Chapter VII

COMMUNAL RITES AS MARKERS OF IDENTITY

Every culture sustains on some or the other rituals that require communal participation not only to socialize its members, but also to bind them with their community to which they belong. Whereas the life cycle rituals construct the gender identity of men and women in different social contexts during the course of their personal lives and make them fit to be the successful members of their respective cultural communities in which they were born and brought up; the communal rites through participation in the respective community rituals enable its participants to develop in them the group solidarity and consciousness. The tribal societies demand communal living to sustain their mundane lives on one hand and on the other, their identities both as a person and as a member of their commune. The communal consciousness and identity emerges out of their respective religion and belief system. Religion through its spiritual ideology and ritual performances gives an identity to its followers, be the lay people or the power groups in the society. The ruling powers, the tribal heads/councils empower their political statuses by enacting as ‘ritual heads’ of the religious performances and also undergoing/celebrating political rituals like anointment as ‘tribal head’ or ‘village council’. These political rituals are always performed in conformity with customs, traditions and belief system of their respective societies. Thus society, religion and state form a matrix in the communal ritual life of the people in Ao-Naga society.

In this chapter the rituals that demand communal participation are categorically studied as (i) socio-religious like Lijabamong (creator of earth ceremony), Tsungrem Mong (god ceremony) and Watsü Merok (cleansing of the village) (ii) Political rituals like Putu Menden. The ritual are analysed and interpreted to show how the Ao-Naga society reflects its core traits - animistic beliefs, religious pantheon, and ritual practices, tribal agrarian and political life - in the ritual process, behaviour and material culture of the communal rites.
Society forms the base of political formations and the political structure in turn reiterates and reinforces socio-economic and cultural norms of people. These two aspects of the Ao-Naga social life are not independent isolates but are holistically articulated in every aspect of their mundane activities. Though Colonial rulers gave the robes of Christianity to almost all the Nagas as a religious stratagem to attain political integration, the core traits, that endure the Naga uniqueness and identity still peeps into their worldview. Nagas in general and the Ao-Nagas in particular till date retain their traditional beliefs and practices, atleast symbolically and represent them in the ritual events celebrated in their familial and communal domains. Thus they preserve the symbols of their identity to endure their cultural continuities and thus establish past-present-future continuum of their societal values and norms.

The Ao-Naga community celebrates a hoard of rituals such as harvesting (aluro), pulling of log drum (Süngkong), construction of Arju (Morung), coronation of new village council (Putu Menden), feast of merit (Kikha süchi) and so forth. Over the years several major and minor ceremonies are being observed as per the demand of the people and society. These are public ritual performances conducted to negotiate the spirits of nature for protecting the society from calamities. Certain rituals like mosü mong/drought ceremony, wara lepdang/prevention of disease and earthquake, Anü sangwa mong/ceremony for daylight, tsüngsang mepong mong/ceremony for good atmosphere and sung naro mong/cleansing of environment necessitates the involvement of whole village where as some rituals like kitsükirong mong/fire incident, menen mong/sanctification require the participation of individual families. It depends upon the nature of calamity the individuals and the society undergo. The Aos believe that such calamities occur due to disorderliness in ritual performances and irregular observance of ceremonies that prescribed to the people and community. The Ao-Nagas, after they got converted into Christianity though they did not observe ‘typical Ao-Naga rituals’ the ideology behind performance of ritual observances still endures in their mindset. For example, ethnically Nagas celebrate each event as a ritual accompanied by feast and drink. Though Christianity condemns intoxicant drinks like rice beer, Nagas offer it to the invitees to celebrate the event. Rice beer is not only a staple beverage but also a marker of their community gatherings. Even now Ao-Nagas spread salt around the houses and put water bowl beneath the cots or doors to ward off evil spirits that disturb the minds of the dwellers. The core belief of
the community sustains the people even in the changing socio-cultural and politico-religious dimensions.

Though Ao-Nagas celebrate several community rituals, in this section a few of them that focus upon their identity formations are studied.

(i) **Socio-Religious rituals**

Society and religion are two essential aspects of any community that form an intricate network to articulate the people with one another and also with the society and polity on the other. Rituals are the media through which such network operates successfully. Social rituals shape the cultures that can create a sense of group identity and further develop social bonds. The rituals give an opportunity to the people and communities to express, reinforce and to spread the shared values and beliefs in their respective societies. Throughout the whole year the Ao-Nagas remain busy in celebrating one or the other ritual to regulate their social roles and behaviour. It is because the Ao-Nagas belief system manifested in their ritual ideology and practices which were rooted in their environment and worldview form the undercurrents of their life style patterns.

**Ao-Naga religion and ritual observances**

Like any other tribal societies of India, the Nagas who consider themselves as part and parcel of the nature are animistic\(^1\) in their religious behaviour. A brief picture of Ao-Naga religion is given in the Chapter II, *An Overview of Ao-Naga Cultural Life*. The Aos deify the elements of nature and worship them to realize their wishes. They are also polytheistic\(^2\) and venerate several benevolent and malevolent gods and spirits, in different names for different purposes. They believe that their lives are regulated by earth, heaven and spirits. They opine that the earth takes care of sustenance, the heaven takes care for life and death and the spirits takes the responsibility of controlling every phenomenon in nature. Nagas believe in supernatural powers. In their worldview these powers exist behind high mountains, in flooded rivers, big trees, stones and in epidemics that threaten the populace. The traditional Nagas conduct animal sacrifices by offering, cows, pig, chicken, birds, and items like food, drink, clothes, etc, to appease their pantheon. The Nagas strongly believe in the existence of
a Supreme Being, a benevolent god that creates everything for the good and welfare of the humankind in the universe.

Hence religion is inseparably articulated with the socio-cultural life of the Ao-Nagas. According to Panger Imchen, “An Ao cannot conceive of a world apart from religion. The whole universe is sacred and filled with gods...Religion possesses ideas and values that are the guiding principles of one’s behaviour.” The religious beliefs and practices of the Ao-Nagas are well-established and organized. The Ao respect and fear their gods (tsungrem) and seek blessings, protection, security and well-being. They also believe that the causes of troubles and suffering which befall in a person’s life or family and the inhabitation are attributed to the action of the evil spirits. So they perform a system of ceremonies by offering sacrifices to keep these deities and spirits in good humour. Mill describes the Ao-Naga’s religion as “not a moral code...[but]... a system of ceremonies... [to appease]... the deities around him who... are every ready to blight his crops and bring illness upon him and his family.”

The domain of religion is highly pervasive as it represents not only the cultural beliefs and practices including moral codes, rituals and spiritual ideologies but also mythology that speaks about the creation, nature and purpose of the universe and the role of a god, gods or other superhuman agencies therein. Further, the origination of the user communities of the particular religious ideologies is linked with their respective pantheon. In other words, the devotees are being linked with gods through ritual observances and practices prescribed in the belief system. Thus the religion establishes an identity with its followers and vice versa. As mentioned above, the polytheistic dimension of Ao-naga religion gets expression in the functioning of gods and spirits in hierarchical order. The following three tables respectively represent (i) major pantheon (ii) Tsungrems, the gods associated with the nature and environments of the Aos (minor pantheon) and (iii) spirits and souls in Ao Nagas belief system. (These tables are prepared basing on the information gathered from folk narratives, personal narratives and exegesis collected in the field work).
Table No. 7.1: The Major Ao-Naga Pantheon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.no</th>
<th>Name of the god</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
<th>Mode of worship</th>
<th>Portfolio</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><em>Lijaba,</em> Creator of the earth.</td>
<td>He stays beneath the earth. He holds the earth between his two hands. He is aware of all happenings and events on earth.</td>
<td>A major ceremony is observed yearly to offer sacrifices and prayers (see <em>Lijabamong</em> ritual in the following pages)</td>
<td>He is causes natural calamities if the people do not perform the rituals that are prescribed to them. He blesses on one hand and Curses/punishes basing on the good and bad deeds of the people.</td>
<td>A special day is observed for him in prayer for protection from natural calamities. People observe ‘thank giving’ ceremony (<em>Tsungrem mong</em>) before the onset of harvest time. The ritual blesses the field after the seeds are sown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><em>Longitsung ba</em> Lord of Heaven.</td>
<td>He is also called, <em>Aningtsungba, Aning</em> – heaven, <em>tsungba</em>– Chief or Lord.</td>
<td>Sacrificial ceremonies are performed almost every day by one or the other in their respective agricultural fields to obtain plenty of rains. (Domesticated animals like cocks, pigs, eggs, etc, are offered)</td>
<td>The god holds power over the heavenly bodies like the sun, moon and other celestial forces like the rains, storms, lightening, thunder, winds.</td>
<td>People observe <em>genna</em> during the times of drought to have a good harvest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><em>Tiar/Tiaba,</em> pre-destiner.</td>
<td>He predicts man’s earthly fortune. He casts spirits of various kinds; some people are not given any spirit so they remain dumb and dull.</td>
<td>There is no fixed ritual but right from birth people offer prayers and sacrifices.</td>
<td>He is both giver and taker of life and futures of the people.</td>
<td>People offer cocks, eggs, pigs etc, to ward of sickness or ill fortunes and gain prosperity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><em>Meyutsung,</em> Lord of death</td>
<td>He is the god of truth and justice. He judges the deeds of the people when they are alive on earth and punish them accordingly after they die. <em>Ongangla</em> his wife assists him to judge people. He remains as silent spectator.</td>
<td>No ceremonies and offerings are given to him because he is the god of righteousness. He has no mercy.</td>
<td>At the gate of <em>Meyutsung</em> every sin are revealed and disclosed for shame and punishment. He judge right and wrong so he does not know forgiveness.</td>
<td>He gives judgement when meets people on face to face at his place.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table No.7.2: Tsungrems, the gods associated with the nature and environments of the Aos.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Name of the deities, spirits/souls</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
<th>Mode of worship</th>
<th>Portfolio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>Tekong Tsungrem</strong>, mountain deity; <strong>Tzuba Tsungrem</strong>, well/spring deity; <strong>Along Tsungrem</strong>, stone deity</td>
<td>It is believed that these deities positively influence their devotees if properly venerate them.</td>
<td>People offer meat or food items. Devotees are supposed to make mistakes which otherwise is considered as a bad omen.</td>
<td>These Tsungrems spirits breaks havoc upon the people through their powers if they are not invoked for their blessings and benevolence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><strong>Yongpang Tsungrem</strong>, spring deity; <strong>Tzutsung Tsungrem</strong>, Deity of lake; <strong>Tzuta Tsungrem</strong>, Stagnant and lowland deity; <strong>Mosakni Tsungrem</strong>, deity of indigo; <strong>Thini Tsungrem</strong>, deity of the uncommon jungle and certain trees.</td>
<td>They are believed to reside in Bamboo groves. Tsungrems afflict the physical body with ailments and wounds.</td>
<td>The illness and suffering happens if the people are captured by the devil deities. During the times of illness, the offerings and sacrifices are being conducted.</td>
<td>These are the lesser in the hierarchy of spirits and deities. They are meant to cause illness and mischievous activities to man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><strong>Atsu Tsungrem</strong>, water deity</td>
<td><strong>Ahlachetla</strong> is the water deity and believe to be the most dreadful deity. This deity lives in the river, lake, stagnant places.</td>
<td>The villagers observed a one day ceremony to offer sacrifices to the deity and as well clean the common village pond.</td>
<td>Patient attacked by this deity does not survive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><strong>Kini Tsungrem</strong>, house site deity</td>
<td>There is no specific description of this deity.</td>
<td>This god is propitiated before putting the first spade on the earth while digging foundation for building a new house to seek (i) protection from evil spirits elements and (ii) getting blessings and benevolence from gods.</td>
<td>The clan patir, priest perform the ritual by sacrificing a cock and the whole family have a feast.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aos also believe that the spirits, ghosts and angels could influence their lives ambivalently showering positive and negative affects upon them. A human being is believed to have personal spirit (*Tiyar*) and a soul (*Tanela/ Temhila*). It is further deemed that a man has three spirits and three souls; whereas a woman has two spirits and three souls. The soul is the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being or animal, regarded as immortal. Whereas the spirit is the nonphysical part of a person that is the seat of emotions and character (the soul). The animist believe that all living
and non-living beings possess souls. In other words, spirits are souls that have passed out of their human body, but for some reason have not left this “illusion” and completed their journey back to the supernatural reality. The space given in Ao-Naga worldview to the spirits and the souls of the human life gets expressed still in their death ritual practices like offering food to the dead in the cemetery or near the death bed (after the death). The following table shows the role played by the spirits and souls in a human being.

Table No.7. 3: Spirits and souls in Ao Nagas belief system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.no</th>
<th>Role of the spirits</th>
<th>Role of the souls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>a. For a man, the three tiyar respectively brings him (i) happiness and good health; (ii) children and prosperity; and (iii) protection. The first two remain at home and the third, the protector follows wherever he goes.</td>
<td>It is believed that every person has three souls, Tanela/ Temhila. One soul is in a person’s eyes. When the person dies, this soul gets released from the body and passes to the land of the dead, i.e. the abode of Meyutsungba. The second soul lives in the form of tiger, wild cat, locust or rat which on the death either dies or escapes death or lives elsewhere. The third soul is a hawk. On the death it flies to the land between the dead and the remaining family members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. For woman, one tiyar blesses her with a husband and children, while the other protects her from illness and unseen dangers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Traditional Ao-Nagas venerate Lijaba (Li means land, jaba means real) the supreme god (creator of earth). They regard him as the creator and sustainer of the earth/world and with everything ‘embedded in’

The community affirms that the earth is the source of life and hence is sacred. They consider the earth as the provider of space, food and other basic resources that meet the needs of people. Symbolically, like any tribal communities, the Ao-Nagas understand the earth to be the spouse of the Supreme Being. The Nagas view the earth and the Supreme Being is inseparable entities. So their belief system and ritual patterns are constructed to appease them in different cultural contexts.

The following myth associates Lijaba with the creation of world in the view of Ao-Nagas

**Narrative 7.1: Lijaba and his creation**

*Lijaba* is the creator of the earth and the supreme god. He created the earth very beautiful, smooth and plain. When he was still in the process of creating the earth, out of nowhere a water cockroach (tsü leplo) scared him by giving false alarm, “Enemies are coming, enemies are coming to destroy the earth with dao and spear.” Then the water cockroach disappeared. *Lijaba* thought that the enemies are really coming. Out of hurry he roughly created
the rest of the Ao land. For this reason, the Aos believe that the land of the Ao is full of mountains and hills and does not have many beautiful plains, valleys and river like the Assam region. The land of Assam looks plain and the place where Nagas lives looks hilly in nature.  

This short myth is still remembered and retold by many people from the community. From the narration, Aos concludes that from the very beginning of the creation there was an evil force whose main intention was to distract and bring confusion. R.C.Tocy Ao interprets the myth: “The water cockroach is not a cockroach but an enemy of Lijaba. The forefathers named his enemy as cockroach. Lijaba was frightened by the cockroach because of the notion that he might rule all the earth. The enemy was there from the beginning before the earth was created. The enemy might be the Assam people because different story tells about the war between Nagas and the Assam people”.

**Ritual process of Lijabamong**

The traditional Aos celebrate the Lijabamong, in commemoration of the creator, Lijaba and the myth is still being remembered as a metaphor till date. Ao’s consider Lijaba as giver of good crops, regulator of the rain and sunlight and responsible for occurrence of natural calamities. The following myth perpetuates Lijaba as the provider of sustenance in the worldview of Aos.

**Narrative 7.2: Lijaba and the two girls**

One day Lijaba, the creator of earth decided to travel to different parts of the earth. After travelling for many days, one evening he reached a village. Lijaba went door to door asking for shelter for the night but all the family in the village refused to welcome him. Everyone has different excuses. Eventually he saw a small house at the end of the village so he decided to go there. He found out that two sisters were staying in the house. When he asked for shelter they welcomed him happily though they were very poor. The girls told him, “We have nothing at home so we are not cooking anything.” But Lijaba told them, “Place the pot in the hearth and warm the water.” The girls obediently did what they were asked to do. Then he started to scratch his knee. From his knee, a grain of rice came out so he put it on the pot. To their surprise the rice filled the pot. Again he told them to boil water. This time when he scratches his forehead, a piece of meat came out so they cooked the meat. The meat fills the pot. They had a hearty meal that evening. After dinner, three of them went and stood outside the house. Lijaba asked them, “Whose field is that?” “They belonged to the family who insulted us” was their reply. Then he started to curse that field, “Let their field never prosper, let their field harvest only tusk.” All the fields were cursed by Lijaba because all the villagers insulted the two sisters. Finally he asked them, “Where is your field.” But the sisters were so ashamed to tell him because it was just a tiny patch of a rice-field. Finally he asked the two sisters, “Whose field is that, that small field in the corner.” They were feeling shy to say but replied to Lijaba, “It belongs to us.” Then Lijaba blessed their field by saying, “Let that field be harvested non-stop.”
In order to balance the nature from disequilibrium people observe it as a major ceremony \textit{(among) Lijabamong}. The ritual rests on the belief that Lijaba sends his spirit, \textit{tanula} in the month of May and June in guise of \textit{sungkok} (grasshopper) to receive thanks giving from the people in return of his blessings poured upon them. On this occasion nobody is allowed to engage in any other activity than this. It is a day of \textit{genna}. It is an auspicious occasion. Hence the leaves of \textit{Tsungpet} are tied outside onto the doorjamb of each house. It is a ‘one day’ thanks-giving ritual to \textit{Lijaba} who showers prosperity upon those who worshiped him. The spirit of Lijaba lives on the earth only for a week and later vanishes. Whoever sees the grasshopper in the field informs to the village chief or the chief priest. The chief priest would perform the ceremony by killing one rooster (\textit{An tepong}) in the village gate (\textit{sungkum}) as a token of thanks giving to Lijaba for sending his spirit to the village which makes the village and villagers affluent. From the next day onwards the village resume its normalcy. The feel of bliss that the villagers get by performing the ritual makes them to rejuvenate their vigour and rigour attend their life core. The following narrative explains the myth behind the celebration of Lijabamong and also mode of worship to be done in this context.

\textbf{Narrative 7.3: Lijaba’s spirit}

In olden days, the people worshipped \textit{Lijaba} as the creator of earth. But nobody saw him. The \textit{arasentsür} (witchdoctor or magician) was the only mediator between the people and Lijaba. One day, \textit{Lijaba} told the \textit{arasentsür}, “I’m not going to live anymore on this earth amidst the people. Instead, I will send my spirit to bless and punish depending upon their good/evil deeds. Whenever I come people will know. So everyone should celebrate a feast to commemorate my name. One should offer a prefect, healthy and complete animal without any handicap or scar upon its body. The meat of the animal should not be shared with anyone. The bone too should not be broken”. So one summer season a grasshopper appeared. Then people thought that it is the spirit of Lijaba and uttered as ‘Lijaba’s \textit{sungkok} (Lijaba’s grasshopper) came’. It remained only for two to three weeks and then disappeared. When the people saw the grasshopper they announced to each other that \textit{Lijaba’s} spirit has come onto the earth. The entire villagers worshipped and asked for blessing from him. Ao folk believe that the grasshopper is the spirit of Lijaba and hence venerated it remembrance of the god \textit{Lijaba}. \cite{15}

The ritual course of the Lijabamong rite is represented in the following diagram No.8. In the diagram, (A) depicts phases ritual course (B) represents Structure of the ritual. In Indigenous model, the entire stages of the rituals that are being observed are sequentially numbered. In the Structural model (B) the series of ritual observance performed in the Lijabamong rite are shown in terms of the Structural models of rites of passage.
Symbolism

In Ao-belief system the grasshopper symbolises the spirit of prosperity. The onset of grasshoppers onto the earth depicts full bloom of the grains, trees, vegetables etc., in the fields. Since it occurs in the month of May and June, it is clear that right after the seed sowing the grasshopper appears. An emergence of the grasshopper shows that the harvest is not far away. The symbolism of the Tsungpet leaves shows that the household is in genna. No one can visit anybody’s house.

Another god, Longtitsüngba which is also called Aningtsüngba (Aning—heaven; Tsüngba—Chief or Lord)/ Lata-zuni Tsungrem (moon-sun god) is custodian of the heavenly elements. He sees that all natural forces get articulated with the solar system. The people in general and the individual in particular over the year observe ceremonies and offer sacrifices for plentiful of rain and special ceremony is taken up.
by the priests for rain during the time of drought. Chicken, pigs and eggs were given at the field altar. After their conversion into Christianity, the Aos substituted the animal-ritual sacrifice with a special prayer for having bountiful rains.\textsuperscript{16} The text and texture of the rituals changed but the spirit of the context remained the same. The people strongly believe that the god would definitely answer to their prayer requests of his subjects. They further advocate that the god can even reorganise the nature of the celestial bodies for the benefit of the devotees. The following narrative substantiates it.

**Narrative 7.4: Moon covered with cow dung**

Once upon a time, the moon was closer to the earth than the sun. So, the moon was warmer than the sun thus causing much heat to the human beings. The people on the earth could no longer tolerate the hot rays of the moon. They complained the matter to Aningsüngba, the god of heaven who could regulate roles of sun, and moon. After listening to them he threw cow dung on the face of the moon to diminish his heat and brightness during the nights. Then the moon felt ashamed with the act and slowly moved away from the earth and the sun. Till today, this story is being narrated by the older people.\textsuperscript{17}

There are many other gods (tsungrems) who have been associated with the environments of the Aos and there are various minor or lesser deities and spirits/souls. The deities on the earth are regarded as lesser to Lijaba and their respective domains on earth are prescribed by him. This lesser deities are explained on table 3: as Kini tsüngrem (house site deity), Tekong tsüngrem (mountain deity), Tzüba tsüngrem (wells and springs deity), Along tsüngrem (stone deity).

**Social rituals**

There are some rituals in Ao-Naga society that require the participation of the community. The priests conduct the rituals. The social solidarity gets reflected through the celebration of community rituals. Hence priesthood, Poti Menden is one of the most important institutions. The priest in the Ao-Naga societal rituals is instrumental in conducting ritual performances and organises the entire ritual process including offerings to god ranging from simple vegetarian foods to animal sacrifices. There were also clan priest who act as a leader during certain ceremonies of their respective clan. The ritual (Among) and genna (Anempong) are observed simultaneously. Among are the days when ceremonies are held, and anempong are the days of purification before and after the among. The ritual of Watsü Merok is
discussed below. It is a ritual observed by the whole village from cleansing the village from epidemics causing different sickness and death.

**a. Watsü Merok (epidemics burn)**

*Watsü Merok* (epidemics burn) is a ritual of cleansing the village from different epidemics which leads to different kinds of sickness and sufferings which sometime claim lives. The ritual was observed to prevent from occurring of illness and infections throughout the year.

**Ritual process**

When the ritual of *Watsü Merok* is performed, *genna* was observed for the whole village. No one was allowed to moves outside the village. The household priest (father/husband) performs the family ritual. The whole family kept themselves clean by taking bath. They also keep the house clean. When everyone is inside the house, the oldest man (*zünza*) of the village walks from one end to the other end of the village gate. He carries a basket with slings on his head and a bamboo stick. He shouts, “Today is epidemics burning day”, and the villagers from inside the house shouts back, “let the epidemics, illness, sickness be burn”. They beat the wall, post, roof, ceiling and stamp on the floor while shouting. As he stands outside shouting, each household priest (father/husband) brings old pieces of cloth, broken baskets, mats, half burnt wood. The old man collects them and burns them on the village altar. A *Somi/shiniu*\(^{18}\), a rare black monkey with a white strife on forehead considered to be medicinal species was given as a sacrifice at the village gate. Then dust and waste were collected and then burn outside their houses at sunset. From the next day, the villagers end their *genna* and continue with their daily activities. The following diagram represents the various phases in the ritual
Before the coming of Christianity, it is observed that socio-religious rituals and practices of the forefather were very costly. For every illness and sufferings, diviners were consulted and sacrifices with pigs, fowls, eggs, dogs, cows and drinks were offered to gods according to the diviner’s prescription. This often led to extreme poverty among the people. In the cases of desperate illness, land and property were disposed off to meet the expenditure for such ceremonies. Consequently, less land or no land were left for the heirs.

II: Political rituals

Ao-Nagas celebrate political rituals because it display the supremacy of the generation (putu) to the community since it is a public affair, the authority and power helps to determine what is politically significant in a community. It represents the past and the future having relationship within the community and religion. The political
ritual is a community ritual where the people participate and raises the possibility for further collective action. Those who participates in the ritual builds commonality among them, emphasizes their distinctiveness from nonparticipants. The community perform this ritual to lend authority and legitimacy. The community is connected with the rulers through the ritual. It creates identity and sense of belonging.

The reinstating of village council (Putu menden) ritual is an important event among the Aos. In the past, the procedure of Putu Menden celebration was very complex with long ceremonies but in the present time, though the celebration is big but it has become very simple. The celebration varies from village to village. There is a replacement of the old members with the new one, and then followed by oath taking which is a serious business. In the past, right after the formation of the village, the Ao-Nagas established a village council made of representatives chosen by the dominant clans. According to Tajen Ao, “As a whole, the Aos have no political organisation but their respective village organisations which are formed on similar patterns from one another represent the political organisation.” The village council of elders is known as “Putu Menden” and the members of this council are known as “Tatar.” Among the Mongsen group, the Council is called Samen Menchen and among the Chungli group it is called Tatar Menden. The village administration is carried on by the Tatars who like the present administrative officers are responsible for policy and the administration as well as dispensation of justice. In the village council only perfect people are selected because he will be the one who will be giving the judgment. Not everyone can be a member of the Putu Menden. For example, a person who has a blood line of stealing cannot go into the Putu Menden. During this celebration all the men are supposed to wear their traditional attire. It is a customary practice that every new comer has to contribute a pig, one each, which will go for the feast and distribution among themselves, especially for the old timers. After the celebration is over the man has to distribute the meat to others for blessings. Before going into the ritual process of the Putu Menden, here are the names and meaning of the Putu (generation).

Names of the Putu (generation)

The Chunglis have five generations, each generation is called Putu and each
Putu (generation) consists of thirty years. The names of the Putus and why the names were called are explained below:

a) Mechensanger: Members who are united.
b) Mepongsanger: Members who are like wind, who go where the wind blows.
c) Kosasanger: Members who has full of complains and jealousy.
d) Rionsanger: Warring members.
e) Medemsanger: Equal strength members.

The names of the Putu start from Mechensanger till it reaches in Medemsanger. After that again a fresh Putu starts from the beginning i.e., from Mechensanger. According to the Chungli Putu Menden system, Tatars live in power for thirty years and at the end a new group of Tatars comes to power ousting the members of the outgoing Putu from office. In Changtongya village, the older generation was replaced by the Kosasanger in 2008 after the completion of thirty years ruling by the Mepongsanger. The succession to Putu Menden is called ‘Putu Atsüngtep’. It is not only meant for transfer of power from one Putu Menden to another but it is also meant for change of a generation which is replaced by another.

In the said village, during my fieldwork, I met a man who was 31 years old who entered into the Putu Menden. He will be in the Putu Menden for thirty years. For the Mongsen group, there is no standardized system of Putu. The government is run by chosen representatives called Samen and the councils formed by Samen are called Samen Menchen.

**Photo No. 7.1:** In 17th November, 2008 when the Medemjanger putu in Longkhum village completed thirty years of ruling the Mejenjanger putu replaced them. The pigs weight 60kgs and above were contributed for the celebration by every new members of Mejenjanger putu.
Ritual process

The ritual process of the Mongsen Putu Menden melentepba (reinstation of Mongsen village council) has been narrated by Toshimeren Imchen. If the kosasanger are in ruling then they inform the Reongsanger, who will be replacing the former, in two years advance to select the Aola and council chairperson wisely for the next Putu Menden. They pass the information by saying that they have only two years left to rule the village so get ready and select the members wisely. This is done in advance because the successors have to know and memorize about the culture and tradition, customary laws, story of Chungliyimti, how headhunting was done by the ancestors and all the rituals and practices. They have to represent the Mongsen group of that village. After the news has been spread, the Reongsanger select their Aola (chairman) and sit for a meeting to discuss about the celebration of the Putu Menden, decide on how many pigs to kill (the legs belongs to Aola and the persons who will enter the new generation and the remaining parts for the people). They also check out the members of this generation. When the succession to Putu Menden (atsungtep) day comes, it is celebrated in Imrong (middle of the village).

Even seating position is well maintained for the two Putus (generations)

On the East: Mopungsanger will sit (they say everything to Kosasanger).

On the West: Kosasanger (the new Putu Menden) will sit.

After the discussion is over, they shift their seats and sit towards the east. Then spear nail (nu asonger) is on the ground by the Aola and discuss about the culture and traditions, customary laws, how village was formed etc., of the Aos starting from the Chungliyimti. Aola will proclaim, “Let this generation be the best and bless with good life till the 30 years is over”. This kind of speech is given by the other Aola also. This session goes on the whole day. After the talking is over, they have big feast. After this, the new putu starts their administration from the next day. After Kososanger term is over, again they will inform the next generation called Medemsanger. The ritual course of the Mongsen Putu Menden melentepba rite is represented in the following diagram No.10. In the diagram, (A) depicts ritual course and (B) represents Structure of the ritual. In A, the entire stages of the rituals that are being
observed are sequentially numbered. In the Structure (B) the series of ritual observance performed in the rite are shown in terms of the structure of the ritual.

Diagram No.7.3: Putu Menden ritual

The ritual process of the putu menden is not so complicated because, all the preparations are done in two years advance. By analysing the diagram it is found that there is no need for another ritual for the new members to get incorporated into the society. Since the members have already received their identity during the liminal period so they are incorporated directly by starting their administration. The separation is a long period (1 to 6) in (B) Structural model.
The councillors in the Putu Menden or Samen Menchen settled all the disputes within the villages according to the customary laws but there are people who are not satisfied with the judgment appeal the Magistrate’s court. In order to judge over such cases, the British appointed certain hand-picked men to act as interpreters and were required to advice the Magistrate on custom. These men are called ‘Dobhashis’ and they have a separate court called the Dobhashis’ Court. Though these officials were not highly paid, they were held in great esteem by the public. Besides, those who were required to be in the headquarters, in every village, Headmen or Gaonburas (small village had just one, but big villages have five to six Gaonburas) were appointed to act as go-between the government and the village. But the village administration is carried out by the council of elders or the Putu Menden. They are guided by a set of well established laws commonly known as Ao Customary law. Though Ao society is egalitarian in character but women were never allowed to be a member in the village council and they even have no voice in the council. J. P. Mills writes, “It is interesting to note that two of the earliest villages founded were ruled by women. One was Sangtemla... and one was the first foundation of Kabza on a site a short distance from its present one.” But it did not last long because they were not recognized as a member of the Council and could not participate in policy making matters and has no privileges.

The above mentioned rituals help us to understand how the Ao-Naga as individual and community participate and construct their identity. Since the socio-religious and political rituals are inter-related, one can notice how these three are inseparable by studying the Moatsü Mong (seed sowing festival) of the Ao community.

**Moatsü Mong (seed sowing festival)**

Moatsü is celebrated in the spring season when the villagers have finished with seed sowing. They pray for blessings upon new grains in the field and also for protection of crops throughout the season. Every community is aware that right after the seed sowing is over Moatsü festival starts. So there is no need for the village heads to inform community. It just automatically falls on the fixed date as the family and the villagers has store and prepare foods in one month advance for the
celebration. The women folk get ready with the dress to wear for the festival. They make sure that everything was ready before the festival starts.

Photo No. 7.2: Celebrating Moatsü festival

Moatsü festival

Moa, is an open field or street, and tsü, to go round; meaning to go round the open streets with singing, drinking and dancing. Both men and women including children participate during this festival. Among all the ceremonies, Moatsü is the only occasion in which there was not much taboos, gennas and ethical restriction.

Ritual process

For the first three days, anempong was observed strictly from sex, travel, and no hard works etc. On the first day, Sungpen (firewood) was collected for cooking, new fire was made for this purpose, and sites were cleaned. The family and the community start preparing for the festivals. On the second day, yati (major day) the people kill a pig, cow or cattle according to the status of the family. Meat is disturbed among the relatives, family, friends, zunga (stage) from the Ariju. Even outsiders were given meat. Then people dressed themselves with their full attire and the inaugural feast began with the beating of the drum. On this festival the rich men and warriors show their status through their attire. The women folk recite poems and sing songs for them. The rich will serve rice beer for those who came to sing song for them. Every khel Ariju members have fun time dancing and singing. During this festival, the lovers exchange gift and sing song for their lovers. It was a time of joy and fun. This festival is normally a festival of young boys and girls where they interact with each other through various activities like singing, dancing and playing.
On the fourth day, a sacrifice was made by the village priest for blessing and prosperity and also for possible sins committed during this festival. But still the whole villagers continue to feast and celebrate dancing and singing till on the fifth and sixth day. On the last day, they play tug-of-war between men and women which brings end to the festival.

On the seventh day, the villagers observed *genna*, while the high priest sacrifice a pig at the village altar as a sign of cleansing of the whole village including their fields and public path leading to the field. Then they resume their normal works the following day.

This festival is still celebrated in the present time but with the coming of Christianity, the *genna*, taboos, sacrifices etc., are not observed but singing, dancing and feast is part and parcel of the festival.

The ritual course of the *Moatsii Mong* rite is represented as following diagram No.11. In the diagram, (A) phases in ritual course and (B) Structure of the ritual. In (A) the entire stages of the rituals that are being observed are sequentially numbered. In (B) the series of ritual observance performed in the *Moatsii Mong* rite are shown in terms of the Structural models of rites of passage.
Moatsü Mong (seed sowing festival) is one of the biggest ceremonies for the Ao-Nagas. In the past, Moatsü was celebrated on different months because the cycle of harvest and sowing depends on the climate and environment as there are different ranges for the Ao-Nagas. With the opening of schools, it became difficult to celebrate on different dates since the students have to attend classes. In order to uniform with them, in 1936 it was decided to celebrate Moatsü from 1st to 3rd May (in the past, Moatsu[31] was celebrated for six days) every year with big celebration and feast. It is a long and big celebration so everything was kept ready for the feast and celebration according to family richness and status. The celebration includes everyone. This festival is a time of celebration so there was not much taboos, gennas and ethical restriction.
In the Ao-Naga Moatsü Mong, the separation period (1 to 2) is a long process. Separation starts from the time the villagers know that the celebration is about to begin once the seed sowing is over. The entire family household has to do some extra preparations and works from the normal time. Till the day comes for the celebration the villagers are in separation period.

Once the celebration starts, the period of liminality starts (3 to 7) of Indigenous model (A). The Moatsü Mong rite includes all ritual behaviour and rituals performed on the festival. The liminal period starts on the day of the festival and goes on till they are incorporated as a new person in the society. The initial three days are considered very important and anempong, genna was observed strictly from sex, travel, and no hard works because the community has to participate for the events. They should be focused in order to observe the rituals properly because the first three days is like a welcoming rite. They cannot start the festival with any mistakes. Everything has to be ready and cleaned. It is a very important day because, the neighbouring tribes comes to celebrate the festivals with the Ao community. This is a time for the rich to show their richness and status to the villagers as well to the visitors. It is a time where the community as well the individuals show their way of life not only to the villagers but also to the outsiders. During the liminal period the identity of the individual and the community are legitimised. Since the festival is a long one, in the process of celebration, the community might have committed some sins and so on the fourth day, a sacrifice was made by the village priest for blessing and prosperity and for forgiveness during this festival. Playing of tug-of-war between men and women concludes the festival.

The incorporation period (8) covers the rite of observing genna by the whole community while the high priest sacrifice a pig at the village altar as a sign of cleansing of the whole village including their fields and public path leading to the field. The villagers are incorporated and resume to their normal activities once the ritual process of sacrifice and cleansing is over.

Symbolism

The rituals symbolically speak about the values that the people attach to the self and to the identity of the community. Following diagram No: 6 shows the
importance of symbolism during the *Moatsii Mong* ritual.

**Diagram No: 7.5. Ritual Symbolism: Moatsii Mong**

Spring is very valuable for it is the time for the people to prepare land and planting crops, thereby providing the perfect conditions for germination. In spring time, the days become more joyful and stimulating while plants grow and flourish. It is the perfect time for the individual and the community to have time to celebrate once the seed sowing is over and give time to germinate. The killing of pig, cow and cattle shows the status of the family and during this time they show their colourful attires and possessions to the community. Only rich can effort to kill such animals and give feast to the community. Since *Moatsii* is a festival for everyone so the young boys and girls expressed their love through songs and gifts on this occasion. The women beforehand make shawl or *dao* holder etc., for their lovers as gifts on this special occasion. Tug of war is one of the important games for the Nagas. It is a game played at the end of every festival. Tug of war is a game to test the strength of two teams.

To conclude from the above, the tribal societies demand communal living to sustain their mundane lives on one hand, and on the other, their identities both as a person and as a member of their commune. The communal consciousness and identity emerges out of their respective religion and belief system. It is observed that the Ao-Naga pantheon consists of (i) major gods (ii) minor gods and (iii) sprits and souls. The hierarchy of gods depicts the social hierarchies in the tribal life. They perform the communal rites to express their special and temporal existence. Even in these rituals, they perceive the period of liminality as a site of preparation and training for
proceeding to the next stage. That is why even in the life cycle rituals and communal rituals period of liminality is designed as citadel of primary identity formations at the family as well as at the society. The prolonged liminality only suggests that it is in tune with their worldview and the structural feature of narrative tradition. The narrative structure reveals the conflict and violence which is resolved only through the elimination or subordination of the ‘other’ as reflected in the practice of headhunting. In other words, identities of the tribes of Nagas are established only by negating the other and preparation for negation is a prolonged process therefore, liminality also remains as a prolonged course.

Endnotes

1 The genesis of the practice of religion when traced to its roots in primitive tribes and societies is often found to rest in some form or manner of ‘animism’, Hokishe Sena, Emergence of Nagaland: Socio-economic and Political transformation and the future, New Delhi, Vikas Pub., House, 1986 p.34.
2 Worshipping or believing in more than one god
33 Panger Imchen, 1993, Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture, New Delhi, Har Anand Publication, p.3.
4 J.P.Mills, The Ao Nagas, Kohima, Directorate of Art and Culture, 1926, p.214
5 One day Lijaba, the creator of earth decided to travel to different parts of the earth. After travelling for many days, one evening he reached a village. Lijaba went door to door asking for shelter for the night but all the family in the village refused to welcome him. Everyone has different excuses. Eventually he saw a small house at the end of the village so he decided to go there. He found out that two sisters were staying in the house. When he asked for shelter they welcomed him happily though they were very poor. The girls told him, “We have nothing at home so we are not cooking anything.” But Lijaba told them, “Place the pot in the hearth and warm the water.” The girls obediently did what they were asked to do. Then he started to scratch his knee. From his knee, a grain of rice came out so he put it on the pot. To their surprise the rice filled the pot. Again he told them to boil water. This time when he scratches his forehead, a piece of meat came out so they cooked the meat. The meat fills the pot. They had a hearty meal that evening. After dinner, three of them went and stood outside the house. Lijaba asked them, “Whose field is that?” “They belonged to the family who insulted us” was their reply. Then he started to curse that field, “Let their field never prosper, let their field harvest only tusk.” All the fields were cursed by Lijaba because all the villagers insulted the two sisters. Finally he asked them, “Where is your field.” But the sisters were so ashamed to tell him because it was just a tiny patch of a rice-field. Finally he asked the two sisters, “Whose field is that, that small field in the corner.” They were feeling shy to say but replied to Lijaba, “It belongs to us.” Then Lijaba blessed their field by saying, “Let that field be harvested non-stop. (information given by Otsufuba Longkumer (M), 73 years old, Longkhum village, interviewed on 18th Dec, 2007).
6 Dictionary, www.google.co.in.
7 www.spiritualhealingenergys.com/terminology
8 The Rengma-Naga believed that Songinyu/Aniza who lives in the sky and is the father of all living things, as earth is their mother but for the Aos there are no such things as mother. The Eastern and the Western Rengmas have different opinion on how the earth was shape. One says it was aniza while the other says it was Ndü or Asükhi. J.P.Mills, op.cit., 1926, p. 165.
Information told by Otsufuba Longkumer (M), 73 years old, Longkhum village, interviewed on 18th Dec, 2007. This narration is also mentioned by J.P.Mills in his book, 1926, The Ao Nagas. In his version instead of water cockroach it is water-beetle. P.220.


Information given by 53 years old, Yaongyimsen village, interviewed on 26th June, 2009.

Information given by Otsufuba Longkumer (M), 73 years old, Longkhum village, interviewed on 18th Dec, 2007.

Information given by Otsufuba Longkumer (M), 73 years old, Longkhum village, interviewed on 18th Dec, 2007.

Information given by Sakunungla Longkumer (F), 55 years, Longkhum village, interviewed on 18th June, 2008.

Information gathered from Toshimeren Imchen (M), 56 years, Longkhum Village, interviewed on 18.06.2008


25 Ibid, p.8

26 http://infomaram.wordpress.com/nagas/

27 Panger Imchen, *op.cit.*, 1993, p. 52

28 Interviewed on 18th Dec, 2007, 73 years old, from Longkhum village.

29 https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=oa.237476886285017&type=1

30 Information given by Otsufuba Longkumer (M), 73 years old, Longkhum village, interviewed on 18th Dec, 2007.

This festival slightly differs from one village to another. This ceremony is narrated by Imtilepzuk Jamir, Interviewed on 24.06.2009, 68 years, Changtongya village.