the tensions that plagued the early Christian congregation. At issue in all these conflicts and confrontations was the nature of Ao identity after the disintegration of once dominant tradition. Religious conversion was seen as a process through which the established Ao tradition was to be replaced by Christian religion. As such conversion created an arena of confrontations in which the Ao traditional sense of identity was reworked through the encounter and the converts came to embody a fusion of several conjoined identities, each refigured in the process of dialogue.

\textsuperscript{43} Forrester, "The Depressed Classes and Conversion to Christianity", in G.A. Oddie(Ed), \textit{Religion in South Asia}, 1977, Page, 46.