Chapter Three

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC WORLD VIEW OF AO NAGAS OF NAGALAND

Having defined as well examined Religion and Morality with their independence and inter-dependence of each other in the first chapter and in the second chapter discussing a philosophical study of Tribal culture from the perspectives of Religion and Morality, this third chapter presents an ethnographic world view of the Aos. It ventures to unearth and research the philosophical prospects of the Ao Naga tribe. It strives to examine and represent in a small way our intellectual participation in the life of the Ao Naga.

Let us begin this chapter with the question, who are the Nagas? In order to bring out a greater understanding of the Naga tribe to the world view, various philosophical tenets of the Ao Naga such as the General features, Status of Women, Concept of Life and Death, Understanding of God, Head hunting, Wealth and Services, Morung etc are incorporated.

The Aos are one of the fourteen major tribes found in the political map of the Indian Union. They were the first people to accept Christianity among the Nagas and subsequently the enlightenment. The etymology of the word Ao is a corruption of the verb ‘Aor’ meaning ‘to go’ (i.e. to go across the Dikhu, a boundary river that divides Aos from Sangtam and Phom tribes.). The Aos called themselves ‘Ahor’, with a stress given to ‘Ho’, which in several local dialects means ‘mountain’ or ‘mountain dwellers’. The traditional habitat of Ao Nagas corresponds in the North-Eastern part of Nagaland, mostly in the central Mokokchung District and also few are found in the adjacent districts of Nagaland state. Mokokchung (one of the district in Nagaland) is considered as the native home of the Ao Naga tribe.
I. Ethnography in Brief: -

The Naga people consist of several tribes inhabiting the North Eastern part of India and north-western Burma. The tribes have similar cultures and traditions, and form the majority ethnic group in Indian state of Nagaland, with significant presence in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and some small population in Assam. The Naga speak various distinct Tibeto-Burman languages, including Sumi, Lotha, Angami, Pochuri, Ao, Mao (Emela), Inpui, Rongmei (Ruangmei), Tangkhul, Thangal, Maram, and Zeme. In addition, they have developed Nagamese Creole, which they use between tribes and villages, which each have their own dialect of language. As of 2012, the state of Nagaland state officially recognizes 17 Naga tribes. The Naga Hills have been an area of continued resistance as they had long been isolated from outside cultures. The development of a spirit of nationalism and sense of a common identity are relatively new concepts among the Naga people. According to their traditions, each village is an independent republic; initially, they wanted to be free from all outside domination. In addition, some other Naga tribes occupy territory in the contiguous adjoining states of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh, India; and across the border in Burma. The Naga tribes practiced headhunting and preserved the heads of enemies as trophies through the 19th century and as late as 1969. Generally, the traditional customs of the Naga, as well as their lifestyle, are very similar to those of the “WA” people further to the Southeast and the numerous parallels between the societies and traditions of the Naga and the “Wa” has been pointed out by Anthropologists such as J.P. Mills and J.H. Hutton.184

II. Religious Anthropology: -

The traditional Naga religion is often called “animism”. Animism is the belief in the existence of spiritual beings inhabiting the natural world. Traditional Naga religion is however somewhat different from other forms of religion called “animistic” in that they also believe in gods. All Naga groups know of three types of gods and spirits: a high, creator God (sometimes there are several), the spirits living in the sky, and the earth spirits. But gods and spirits usually interfere only indirectly in human affairs, through influencing positively or negatively the natural cyclical flow of “fertility”. Sacrifices to gods or spirits are therefore done to ask for their positive intervention in order to maximize fertility: good harvests, many and healthy children. Today, 90% of the Nagas are Christian, most of them Baptists. But although the missionaries were deliberately trying to replace key institutions and beliefs which

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184 Naga people://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naga_people
they thought to be incompatible with Christianity, many elements of the traditional religion and worldview are found also among the Christian Nagas. They have merged with the new belief to create something new. Therefore, there is no clear-cut division between them and the so-called “animists”. And the important traditional festivals, especially those connected to the agricultural cycle, are celebrated by both Christian and “animist” Nagas. Even though the spiritual meaning may be different, as a social event they are of the same importance to both. In some villages, Christians also observe “genna” (forbidden), everywhere they consult traditional healers, and the belief in spirits is very common among all Nagas.185

III. **Science of Religion: -**

Christian Missionaries had spread the message of tolerance and love among the native population of Nagaland. Every village of Nagaland has a Church that follows strict religious rituals and customs. The followers of Christianity regularly visit Church and take part in the Services of the religious institution to seek divine blessings of the Supreme Being. Some population of the local indigenous inhabitants still follows the ancient religion of Animism. According to the principles of animism, the followers worship their ancestors who are believed to help them from any kind of difficult predicament. A little proportion of the native population are ardent followers of Hindu, Islam and Sikh religious community. Christianity has taken root in Naga tribes, but it has by no means eclipsed traditional religious beliefs. The Naga religious system features belief in a number of spirits and supernatural forces associated with the cycle of life. Animate and inanimate objects may be regarded as embodied spirits, and there is a distinction drawn between the gods and the souls of dead humans. Supernatural forces are believed to possess both benevolent and malicious qualities and, when occasion demands, Naga belief provides for prayer to be made to them and for their propitiation or challenge by humans.186

A. Who are the Nagas?

Tradition and Culture are the two main conduit pipes through which one can smell the odours and peep into the social, political and religious systems of the people and their societies.\textsuperscript{187}

Nagas are the fine people, of whom their country is proud of them, strong and self-reliant, with the free and independent outlook characteristics of highlanders everywhere, good to look at, with an unerring instinct for color and design, friendly and cheerful with a keen sense of humor, gifted with splendid dances and love of songs.

The Nagas are the ones whose conduit pipes were sealed to the outsiders until the white Christian missionaries changed their hearts thoroughly in the early parts of twentieth century and thereby opened up their sealed covers to a few white writers.

The Nagas belong to the mongoloid group, inhabiting the hilly and mountain regions between the Brahmaputra River in India and the Chidwind River in Myanmar (Burma), in the states of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in India and Eastern Nagaland in Myanmar with population of around 1.5 million.

The Nagas are the tribes living in thousands of villages, many of which are buried in the deep jungles of Indo-Myanmar, speaking more than fifty languages and dialects, formerly notorious for head hunting and human sacrifice, which is almost the only thing most outside world knows about them.

\textsuperscript{187} R.R.Shimray “Origin and Culture of Nagas” (Aruna printing press, B-78, Naraina industrial Area, phase - II, New Delhi), p.1
Originally, all the Naga tribes had their own separate identities. The major tribes of Nagas who were once famous for their head hunting culture are the Konyak, Ao, Angami, Sema, Phom, Lotha, Tangkhul, Chan, Sangtam, Chakhesang, Zeliangrong, Rengma, Yimchunger, Khiamuangan, Mao, Thangal, Maram, Tikhir, Puchury, Maring, Anal, Mayon, Poumai, Mokware, Chirr, Keyho-Kenyu, Lamkang, Kuki, Damsa, Kom, Chiru, Nokte, Tangsa, Chin, Wancha Simpho, Khampti, Haimi, Htangran, Rangpan, Para, Somra, Phevungri, Shangphuri, Mimi, etc.\textsuperscript{188}

There was no term as the word “Naga”. They were known by their own tribe names and their respective dialects. The name was given to them by outsiders who came into contact with them. There are different views and theories by different Scholars, Anthropologists, Sociologists and travelers in regard to the term ‘NAGA’; they expressed their views in varied ways.\textsuperscript{189}

1. One group of scholars opines that the term “Naga” must have been derived from the word “NOK” or “NOKA” which means “Folk” or “People” in some tribal language.

2. Some scholars think that the word “Naga” has evolved from the Kachari word “NANGRA” which means “a warrior”.

\textsuperscript{188} Joseph S. Thong “Glimpses of Naga Legacy and Culture” (Society for Naga Students’ Welfare, Kerela) pp. 17-18.

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., pp. 18-19
3. Another view suggests that the word “Naga” originated from a Sanskrit word “NANGA”, which means “NAKED”.

4. Another view is that the word has come from a Hindustani word “NANGA” meaning “NAKED”.

5. The fifth view says that it has originated from the Bengali word “NANGTA” meaning “NAKED”.

6. The sixth View has been derived from the Assamese word “NOGA” meaning “NAKED”.

7. Another view says that it has originated from two Assamese words “NO”, the shortened from the “Notun”, which means “New” and “GA” meaning “Body”, thereby meaning “new body” or “new man.”

8. The eighth views hold that it has originated from “NANGA SANYASI”, applied to all naked Sanyasis and all naked people in India.

9. Another view says that the word “Naga” has originated from “NOGA” meaning “Snake” or “King of Snake.” This group of scholars opines that the Nagas are the descendants of the serpent.

10. Some say the “NAG” means “Hill” in Sanskrit and the word “Naga” means “Hill Man.”

11. Originally the word “Naga” had been given by the Cachari King Dima of Dimapur, to the Legendary Rengma hero of Chokedonyu village.
R.R Shimray in his book “Origin and Culture of Nagas” states:

The most plausible theory as to the origin of the word ‘NAGA’ is one which has Burmese connection as the Nagas had migrated from Burma to the present hill country. This is supported also by historical facts. The Nagas, men and women, had the tradition of making holes in the ears for ear decorations. The Burmese called that group of people with holes in ears as ‘NAKA’ meaning pierced ears. The anglicized word for NAKA became NAGA. The reason for it is that the Britishers first came into contact with the Burmese since 1795 and with the Nagas in 1832. It is, therefore, obvious that the British explorers heard about the ‘NAKA’ group (pierced ears) of people from the Burmese. Thus, it is sensible and practical to believe that the word ‘NAGA’ originated from the Burmese word ‘NAKA’ which to its logical support has the historical background that a group of people having “holes in the ears” had one time left ‘Chiang Mai’ area in Thailand in the remote past and were said to have gone towards Burma. These groups of people were simply known as ‘NAKARI’ in Thai meaning people with holes in the ears.190

J. H. Hutton gives a clear picture of Naga tribe: “Naga have fine qualities. They are simple, cheerful, colourful, humorous, courteous and hospitable. Nagas are people with a sense of humor and generosity at home, at work and gatherings; laughter is the food of the society and hospitality is over-whelming. Nagas are honest and truthful people, stealing is not common….and they have respect for elders. Nagas are generous but

190 R.R.Shimray, Origin and Culture of Nagas, (Published by Mrs. Pamleiphi Shimray, New Delhi, 1985), p.41.
begging is an abomination. They are healthy, active, vigorous and brave people. The Nagas are well built and enthusiastically looking for a true God and also religious.”

Over the years, in the process of change and modernization, cultural evolution and innovations, cross-cultural contact and cultural diffusions and acculturation process, the beautiful ways of life and the rich cultural significance of the native Nagas are disappearing rapidly. Many of the old natures, habits, conventions, fashions, values, manners and temperaments have changed and have assimilated the new ways and forms of life after the dawn of Christianity in the Naga society.

B. General Features of Ao Naga Tribe

A tribe which dominates Nagaland today both in political and bureaucracy, having high literacy rate amongst Nagas and finally having pride of place in India (particularly since it was an Ao who was the first Indian soccer captain in Olympics) is the Ao Naga tribe.

Ao Nagas are found in the north-eastern part of Nagaland, mostly in the central Mokokchung District and also few are found in the adjacent Assam state. Mokokchung, one of the districts in Nagaland, is considered as the home of the Ao Naga tribe.

The Ao country is a pleasant land with one of long unbroken sloping gently down to moderate streams and is bounded by Dikhu River on south east, the edge of Assam’s plain on the North-West, the Konyak’s in the North-east, the Sema’s and Lotha’s on the South-west.

The Aos are one of the fourteen major tribes found in the political map of the Indian Union. They were the first people to accept Christianity among the Nagas and subsequently the enlightenment. Literacy rate among the Aos is 62% and in general, Nagaland stands at 48% and is reported to be the fastest growing group in literacy in India. The land occupied by Aos is situated in North-West Nagaland and lies between 25°6’ and 27°4’ latitude North of the Equator, and between 93°20’E and 95°15’E longitude. The Ao area is one of the eleven districts of the State, called Mokokchung. Mokokchung district covers an area of 1,615 Sq.km. Bounded by Wokha district in the South-West, Zunheboto district in the South-East, Tuensang and Longleng districts in the East, Mon district in the North-East and Assam in the West. The physiography of the district shows six distinct hill ranges which are more or less parallel to each other and run in the south-east direction.

- Tzurangkong
- Japukong
- Changkikong.

• Asetkong,
• Langpangkong,
• Ongpangkong.

• Tzurangkong Range: These are actually pimples of hillocks thrown at random. They lay adjoining the plains of Assam mostly along the valley of Dissai and Jhanzi Rivers just before they flow into the plains of Assam. These hillocks are densely covered with bamboos and the climate of the entire range is warm.

• Japukong Range: It is the outermost range stretching from north-east to south-west lying to the interior south of Tzurangkong Range.

• Changkikong Range: This is a parallel range east of the Japukong Range. The Changki village was said to be founded by a man named Changki, and so the range too was named after him as Changkikong.

• Asetkong Range: It is a central range running from east to west but compared to the other ranges, it is the shortest one. This range lies between Melak and Menung rivers, and therefore, it resembles an island. Hence the name Asetkong (Aset meaning Island) was given.
• **Langpangkong Range:** It is the eastern-most range skirting along the course of *Dikhu* River. The river forms a natural boundary line of *Mokokchung* with *Tuensang* and *Mon* districts. This range is spread like a bed and so the name has been aptly given to this range. (*Langpang* means bed)

• **Ongpangkong Range:** It is the southern-most range forming an irregular boundary of the *Ao* area with that of the *Lothas* and *Semas* to the south and with the *Sangtams* to the east. It is called *Ongpangkong* as the land is higher and cooler than the other ranges. (*Ongpang* means higher)\(^{193}\)

The Aos are composed of at least four linguistic groups representing:

- **Mongsen,**
- **Chungli,**
- **Changki,**
- **Sungpur**

*Mongsen* dialect is poetic and original. All the traditional songs, poetry, technical words and literary works are found in *Mongsen*. *Chungli* became the common official language because the American missionaries happen to appear in a *Chungli* speaking village and

introduced writing in Chungli. Changki has Mongsen roots and sounds more musical due to a mixture of the Lotha dialect acquired during their migration.\textsuperscript{194} Sangpur used to be spoken in Sangpur Khel, sector of Longsa village and is now obsolete.\textsuperscript{195}

The etymology of the word Ao, according to the local traditions and as observed by J.B. Mills, is a corruption of the verb ‘Aor’, meaning “to go” (i.e. to go across the Dikhu, a boundary river that divides Ao from Sangtam and Phom tribes). Those who did come were called Aor, opposite to Mirir (those who did not come), pointing to Sangtams, Phoms, Changs and Konyaks. The Aos called themselves ‘Ahor’, with a stress given to ‘Ho’, which in several local dialects means ‘mountain’ or ‘mountain dwellers’.

The Aos have a fascinating myth connecting with their ancestral origin in an ancient village called Chungliyimti. Tradition holds that the Aos came out of stones near this village, tracing all the six major clans as having emerged from the six stones called Longtrok.\textsuperscript{196} ‘Long’ means stone; ‘trok’ means six, thus having six Ung (Chiefs) symbolic to the six stones. Both Longtrok and Ungtrok may be used. Ung, Ungr means, Chief ie, six ancestors from six stones. Modern archeologists have unearthed artefacts from this village yielding to the plethora of information about its historical importance. Neolithic cultural remains have been discovered recently in the shape of stones and tools

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid.186, p.20.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.187, p.6.
such as awls, hammers, mullers, whorls, knives, axes, scrapes, flakes, terracotta, smoking pipes of stone, etc. as well as appreciable quantity of mica which was used.\textsuperscript{197}

From Chungliyimti, tradition says, the Aos came to Aonglenden and on their arrival, ten sons were born to the Ao community. Hence, the place was called Soyim. While at Soyim, one of the Ungr was killed by a tiger so Soyim became Ungma, meaning “chief is lost”. Therefore they left this place and came to Koridang, a new site and from Koridang to various parts of the Ao country. According to local research, Aos came to Chungliyimti around 100 A.D. and to Soyim about 1030.\textsuperscript{198}

C. Status of women in Ao Naga tribe

A home is not a home and has no meaning for a man in the absence of its woman. The woman is the initiator of almost every ritual, rite and sacrifice in the Ao Naga society.

The Naga society was patriarchal from time immemorial. However, it does not mean that theirs was dictatorial. It simply means that the male takes the upper hand in the community as in the family affairs.\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.186, p.21.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.186, p.21.
Verrier Elwin states:

*Naga women hold high and honorable position. They work on equal terms with men.*

The father is the head; yet the mother plays an important role in the family. Apart from growing vegetables and educating the children, particularly the daughter in weaving and handicrafts, the mother performs the entire family work by taking care of the children and the domestic animals. She gets up early in the morning although she is the last in the family to retire at night.

A mother in Naga society is considered lucky if she has a baby girl as the first child and of course, the more girls she has, the more relief she gets in doing the odd jobs in the house, for the children are taught to help the parents as soon as they are able to walk independently to the fields. Rest is a luxury for the mother and her husband and a temptation for their offspring. She is as virile, strong and active as men while working in the paddy field too. Hence both husband and wife are co-workers with equal rights and dignity in their own spheres of work.

In bygone days, when head-hunting was practised, women played a vital role in saving the lives of men. A woman was like an ambassador and also a mediator if talented. She

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enjoyed full diplomatic immunity. Nobody could lay hands on her. She was called the peace-maker, the bearer of torch of peace and the Red Cross bearer of Naga inter-village war. Even in politics and diplomacy, women influence directly or indirectly through the village councilors or their husbands. The story of Naga Rani called “Rani Gaidinliu” is found in many pages of historical books of the independence of India.  

The role of women in Naga society is therefore immense. However, there are some social restrictions.

a. Women cannot become a priest

b. Women cannot sit cross-legged

c. Women cannot put her leg on men

d. Women cannot touch spears and shields which are men’s domain

e. Women cannot wear male shawls

f. Women cannot join hunting party

g. Women cannot loosen their hair before the village elders

h. Women cannot inherit the father’s landed property

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202 *Ibid*, p.169
It may be mentioned that the first few Ao villages were ruled by women particularly “Sangtamla” who was known to be one of the famous Ao ruler.\textsuperscript{203} Woman is considered the head of the household affairs. Women have a high place in society, much higher than that in Vedic texts of Hinduism, the Old Testament of ancient Jews, Koranic law, early Greeks and so-called tribals both ancient and modern. Aos are of patriarchal and patrilineal society, major shares of property still go to sons rather than the daughters. Women are not entitled the co-ownership of property with brothers. A girl can be named after her father’s family, but she cannot name her children after her father’s family. However, she enjoys considerable privileges and rights, unlike other tribes among the Nagas.\textsuperscript{204}

In another statement, J.P. Mills, a renowned author also quotes,

\textit{An Ao woman is very far from being a slave and a drudge. Her position is no way inferior to that of men. She always has her clans behind her. If a bad tempered husband bullies his wife, he would soon have a swamp of angry in-laws buzzing around his ears, and his wife would promptly leave him.}\textsuperscript{205}

\section*{1. Inheritance}

An Ao woman inherits property from her mother, sister and aunt. On the death of her husband, she inherits from her husband with her sons in respect of movable property. She

\textsuperscript{203} An interview conducted with one of the elders from Molungyimsen village (Ao village), December 2011.
\textsuperscript{204} Panger Imchen, \textit{Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture}, (Harahan Publications, 1993), p.113
takes care of family welfare in her husband’s clan who are always behind to help her, and her clan for legal protection.

She has the right to possess, increase and so dispossess her own property in the manner she desires. On her marriage, her own property does not merge with that of her husband. On the death of her husband, with minor sons, she is the owner of family property until her sons mature. She can take customary oath for settlement of any dispute. She has legal rights and civil and criminal defense; she can sue or be sued. Her clan always stands behind her to safeguard and defend her rights. Her property inheritance cannot be taken away or absorbed by her husband’s clan even after her death. Domestic animals like fowl, goat and dogs are inherited by the wife and pigs and cows by the male heirs.\textsuperscript{206}

\textbf{2. Socio-Political-Religious aspects}

The Ao woman was never treated inferior to men. From the earliest time, an Ao woman could obtain all basic education just like the men and could be consulted, especially for traditional songs, history, art and culture, festivals and even religious affairs. But a woman was restricted in some ways, politically and socially.

Women cannot become the religious head of her family, clan or the village. So she is debarred from performing religious rites and sacrifices. However, she can assist her

\textsuperscript{206} \textit{Ibid}, p.114
husband in preparing all necessary items to be used in sacrifice such as food and new wine. There were a good number of women who were professional medicine women, diviners, tiger-women and prophetesses who were believed to be more powerful than men and occupied a comparatively higher position in the spiritual world. She cannot participate in public debates or discussions but can council and advise her husband at home to a certain degree.\textsuperscript{207}

The statement made by Haimendorf, provides a clear picture of the Naga women’s’ status:

\textit{Many women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills. Their high status and their family and happy life; and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking on the Nagas as savage.}\textsuperscript{208}

\section*{D. Concept of Life and Death}

Aos are very religious. They believe in a life after death. There would be no doubt of a definite destiny for man in a world beyond as a reward for his life. It is not liberation from his sinful world, but as a result of how life was lived in the earthly sojourn. It is a misrepresentation of the ancient mind of the Aos, to say that the Aos’ concept of life after death is vague. Professor C. Smith has said, “Concerning the future of the Aos, ideas are

\textsuperscript{207} \textit{Ibid.} p.115  
\textsuperscript{208} \textit{Ibid.} 194 p.168
vague, weak and shadowy.”

This is far from the truth. The general concept of a life after death may be understood in the language of M. Horam who says,

*Like all other members of the greatest human family, these wild Nagas believed in the existence of a better world and adored, under different names, gods, the creators of the universe... their notions were in general simple and philosophical.*

*Meyutsungba* is the lord or the supreme judge over every man and all his deeds at death. Terms such as *Meyutsung, Motsung, Mozing* mean the same. Some villages like *Kencha* and *Chungtia*, called *Meyutsung or Motsung* the devil after they accepted Christianity, a deterioration of the original meaning of *Meyutsung* as the God of Righteousness.

Aos believe in a place called *Asu Yim/Diphu Yim*, the village of the dead. When a man dies, the Aos believe that one of his souls has gone ahead and that caused his death. Thus it is observed that a man appears pale and feeble as his days are numbered. After a man dies, one of his souls is believed to linger near the body for six days; five days in the case of a female. During this period, the relatives offer their daily food to the dead and, it is noted, that if the offered food gets stale in a given period of time, it is believed that the dead had eaten and is happy. If the food remains unchanged, it is the other way round and

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so a household sacrifice is held in order to plead pardon from the dead. Surprisingly, this practice does not turn out to be a kind of Ancestor Worship as held in the ancient Korean and Japanese religions.

*Leptsu*, grave falling is a significant omen for Aos. In ancient times, the Aos kept a corpse rolled in a bamboo mat on a raised platform four to eight feet high. This was called *Lepchung*. The corpse was kept in such a way that when the bamboo post rotted, the lower limbs should fall to the ground first. But if the head falls first to the ground, the man was declared to have lived a dishonest life. As there was no teaching on forgiveness for wrong, a man’s future was based on being honest or dishonest and his *Leptsu* was the judgment whether he had lived an honest or a crooked life. So the phrase “let us see your grave-falling” was common among the Aos.

The concept of heaven is depicted in a more elaborate and popular story among the Aos. This speaks of a certainty of a heaven above, in the sky, and not underneath the earth as represented in the philosophy of life after death. A certain story in *Chungliyimiti* (Ao Naga village) goes:

> There once lived a righteous woman called Longkongla. She was a just and upright woman, hospitable and with a love for children and everyone on earth. One day, as she was weaving cloth in her courtyard, a male hornbill passed overhead. As she looked covetously at its feathers, the hornbill dropped one of its tail feathers. She was overjoyed and so she kept it hidden in her kettsu (cane mat box).
The next day the feather turned into a sharpening stone. She kept the stone in the fore-room of the entrance to her house and soon found that the stone turned into a broken bamboo basin and so she threw it outside. That night she found the broken bamboo basin had turned into a baby boy, who was crying. She took the boy and he became her son whom she named Pongtang, to carry on her back.

The boy grew strong and handsome and all the young girls admired him. In the course of time, some of his girlfriends devised a wicked plan out of jealousy and took him to fish in the river. They killed him there. Longkongla came to hear of this plan and she took revenge on the villagers. One day when all the villagers were out in the fields, she killed a big pig and gathered all the children for a feast. Without knowing her plan, all the children went happily and she, having given the feast with pork, closed her house from the outside and then set fire to it. All but one boy was burned to death. As the news spread, that evening, about the tragic killing of the children, the Ungr, chief of the village council called upon all his people to stay at home and kill Longkongla. Having learned of their plan, Longkongla spread all her rice, millet, soya beans and maize round about herself and waiting, wove her cloth. As ordered by the chief, the villagers all gathered with their dao. They tried to kill her but as each approached, he would slip on the rice and beans. Thus, this great woman casually killed all of them with her sword, weaver’s baton.
When evening came, she found herself alone and could not think of living on earth. Therefore, she asked the Aningtsungba (God of Heaven) to lift her up to heaven as she no longer wished to remain on earth. The word came from heaven that this could be done on one condition, which was, that she should not feel attached to all the possessions and wealth. She was warned not to hanker for her wealth and told that she would be dropped back to earth if she still remembered them. She promised to forget as she wished to go to heaven. As she looked up, a rope was stretched from heaven by which she could lift herself up. But, halfway to heaven, she heard all her dogs, cows, pigs, goats and chickens crying. As their voices grew louder, she said, “oh my poor cattles.” The moment she said that, she was dropped to earth never to reach her home again. It is believed that she was dropped and turned into a rock in Molutelang, in the bottom of the Molutzu (ocean).²¹²

The main philosophy drawn from this story is that there is a heaven above the earth where there are no selfish attitudes for wealth. Heaven is totally opposite to the worldly idea of pleasure and wealth. The ethical value that can be drawn from this simple story concerns the righteous and their wicked counterpart; and their destiny. The story is therefore a dramatization of the destination of man according to one’s own life here on earth; the righteous go to heaven and the wicked go to hell. What is more is the

corresponding ethical attitude toward wealth. This is why it is difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God, which is in the teaching of the New Testament.  

For this reason, the Aos lived a very careful life in ancient times even when there was no understanding of the Gospel. It was not strange therefore, for them to hear of heaven and hell, and life beyond death from the Christian missionaries. Rather, it was a confirmation of their ancient concept and belief and the fulfillment of their age-long traditional belief and value system when the Gospel was preached.

E. Understanding of God

The Aos believe in a god above all creatures. Whether there is only one God, or several gods and spirits, is a question of debate even among local researchers. But an Ao would go on naming several gods and their jurisdictions and finally, conclude by saying, “but there is one invisible God from whose eyes no one can be hidden.” This sometimes would imply that there is a big eye which watches man’s honest life and crooked mind, a conscious being that is simply called God. This suggests that the various names are for, but one God named after his various activities at different times as observed by Majumdar, “the Ao Naga believes in one God...Lichaba Ali yangraba Sangram (sic), the creator of the earth including man and plants.”  

The Ao concept of God can best be

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213 Matthew 19:24, ("Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.") King James Bible.
214 S.N. Majumdar, Ao Naga (Calcutta: Sailen Majumdar, 1925), p.21
compared with the Vedic explanation which reads, “The one reality is called by the wise in different ways, Agni, Yama, Matarisva.”

For the Aos, God is always personal, working actively in the nature of the universe. This mysterious and overpowering god (Tsungrem) is fascinating and not reducible to any other power. Before Tsungrem, an Ao stands in fear and reverence and yet, turns to him for protection, security, well-being and blessing.

It is said that while the Aos were at Chungliyimti village, Lijaba, the Supreme Being visited the village in disguise.

A story of his visit goes like this:

Lijaba came disguised in the form of an old man, almost naked, having sores all over his body. He went from door to door requesting for shelter but everyone gave their own excuses saying, “Behold, we wait for the coming of Lijaba,” some would say, “we are observing anempong (Sabbath day) because a child is born to us today and so we cannot have you here.” Again another person said, “We have genna because of the delivery of a calf by our cow today and we cannot allow you to be our guest.” None welcomed him. At the end of the village there were two orphan sisters living in a small hut. They were Yarla and Asatula,

215 Rig Veda 164:46.
216 A village located in Tuensang district, Nagaland. India
daughters of Nokdensanger. Lijaba asked Yarla and Asatula for shelter. At first they thought of refusing him for their poverty. Their house was a tiny thatched home and they also knew that the old man was not carrying anything with him. Thus they said, “We do not have enough food to entertain you, grandfather.” Lijaba answered, “I am carrying enough food for three of us.” The two sisters invited him to their little hut. The old man asked them to set the pot on the fire. He took a grain of rice from his head and put it into the pot. To their amazement it turned into a pot full of rice. In the same way, he peeled a small piece of skin from his knee and cooked it in another pot. This also turned into a pot full of meat. Three of them had a delicious meal that night.

The following morning, the old man casually looked towards the village fields and asked the two sisters to identify the owners of the fields. They named the owners of each field except theirs because their field was so small that they felt ashamed to disclose to others. But the younger sister disclosed it while the elder sister went to get a comb that had fallen. However, her embarrassment was turned into a great blessing. The old man cursed all the fields that belonged to the villagers and blessed the field of the two orphan girls. He said, “Let there be a good harvest.” The old man instructed them to cut string or rope out of their basket when they have enough harvest. Having blessed them, Lijaba left them and disappeared out of their sight. The two girls kept the old man’s word in their heart. The harvest time came. The field belonging to the two girls
had a good harvest whereas others had not. Yarla and Asatula had a rich and abundant harvest that they had no place to store their grains. Then, as instructed by the old man, they cut their basket-strings and to their surprise the harvest was completed. When the villagers came to know what had happened to their harvest, they realize that the old man who had visited them was none other than Lijaba.217

This myth provides a profound Ao-Naga understanding of the Supreme Being and his relationship to humans and creation. The Aos sometimes addressed Lijaba as Longkitsungba, Tiaba and Meyutsungba. When people speak of the Supreme Being in relation to the heavenly elements such as the sun, the moon, rain, lightning, air and the solar system, they call him Longkitsungba. When he is referred to in connection with the fortune of a person, he is called Tiaba, and when referred in relation to judgment in life after death, he is called Meyutsungba. When the Aos talk of the Supreme Being in relation to creation, the earth and vegetation, they call him Lijaba. But for the Aos, there is only one Supreme Being, though people call him by different names according to the different roles he plays. All those names are the functional names of the one Supreme Being, Tsungrem. Since the Aos are an agricultural community, people give more importance to Lijaba though Longkitsungba, Meyutsungba and Tiaba are interchangeably used especially in worship.

O. Alem an imminent author writes that:

*Lijaba* expresses the mundane nature of God, while *Lungkitsungba* expresses the transcendence of God, and *Meyutsungba* expresses the omnipresent nature of God. The Ao concept of God, therefore, present God as one by whose power the past, present and the future holds the “Alpha” and “Omega”. All things exist from him, through him, and for him; he judges all humans according to their keeping of the “covenant” and deeds done on the earth. His presence is both simultaneously transcendent and immanent.²¹⁸

The Aos understand *Lijaba* in two different ways: as a guest at home and as the one who indwells the earth.

### 1. A guest at home

In the Ao world-view, the Supreme Being is seen as being male, and as an old man, though the nature of his work is described as being motherly. In the Ao understanding “Old” implies qualities like “wisdom” and “patience”. He is merciful to those who allow him to enter their homes and invite him to stay with them. But he brings wrath to those who do not welcome him. The coming of *Lijaba* always accompanies unusual blessing as well as curses. Lijaba is the one who pours abundant blessings upon his people. Even a small bit of food, blessed by *Lijaba*, increases in plenty. A useless thing in his hand can be changed into a precious thing or delicious food when he blesses it. When he visits

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humans, he appears to be destitute, but in reality, he has everything.\textsuperscript{219} It is also believed that \textit{Lijaba} sends down hail and storms to punish the law breakers when people break the \textit{genna} and taboos. This is why the Aos were very careful not to displease any stranger lest they might by mistake turn away \textit{Lijaba} and invite calamity.

The Aos do not see the Supreme Being as directing the process of cosmos as an unmovable mover, who is absolute up there in heaven. But he comes, dines and stays with us providing and attending to all their needs. Therefore, for the Aos, \textit{Lijaba} is regarded as one of the family members.

\textbf{2. \textit{Lijaba}, the earth entering Supreme Being}

The other meaning of \textit{Lijaba} is “the one who enters the earth”. \textit{Li} means “earth”, \textit{zaba} or \textit{jaba} means “enter” meaning “the one who enters or indwells the earth.” In honour of \textit{Lijaba}, every year, the Aos observe three days \textit{genna} known as \textit{lijaba za mong} or \textit{Lijaba mong} in the month of March/April, the Ao sowing season. On this day, \textit{Lijaba} is believed to enter the earth just as a vital seed which gets buried beneath the soil and germinates as the life of plants. It is believed that during this time \textit{Lijaba} enters the earth to rise again after three “moons” (means after three days). \textit{Lijaba} enters the earth with the seeds and rises again along with the crops. He is the one who gives vegetation in the land and regenerates the earth by entering into the earth every year.\textsuperscript{220} \textit{Lijaba} is the Supreme Being of fertility like Baal among the Babylonians.

\textsuperscript{220} \textit{Ibid}, p.60.
The Aos see Lijaba as the Creator who is always active, giving life and vitality to all creation. On this day of Lijaba za mong, the whole village observes strict genna. Except fetching water these days, the cutting or digging of the earth, going out of and coming into the village and mutual labour are prohibited.\footnote{L. Imti Aier, \textit{Aor Sobaliba aser Temzung Ozung} (Mokokchung: Author, 1981), p.27.} In the Ao world-view, Lijaba is the one who created and continues to create the earth and thus the earth continues to be a constant source of fertility for the growth of all vegetable life thereby providing food for both animals and humans. Thus, for the Aos, all creation is a manifestation of the Supreme Being.

Since vegetation signifies the presence of Lijaba and the whole of vegetation is perceived as the manifestation of the Supreme Being, the Aos, like other tribals, do not erect temples for the Supreme Being. The whole world is the Supreme Being’s temple. Therefore, in the Ao world-view, creation is the exegesis of the Supreme Being. People experience the involvement of the Supreme Being in terms of his continuing acts to create, sustain, provide, pastor, nurse, heal and save. The Aos considers that the rich harvests, prosperity and wealth are bestowed by Lijaba.

3. Understanding Tsungrem

Like various other tribes of North-East India, the Aos believe in the existence of one Supreme Being, Tsungrem. He is neither spirit nor deified ancestor.
He is the creator and the sustainer of man and the universe. He is everywhere, near and “beyond man’s reach”. He is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. Thus the “wholly other” and mundane nature of God is important in the discussion on the Ao understanding of the concept of divinity.

The Ao concept of God is greatly influenced by the historical, geographical, economic, social and cultural factors. The Ao religion recognizes the reality of man’s existence as life in “flesh and blood” and his relationship with God, community and the things around him. He is aware that the kind of life he lives in this world will determine his future life. He has neither power nor opportunity to alter the condition in that future life. He knows that God shall reveal his deeds, rewards and punishment.

E.W. Clark, in the Ao Naga Dictionary states:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Tsungrem, a general term for deity, of which Nagas have many. The Tsung} \\
\text{in Tsungrem may be called to zing or Tsing in Mozing and Lungkizingba,} \\
\text{the rem is probably the stem of the arem and means concealed, invisible:} \\
\text{it recalls the name of Ram, one of the great Hindu deities.}\text{222}
\end{align*}
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In 1907, a book was written by Mary Mead Clark, wife of Dr. Clark, the first missionary to Nagaland. This was published under the title, *A Corner in India*. The salient points of Mary’s observation of the Ao belief in God may be quoted here:

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The sun and moon are regarded as deities, and are occasionally worshipped, as are also the spirits officials and ancestors. The three important deities in Naga creed are Lungkeezingba (Lungkitsungba), Mozing (Meutsung), and Leezaba (Lijaba). Lungkeezingba, the chief deity is the god of destiny and is worshipped by the household. Mozing is the king of the spirits of the deceased;...All departed spirits must pass to his judgment seat, where by certain tests their characters are terminated and their future status assigned. Leezaba, although not the creator of the world, is said to have had a part in moulding and fashioning it to its present shape...

Leezaba is an important deity in Ao village worship. He has the power to give good crops or to withhold the rain and sunshine; power to send famine, disease, pestilence, the war; power to permit or cause accidents, small and great.223

Thus the etymological meaning of Tsungrem carries something of God’s inner nature. In other words, the name Tsungrem itself is a hermeneutical language of the Aos, an attempt to interpret God in the language of their own.

Tsungrem, therefore, may be considered as a principal name for God. Names by which God is called in Ao are descriptive of His character, His reality and that He is not an abstract concept. It conveys the purest expression of the Ao religious thinking and their religious experience. God is real to the Aos. God, as He is known, thought of and spoken of by the Aos is an ever present, ever active and ever acting reality in the world.

F. Head hunting

The Nagas were known to the outside world for their head-hunting. Although head hunting is now a thing of the past in Nagaland, yet its importance on the social impacts on Naga system is so deep that no study in Naga social system can be complete without a discussion on head-hunting.

The Nagas say that their fore-parents learned to wage war by watching ants raiding each other’s nest. In the beginning, people fought one another in dispute over land. During war/raids, the villagers who had to stay back in the village were curious to know the outcome of the war/raid. But people who had been to war did not bring anything except the news of victory/defeat through words or mouth, which were not very convincing. Therefore, in order to prove their success, the warriors thought that they must bring some part of the dead bodies, confirming their achievements. Thus, they started to bring knee-cap of their victims, whenever they kill an enemy. Thus, people started believing in the success stories of their heroes from war. After some time, they started cutting the head along with the upper limb, but they found that it just added to the weight to be carried home.
Joseph S. Thong states:

   One day a warrior, while on his way to fight his enemies, saw two red ants fighting each other in the forest. As he watched the fight, he saw one of the red ants killed the other and severed its head which was then carried into the hole. The warrior liked what he saw and so he started cutting off his victim’s head, whenever he made a kill. Others too started appreciating the idea, as carrying the head was handier; this was how the idea of beheading the dead victims started.²²⁴

Head-hunting was the one spice of life and the only way for recognition in Naga village group. They sought opportunity to outshine others only through the warpath. They wished nothing more in life than to have success, first recognized then praised, and finally rewarded by their group. So it was that young men eager to prove their mettle, would long to take a head, bring it home in triumph, to be feted as a warrior, gain the privilege of wearing the coveted warrior’s ornaments and having at last proved their worth and manhood acquire a bride.

Heads were also needed in connection with several religious ceremonies. Whenever a chief’s house or Morung or such similar abodes were being built, a head was needed to appease ancestral ghosts. The taking of heads also, it is believed, ensured good crops,

fertility in women, good luck during hunting and general well-being and prosperity for all, not only in this life but even in the life to come. The taking of heads paid dividends. Thus, the practice of head-hunting was bound up with the social, religious and even the economic life of the Nagas.

After the warriors return from the head-hunting expedition, the whole village observes ‘genna’ (a customary ceremony) for five days by feasting and rejoicing, and for ten days, the raiders slept away from their wives and use separate hearths. If they do not observe this ritual, it was believed, they would never get heads again.

The man who excelled in head hunting had better chance to become the chief of the village in the Ao tribe and Lotha tribe societies or at least, to have a better say in the political affairs of the village in the Range councils of the areas or of the whole tribe. The special impact of the head hunting was so immense that one might have to remain a bachelor throughout his life, if he failed to capture enemy heads.225

Dr. Verrier Elwin wrote:

> It stimulated the crop to grow better, especially when the head was that of a woman with long hair. Moreover the Nagas have always been a warlike race and the warrior, especially the young warrior,

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225 R.R. Shimray, *Origin and Culture of Nagas*, (Published by MRS. Pamleiphi Shimray, New Delhi, 1985), p. 75
who had taken a head held a great advantage over his fellows in attracting the most beautiful girl of his village for marriage. Indeed, it is said that youth who had not taken a head found considerable difficulty in obtaining a wife at all.226

This practice of head chopping was established as a custom in the process of history and had gained recognition as a sign of bravery. It was connected with religious rites and ceremonies. In ancient period, the practice of head-hunting was inevitable because at that time ‘might was right’ and the theory of ‘survival of the fittest’ by Charles Darwin held well. They did this as a call of duty to adjust themselves to their environment, and their very survival depended on it.

The term “Head-hunting” does not mean wanton killing of anybody, because the rule of the hunting is to chop off the head of the enemy only, and not each and every one on whom one can lay hands on. Head-hunting was restricted to enemy heads only. In head-hunting, sex and age had no consideration. The only thing to be considered was that the victim should not belong to the same clan or family, though living in different villages or region. For it is a taboo to lay hands on the head of the clan member.227 The culture of head-hunting was a part and parcel of the lives of the Nagas during the period when all the villages were independent and sovereign; therefore, the village had to be located in a

226 Ibid. p. 75
227 Ibid, pp. 46-47.
secure place on top of a hill for good defence. The cultivators, firewood collection and water carriers had to be protected against sudden raids.\textsuperscript{228}

Randip Kanwar Singh writes:

\textit{Amongst Ao Nagas, a belief prevails that the prosperity of the villages depends on the “Aren” (the spirit of fortune) they contain. Crops, life-stocks, progeny, health and prosperity depend on the quality of “Aren” a village is able to obtain. By head-hunting the village drags the “Aren” of the other villages to itself and thus it prospers.}\textsuperscript{229}

Among the Ao tribe, the famous warrior shawl “\textit{Tsungkotepsu}\textsuperscript{230}” can only be worn by a person who has taken head and giver of “feast of merit”. On the “\textit{Tsungkotepsu}” shawl is imprinted or painted the figure of elephant, tiger, \textit{mithun} (bison), cock, \textit{dao}\textsuperscript{231}, spear and human head.\textsuperscript{232}

Some writers like B.B. Ghosh, in Tuensang District Gazetteer, term the practice of head-hunting as an act of ‘uncivilized barbarism’ and ‘anarchism’. Such a conclusion is biased, when a writer looks down a method of ritual warfare, which at the most, involved the loss of a few lives. Nevertheless, the practice of head-hunting is found all over the world.

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid., p. 47.
\textsuperscript{230} An Ao Naga warrior traditional shawl of Nagaland.
\textsuperscript{231} A long heavy knife of the \textit{Nagas} for chopping and cutting.
When the so-called civilized (advanced) countries wipe out the whole population of a certain area with chemical weapons and look down on another ethnic group for killing a few men with a simple tool and term it ‘anarchism’, whereas destroying millions of lives with chemical weapons are civilized, scientific and a lawful act.\(^{233}\)

The head-hunting culture of the Naga is not a culture of dead but a culture of life, seeking new grounds and new heights, whereby the Naga can hold his head high equal with others without fear.

**G. Ceremonies in Ao Naga Tribe**

The Aos religion is full of ceremonies and sacrifices. There are public ceremonies and household and individual ceremonies throughout the year. The Ao Naga surrounded themselves with a number of regular and irregular, or emergency ceremonies and sacrifices which kept them conscious of being religious. The two most important are *Moatsü* and *Tsungrem Mong*.

**1. Moatsü Mong**

The Aos observe *Moatsü Mong* after the sowing is done and the mother earth begins to show the sign of fertility. Moa means an open field or street, and *Tsü*, to go round; meaning, go round the open street singing, drinking and dancing. This is the main festive

day for the Ao. The term *Moatsü* means ‘Bless’. It provides the Aos the period of recreation after the strenuous job which goes into clearing fields, burning jungles and sowing seeds, cleaning up the *Tsūbu* (Wells) and repairing and construction of houses by elders of the *Putu Menden* (*Putu* – generation, *Menden* – seat) stretching over a week. The festivals, marked by vigorous songs and dances, merrymaking and fun, were usually observed for six days (*trokni*), but are now observed only for three days (May 1-3) without much meaning ever since the dawn of Christianity.

The natural customary practice of the forefathers was competing in making the best rice-beer and rearing the best possible pigs and cow to be slaughtered during the festival. The womenfolk would weave the best of traditional garments and adorn themselves with all their fineries. They would join the men folk in dancing eating and drinking and composing warrior songs. Singing songs in praise of the lovers and the village as a whole was done and the elderly men folk would encourage the young people to be bold and heroic to defend and protect them from enemies as head-hunting was practised during the fore-fathers time.

During this festival one of the symbolic celebrations is where a big fire is lid and women and men sit around it. The best women serve the best wine and meat and make merry. Forecast is made by the righteous men who live by the guidance of the Almighty to see whether good or evil days are awaiting the people. Among the other ceremonies, this is

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the only occasion in which there is no much taboos and gennas and moral ethical restrictions.235

2. Tsungrem Mong

Tsüngrem Mong is known as the Harvest festival. It is celebrated on the eve of the harvest. However, nowadays the Aos celebrate this festival from 1 to 3 August. Prior to the commencement of the festival the Village will declare the Süngküm (Village Gate) closed and free entry or exit is restricted and regulated for the people who do not belong to that particular village.

Panger Imchen states:

This is called “Asemni Amho”, three days Sabbath. This is the last ceremony over the year by all villagers including children. Lichaba, the lord of earth, being the greatest Tsungrem (god) on earth and responsible for crops, rain, seasons, plants and all creatures on the earth, needs the greatest attention from men. Among all the other ceremonies, this is the strictest and holiest one. Any lapse or careless observance of this ceremony surely result in drought, landslides, hailstones, calamity, illness and tragedy that destroys crops and brings epidemics that claim life. The

235 Ibid. 207, pp.52-53
main purpose is for the plenteous crops and health. This is observed in the first week of August Jakmapang.\textsuperscript{236}

Parties of old and young wearing their colourful costumes sing songs and perform dances to express their gratitude to the supreme Power for helping the crops to grow well. They provide the best offerings to the supreme Power for abundant blessings.

These festivals provide opportunities to the budding generations and village stalwart to demonstrate their intellectual skill and physical powers. A handful of young men hold the stage and tell amusing stories about their elders. Peals of laughter greet them and young and old jump in excitement. These festivals are usually rounded off by a tug of war between men and women. Stories are galore that men lose to please their womenfolk. But none has refuted the argument that attracted by charm of their opponents, absorbed by their sweet songs and regaled by their very presence men lose gracefully. The only defense offered is that men have to pull uphill and the women downhill. Whatever the spirit behind this sport, it is a treat to see and an honour to participate.\textsuperscript{237}

\section*{H. Wealth and Service in Ao Naga Tribe}

Obligation to the other is what marbles the Ao Naga society. Wealth is secondary when compared with service and obligation to the neighbour.

\textsuperscript{236} Ibid. 207, p.55.
\textsuperscript{237} Ministry of Communications & Information Technology. National Informatics Centre, Nagaland State Centre, (http://nagaland.nic.in/profile/festivals/ao.htm)
By mere wealth a person gains no prestige among the tribe of Ao, but by spending for the community – “Feast of Merits”.

The ceremony of the Feast of Merits involves different categories. The Ao Nagas had four stages of Feast of Merit:

1. At the first stage, called *Masutsu*, the donor of the feast was expected to offer one red bull, six pigs, two boars and four cows. Supply of rice and wine for seven days, eating and drinking by all the inhabitants of the village was another requirement. It is therefore clear that only the rich could perform this ceremony.

2. The second stage called *ATSUTSU* (Mithun sacrifice) had to be performed within three years after the first feast, in which greater expenditure was involved. In the second series (*Atsutsu*), one Mithun and four pigs were sacrificed and the celebration continued for eight days.

3. In the third series called *AOK KHIKHA* (pig ceremony), as many as thirty pigs and a bull or cow were killed and meat distributed to other villages along the range in either direction. This lasted for seven days.

4. The fourth and the last series known as *TSUMATSU* (Mithun sacrifice) were more or less similar to the second stage. Though many failed, many could repeat it and they said “let my bones rest. I have done all that was expected of a rich man.”

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238 The local name for Bison
One who is exceptionally gifted can repeat the series two to three times in a lifetime.\textsuperscript{239}

The philosophy behind the performance of Feast of Merit is that the performer is honored when in life and after death. The deep philosophy involves here is, however, the sense of generosity and the warm heartedness towards the poor people who are fed on the occasion.

The spirit of feeding the public and sharing of one’s wealth with others was so deep in the hearts of the Nagas, particularly the donors of feast of merit that they did not set apart anything even for their rainy days. The spirit of give-and-take and sacrifice for others filled their hearts.\textsuperscript{240}

On the feast of merit Dr. Elwin wrote,

\begin{quote}
The feast of merit, which bestowed so much distinction on their donor, showed that it was the distribution of wealth rather than its position that was important. And this distribution included everyone, not merely one’s own relations and rich friends, but the poorest and the least important.\textsuperscript{241}
\end{quote}

For the Nagas, life was deeply occupied filled with activity. The heroes and the common men alike were never idle. Nearly every one of them had behind him a long history of life

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\textsuperscript{239} R.R. Shimray, \textit{Origin and Culture of Nagas}, (op. cit). p.113.
\textsuperscript{240} \textit{Ibid.}, p.114.
\textsuperscript{241} \textit{Ibid.} p.114.
\end{flushright}
at feasts of merit or adventure. We may say this feast acts as a check and balance in the society so that none gets too rich to exploit the other.

We may also say when the equilibrium of the balance-economy is disturbed, the feast happens to balance the disturbed economy of its people, so as to facilitate economic equality which is an essential feature for the establishment of calmness and peaceful co-existence.

I. Morung (The Bachelor’s Dormitory)

‘Morung’ in real sense connotes big hall built separately for young men to sleep and keep a vigil against the enemies. A male child having attained puberty no longer slept in his home but moved into the Morung. They slept in groups and spend their times there when they were not engaged in the farm or any other activities. They had to sleep there till they were married.

Morungs among all the Nagas played an important role in educating the people. The form differed from tribe to tribe but their main objective was to impart education in war and in peace. It was compulsory for all young men to become members of the Morung. The seniors carried out the administration of the Morung on the advice of the village elders. Functions of the members were divided among the members according to their age. The junior group was generally entrusted with the task of collecting fuels from the jungle, for use in the night in rainy days.
The intermediate group had the important function of helping the people of the village in distress. They were expected to assist the senior groups in administrative works.

R.R. Shimray in his book “Origin and Culture of Nagas” writes:

*Every village used to have one or more Morungs according to the size of the village. Some villages had more than four or five Morungs and lady’s dormitories. All the young boys, as soon as they reach a certain stage – say between 10-15 years, were compulsory sent to ‘Morung’. They slept there in groups and spend their times when they were not engaged in the farm or any other activities. They had to sleep there till they were married. Sometimes a member who wanted to show their self-control over sex, liked to sleep there for more than a year even after their marriage, maybe out of sheer shyness or to test the chastity of the newly wedded wife or to show that he has more capacity to abstain from sex more than their friends. Even after marriage many of them retain their membership in the Morung.*

Rich or poor, everybody was equal in the membership of the Morung in particular and society in general. Discipline by iron rules of the Morung and elated by the teachings of the elders, the young people turned out perfect citizens.

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Obedience soaked with discipline was the watch-word. In the days when raids and wars from neighboring villages were frequent, an institution like Morung was very vital and essential for the security of the village-state. The young people, by turn, kept vigil throughout the night by guarding the village against the enemies. In the Morung, the dos and the don’ts of life are imparted, together with the art of living. No women were allowed to enter the Morung. Morung is also called as a man’s club-house in Naga villages.

There are different local names used for the word Morung by different tribes. The Tangkhuls called it “Longshim”, the Angamis called it “Kichuki”, the Aos called it “Arriju” whereas Lothas and Semas called it “Jambo” and “Dakha Chang” respectively. Morung has its Assamese origin.244

It is in Morung the Naga boys learn the art of basketry, wood carving, singing, dancing and other traditional arts. The Nagas’ passion for beauty and artistic work inspire them to decorate their Morung with varieties of wood-carving, basketry, etc. Everything that they used and wore conveyed meaning, beauty and their artistic works.

In the Morung, through interaction, an individual learns different skills, beliefs and standards of judgment that are necessary for their effective participation in social groups and also enable them to perform social roles and develop in them the community feeling.

Morung organisation is a process of working together for developing group responsibility guided by the welfare needs. It is through the process of socialization in the Morung that an individual is molded into a social being and sought their fulfillment within the society.\textsuperscript{245}

\textbf{J. Spirit of Oneness in Ao Naga Community Life}

Among the Ao Naga tribes, individuals know no other life except that of community life. The individual has no existence apart from the community. The communist principle “he who does not work, neither shall he eat” is a very strong Ao Naga principle too. All must work and participate in the community work, may it be house building, feast of merit or harvesting. They worked hard in the fields and in the home. In every work, there were competition between man and man, woman and woman. The weak and the strong work together in a line, the weaker ones in the corner and the stronger ones in the middle so that the stronger ones may cover the portion of the weaker ones. The sense of pride and charm of belonging and devotion to one’s group is note-worthy. In each festival, whether for the dead or the living, what were essential were the participation of the whole population and the synchronization of the ceremony so that there was uniformity and public order in the various social functions. There was, thus, sharing of sorrows at the time of sorrow, and sharing of joy at the time of joy.

\textsuperscript{245} Joseph S. Thong, “Glimpses of Naga Legacy and Culture”, (op. cit.), pp.79-80
Indeed, it is hard to earn social recognition, even in today’s society, except through hard work. It was a virtue with the Ao Nagas. Each hard period of work was followed by festivals which provided ample relaxation. In the community life, every individual was given equal opportunity and rights and there was absolutely no discrimination of any kind based on birth, wealth or rank. There was no difference between the rich and the poor and no caste system and class system. It was a classless society and the rule of proletariat (farmers) in the Naga community. Life was an accomplished way of life without having the least idea of Marxism and Communism.\textsuperscript{246}

The spirit of oneness and the corporate fate of the community as a whole made them good citizens of the village-state. The “community life” steered the ship of the Ao Nagas so well through the many social and political upheavals in the last two or three centuries.

Under the community life it was true that for Aos the question was not ‘how long they could live’ but ‘how best they could live’. Life was full and long in the ever fresh mountain air – each one living for himself and for others as organs of the same body.

K. Ethics of Living (\textit{Sobaliba}) in Ao Naga Tribe

Like many other words in the Naga tribal dialects, ‘\textit{Sobaliba}’ is a compound word made up of two words. The first word is “\textit{Soba}” which means “Being Born/the act of being born/Giving a New Life/a bringing into life”.

\textsuperscript{246} R.R. Shimray, \textit{Origin and Culture of Nagas}, (op. cit), pp. 124-125.
It is basically a word which refers to the whole act of giving birth to a new life. The second word is “Liba” which means “The Lifestyle/act of living/character/behavior/attitude”. Sobaliba is derived from the Mongsen dialect of the Ao Nagas. Therefore, to start off with, Sobaliba would basically mean an ethics of living with regards to the society, culture, tradition, environment, nature, etc., which is required in the day to day living of an individual’s life, be it to self or to the community. The Ao Naga society is governed and sustained as a community by the principle of self-sacrifice. This principle is characterized by the traditional etiquette, social manner, honesty, integrity, virtues and much more. It is a socio-ethical principle that forces a person to deny oneself or one’s own wishes for the sake of the community; or lose oneself for the common cause. This socio-ethical principle is known as the Sobaliba among the Aos. It finds its equivalent in the socio-ethical principle of the Mizos of Mizoram, called the principle of Tlawmngaihna.

In every matter, the Ao rhetoric says, “community first then comes the individual”. The community welfare comes first and foremost. Sobaliba makes this vision a reality. In short, it means a total surrender of one’s life to the cause of the society. The principle of Sobaliba contains in it a wide range of implications for both the individual and community life. Some of the examples are:

1. To extend help, or to be sensitive to the needy, poor, old people or strangers

2. Willingness to share one’s belongings with friends, neighbors and needy people

3. To respect the elders and parents

4. To be unselfish while eating, drinking or collecting materials

5. To speak the truth

6. To avoid false witness, stealing, cheating or robbing

7. Not to commit adultery

8. Not to seek position, power or self-glory in the community

9. To respect and obey the clan and village leaders

10. Willingness to protect the village from enemies by sacrificing oneself

11. To bring up children in the right path

12. To be sociable and cheerful

13. To be hardworking and have a dignity of labor

14. To observe the norms and laws of the community

15. To be hospitable

16. To abstain from cutting of trees without reason

17. To abstain from killing of living beings

18. Participation in community works
19. Willingness to share one’s land with the landless

20. To be serious in everything

All the examples given above shows that Sobaliba is an ethical principle which includes self-sacrifice, self-emptying, total self-denial, preservation, co-operation, honesty, truthfulness, industriousness, vicariousness, tactfulness, sociability, dedication, commitment, frugality, simplicity and sustainable use of resources. This could probably be the reason why Rehthy Keitzar, a famous theologian, says that,

*We cannot explain such traditional code of morals, but these can be understood to some extend in the Christian concept of agape (love) as in (bible) John 13:34.*

Sobaliba is a highly prized virtue and a wonderful philosophy of life which is so rich in meaning and so wide in scope. It is a principle –

a) to be self-sacrificing, unselfish, self-emptying and self-denying, persevering, brave, firm and independent

b) to put one’s inclination on one side and do a thing for helping another person or society

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c) to do whatever the occasion demands no matter how distasteful or inconvenient it may be to one’s own inclination/wishes.

The essence of human beings is Sobaliba and it makes a human distinct from other animals.

The Ao society cannot be sustained without Sobaliba because the moral percepts of this principle make the people to act selflessly in times of calamities and dangers affecting the society. In Sobaliba, the ultimate goal of life becomes living for others. This ethical value of self-sacrifice produced many selfless people among the Ao Nagas in the past. A person who practices Sobaliba is one who has a love and respect for the community and at the same time is sure of where he/she comes from and does not suffer from an identity crisis. If a person practices Sobaliba, he/she can always be proud of his/her roots, wherever he/she maybe and under whatever situation or circumstance.