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Land Ethics and Eco-Management among the Ao-Nagas: With Special Reference to Changki Village

The Aos are a major tribe of the Naga group of people. As far back as the people's oral history recalls, they have been a land-based agricultural society. The different villages were established on strategic sites; on hilltops, surrounded by arable land and most importantly near the permanent water sources. The bond to the land and its resources, therefore, has played a vital role in defining their attitude to it and evolving the tenets for its management have been incorporated into the Ao way of life for centuries, as is the case for other Naga tribes.

The traditional way of life of the Aos has always revolved around the land: taming its wild nature and harnessing its bounty for sustenance. Thus, it is not surprising that the collective psyche of the people developed not only a deep sense of attachment to, but also a reverential attitude towards it. This sense recognizes that nature has a pattern or law of its own which has to be respected if man has to live in harmony with it. They have also understood that nature is not a mere storehouse of resources at human's disposal, to be utilized and exploited at will. The Aos have always believed that the earth or land is sacred because it has a spirit of its own which animates the different elements. This is reflected both in practice as well as in language. For example, there are sayings like, 'The land never lies' or 'The land is truth' or 'The land is God'. Such figures of speech are used mainly during land disputes when the litigants are cautioned to be truthful. There is a superstition among the Aos that whoever lies about land boundaries or ownership, or bears false witness in such cases, great calamity will befall either him or his family. In the olden days if a land dispute could not be settled by the village council in a satisfactory way, the parties involved were made to take an oath known as 'eating the land', in which each party would take a fistful of earth, lick it and say 'I eat this earth', to signify that he had told the truth in the hearing. The ruling of the council would be that if, within a stipulated period of time, usually a month or 'one moon' any calamity befell either of the two, he would be proven wrong and the case would go in favour of the other party. Such was the belief in the sanctity and power of the land. There are

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