CHAPTER - IV

The Aos believe that an individual person has many souls: men six and women five. This belief in the nature of individual soul provides grounds for explanation of certain belief about immortality of soul, its relationship with body and certain other phenomena.

Of the several souls, the principal soul is the life giving force of the body. The death of the person occurs when this major soul leaves the body. Taking the shape of astral-body it goes to the 'Asuyim' (Death Village). That soul represents the person's whole being and it will be judged at the 'Nyutsung's court.

The next important soul turns into a hawk and flies away. It is believed that the soul which turns into a hawk resides in the pupil of the eye while alive in case of both males and females. A hawk usually comes and sits at the housetop of the dead person or flies around the house. They believe that the hawk goes to the land of the dead somewhere beyond and occasionally visits the earth. As soon as the person dies these two major souls leave the body, one directly goes to the 'Nyutsung's court and the other turns into a hawk. The other five minor souls in case of men and four in case of women
remain in the body sustaining it till it is decomposed after the death of a person. When the body is decomposed these souls leave the body turning themselves into stones, sticks and insects, etc. It is said that when the souls turn into material objects like stones, etc. the body has already decayed. When a person is sick, the Ao's believe that one of the person's minor souls is being held captive by evil forces. And so sacrifices are offered to 'Taungrem' or god of a particular place to release the soul, so that the person might recover from his sickness.

The Ao's believe that the human body is sustained by the souls. It was a tradition for them to keep the dead body of a person, six days for men and five days for women, in the house, in the past. The dead body was kept in a bamboo platform. During these days the members of the household and loved ones would offer food and drinks to the dead body talking to it as if it was still living. These rituals were done because of the belief that till the body decays, there resides in it some of its souls. After the completion of six or five days the dead body was usually put outside the village where it eventually became part of the earth.

Along with the Ao Naga belief that of man having a

*This practice was stopped by British administrators as it was considered unhygienic by them.
plurality of souls, there is another unique belief regarding the possibility of possession of two bodies by one major soul. Just as it is believed that one of the souls of an individual may be possessed by some evil forces resulting in sickness, so it is also believed that the human soul may possess other bodies like that of the tiger or the leopard. Needless to say it is the exceptional persons, who are nearer to 'Tsungrem' or god who have the power of possessing another body.

There are cases of many persons among the Nagas whose soul has the power to possess tiger's bodies. The common man might think that it is the spirit of the tiger that has possessed the person. But a close analysis of the phenomenon suggests that it is the human soul that possesses the animal. Because it is found that the animal moves and behaves at the will of the person. J.P. Mills enumerated a long account of the fact of the tiger possessed persons using the term 'Tiger-men' with the personal names and village with date and years in his book 'The Ao Nagas'.

**Possession has been linked with mental disturbances or epilepsy by some western writers. But the kind of possession talked of among the Nagas cannot be termed as a kind of sickness. It does not show any symptom which would entitle it to call a kind of physical infirmity.
"He (tiger-man) knows the whereabouts of his familiar (tiger) and if his familiar be wounded, injuries appear on corresponding parts of the man’s or woman’s body... Tsoknungtemshi (personal name) of Unger (Village)... developed ulcers corresponding to the wounds of his familiar’s body and sores appear in his mouth corresponding to the places where a stick has been fixed to keep the dead leopard’s jaw open. He saved his life by procuring another leopard... In 1919 a sick man went to consult Tsoknungtemshi and slept in his house. He woke up to find Tsoknungtemshi talking in a strange tongue to leopard which was sitting by him licking his arm....... Pangermiri (Personal name) of Ungma (Village)... directed to the carcasses the owner of animals killed by it”

At present in my village (Khensa), there are two such tiger-men. Their experiences of the phenomena might appear to us as unbelievable. In 1901 a noted tiger-man belonging to this village died after much jumping and rolling on the ground suddenly when his tiger was killed by Ungma villagers. A man can procure a new tiger if it is killed by someone. But such procurement of new tigers

1 In 1962 underground people requested a group of tiger possessed persons to drive away some policemen from a particular place where they had encamped. The tiger-men took the challenge and every night a band of tigers use to haunt and disturb the policemen. After about two weeks the police men shifted their camp to a distance of five miles.
can only be for six times in total, in other words a man can possess only six tigers in turn, in case of former ones being killed. When the last (sixth) one is killed the man too has to die. In case of women the total number is five.

The possessing soul (i.e. the man) can make the tiger work in his interest. For this reason, it is necessary to point out that contrary to popular fear it is not the animal soul which possesses human bodies, rather it would be proper to say that the human soul possesses the animal body. The animal moves at the will of the person. For instance, in times of war the men who have possessed the tiger soul use the tigers to fight against their enemies. Such cases and records are available in abundance.*

However, it may be remarked that there is a kind of two-way traffic between the tiger and the man. As mentioned, if the tiger is wounded, injuries appear in the corresponding parts of the person's body. If the tiger kills a prey the person who has possessed him vomits out raw meat even

*In 1962 underground people requested a group of tiger possessed persons to drive away some policemen from a particular place where they had encamped. The tiger-men took the challenge and every night a band of tigers use to haunt and disturb the policemen. After about two weeks the police men shifted their camp to a distance of five miles.
when personally he has not consumed the meat at all. The tiger whose body has been possessed is not free to kill anyone or any prey without the permission of the tigerman who in his turn takes permission from the god of the mountain. Those tigers who are under the direct control of the tigermen have an organisation of their own. It is said that these tigers gather together at a mountain called 'Firong' once a year. This mountain is not in Ao area. It is said that in the assembly of the tigers ordinary tigers are not allowed to attend. The possessed tigers have a discipline and a government. The eldest among them is usually their chief. They communicate in a language of their own. This leads the Aoos to believe that animals have language. The tigermen, who possess the tigers, can communicate with each other in an unknown dialect among themselves. The tiger-men from quite distant tribes having completely different languages meet the talk in the strange dialect.

In 1979 an old man who possessed a tiger fell sick. The cause of his sickness was diagnosed as due to his tiger's being wounded by some hunters of another village. Sores appeared in his body corresponding to the injuries on the body of the tiger. The tiger in the forest became critical and the man also fell seriously ill. The cause of the sickness was revealed by the other tigermen of the same
village. The sick man was very old. All kind of medical treatment was given but to no avail. The other tiger-men offered to treat him, because they said that they knew of a kind of leaf in the forest, by application of which the sores and the injuries of the tiger will be cured and as a result the healing of the old man's sickness was assured. But unfortunately, the sick man had two sons, who are top ranking church leaders, and they did not allow the tiger-men to treat their father (Although he was a non-Christian). After a month-long sickness the old man died simultaneously with the death of the tiger in the forest. The other tiger-men deeply regretted being not allowed to cure their friend.

The Aos believe that animals have souls but the animal souls are regarded as inferior to the human soul. They believe that animals were, in the beginning, with man. The superiority of human soul over the animal soul is substantiated with the belief that the tigers whose body is possessed by man is under his control. Such tigers in their turn direct the other ordinary tigers in the deep forest. To kill a prey, to take revenge against someone, to challenge a fight - all these activities of the tiger is controlled by the soul of the man inhabited in the tiger.
W.C. Smith wrongly observed about the Aos that 'Concerning the future his ideas are vague, weak and shadowy'. As I have mentioned earlier the Aos tried to live a good moral life acceptable to the social customs and norms because of the fear of the conceived, miserable state of the soul in the hereafter. The idea of man's existence after death is based on the idea that soul survives the body. The departed souls live in the hereafter very much as they had lived on this earth. The only difference is that there is no social organization and sexual passion over there. It is believed that they live a happy life without any cares and problems. Such belief makes the people face death with less anxiety and with a sense of comfort.

"The Aos apparently do not fear death. They seem to accept it as a part of the programme which must be followed. At first there is some wailing by the women but that also seem to be a part of the regular schedule and must occur. The mourning however is short duration....and enters into task of preparing symbol which are the display to the world that what a noble man was he."

The departed ones do not as such influence the living but the behaviour of the living, it is believed,

2 Ibid p.108.
has an effect on them. For instance, when the word or the wishes of the ancestors are not valued, they are grieved and as a result of that the living do not prosper is their fields and related activities. It may be noted that the departed do not have any direct relation with the living. They have no power to bless nor curse the living. The point is that the unhappiness of the dead caused by the untoward behaviours of the living ones can deprive them of the blessings of their ancestors. This belief is only a projection of a common belief among the Aos that if a man causes someone else to grieve, he cannot prosper in life, because the 'Tiar' (Fate)* will not take kindly to such behaviour.

People are not afraid of the ancestors' souls, who have left the society but nonetheless always watch over the survivors, wishing them the best while living. The memories of the dead gradually fade away but the rituals insure continued interaction with them. The ancestors are believed to be lonely in the next world. It is said that they wish the living ones to join them earlier than the date which the 'Tiar' (Fate) has set for them. Hence they are in need of persons to construct a big house in the land of the dead to accommodate all those who will

*Tiar is identified with the God of heaven 'Lonkitsungha'
join them. So certain rituals are performed while worshipping the household deity 'Kituang Tangren' asking the ancestors not to hasten the 'Tian' asking for the living ones to join them. They say "O Father, O mother, do not feel so lonely, we shall all come one by one, bear with us to finish out task in this land of the living."

When crops are bad it is sometimes assumed that some ancestors' grievances may be the cause of such crop failure. Then people perform ceremonies seeking forgiveness if by any means they might have grieved them. They do not worship the ancestors' souls as deities. They consider them as same as while they were living. Hence I object to J.P. Mills's remark that the Aos practice ancestors worship.

On the harvest day the ancestors' souls are believed to have come to the fields and on that day the living ones offer food and drink as if the departed are physically present. Taking of the name of the dead is not a taboo. The name of those who were rich, noble and warriors are given to their descendants with the belief that they also may be like their great ancestors. All these beliefs and rituals are conducive towards social cohesion. And it may be mentioned that such rituals and beliefs are still
adhered to by many Christian Nagas.

For instance, one of the top Church leaders got a baby boy recently. The boy was named after his grandfather with the belief that his son might also live a long prosperous life like his grandfather. Similarly as in earlier days even today, when a person dies farewell speech is given asking forgiveness from the departed soul, almost as if the soul hears. So also continue the practices of putting belongings of the dead man in the coffin. This only goes to substantiate my point that the deep-rootedness of the traditional culture has not been shaken by the religious teachings and confessions of another religion. What has been adopted is not a total cultural system but only a particular theology. The acceptance of theology amounts to only lip-service and seems to have left the ritual and ceremonial part untouched. The Christian beliefs, for instance, claim that material things which are perishable have no place in the hereafter. It is also taught and believed that at the very moment of a person's death, the soul goes either to hell or heaven, and that the living and the dead cannot communicate. These teachings are fully accepted and are believed, without any doubt, to be true. Yet the converted Nagas' behaviour is contrary to the teaching, and non-Christian in essence. This practice one can note is neither condemned nor advised against.
The pride of the Ao Nagas in his own cultural system prevails because of the deep-rootedness of the Ao Nagas religion which has held the tribe together for centuries. The change of modernization, for instance, has undoubtedly been brought but it is interesting to note that the change is only superficial or piecemeal. The additional Christian doctrines are added to the earlier and have not succeeded in completely destroying the traditional. Inspite of the fact that the two are contradictory at various points. The burden of these various instances suggest that Christianity seems to be a mere theology and not a religion to the Nagas. As J.G.Frazer wrote:

"Unless the belief leads to corresponding practices, it is not a religion but mere theology"\(^1\).

Contradictions have brought on other hand a stagnation and degeneration in the society and has not resulted in any spiritual revival.

"Even so faith, if it hath no works, it is dead, being alone. But will thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."\(^2\)


\(^2\) Bible, Book of James 2:17,20.
The traditional belief about the idea of the life after death taught the people to be honest and humble. To be honest and true to everyone and in every aspect of life in the sight of God and the ancestors, is a traditional norm for the Aos. This moral force is found to be weakening among the people today since they are taught by the organised religion to abandon the interaction between the living and the dead. This has led them to become responsible only to God and not to their ancestors. But the ideas of the ancestors and intimacy with them is definitely clearer than the idea of a God for many person.

Embracing a different religion has not succeeded in uprooting the deep-rootedness of the traditional beliefs. It may be cited, for example, that when a high level of spiritual revival swept over Ao Christians beginning from 1976, certain diviners and visioners appeared. They started to communicate not only with God but also with the dead ones namely the ancestors who are believed to be somewhere is heaven or hell, now this is erroneous according to Christian teaching. As noted above much doctrines and practices are not in accord with Christian teaching and belief. Such incidents were, no doubt, an unconscious reappearance of the traditional ideas and belief that are handed down from generation to generation in the traditional culture.