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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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lores among the people how such 'eating the earth' oaths upheld the truth about land ownerships. This however did not always happen, but since a village is a small, tightly knit community, where historical truth is common knowledge, the people believed that sooner or later the wrongdoer would be punished even if he had won the case in his lifetime through falsehood. Therefore, one sometimes hears remarks like, "This family is suffering in this manner because their grand-father or great grand-father lied during a land dispute and they are being cursed by the land".

If on one hand, the land taught the people an ethical way of life, on the other, it also helped them evolve a practical system of eco-management, which eventually became the foundation of self-governance. The first step towards the people's ecological awareness was the recognition that the land needed to be protected and nurtured because their very existence depended on its resources. Secondly, they also realized that they had to maintain harmonious balance not only between man and nature but also between man and man, the users of the land and its resources. The people's endeavours, therefore, were not only directed towards a harmonious co-existence with nature but also maintaining honest dealings with fellow men.

Traditional religion of the Aos also played a vital role as it assigned spirits to natural objects like stones, rivers, mountains and forests and even to homesteads in the villages. Given an ambience like this, it is no wonder that the task of eco-management was informed with spirituality and was carried out with a reverence and respect for the environment. Village life is community based and, therefore, the task was incorporated into the system of self-governance which is continuing till today.

Before going into the details of the topic, it would be essential to briefly acquaint the readers with the basic social structure of the people and the general rules of self-governance. The Aos are a patriarchal society and the clan divisions are crucial to all aspects of life. Marriage, representation to village institutions, land holdings and all other matters of village concern are defined on the basis of clans. The main clans among the Aos are **Pongener**, **Longkumer** and **Jamir**. The focus of this paper is on some specific aspects of eco-management, namely, Land Management, Water Management, Protection of Home sites, and Forests.

Land

For the Aos, the traditional rights of possession of village land or home-steads are for all times to come, which begin from the very first day of establishing a village. The first arrivals at a particular village site or the founding clans would obviously have the pick of home sites as well as the surrounding forest areas for cultivation. The claims thus established become the inalienable rights of the clans for perpetuity. Though latecomers were accepted into the fold of the village, they would obviously get only the 'left-over' or inferior sites and forests. Therefore, the founding clans, by virtue of their land holdings, enjoy a superior status in any Ao village even today.

While settling in new sites, each village would stake out vast areas of surrounding forests by identifying natural phenomena like rivers, big stones, a range of high mountains or any other easily recognizable natural landmarks as boundaries. Traditionally, neighbouring villages would always recognize and respect the sovereignty of the particular village over the land within these boundaries. In such areas, there are three types of landholdings: (i) Village holdings, (ii) Clan holdings, and (iii) Individual holdings.

In Changki village, which we have identified for this case study, the three types of holdings, mentioned above, are distinguished by the following terms:

1. **IMLU** or village land. Such areas are the collective property of the village and anyone wishing to cultivate any part of it or use any part of its resources has to obtain prior permission of the village council.
2. **TUKHUTI** or clan land. Each clan owns some defined areas within the village boundary to which the first founding fathers of the clan had staked their claim on arrival at the site. Permission to cultivate or use its resources has to be obtained from the clan elders.
3. **LENCHET LU** or individual land. These are virgin forests within the village boundary which have been cleared and cultivated by individuals first, with due permission from the village authority and thereby earning ownership rights. Such lands are recognized as individual holdings and will remain in that family for all time. The clan to which the individual belongs also has no claim over such holdings.

It is in the management of land dedicated to growing of crops that one can see the elements of native wisdom regarding the environment. For generations the Aos have followed the practice of 'jhum' cultivation to grow their

staple crop which is rice. This method involves clearing of a patch of jungle every year and burning it before rice is planted. There is no doubt that in the process, the jhum area does get impoverished because it is depleted of its vegetation and the top soil.

Contrary to popular perception, the people were aware of this fact, and also understood that in order for the land to replenish itself, it had to be allowed to lie fallow for a number of years. So they evolved a system through which successive areas were allowed to lie fallow after one crop cycle so that the land could renew itself. Since such a practice is followed within clearly demarcated village boundaries, the system runs smoothly. The fallow period in the cycle differs from village to village depending on the size of their land holdings. On an average, the cycle used to be between 10-15 years.

The actual process of jhum cultivation as practiced in Changki village

Each year's area of cultivation, known as **POK** in the Ao language, is chosen very carefully. As the time for the clearing of the jungle approaches, men belonging to a particular age-group called **AZU AKHANG**, both junior and senior members of the group, are sent to survey and select the area for the year's 'pok'. Wherever possible, a 'pok' is chosen between streams which form natural barriers against fire. Then again some areas may be below a saddle between two ranges of hills. The whole exercise is undertaken with the precise aim of controlling the fire when the 'pok' is burnt.

After choosing the area, the proposition is brought before a general assembly of the village. If the designated area appears to be inadequate, the assembly can decide to add some more areas for the purpose. When the issue is finally settled by a consensus, a date is set for the felling of trees and clearing other vegetation. This announcement is made by the village crier at night throughout the length and breadth of the village.

After the selection of the 'pok' comes the distribution of plots to families. A particular year's 'pok' can contain all three types of holdings discussed earlier. In cases where particular clan areas have not been covered in the 'pok', they can, with the council's permission cultivate village lands. Further, they can also enter into deals with other clans whose lands fall within the 'pok'. However, this can be done only after the clan's own members have been allotted adequate portions for cultivation. The year's 'borrowers' are required to pay a nominal tax in the form of some paddy called **LUMELEN**

at harvest time, or in lieu of that, half a rupee, so that ownership of the land is never disputed.

The distribution of jhum land within each clan is done on an age-wise seniority basis, the senior most members getting the first choice. This is done to ensure that they get plots nearer the village and therefore do not have to commute long distances daily to and from their fields. As a result, the youngest members invariably get the plots farthest from the village.

Clearing the Pok: Clearing of the selected areas of all vegetation, trees, bushes and tall grasses takes place in the month of January and these are allowed to dry thoroughly for a month or so. It is during this slack period that the villagers are able to avail of 'station leave' as it were, and go to the plains of Assam to earn some money by working as labourers in the tea gardens or in any other unskilled jobs. This leave period is called **INGKHU** which can be for 20 or 30 days depending on circumstances, at the end of which every villager is expected to be back in the village. Defaulters have to pay a fine called **INZANGLEM**. During **INGKHU**, which is generally in February, some villagers are required to stay back in the village to do general guard duty called **MEZET-MONGBA**. The council pays them appropriate daily wages as compensation.

Buffer Zone Against Fire: The 'pok' is now ready to be burnt and the most important task for the villagers before setting it on fire is to create an adequate buffer zone called **MERUKPHET**, so that the fire is contained within the area to be cultivated. This zone is usually 15 feet wide constructed of bare earth around the area to be burnt where there are no natural buffers like streams or high mountains. The construction of this zone is first inspected by council members and if found unsatisfactory, the workers are fined and made to do the work again. The date for burning of the 'pok' is announced by the village crier and villagers are instructed to remove anything of value like timber or bamboo they might have collected in their plot. Before starting the fire on the appointed day, another loud announcement is made to clear the area so that no straggler or stranger is caught in the fire. All able-bodied villagers tend the fire until all the dried vegetation is reduced to ashes. After this all roads, main and subsidiary are cleared by an order of the council and wherever necessary, steps, bamboo or wooden bridges across streams and marshy areas are constructed. Only then, each family erects a temporary shed within their plot for cooking their meals and shelter during inclement weather.

There is another type of buffer zone known as **SAJEN** which is constructed

to keep wild animals away from cultivated areas. The onus for this falls on those farmers whose fields adjoin the jungles. They have to clear an additional area beyond their boundaries wide enough to keep the animals at bay. In spite of such precautions, depredation by animals is a usual occurrence because different varieties of rice used by the villagers ripen at different times and hence there are different harvest schedules. In order to tackle this problem, in Changki, the council decreed that only those varieties of rice which had more or less similar period for ripening should be used. This way, when collective harvesting was done, there were fewer chances of depredations by wild animals.

There were also certain other norms which were to be strictly followed from budding of rice stalks to harvest. This period was to be kept holy and untainted to ensure a good harvest. For example, food items like young bamboo shoots and crabmeat are considered to be harmful for budding rice stalks and are not to be brought near them at any cost. Even in the affairs of the village polity, no cases of disputes are to be adjudicated, because it is believed that such incidents create bad aura, which drives away blessings from the fields. If there are some unavoidable emergencies, the council may sit only for bare discussions, but final judgment and punishment are deferred.

During actual harvest too, there are certain norms to be followed. For example, if some of the ripened rice stalks of a farmer falls into the area of another, the latter is to leave that bunch alone as it belongs to his neighbour. If accidentally, he happens to reap it, he has to leave the sheaf on his neighbour's boundary to show that it was an accident. But if he fails to do so and there is a complaint from the other farmer, it is treated as a theft case, no matter how small the amount of paddy involved and appropriate fines are imposed.

Water

One of the earliest songs from the oral tradition of the Aos is about the discovery of water by two brothers. The people celebrated the event with great rejoicing and afterwards, on the advice of a seer called **ONGANGLA** the water source was consecrated through a ritual of worship. Beginning with this first practice, worshipping at well sites became a part of the traditional religious ceremonies of the Aos. Though such rituals no longer exist, the spirit of this tradition still abides, because safeguarding the sanctity and purity of water sources has become ingrained in the general framework of social duties and responsibilities of the people in the villages.

Unlike the concept of ownership regarding land, water management is administered on the principle that water is common property and that no one should be denied access to its source in the village. Thus, in every Ao village there are several permanent springs which supply drinking water to the people and each village has well-defined rules regarding the proper maintenance of the wells so that at all times the water remains fit for human consumption.

Wells : In Changki village the wells or 'tsubas' as they are called in the Changki dialect, are identified by the names of the 'kiyongs' or wards in which they are located. Incidentally, Changki is divided into two sectors known as **IMPANG** (upper) and **IMLANG** (lower) khels. There is an interesting lore about a well in the upper khel known as **Aingri Tsuba**, which means 'foreigners' well'. According to this lore, once upon a time a neighbouring village sought refuge in Changki to escape hostile attack from a stronger village. The 'foreigners' were given shelter in the upper khel, and not only that, one well was set aside for their exclusive use to ensure adequate supply of water for the 'guests' of the village. This well identified as **Aingri Tsuba** still exists in Changki.

In order to illustrate the strict management of water sources, some examples of the rules pertaining in Changki village regarding wells are cited below :

1. The area surrounding the well is to be kept clean at all times. No one is to throw any garbage, like dead animals, leaves or even twigs in the well or its vicinity. Violators are not only made to pay fines but are required to clean the well until the water becomes potable.
2. No one should spit, urinate or defecate in the vicinity of the well. Violators are fined.
3. No bathing, washing of clothes or utensils are allowed near the well. A fine is imposed on the violators.
4. Paths leading to the wells are regularly cleared by village orders. Whenever necessary, steps are constructed. Defaulters in this duty are fined.
5. Except the undergrowth, no trees in the vicinity of the wells are allowed to be cut. Not only that, whenever deemed necessary, trees are planted by the villagers in areas which surround the wells.
6. Every villager has the right to draw water from any of the wells in the village.

Rivers : Rivers and streams have always been the boundary markers not only between villages but also within village boundaries between individual

land holders. How the waters of these sources are shared can be illustrated by the following examples:

The Dikhu river flows through the perimeters of two villages called Ungma and Longsa. There is an age-old agreement between the two villages for equitable sharing of the water and its resources. They erected identifiable markers in the course of the river to indicate the stretches of river allotted to each. In these stretches, the villages have exclusive rights of fishing or drawing water for irrigation purposes.

Fishing : Fishing in big rivers has always been community affairs among the Aos where correct neighbourly courtesies are observed. For example, when Ungma village goes on a community fishing trip, they inform and invite their neighbour Longsa village and vice-versa.

How the community fishing expeditions are organized and conducted give us an insight into the people's awareness of the ecological and other issues involved in the affair. Each expedition is preceded by elaborate planning. The council decides on the date and exact areas for the fishing. Apart from the logistics of erecting effective bamboo barriers in the lower reaches of the river and constructing temporary sheds on the banks for cooking meals and shelter at night, the most important aspect of the entire enterprise is procuring the indigenous poison with which to stun the fish. Traditionally the poison is extracted from roots, berries, leaves, barks and vines of different plants in the jungle. Though these poisons have the potency to paralyze the fish, they are harmless for human beings.

The following are the different types of poison used in Changki village:

1. **Suli:** The roots of this plant are tied together and thrashed soft and dipped in different spots in the river.
2. **Rhuja:** The berries of this bush are ground, put in loosely woven bamboo baskets and are placed in strategic places in the water.
3. **Akhawa:** The leaves of this tree are used as in 2.
4. **Ajak sung:** The bark of this is also used as in 2 and 3.
5. **Alinungba:** Creepers whose vines are used as in 1.
6. **Jangru:** Same as above.

Of all the above poisons, **Alinungba** is said to be the most potent and is handled with utmost care because it can burn the skin, sting the eye and leave stains on clothing. Unlike the other five whose efficacy is washed away within a day, the poison from Alinungba can remain potent up to a week. Therefore the most commonly used poisons on such expeditions are

the other five varieties. The use of such poisons is sanctioned by the council because of time-tested evidence that these do not cause any permanent damage to the eco-system of the river.

Changki is a big village and therefore a tradition developed by which each khel, upper and lower went on alternate annual fishing trips. Here the courtesy of inviting members from the other khel and sending 'gifts' of fish from the day's catch was assiduously followed.

Apart from the preparations for the actual fishing and social etiquettes to be observed, there is another aspect to this community affair which deserves mention. This is about the notion of being 'clean' or 'pure'. It is believed that in order to have a successful trip, all the men involved are to be clean or pure. So it is customary for them to spend the night before the fishing day in make-shift camps in the jungle in order to avoid sexual contact with their women and thus protect themselves from being 'soiled!'. They have to be 'clean' when they enter the waters, otherwise it is believed that the spirit of the river will curse them and they will have no success in their venture.

Forests

Traditional Ao society has always lived within and with forests, which provided them with food, fuel, raw materials for building houses and other necessary tools. They also were the sources of numerous edible plants and medicinal herbs. Besides these benefits from the forests, the Aos believe that they also conserve water and purify the air. The people say that the surrounding forest preserves the water and makes it 'sweet' and keeps the air 'cool'. Therefore within the immediate perimeters of a village, say within a radius of two kilometers, no 'jhuming' or felling of trees is allowed, even in individually owned land. Even dead wood and trees damaged by storms can be collected only by those people who have attained the status of '**PATIR**' (village elders).

Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be seen how the Aos tried to live within their environment in as practical and ethical a way as possible by devising and imposing on themselves certain norms of conduct. In an inexorable way, such efforts for proper eco-management translated themselves into a form of ethical behaviour for the people. The process was also helped by some innate religious beliefs like the presence of spirits in inanimate objects like stones, rivers and the land itself. The necessity of preserving the earth and its resources therefore acquired another dimension. One cannot say

which followed the other, but it is apparent that all these forces coalesced to evolve a viable and ethical way of life which has sustained the people for generations. Though this way of life is not as pristine as it was once, many of the practices still continue in the villages, and sometimes with reinforcements to contain certain new situations. For example, when it was discovered that substances like bleaching powder, lime and even dynamite can kill fish, and not only that, can bring in greater hauls, and the tedious job of hunting for indigenous poison and all the other logistical efforts could be avoided, these substances became the preferred method of fishing. In the beginning this appeared to be a more 'modern' way of fishing. But when the villagers discovered the extent of depletion perpetrated by these, they took a firm stand and the village council of Changki added a new rule to their books. This method of fishing was prohibited and violators were fined, sometimes up to Rs. 10,000/ for using grenades and dynamites in the rivers. Lesser fines are imposed for using bleaching powder and lime. This is an instance where the traditional principle of protecting the environment has been adapted to fight a modern threat. The council is also contemplating banning even the indigenous poisons for fishing and allowing only fishing rods, nets and bamboo traps to catch fish in the rivers and streams within its boundaries. When that day comes, there will be another chapter in the book of environmental protection for this village.

The concept of environmental protection today has perforce a greater purview and is closely linked with the survival of the species on a depleted planet. The brief discussion presented here may appear to be isolated incidents in a society still so bound to the 'land' in a narrow way. However, for these people too, it was a question of survival, but the difference is that in the traditional system, the process of protecting the environment became an accepted way of life which gradually evolved to become the tenets of self-governance within an ethical framework.

Notes & References

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2. Late Mr. I. Sensen Aonok, Changki village.
3. Late Mr. Tajen Changkija, former Village Council Chairman, Changki.
4. Late Mr. Kina Jamir, Ungma village and former Jt. Director, NEZCC, Dimapur.
5. Mr. Talinokcha, Mongjen village, Jt. Director, NEZCC, Dimapur.