INTRODUCTION

To underestimate the religion of a people is to miss the proper understanding of that race. As Max Muller said, "It is language and religion that make a people, but religion is even more powerful agent than language". In my dissertation I have tried to show how religion plays a great role in the social and cultural activities of the Ao Nagas and how the deep-rootedness of the traditional religious ideals find expression amidst tremendous cultural changes.

The religion of the Nagas has been termed as Animism. Social scientist have long rejected animism as a suitable description of the total system of belief of any people. Christianity is animistic in the sense that the belief in human soul is an integral part of animism. Ao Naga religion continues to be characterised as animism not only by outsiders but also by the Nagas themselves. It is unfortunate to note that this kind of approach is generally held by those who differentiate religions into 'higher' and 'lower' categories attributing

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{Max Muller, Introduction to the Science of Religion. p. 85. Published by Bharata Manisha 1972.}\]
the higher religions as the only ethical religions. Tylor holds that animism is almost devoid of an ethical element. And tribal religions are termed by many as animism. There is no justification for holding that only the so called higher religions have ethical content. If tribal religions are animistic, then animism has a strong ethical elements, and if it is held that animism is devoid of any ethical element then tribal religions are not to be termed as animism. Both literate and illiterate societies find an element of moral strength in their religion. Durkheim stated that in simple societies codes of social behaviour are necessarily religious rules, the moral constraint of society and its religious systems were one and the same.¹ This does not seem to have been accepted by writers who have claimed knowledge of the Ao Naga way of life. For instance, A.W. Davis observed that the Nagas have practically no religion² and J.P. Mills stated that the religion of the Ao Nagas does not contain a moral

¹E. Durkheim, Elementary Forms of Religious life.
Varanasi, p.236-239. (London 1915)
²A.W. Davis, Census of India, 1891 Vol 1
code and that it is a mere system of ceremonies.¹
Contrary to these observations I wish to state that
the religion of the Nagas, as in the case of other
religious people, is the guiding principle in all
their walks of life, a cohesive force in the social
and political life of the people.

The Ao Naga religion has also been branded as
'Primitive'. But what is exactly to be called princi-
ptive needs greater explanation. For this I have felt
it necessary to give an exposition of religion in
general and the essence of religion as studied by
social scientists who mainly advocate consciously or
unconsciously the distinction between primitive and
advanced religions in Chapter 1. Now, religion is a
matter of adherence to an accepted world view. A
world view of a people is conceived in their religion.
A world view incorporates the ideas and values that
form the basis of a social system. Still a section
of the Nagas holds the traditional religion offering
sacrifices as before with great reverence and fervour.

In their religion awe, reverence, wonder and devotion as expounded by Otto is in response to the gods they worship. The emotional feeling in presence of the supernatural of these people is seen to be more religious than the theologies and the confessions of the organised religious adherents.

An enquiry into the Ao Naga religion would help a student of tribal culture of the region in particular and the cause of tribal research in general. The beliefs of a people embody their philosophy which is the basis of their religious, social, and cultural activities. Every culture has some ideas and values which guide the people's behaviour. Undoubtedly, the Ao Naga religion has no text, no written doctrine, no creeds and no permanent appointed priests. But nevertheless, it is transmitted from generation to generation through tradition as a part of their culture. Here I would like to refer to the social scientists' approach to the study of religion. They study religion as a mere social character of a people. Thus religion and the media of its expressions are identified. And then, as expressions vary because social
set ups vary in form and nature from people to people, age to age, religion is understood to have many varieties. Without compromising with the social scientists' view of religion, I consider their approach to its study to be useful for a closer examination of the Ao Naga religion. Generally social scientists study folklores, ritual and legends in order to understand the religion of the past. Accordingly in the process of my inquiry into the Ao Naga religion, myths and legends are given certain considerations. Myths are symbolic statements about social reality and human existence. They are like windows into thought processes. Myths contain values, law, explanation and theology of the tribal culture, they give insight into what the people believe. John J. Honigmann states:

"Myths affirm the value of the past events, even those unsupported by sound documentary evidence. A social system's value-charged mythology is a distillation of the past prepared from selected facts and beliefs".

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Ceremonies, rites and rituals are the carriers of tradition and media of religious expressions. Ceremonies make individuals conscious of themselves as a group affirming belief in common symbols.

Rituals successfully function in maintaining cohesion protecting their identity as groups. Religious ceremonies provide the opportunity for the group worship. Rituals are the implementation of belief. A closer examination of the sanction behind every rite and ritual may lead to myths, myths give meaning to the ritualistic behaviour. Rituals are the instruments by which ideas and convictions are renewed and strengthened. Ceremonies and the rituals are the stuff of a religion. No religion can be conceived stripped of ceremonies, rites and rituals. It is disgusting to label these as primitive practices in the case of the Nagas only. It is a matter of fact that round the essence of every religion there gathers coverings of rites and faiths, myths and mysteries, rituals and creeds.

It is not far from reality when certain anthro-
pologists identify religion with rituals. The
religious ceremonies of the Ao Nagas and the
rituals thereof, of course, express their ideas
and beliefs. The ideas and beliefs are depicted
in their social and cultural organizational set
up. With this view in mind, I have emphasised
the importance of ceremonies and rituals with
certain implications in Chapter III. Traditional
ceremonies, rites and rituals seem to be losing
ground and are not getting due recognition in
the present society. But what is interesting to
note is that their essence is not lost, their
influence is still remarkable. For instance, of
those who have embraced Christianity still many
adhere to their traditional rites and rituals
which find almost no meaning in their adopted, so
called, 'higher' religion.

Before attempting a definition of religion
and an analysis of why and how the Ao Naga world
view is a religion in its own right, I wish to
undertake a brief descriptive account of the Ao
Nagas in the introduction.
Ao tradition states that the ancestors of the Aos came out from the earth through stones at 'LUNGTEROK' (six stones) located in the Sangtam area at 'Chungliyimti' (a village) at the bank of Tikhu river. This place is very important for the history of the Ao Nagas. For any study or discussion about the Aos, reference has to be made to the events that took place there. The Aos, instituted their social, cultural and political systems while living at the first village 'Chungliyimti'. For how many years or centuries they lived there is not known. But tradition says that they went to all directions from that place. It is from there that they came and occupied the present Ao Land.

"During many centuries living at Chungli-yimti the population increased to such an extent that there was no room left for settlement and the village was turned into a dry and barren land. The inhabitants consequently began to search for new place to settle in. Batch after
batch moved to the south, north east and the west. Those batches moved down to the north east found their village in the present Ao country'.

The etymological name of the word 'Ao' is that:

"The Ao name is a current mispronunciation or 'Aor', their own word for themselves, meaning, according to their own statement 'those who came' (e.i. across Dikhu river) as a distinct from 'Mirir' (e.i. those who did not come) the term used for Sangtams, Changs, Phoms and Konyaks''.

Those who did not come across the river Dikhu are living beyond that river. In narrating any myth or legend Aos start with 'While at Chungliyinti'.

Some christian leaders and intellectuals were heavily fined for contradicting the traditional view of the origin of the Aos. One of the stones at 'LUNGTEROK' was knocked down by a certain christian preacher and as it is believed he faced

*It is interesting to note that recent archaeological research has discovered many artifacts at 'Chungliyinti' which indicate a date of 3000 B.C.

1 Tajenyuba Ao, Ao Naga Customary Law, 1957 p.11,12.
many a misfortune as a result of his action. Today the place is well protected and preserved by the Government of Nagaland. Today it is a centre of attraction for many, the same place which was once condemned and which the Christian leaders tried to destroy. With the recognition of the customary laws in Nagaland, the importance of 'Chungliyimti' is being felt more and more. The tradition says that there the ancestors of the Aos became enlightened culturally and socially, and the foundations of the administration and customary laws were first laid down there. At present a section of the intellectuals deny that their ancestors came out from stones. But the importance of the first village 'Chungliyimti' does not lose its ground.

Among the Aos there was a free-mixing of the sexes in their social life and in day to day interaction. Nevertheless youngsters from the age of 13 or 14 had separate dormitories for boys and girls. They learnt handicraft and other handwork with obedience
and punctuality. This dormitory for the boys was called 'Arim' (Bachelors' Hall). Irrespective of any social status a sort of military discipline was followed at the Arin. It was forbidden for any girl to enter the Arin. All boys of the village were compulsorily members of the 'Arim'. This was the greatest training centre for the boys. Girls used to have an elderly woman as their matron. Usually the house of such woman was chosen as the dormitory for girls. They learnt spinning, weaving and other handiwork there. W.G. Smith, in his book, 'The Ao Naga Tribes of Assam' rightly mentioned that:

"... christian boys being not sent to Arju destroys a valuable disciplinary agency and causes the boys to lose respect for the authority of their elders".

In the Arin there were different age group with different duties assigned to them. Joint family was unknown. They had village funds and

 communal funds. In the different age grouping they had common funds and once a year every age group celebrated a ceremony with great feasting and dancing. As such, there are even now village lands, clan lands and private lands. Any private property or land if it is wanted to be utilised by the village for common use cannot be withheld by any individual. All disputes are settled by the village councillors and elders. And if some difficult cases could not be settled by the village councillors as per the customary laws, oaths were sworn before the gods. This swearing of oath would be administered by the village elders (priests). This practice of settling difficult cases of disputes is still in force among the Aoś and their judgement is recognised as valid by the governmental courts of law.

One of the characteristics not found in any of the other Naga tribes is the elaborately organised village councils and administrative
networks. Village chieftanship is unknown to the Ao. No caste system is found in the Ao society. Everyone is equal in society in the eyes of the law with equal rights. Dishonest and immoral elders are not allowed to be members of the village council of elders. Aos consider, according to their tradition, the social and political affairs to be holy. A man or woman can put on the colourful costumes and ornaments only when conferred by society for specific achievements (e.g. in defence of the village against enemies, feeding the people by giving feast of merit, etc.). Every design in the dress has significant meanings. The kind of dress one wears and ornaments one puts on showed the status of the person in the society. It is sad to see that all these meanings are lost today, everyone enjoys the traditional costumes these days without relating the same to the meaning behind the different dresses.
In the year 1935 - 1865 more than ten conflicts between the Nagas and the British administrators were recorded. In course of time the Britishers dominated the hill tribes of the Nagas and put them under the 'Inner Line' Regulation Act, where no outsiders were allowed to enter nor settle without the approval of the district Magistrate. This act is still in force in Nagaland. The Naga Hills District was formed in 1866 within Assam.

"The documentary evidences.....prove it beyond doubt that the original intention of the British Govt. of India was not to rule Naga Hills, but to protect the people of the plains living under ordered administration against frequent Naga raids"\(^\text{1}\).

Since 1929 when Simon Commission visited Kohima, the Nagas demanded a separate sovereign state. The struggle is continuing till today. In 1963 the Nagas got statehood within the Indian Constitution with a 16 - point agreement. Since the achievement of statehood, there is considerable advancement in material development with a complex culture resulting in social disintegration.

By and large the Aos were happy, satisfied and united in their traditional religion. The first convert to Christianity (1851) was killed in a village raid by enemies. Only in 1872 the first Christian Church was founded in the Ao land. Since then the christians and non-christian(Those

\(^{1}\)Alechiba, M. A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland. (Naga Institute of Culture) 1970.
holding Ao Naga Religion) live side by side in every village.

Only recently some intellectuals are making an effort to revive the traditional culture for the stability and integration of the Ao Naga society which the church opposes. I am firmly of the opinion that cultural revival cannot be achieved without a simultaneous reappearance of the religion wherein lies the traditional view of life and the world. Tradition lies in the religion of the Ao Nagas. Revival of traditional culture alone cannot take place in isolation without a simultaneous revival of understanding the system and meaning of the ideas and views inherent in the traditional beliefs and practices (religion).

Christianity has brought marked change in the life and the behaviour of many individuals. But apart from that, it has resulted in a sort of fanaticism and extreme spiritualistic movements. This element has created an unwanted division among the Ao christians which in course of time have spread all over Nagaland. To elaborate:- From 1872 there existed only one church in Nagaland. As a result of a Christian Evangelical movement beginning from 1952 the church was divided into several factions. Such a wave of Christian Revival among the converted swept all over Nagaland beginning from the Aos in the year
1976 for about three years. With many fleeting good effects the movement created certain permanent divisions among the christians and a further split of the churches was witnessed. There does not appear to be any feasiblity for a reconciliation. For the Nagas, since christians are 30% of the total population, the church is a great social institution, its influence over the people is tremendous. It is the greatest public platform. But the so many undesirable divisions within has adversely affected the integration of their society in many aspects.

The early missionaries to my observation ignored the deep-rootedness of the traditional Naga culture. To propagate the teachings of Christianity they need not have undermined the prevailing culture. They totally ignored it, branding it as primitive and profane as against christianity and imposed the christian teaching along with certain elements of western culture. That was, in my opinion, the germ of disintegration among the Nagas.

One of the papers read in the 16th Ao Theological Conference, 1980, states:

"Missionaries did many good things for the Aos, but they did some bad things also. They created a destruction in social and cultural life of Aos..... They failed to differentiate the socio-cultural aspect and religious aspect of the life and culture of the Aos. Along with the worship of of Satan
they buried our culture...Because the Ao Christians regarded Ao culture as a sin. They (missionaries) tried to impart Christianity in American culture. This is the first wound that disintegrates our culture. Aos are suffering from this wound till today without finding a healing balm.

As indicated, many of the devout Christians adhere to the traditional way of life contrary to their professed religion. But the number of non-Christian Nagas who are still practicing their own religion, may gradually decrease, then the study of Ao religion will be a study of the past where, I fear, an element of tenability will be lacking.

According to 1971 census the population of the Nagas was 4,092, out of which 39.68% were non-christians holding the traditional religion. According to the Ao Church Association report of 1978, there were 732 families with 63,340 persons among the Aos who were still practicing the traditional religion of the Ao Nagas.

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1L.Kari. Socio-Cultural Religious Analysis. (This paper was not accepted by the Conference and so it was not published).