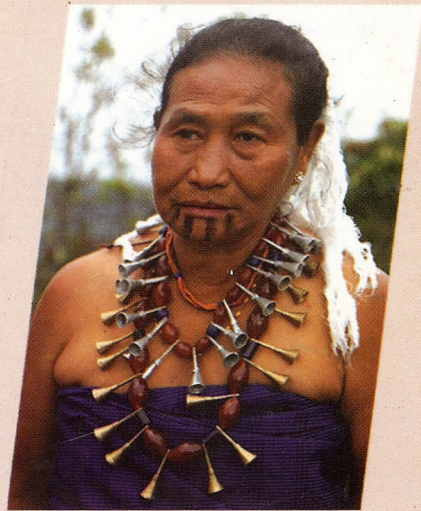




**THE**  
**AO NAGA**  
**TRIBE OF ASSAM**



W.C. Smith

A Mittal Publication

# THE AO-NAGA TRIBE OF ASSAM



**WILLIAM C. SMITH**

*With an introduction by*

**J. H. HUTTON**



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## INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING to the proverb, "It never rains but it pours," and though we have waited long for a monograph on the Ao Nagas, yet while Professor Smith's manuscript was first in my hands, the manuscripts of two other treatises passed, or were passing, through them. Each of the three contained material absent from the other two, and all were written from different points of view. The author of one was a Hindu doctor, of another a British official, of this, the third, an American sociologist, who had been a missionary in the Ao country. The first-mentioned of these three manuscripts, a short account of the Aos by Dr. Surendra Nath Majumdar, M.B., has, I hope, already been published in India during my absence on furlough.<sup>1</sup> The longest of the three, a most exhaustive and authoritative account of the tribe by Mr. J. P. Mills, is just nearing completion as Professor Smith's monograph goes to press.

While it is to Mr. Mills' work that we shall ultimately turn for a detailed account of the customs and beliefs of the Ao tribe, the importance of Professor Smith's work is firstly the comparative point of view from which he has approached his subject, and more particularly in his treatment of the sociological problem which the acculturation of the Ao tribe presents. Although up to now no one of the monographs published by the Government of Assam has attempted to throw much light on the subject of acculturation, there can be no question but that the greatest service which an anthropological study of a "backward" tribe can perform for the people studied is to aid officials and educationalists in the measures to be taken and to be avoided when the tribe in question has to be brought into any scheme of modern administration.

<sup>1</sup> This has been published in *Man in India*, Vol. IV., Nos. 1 and 2 (March-June, 1924).

The cynical view that in any case it matters little what is done, since an uncultured people is sure to perish when brought into sudden and intimate contact with civilization, is scarcely more disastrous than the view that whatever is regarded as good by or for the human product of the latter-day West must *ipso facto* be good for a pre-literate folk accustomed to totally different conditions of life, and must therefore be thrust upon them as quickly as possible. Captain Hocart, in a witty paper on "Psychology and Ethnology,"<sup>1</sup> which is full of value to the practical anthropologist, touches on the evils wrought by the two schools of thought, which he describes as the "damn' nigger" school and the "little brown brother" school, and the latter school he regards as the "more insidious because it is kinder in intention." Any treatment of the question, therefore, which is likely to help us to guard against causing unforeseen evils, of which we cannot know, by our groping attempts to remedy those we think we see, is of the greatest value to us, and still more to the tribes whom we are trying to benefit. It is in this respect, as it seems to me, that Professor Smith's monograph is of most value. We are too apt to blunder in like fools where we should tread, if at all, in an angelic fear of the results our most cautious ministrations may produce, and this volume contains<sup>2</sup> material to show us something of the nature of a problem the very existence of which has in the past been all too little recognized.

We have also been given in this volume such a sketch of the Ao tribe as was necessary to the appreciation of the ethnological and sociological matter contained in it. The author and myself do not always agree on all the points raised, either of fact or of inference, and he has therefore sometimes included a dissenting note of mine on the grounds that, as the last word on some of these questions has not yet been uttered, it is better to give both opinions, and in this, at any rate, I am in agreement with him. The subject of the Ao tribe is one of great complexity. My own view is

<sup>1</sup> *Folk-lore*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2, June 1915.

<sup>2</sup> I refer in particular to Chapters VII and VIII.

that the tribe affords a pretty clear case of the comparatively recent fusion of two racial groups, but that it is most unlikely that either of these was even approximately pure when the fusion took place. The Mongsen Aos probably represent in a greater degree the pre-Ao population of what is now the Ao country, and although there seems to have been a more or less complete assimilation physically and psychologically between the Mongsen and the Chongli groups, a distinction between the two survives to a considerable extent in language and custom. The Mongsen appears to be more nearly related to the Konyak tribes of the north-eastern Naga Hills, whereas I suspect the Chongli of stronger affinities with the Sema, the Kuki and the Manipuri. Probably the Shan element is present in both groups, for it is likely that the Shans penetrated at a very early date into Assam, and that there were Shans there long before the Ahom conquest. The later-comers, however, are perhaps preponderatingly Tibeto-Burman (the Kachins are still spreading southward into Burma), while the earlier inhabitants seem to have comprised, apart from the aboriginal negroids, an element which may have been Dravidian, but was not Mongolian at all.

Professor R. B. Dixon of Harvard University, in analyzing the composition of the Khasi,<sup>1</sup> finds four main factors in the population of Assam, viz. the Brachycephalic-Leptorrhine, the Brachycephalic-Platyrrhine, the Dolichocephalic-Leptorrhine and the Dolichocephalic-Platyrrhine, which he conveniently abbreviates as B.L., B.P., D.L. and D.P. The B.P. he regards as Austro-Asiatic in origin and as having pressed into Assam from the east and north-east, bringing with it the Mon-Khmer language stock and driving back and in part assimilating the D.P., the earlier and aboriginal negroid population. The B.L. type he regards as Alpine, which has pressed south from the Himalayan region and the great plateaux of Central Asia. The D.L. factor he looks upon as Aryan and the latest of all to penetrate Assam.

<sup>1</sup> "The Khasi and the Racial History of Assam," *Man in India*, II. (1922).

These conclusions agree well enough with local tradition in so far as it is definite enough to build on. Many tribal origin stories point to the south-east, and the Mon-Khmer element survives in the shouldered hoe,<sup>1</sup> for instance, now of iron, but once of stone, and in occasional traditions. Such a one is that of the chief who caused his female servants' heads to be shaved so that their hair should not fall into his food, thus originating a clan whose women shave their heads all their lives. This story is told of a clan of Konyak Nagas, and is recorded by Scott and Hardiman<sup>2</sup> as a Palaung story, the Palaungs being of Mon-Khmer stock. The language of that stock also seems to survive in occasional Naga words, such as the Konyak *am*, meaning "stream." I suspect, too, that the use of the buffalo in the Naga Hills, both as a domestic animal and as an emblem in carving, is to be associated with this Austro-Asiatic stock, as also the practice of terracing (I do not imply irrigation necessarily) the hillsides, and perhaps of making permanent settlements in villages with shifting, but not migratory, cultivation. It may be added that the circular tonsure of the Ao and of some other Naga tribes seems to have extended at a comparatively recent date from Siam to the Ganges valley.<sup>3</sup> The Kuki type, whether it be Alpine or not, is clearly a later arrival, and seems to have come from the north down the Chindwin valley<sup>4</sup> and then pushed westwards through the Chin Hills<sup>5</sup> and Arakan, whence it came northwards again into Tripura, the Lushai, and Naga

<sup>1</sup> V. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, p. 12; Peal, "Traces of the Kol-Mon-Sham" (*J.A.S.B.*, 1, of 1896), and Hutton, "Two Celts from the Naga Hills" (*Man*, xxiv. 2, Feb. 1924).

<sup>2</sup> *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States*, I. i. p. 492.

<sup>3</sup> V. La Loubere, *Royaume de Siam*, I. 102, and illustrations at pp. 90 and 154; Ralph Fitch, *Travels in India* (Hakluyt).

<sup>4</sup> Fryer, "Note on the Khyeng People of the Sandoway District, Aracan," *J.A.S.B.*, No. 1 of 1875.

<sup>5</sup> Thus the Maring Nagas of Manipur seem to link up with the Angami and Tangkhul Nagas and the Poi Chins on the other, according to their own traditions, suggesting that a body of Kuki-Chin people may have been thrown off near the Kabaw valley in the course of the migrations down the Chindwin and have penetrated across the Manipur valley to the Assam side of the watershed. My authority for the Maring traditions is information supplied by Mr. C. Gimson; cf. also *The Angami Nagas*, p. 112.

hills.<sup>1</sup> It has thus possibly confused the local origin myths by adding fresh traditions of a south-eastern origin. There are, however, an appreciable number of origin stories which point directly to an origin from the north-west from the far bank of the Brahmaputra river,<sup>2</sup> showing that there has certainly been immigration from that direction also, irrespective of the Chindwin valley immigrants, who, as the Kachins, are still pressing south, or, as the Thado, still trying to penetrate north again. I believe it to be a Tibeto-Burman factor associated with this immigration that has substituted the mithan (gayal) for the buffalo as the principal domestic animal, and been responsible for carvings being spoken of as "mithan heads" though they represent palpable buffalo horns.<sup>3</sup> The Thados, as we know them, clearly have much that is to be associated with the Mon and Tai, but are distinguished from the elements that preceded them in the Naga hills by being essentially migratory, and practising a vastly more wasteful method of cultivation, though in arts of manufacture they are ahead of the Naga tribes

The last of the immigrant peoples in Assam, according to Dixon, are his D.L. factor, the so-called Aryans, and it seems possible that it was this element that brought in rice and irrigated cultivation, perhaps adapting it to pre-existing terraces such as those still used by the unadministered Konyak tribes, who are unacquainted with the cultivation of rice, but have millet as their staple cereal like the hill tribes of Formosa.<sup>4</sup> It may be added that in another part of the Konyak country taro, as in the Pacific, is the staple food. Dixon, however, regards this factor as having had virtually no influence in Assam racially except among the Syntengs, but one wonders whether further investigation of the Angami and perhaps of the

<sup>1</sup> V. Lewin, *Wild Races of S.E. India*, pp. 21, 73, 74, 76, 82, 138.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mills, *The Lhota Nagas*, p. 3; Hutton, *The Sema Nagas*, p. 378.

<sup>3</sup> It was Mr. Henry Balfour who first pointed out to me that many of the carved "mithan" heads, so called, in the Angami country were obviously derived from the buffalo type, though I have come across the converse of this, an obvious mithan head being spoken of as a buffalo.

<sup>4</sup> McGovern, *Among the Head-hunters of Formosa*, pp. 183 sq.

Manipuri might not lead to the conclusion that the D.L. factor is as strong in their areas as in the Jaintia Hills. It is perhaps worth notice in passing that the Angami method of treating and planting out rice seedlings, though differing from that of the intermediate Assam valley, is identical with the system used in Maimansingh in Bengal.<sup>1</sup>

The negroid factor, indicated, no doubt, by the thick lips and frizzly hair often seen in individual Aos, is, according to Dixon,<sup>2</sup> shared in an equal degree by the Khasi, Manipuri, Mikir, Kachari, Abor and Miri, though in a less degree by the Naga tribes, while the Alpine element he regards as more or less equal in all these tribes, including Nagas, though less prominent among Kachins and Shans. The Austro-Asiatic type he considers to be present in a much greater proportion than it is in the Khasi (despite their Austro-Asiatic language), in the Ao Naga, the Mikir, the Kachari, Tippera and Kuki tribes, together with the Chakma and Magh of the Chittagong Hill tracts, and all the Burmese peoples.

The net result of this is to conclude that the Ao tribe is composed of a substratum of Negroid with Austro-Asiatic and Alpine elements superimposed, and although I do not feel convinced that it contains the whole story, it is a very plausible conclusion, based as it is upon anthropometrical data, but agreeing with what we are able to infer from the historical, traditional and ethnological material available. Incidentally it links the Ao more closely than other Naga tribes with the Khasi on the one hand and with the Manipuri on the other, a conclusion which, in the latter case at any rate, is supported by the striking similarity between the physical appearance of the women of the two tribes, while the cephalic indices of Naga tribes taken by me<sup>3</sup> show that of the Ao as appreciably higher than that of the neighbouring tribes measured. In passing it may be noted that the Shan title *T'sawbwa* appears in the titular names

<sup>1</sup> My authority for this statement is a personal communication from Major J. L. Sen, I.M.S., M.C., who is acquainted with the methods used in both Maimansingh and the Angami country.

<sup>2</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Angami Nagas*, p. 437.

*Chaoba* and *Choba*, so common among the Manipuris and the Aos respectively.

The affinities of the Ao, however, go much farther afield than the continent of Asia. Professor Smith has shown the Ao connection with Indonesia, but it goes further than that too. The anthropology of the Ao offers a number of strikingly close parallels with New Guinea and with Fiji, and with the Pacific generally, the resemblances being rather with Melanesia than with Polynesia, but extending nevertheless to New Zealand, and possibly even to South America. It is not possible to go into the evidence for these affinities here, though there is some hope of making a start in Mr. Mills' forthcoming monograph.

It was high time that a beginning was made of studying the Ao tribe, for it is changing very rapidly, and the younger generation, sophisticated and self-sufficient as it is only too apt to be, sets small store on the wisdom of the ancients, so that customs, traditions and beliefs are all being negligently allowed to slip into oblivion. As may be inferred from Professor Smith's monograph, it is clear that the change is by no means entirely for the better, and it is yet a matter for discussion whether the good there may be in it even outweighs the bad. We may, however, be permitted to hope that the light thrown on the question in the pages that follow may help, if not to turn the scales in favour of the former, at least to read the balance truly and estimate shortcomings.

The Aos are pleasant people to live among, very hospitable, and with a strong sense of humour. Conspicuous, however, among their weaker points is a certain captiousness, which causes them to strain at a gnat where they will on other occasions readily swallow a camel if need be, a disposition which inclines them to unnecessary litigiousness in petty matters and a pettifogging spirit in religion, bickering over by-issues instead of settling their differences amicably. The same rather pharisaic spirit is to be seen in the Manipuri, who is a recent convert to Hinduism, and who displays, as a Hindu, the same sort of captiousness that the Ao shows as a Christian, and will burn down his house as defiled if a

white infidel lean a bicycle against it, an act of super-Hinduism quite uncalled for from a Hindu in many respects distinctly lax. It may be that all this is merely the old and satisfying plan of compounding for sins we are inclined to by damning those we have no mind to, but I am disposed myself to regard it as the result of some particularly pragmatic tendency inherent in the race. The Chang tribe and the Angami tribe are noticeably different in this respect, and in the latter the same sort of dispute, arising out of differences in religious practices between the Christians and the Ancients, rarely seems to come into court.

Otherwise, the Ao, as I have said, are a very pleasant folk, and although they can be at times exasperating, the task of an official working among them and settling their disputes is an enviable one, lightened as it is by their friendliness, hospitality and humour. The day never passes without some "source of innocent merriment" arising, and I may perhaps fitly conclude this introduction with an instance of the sort of happening that enlivens routine.

Horses before the British occupation were unknown in the interior of the Ao country. Recently, however, there has been a boom in ponies, for shortly after I left Mokokchung in 1917 the head interpreter there bought himself a pony to ride, and his example caught on quickly. Among others who followed it was an Ao interpreter named L—, who, having bought a terrible old screw to start with, determined to sell it and buy a pony that would be of some use. Simultaneously the pastor of the village of Ch— obtained authority to buy him a horse the better to serve the spiritual needs of his flock, concentrated as it was at the top of a precipitous hill, and to demonstrate himself a person of importance and socially "in the swim." Hearing that L— had a pony for sale he went to see him. "Is it true," says he, "that you have a pony for sale? And what might the price be?" "I have a well-trained and very experienced pony," says L—, "and the price I am asking is only eighty rupees." He had paid Rs.60 for it when he bought it. "Be content," says the other, "take an hundred and ten, for, sure, 'tis the Church will pay for him, not I."

“Well now,” says L——, “I couldn’t take a hundred and ten for him, and he not worth it, but let you give me ninety.”

The ascent to Ch—— is very steep, the weather was very hot, and when asked to carry his new owner up the pony dissented, so he was led. Half-way up he lay’down. On this the flock was called upon to carry him in. They fetched long bamboo poles, tied the pony to these, and the new owner arrived in triumph on foot with his pony borne before him like the ass in *Æsop’s Fables*. The unfortunate animal died next day, but not before it had at least done its share towards relieving the monotony of life in a Naga village.

J. H. HUTTON.

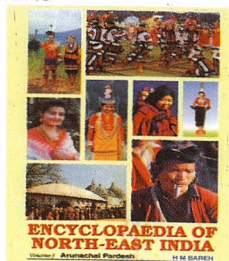
This volume is the first comprehensive study of the Ao-Naga Tribes of Assam. It deals with the Habitat and general characteristics of the people personal appearance and artificial adornments, domestic life, social organization, religion and magic, the place of the Ao Nagas in the human family and the changes through contacts with more advanced peoples. J.H. Hutton in the introduction to this book says, "The importance of Prof. Smith's work is firstly the comparative point of view from which he has approached his subject, and more particularly in his treatment of the Sociological problem which the acculturation of the Ao tribe presents. Although upto now no one of the monographs published has attempted to throw much light on the subject of acculturation, there can be no question but that the greatest service which an anthropological study of a backward tribe can perform for the people is to aid officials and educationalists in the measures to be taken and to be avoided when the tribe in question has to be brought into any scheme of modern administration. We have been given in this volume such a sketch of the Ao tribe as was necessary to the appreciation of the ethnological and sociological matter contained in it. The author and myself do not always agree on all the points raised, either of fact or of inference. The subject of the Ao tribe is one of great complexity."

As a whole this volume describes the life of the Ao Nagas, set them in their proper place in the human family and indicates the processes of both personal and social disorganization and reorganization observed among them due to their contact with people who have moved farther along in the scale of civilization than they.

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