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The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition

Temsula Ao



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Temsula Ao

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Preface

Translation

This book has been long in the making. It started as a minor project *Collection and Tradition of Ao-Naga Folktales*. But over the years, slowly but inexorably it evolved into the present form. It is difficult now to articulate precisely the many reasons and compulsions which led to this. I can state that the more I delved into the context of the tales, the more convinced I became that I needed to understand the Ao-Naga oral tradition in its entirety which has shaped and nurtured the Ao-Naga people for so many generations.

As a Fulbright fellow at the University of Minnesota, I was attached to the American Indian Studies Department. There being in close contact with native Americans, observing and interacting with them was a unique learning experience for me. There may not be any direct material input of this experience in the present enterprise but it heightened my awareness of the vulnerability of all indigenous cultures in the face of rapid modernization and other related forces. It also taught me to look at one's own culture with a fresh insight and greater appreciation. Above all it created in me a sense of urgency to 'learn' more of my culture before time caused any more diffusion and loss of the lore.

One particular incident from my American experience evoked a deep sense of sadness which has stayed with me in all its sharpness. This was a language class which I attended where adult natives were trying to 'learn' their own native language in the most elementary way like, 'what is your name?' 'It is cold today,' etc. The sense of loss I experienced was for these young men and women in particular and other such natives who would never fully grasp and feel their native culture due to the loss of language, which is the medium to the heart and soul of any culture.

Back home, when I started collection of data, I realized that even as a native speaker of the Ao-Naga language my knowledge about my own culture was limited and peripheral. It was so because

I represent the so-called 'educated, urban' fringe of the people. Nevertheless, as I continued interacting with persons knowledgeable about lore and listening to their views regarding the changes in the society, I began to understand more clearly the intricate interweaving of the oral tradition with the culture of the people and the vital role it has played in their lives.

This book is an attempt to present this tradition among the Aos as their 'Way of life'. In this sense it is not only an exploration of the concept 'folklore in culture' and 'culture in folklore' but goes beyond it to say that for the Aos 'folklore *is* culture' and 'culture *is* folklore'.

I would like to conclude by quoting A.K. Ramanujan from his Introduction to *Folktales from India* : "Cultural forms (such as tales) make people what they are as much as people make culture."

Shillong, August 1999

Temsula Ao

Acknowledgement

It will be difficult to name all persons who have helped me in the writing of this book. But I would be failing in my duty if I do not mention the following :

So with a deep sense of gratitude, I say, 'thanks' first of all to the United States Educational Foundation in India for awarding me a Fulbright Fellowship in 1985-1986 which enabled me to go to the University of Minnesota.

I also owe a great debt to the simple but knowledgeable village folk who so willingly gave me much of the material for this book. Many have since passed away and with them are lost the treasures of our lore which I was not able to obtain during that period. The regret for this failure will always haunt me. Certain names have been mentioned in the text itself, to whom I say 'thank you'.

For the actual compilation and typing of the innumerable drafts, I am indebted to Ms. Prabha Lama, Mr. Thomas Koshy and Mr. N. Bahanan of the North-East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur. Also to Ms. Ritimon Wanshnoong, Mr. Sarju Ao and Mr. I. Nongrum of the English Department, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, I say a heartfelt *Khublei*.

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Birendranath Datta, an eminent folklorist of Assam for writing the Foreword to this book and thus acknowledging my venture into a field in which I am yet only a tentative amateur.

Foreword

No one in oral societies doubts that memories can be faithful repositories which contain the sum total of the past human experience and explain the how and why of present day conditions. Whether memory changes or not, culture is reproduced by remembrance put into words and deeds. Through memory the mind carries culture from generation to generation. How it is possible for the mind to remember and to spin out of nothing, complex ideas, messages, and instructions for living, which manifest continuity over time, is one of the greatest wonders one can study, and is comparable only to human intelligence and thought itself. Because the wonder is so great, it is also very complex. Oral tradition should be of central importance, central to a student's culture, ideology, sociology, psychology, art, and finally, history.

- Jan Vansina

Francis Bacon is known to have used the term 'tradition' as far back as 1605 in the sense of expressing and transferring knowledge. Later, in the eighteenth century -- when romantic nationalism prompted societies in Europe to look back with nostalgia at their heritage -- the term 'tradition' came to be more intimately associated with folklore material like songs, ballads, tales, proverbs, customs, and so on. Such folklore material, it was argued, belonged to the oral tradition. However, the use of the term 'oral tradition' as an item of academic terminology became popular in the English language after the publication of the translation of Jan Vansina's *De la Traditione Orale : Essai de Methode Historique* (1961). In this book Vansina had laid down systematic rules for the identification, collection and interpretation of oral tradition for the purpose of finding out aspects of the past -- 'verbal testimony transmitted from one generation to the next or a later one' -- when documentary

evidence was lacking or inadequate. Vansina carried forward his advocacy of oral tradition in two subsequent volumes : *Oral Tradition* (1973) and *Oral Tradition as History* (1983)

The importance of oral tradition has come to be widely recognised in the context of tradition-oriented communities of the non-Western world, for whom the search for identity in the face of waves of change has become an extremely vital issue. In the newly emerging nationalities in Africa in particular, oral tradition has proved to be not only of great academic significance but also of immense practical value in the nation-building process.

As is well known, North-East India with its hills and plains is the homeland of an almost bewildering variety of ethnic groups, both tribal and non-tribal. The region has been, and still remains, a veritable 'folklorist's paradise'. Although various factors of change represented by proselytization, modernization, and 'liberal education' of the Western model, accompanied by large-scale literacy, have made deep inroads, oral tradition still remains an abiding force for most of the indigenous communities here. Thus, much of the tradition has been lost and much discredited, and yet much is still vibrantly alive, often juxtaposed with what is radically new.

As in other parts of India, the work of the ethnographic study of various indigenous communities of this region had started around the beginning of the twentieth century at the hands of scholarly British administrators, military officers and occasionally, Christian missionaries. The resultant volumes usually covered aspects of the oral traditions of the respective communities. Later, Indian scholars -- some from this region and others from outside--entered the field; and there have since ensued a good many publications, both major and minor, dealing with hitherto unexplored areas of the traditional life and lore.

It is really a happy and healthy sign that conscious and committed members of the indigenous communities of this region have in recent years come forward to probe into their own heritage as reflected through oral tradition. While in majority of such cases the focus has been on some specific aspect or aspects of tradition, there have also been a few studies which are of a more comprehensive nature. Dr. Temsula Ao's *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* is a most welcome addition to the crop of serious academic works

of the latter category. It is not just a collection of isolated impressions of different aspects of the Ao-Naga oral tradition but represents an integrated and holistic approach to the culture of a people 'who for generations have lived in the morality of a verbal dimension'. A veteran professor of English literature, Dr. Ao brings about in her work a delightful combination of a delicate sensibility associated with the emotional involvement of the insider and a guarded objectivity generated by the trained sophistication of a scholar. As a native member of the community Dr. Ao is endowed with an innate perception about the all-embracing nature of the Ao-Naga oral tradition at its pristine best.

The Ao-Naga oral tradition is not a mere form of 'story telling' as opposed to a written, recorded version. It is indeed in many ways the source of the people's literature, social customs, religion and history. But at the same time, it is much more than that. It has evolved into a comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge systems, incorporating art with reality, history with imagination, and the ideal with the practical. In this sense the tradition constitutes for the Ao the world of his origin as well as the idiom of his continuance within the world.

At the same time, the dispassionate scholar in her clearly discerns the process of disintegration induced on the one hand by the inherent weakness of the oral tradition and hastened on the other by extraneous destabilizing factors. As she observes :

The inherent instability of any oral tradition needs no great elaboration. In the context of the Ao-Nagas too, the inevitable variables in human memory and performance led to a gradual depletion of the literary contents and poetic language of the tradition. Added to this some inexorable facts of history further hastened the process of deterioration.

Although made in the specific context of the Ao-Nagas, certain observations by Dr. Ao are replete with a sober pragmatism and hold good not only for the Ao-Nagas but of all indigenous communities facing similar situation here or anywhere else for that matter. Here are a few representative examples :

... in an age when the written word reigns supreme and any reconstruction of the past depends on,

empirical data the Ao-Naga oral tradition finds itself increasingly marginalised.

... It is an undeniable fact that the rhythm of the tradition is disrupted and its relevance certainly diffused. In many ways it finds itself out of step with the modern world and it is at a stage where, ostensibly, the only acknowledgment it receives is in the wearing of traditional garments and ornaments on special occasions. Old songs and dances are re-learned in a hurry and presented awkwardly. But on another level one believes that the moral values imparted by the tradition are still relevant and they continue to govern the people wherever they may live, not because they are the values of a certain people but because they are universal human values.

... In certain ways the imperfection or incompleteness of the oral tradition is due to genuine memory lapse, but in many other ways 'racial memory' was allowed or 'induced' to lapse. In this imperfect form the new generation has inherited the tradition. Acknowledging the heritage is to remember, and only by making sense of remembrance can a more stable form be given to the tradition : a new written literature, codified customary laws and perhaps a new history of the people. This task of recreating the tradition is both a challenge and a necessity.

I am certain that *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* will receive a serious attention from the students of society, culture and tradition.

Silpukhuri, Guwahati
12 June 1999

Birendranath Datta

The People and The Oral Tradition

The Ao-Naga People

The Aos are a major tribe of the Naga nation who occupy a territory comprising long unbroken ranges of hills which perhaps accounts for the fact that the entire Ao territory is divided into six ranges. The villages are grouped into Units according to their proximity to the various ranges and named thus: the Langpangkong Range, the Asetkong Range, the Ongpangkong Range, the Changkikong Range, the Japukong Range and the Tsurangkong Range. In the past, the Aos had occupied a much wider area stretching into what is now Sema territory to the South and Lotha territory to the South-West of their present boundaries. But as an inevitability in the history of an old tribe, it now occupies a much smaller territory than it did in the prime of its power.¹

The fountain-head of everything in Ao folklore is the belief that the ancestors of the Aos emerged out of the earth at Lungterok (literally, six stones). Some of these stones are to be seen above a village called Chungliyimti on the South bank of the river Dikhu. The Ao myth records that of the six stones, three were males named Longpok, Tongpok and Longjakrep and the other three were females named Longkakupkla, Yongmenala and Elongse. Dr J. H. Hutton recounts seeing these stones on 6th November, 1923, as reported by Mills in his book. By his account, there were only three of these stones standing, of which two were 'Male' and one 'Female'. Of the others, the biggest one, a 'Female', was reported to have been destroyed by a Christian missionary who, however, suffered 'well deserved' misfortunes for his act of sacrilege.²

The different clans among the Aos trace their respective origins to one of these stones. Through the ages, folk-songs, beliefs and legends have further augmented and perpetuated this particular myth. In recent times too, there have been councils in which debates were held among the learned and knowledgeable elders of different

villages and consensus established so that a single undisputed strand keeps this myth alive among the modern generation.⁴

However, there is a similar myth prevalent among the Phoms, another Naga tribe. There are also several clans among the Aos who have traced their origins to sources other than the stones at Lungterok.

In a strange reversal of accepted norms, a single language is NOT a common feature among the tribes grouped under the blanket-term of Naga. Each tribe has a language of its own which is mutually unintelligible. The Aos too have a distinct language simply known as Ao-O (Ao Language). But in this context the Aos have an intriguing linguistic peculiarity, not found among the other tribes. Of this Ao-O, there are two distinct dialects, Chungli and Mongsen, which have had a tremendous impact on Ao society and culture as a whole.

The Chungli dialect has now become the standard Ao dialect as a result of the usual process by which any dialect attains such a status anywhere. The first American missionaries settled in a Chungli-speaking village and naturally that dialect was learnt and adopted for all subsequent communication and translation. That is how the entire Bible has been translated in this dialect and all other formal discourses and official communications are conducted in it.

On the other hand, all the folk-songs and traditions are preserved and transmitted through a variant, the Mongsen dialect. For example, the teller of the story may be a Chungli speaker and even though the main discourse may be delivered in his dialect, when he wishes to authenticate his narration with the ballads of old, these are presented in the Mongsen dialect.

The bifurcation of the Ao-language into these two dialects has had far reaching implications in Ao Society, it would seem, from its very beginnings. These are manifest in the variations in the observance of festivals, rites and even in the formulations of customary laws. For example, when new members are inducted into the village councils, the Chungli and Mongsen speakers follow different norms, as also in the case of observing important festivals and even in the customs relating to marriage, divorce etc. Such variations in these matters persist even today, thus emphasizing

the vital role that language plays in human society. On a personal level too a very interesting relationship is maintained between a husband and a wife speaking these different dialects. A Chungli-speaking woman will communicate with her husband only in her own dialect but will use her husband's dialect with her son, as he, by tradition must be taught his father's dialect. This is so because the Aos are a patriarchal society and males are sole inheritors.

(Like all the Naga tribes, the Aos too boast of a long tradition of expertise and excellence in the cottage arts. Dying of yarn and weaving of cloth is the art in which the womenfolk excel. It is an industry which gratifies the need for artistic expression as well as meeting the needs of each family for clothing. It is also an important means of preserving folk-traditions and legends.) The most well-known example of this is the Ao "Tsungkotepsu" or "Mangkotepsu" the black and red shawl with a white strip in the middle which depicts the valour and prosperity of the wearer through the symbols used in this portion. The art of weaving has also helped to preserve a certain amount of conservatism and tradition consciousness among the people. Each noteworthy village has produced a distinctive design of its own especially in women's wear which remains unchanged even today, in terms of both colour and design. The traditional designs are woven mainly in basic colours : red, black, white and indigo.

Apart from weaving, pottery, though now an almost extinct art, was also one of the artistic skills of Ao women. But expertise in this art was confined to a few villages, where only women of certain class were privileged to practise it. Not too elaborate in design and quite limited in the range of shapes, this was necessarily an art which met the needs of the society. For example, pots were important items of exchange with people from neighbouring villages. People would come and exchange their farm produce like chilli, dried bamboo-shoots, vegetables and various other household items for pots.

An interesting aspect of this art is that in it no potter's wheel is used. Instead, tools like spatula, cone etc. are used. The pots are dried in the sun and later fired in earthen kilns banked by dried wood. Unlike some other societies in the country, there was no 'potters class' of people considered an inferior group because of

their profession. Also' among the Aos, pot making is an exclusive domain of the womenfolk.)

The craft of pot making has always been considered as an important skill confined to a particular group who were considered experts in the field. It is said that in ancient times when inter-village rivalries leading to open hostilities were frequent, this particular village called Changki was spared because of the fear that if the potters of the village were killed, the whole tribe would suffer for want of this important item of daily use !

(The menfolk were adept at bamboo and cane work, metal work and wood carving and sculpture. Carved and painted wooden boards adorn doors and posts in individual houses as well as the main village entrance gates. Metal workers produced tools of agriculture and weapons for hunting.)

(An important extension of the skill of wood sculpture among the Aos was the fashioning of huge log-drums which were integral symbols of collective village life. They were hewn out of huge single logs and were decorated with many designs, the head being given special treatment. They often had human shapes with leering tongues. These drums were pulled into the village and installed in a central place with due pomp and ceremony. These log drums served many purposes.) During emergencies like a fire in the village or a sudden attack by enemies, (they were beaten with wooden sticks to sound the alarm.) (The message would be conveyed through the rhythms used by the beaters. They were also used during festivities and important ceremonies. Dignitaries were welcomed to the village with ceremonious beating of the drums.)

In most Ao villages one finds these drums even today, still revered as sacred symbols, but perhaps used less frequently than in the ancient days.

There is however a village called Changki which does not possess such a symbol. This is explained by a legend which is part of the village lore. According to this, in the beginning, this village too possessed a huge log-drum. But it 'went away' because it was annoyed by the patter of the womenfolk making pots which seemed to rival its own sounds. The constant beating of the wooden spatula against the lumps of the earth being fashioned into pots so irritated the drum that, being unable to withstand it, one dark night it

rolled out of its appointed place in the village and slid down a steep incline and disappeared into the jungle never to be seen again ! It is also said that when the drum was sliding away, it sang this song:

Changki lar
tak-tak tak-tak Yabo tepba
Olam lakteli

Changli women
 making pots;
 Fed up with the noise.

Since that time, the villagers say that they never made another log-drum for the village. Incidentally, there is a particular area in the immediate perimeter of Changki which even today is known as 'Tongden-Meru' which means log-drum (Tongden) sliding (Meru).

Very often it has been observed that tribal art offers a dual justification for its existence, that of utility and adornment. In this context, there is one art among the Aos which is noteworthy to be mentioned here. It is the custom of tattooing the face, arms and legs of Ao womenfolk. This art was an elaborate process of ornamentation and took as many as five years to complete. In the patterns used for tattooing, there were three distinct schools of design, as recorded by Mills : Chungli, Mongsen and Changki.⁴

Apart from the purpose of ornamentation, tattooing was considered a part of the coming-of-age rituals in a girl's life. When the first year's tattooing was complete, a girl was considered to be full-fledged member of the community. But as was the case with many other traditional customs, this too was banned by the Christian missionaries and it has now gone completely out of practice.

All Ao social and domestic life was governed by a set of well articulated laws and customs. These pertained to all aspects of village life and were administered by an elected body of village polity called the *Putu Menden* or the village council. These elaborately organised village councils are a testimony to the existence of a democratic set-up in the traditional Ao society and the absence of any feudalistic practice which was evident in some other Naga tribes.

The *Putu-Menden* consists of the representatives of each clan

in the village, who have been elected to this body by members of the respective clans. In essence, this body resembles a miniature parliament, the difference, however, being the criteria of election to it. This council is endowed with a wide range of powers and is competent to deal with any matter of the village life. Every member of the village is bound by its rulings and, though the right of appeal to a higher court of justice like the district magistrate's is not denied, most village problems are taken care of by the village councils. The tenure of office of these councils varies from village to village and once again even here, the Chungli-Mongsen distinction is maintained in the different sets of codes in constitution, rules and tenure of these councils.

(The traditional religion of the Aos can be said to be a form of animism. They believe in a number of spirits called *tsungrem* associated with rocks, river, trees and mountains. Apart from these lesser *tsungrem*s, when an omnipotent super-spirit was talked of, he too was referred to as *Tsungrem* - as distinctly different, for example, from the stone-spirit or *tsungrem*. The creation of the earth is attributed to Lijaba, another powerful *tsungrem*. The Ao equivalent to fate is *tiya* to which were attributed one's ills and troubles as well as fame and prosperity etc. Aos believed in life after death but the concept of a polarised heaven and hell is a post-Christian belief. So is the custom of burying the dead.)

Traditionally, the Aos disposed off their dead by laying the corpse in specially constructed platforms in the burial grounds located beyond the perimeters of the villages. The dead were often accompanied by the usual paraphernalia of the living : dresses and ornaments were laid out and food was ritually offered for a specified period of time. In a slight variation of this custom, in some villages, their bodies were first 'smoked' in the outer room of the house for a required number of days and then only it was taken out to the platforms outside the village. As in all other aspects of life, the disposal process too involved an elaborate set of rituals. Though the custom is evocative of other cultures where the dead are disposed of by similar methods of exposure to the elements, this particular custom indeed was barbaric and unsanitary too. However, this practice was abandoned more than a hundred years ago as a result of Christian teachings.

Life in a perpetual state of hostility with neighbouring villages was tough, to say the least. This was made tougher by the necessity to eke out a living from a difficult terrain, exposed to the vagaries of nature and danger from its inhabitants. But despite these hardships, the Aos found time to register their joys and sorrows of living through their folk-songs, tales and ballads. These reflect their enjoyment of life and also their matter-of-fact, almost stoic acceptance of it. These are however preserved entirely in the oral tradition as the Aos have no written literature. Whatever literature exists has so far been in the nature of utilitarian outputs and written in the borrowed Roman script. The oral tradition also serves as the custodian of the village customary laws whose interpretation depends mostly on the memory and clarity of insight of a few 'learned' village elders.

In any discourse on Ao-Naga Folklore and culture, reference must be made to this oral tradition which so effectively binds and holds together the folklife of the Aos considering its time-tested relevance in governing both individual and social life of the people.

The Oral Tradition in Ao Folklife

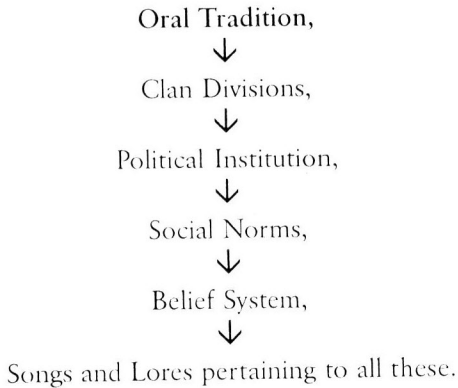
N. Scott Momaday, an American Indian writer defines oral tradition in the following words.

The oral tradition is that process by which the myths, legends, tales and the lore of a people are formulated, communicated and preserved in language by word of mouth, as opposed to writing. Or, it is a collection of such things.⁵

While this may be an acceptable definition of oral tradition in many cases, in the Ao-Naga context, a new dimension has to be added which includes the collective history of the people, the belief system and all the principles governing community life of the tribe.

(For the Aos, the 'process' which Momaday talks about, began in the *Origin Myth of Lungterok*⁶ which tells of the emergence of the progenitors of the Aos from six stones. The most important factor in this myth is the clear identification of the three major Ao clans and the exogamous marriage of the three patriarchs to the three females.)

In the following diagrams an attempt has been made to present



(But since all knowledge of these aspects was in the oral mode, the continuation of the tradition had somehow to be ensured. In order to do this, the institution of the *Arju* or male dormitory was established. From the very beginning the Aos had a patriarchal society, so it became imperative for young males to be acquainted with the tradition and to train themselves to inherit this knowledge so that they would transmit it to the younger generation of males.

According to the age-old custom, as soon as a boy reached adolescence, he could no longer sleep in his parents' house. Though he still belonged to a particular family and participated in all its activities, at night, he was required to be present at the men's dormitories called *Arju* where all the unmarried males, adults and adolescents alike spent the nights together.

The *Arju* was the equivalent of an Academy where the youngsters were governed by strict rules. This is where discipline was taught and enforced. The manly arts and handicrafts were taught and learned here. The youngsters were told of the brave exploits of the heroes of the tribe. They were told which villages were friendly and why; they were also told of the enmity with other villages. It was here that the young men had a foretaste of community life and were indoctrinated about the need to follow rules in order to survive in hostile surroundings. But most important of all, it was here that the history and traditions of the tribe and the particular village were taught. However, mere acquisition of information was not enough. They were also taught the correct form of address in an assembly, the right way of narrating stories, singing songs and

ballads. In other words, the emphasis was on the proper form of delivery of speech so that these youngsters in their turn would become good teachers when their time came.

Likewise, for adolescent girls too, similar dormitories were maintained by the villages where girls learnt handicrafts, social etiquette and all the different songs and chants used in the various religious and social festivals of the village. In some villages these dormitories were maintained by the different clans where they sent their clan-women for such education. These dormitories were supervised by an unmarried woman of the clan. Such a custom however, has, in recent times, been replaced by a general dormitory where girls of different clans spend their nights together and are supervised by an elderly unmarried woman.)

The tradition thus evolved and established can be viewed as an extraordinary and long-lasting legacy of the dwellers of Chungliyimti. By the time the general migration of the Aos began, the people were already bred in a well-defined, well-articulated culture which they carried with them to their new settlements.

For the sake of convenience, this tradition will henceforth be referred to as the Primary Tradition.

(In the new villages too, the Primary Tradition continued to govern community life. But gradually, a new lore began to emerge which embodied the history of the establishment of a particular village i.e. which clan was the first to arrive at a particular site and could thus claim greater land holdings, seniority and prominence in the village government, also which clan was a late comer and therefore would have smaller land-holdings and would always be regarded a minority in the village governance. In addition to these intra-village details, the new lore incorporated inter-village relationships - of friendliness or disputes regarding land and water rights etc. For villages bordering the plains of Assam, the lore of friendship between the Ahom Kingdoms and Ao-Naga villages became a part of this tradition which can be termed as the Secondary Tradition.)

For example, in a village called Changki (in Mokokchung District, two and a half hours journey from Mariani in Assam) there is a tradition according to which members of the village council make annual trips to villages in the border areas to collect 'taxes' in the form of livestock like ducks, chickens, betel nuts and leaves. It was

a relationship/treaty which began hundreds of years ago to stop raids by the neighbouring tribe in return for the annual tax. But gradually, it has developed into a more friendly and neighbourly relationship so that when the Changki councillors go on this errand, they too carry small gifts of ginger, yam etc. and whatever is collected from the Assamese villages is shared by all in a community feast. The term 'tax' is also no longer used.

Such lores constitute parts of this secondary strain and are quite outside the Primary Tradition.

In the same manner, experiences of the villages during the Naga struggle for independence have also now become part of this Secondary Tradition. Thus we see that this particular strain of the oral tradition is the most dynamic as it absorbs new data and new experience shared by a particular village.

There is yet another strain of the oral tradition which is termed *Tertiary Tradition*. This deals with the lore of a particular clan. It has been mentioned how important the clan distinction is in Ao social life. Therefore it is not surprising that within the collective tradition of the village, each clan maintains a tradition of its own. This is both *exclusive* and *all-embracing* at the same time.

It is *exclusive* in the sense that it deals with the origin and history of one particular clan only; but it is *all-embracing* because this history can trace the relationship and existence of the clan-members in all other villages and sometimes in neighbouring tribes too. This strain also perpetuates the settlement of the particular clan in a village, its special achievements and distinctions. Another important aspect of this tradition is that it nurtures the clan-lore in the names that are chosen and given to its members, so that each name has a special significance for the clan as a whole.

Thus it can be seen how this oral tradition has moulded and preserved the social fabric of Ao society and how pervading its influence has been on Ao folklife. Because of this, a great deal of prestige is attached to the richness of lore in a village which rests in the persons of story-tellers and raconteurs of history. Such persons always begin their narratives with 'the days of *Lungterok* and *Chungliyimti*' which lends authenticity to their narration. Persons accomplished in this art are given a special place in society and are considered leaders of the community.

No account of the oral tradition among the Aos would be complete without a reference to its poetic form. Singing, either of ballads, lullabies, dirges, hunting or fishing songs always formed an integral part of any narrative account, because no matter what the subject, the punchline, as it were, is always delivered in the form of a poem sung by the narrator.

Singing in its purest form is governed by certain norms. Each different occasion calls for the appropriate song. And there are songs exclusively sung by men only and some others by women only. For example, the following songs are sung only by men :

1. *Nok Ken* - War song,
 2. *Niingsang Ken* - Songs in praise of particular men or clans,
 3. *Mera Ken* - Group songs sung while going from house to house on courtesy visits during the Moarsii festival. The singers are greeted in each family by offering 'Khozii or Sali' (arecanut with betel leaf) and newly brewed rice beer.
 4. This is a group song which is sung while going from house to house on courtesy visits during the Moatsu festival. The singers are greeted in each family with offerings of 'Kozu or Sali' (areca nut and betel leaf) and newly brewed rice beer.
 5. *Lipok Ken* - Songs which recount tales of creation, the origin of man and the settlement of villages etc.
- There is a type of song called *Jokshishi ken* which is sung by both men and women while performing dances.
- Songs which are sung by women only are as follows :

1. *Tsuki Ken* - Songs which are sung in girls' dormitories only.
2. *Mojing Araba Ken* - Songs to ward off evil spirits.
3. *Ilangtsii Ken* - Clan songs taught to girls of each clan pertaining to the history of their clan. The different clans of the village may sing of the same event, but each highlights only that aspect which relates to their own clan.
4. *Masemba Ken* - Songs of disappointment. Love songs of a sort - but sung by a jilted girl.
5. *Toktep Ken* - Impromptu competitive songs, on any topic.
6. *Tanur Mesiiziik Ken* - Lullabies sung while carrying the baby on the back with the help of a shawl.
7. *Mangyim Ken* - Mourning songs. This type of songs has a refrain which is repeated after the main lines.

There are certain other songs which are sung while pounding rice and doing menial jobs.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the poetic element forms the core of any discourse or narration in Ao folklore. On very formal occasions, even greetings are exchanged in couplets. There are several examples in Ao folklore which illustrate the poetic content of the oral tradition. The earliest example goes back to the beginning of time when man could understand the language of the birds and beasts.

According to this legend, in *Chungliyimti* when Aos first began cooking their food, they had no idea about the use of water. It is said that rain water, dewdrops and sap obtained from roots and tree trunks were used for drinking and cooking.

But one day two brothers called Imsenpirong and Sempirong were surprised by the call of a 'bulbul' (*tsiikpo*) from a nearby tree. It sang -

*Imsenpirong Sempirong,
Longkitsuyong tsumayong.*

(Imsenpirong, Sempirong, haven't you seen the water in the cave ?)

The two brothers surmised that there must be a source of water nearby and when they searched for it, they found the water.

Thus it is seen that in Ao folklore even birds and animals are believed to be using this form of addressing and delivering messages.

In another famous legend, the love story of Jina and Itiben, all their exchanges of love and other conversations are recorded in the poetic form. One oft-quoted instance from this story is one where Jina (the poor lover) comes back to the village with the bride-price demanded by Itiben's rich father. But the moment he enters the village gate, he knows that he has lost his love. Nobody tells him the news directly but he hears the messengers sent by his lost love singing thus,

*Adi rongchen makachang,
Tsutelang na rongchen yimo wa;
Yimko nii - narole bendanger na tsuka wagona.*

(O brother, without wealth, while you were away



In search of the bride-price,
Your flower in village
Has been plucked off by a stranger.)

Names, Textiles, Artefacts and the Oral Tradition

When a society has to depend so much on its oral tradition, it has to evolve a system by the help of which all aspects of life, present and future can be governed and regulated. Moreover, it has to ensure that there are, within this system, constructs which will ensure the perpetuation of the system.

In the context of the Aos, the institution of the *Arju* or *Moring* is one such device through which successive generations of youngsters are 'educated' and moulded to shoulder social responsibilities in adult life.

Considering the fact that the tradition has to survive within the framework of language, one can see that besides the songs, ballads and tales, Ao-Naga names also have played a vital role not only in augmenting the tradition but also in keeping it alive. This is what Norman Scott Momaday calls 'existing within a verbal dimension':

It seems to me that in a certain sense we are all made of words; that our most essential being consists of language. It is the element in which we live our daily lives. There is no way in which we can exist apart from the morality of a verbal dimension.⁷

Ao-Naga names, therefore, are one of the core elements of the oral tradition which continue to play a significant role in the preservation and perpetuation of the culture of the people. Seen from a modern perspective, one can say that names are a part of the traditional methods of documentation in a society where no written forms existed.

'What's in a name?'

We often hear this uttered in the sense that a name by itself has no significance to the essence of what is being named.

But put this question to an Ao-Naga and the answer will be an emphatic, 'EVERYTHING!' - because in the Ao language, names of persons, clan and even of places are an integral aspect of the oral tradition which in turn embodies everything related to the traditional Ao way of life. Names are therefore, in their own right, mini-treasure

houses of legends, myths, and clan histories. They are also documentaries of personal achievements in particular, and achievements of clans in general.

The very term *Aor* (Aos are called Aor) has a meaning - 'those who went away'. This is a direct reference to the migration of the people from the first village established by the Aos called *Chungliyinti* which is situated on the north bank of the river Dikhu. Legend has it that the present day Aos migrated from this original village, crossing the river and dispersing to the various villages where they are living today. The term was coined by those who stayed back, distinguishing the migrants as "those who went away" (across the river).

The significance of Ao names is that they all have meanings and these meanings pertain to particular lores concerning the person's immediate family and his or her clan. In certain cases, even the names of villages, mountains, rivers, trees and places embody the ancient lores regarding them.

Clan divisions among the Aos are sacrosanct and as such, names are exclusive to each clan among the people.

In order to fully explain the significance of Ao names and their role within the language, two broad classifications have been made.

I. Historical : This class of names is based on myths, legends and history of the different clans of the tribe and therefore are limited in range.

II. Modern : This class is innovative, commemorative and hence coinage in this class can be unlimited.

I. Historical :

a) Based on Myths : Since the oral tradition plays such an important role in the life of the tribe, names become another means of capturing the essence of history and perpetuating it for posterity. Therefore, certain names have been handed down from generation to generation in the different clans among the Aos, with the accompanying lore related to the names.

For example, the name *IMSEMPIRONG* belongs to the Jamir clan and no other Ao clan can use this name. The legend behind this name relates to the first discovery of water by the Aos. According to this legend, it was two brothers belonging to this clan who were first shown the existence of water' by a bird and who then were

eventually responsible for the introduction of water into the daily life of the Aos. It is claimed that prior to the discovery of water, the Aos used rain water, dew-drops and the sap of trees for drinking as well as for cooking their food. Because it was the Jamirs who first discovered a pool of water, this particular name is synonymous with this major discovery and is the exclusive property of the Jamir clan through successive generations and will be so till the end of time. Therefore when an Ao boy says that his name is IMSEMPIRONG every other Ao knows that he belongs to the Jamir clan. There is even a dialectal variation of this name among the Mongsen speaking people which is TSUONGCHANG. Literally translated, it means 'one who discovered water'.

There is another historical name related to the emergence of the first Ao patriarchs and matriarchs from the six stones at Lungterok. It is believed that three men were the progenitors of the three major Ao clans - PONGENERS, LONGKUMERS and JAMIRS. LUNGJAKREP is the name of the Jamir patriarch and this name is still in use among this clan.

There is a sub-clan called *Ozukmer* who derived the name through a myth which says that the patriarch of this sub-clan was transformed into a baby boy from the feather of a passing horn-bill which fell on the loom of an unmarried woman called Longkongla. Since the boy derived his being from a bird, the name *Ozukumer* which means 'became from a bird' became the surname of the descendants of this man. (*Ozukumer* is considered to be a sub-clan of the *Longkumer* clan.)

b) Based on Legends : This class of historical names is derived from legendary figures. They perpetuate the lore about illustrious patriarchs, brave warriors and enhance clan histories. For example, LAKY is the name of a famous LONGKUMER patriarch and this name has been handed down from generation to generation in this clan. (The present day bearer of this name is currently a Post-graduate student of the North-Eastern Hill University at Shillong.)

Another name POKTENBA belongs to the CHANGKIJA (Changkiri) clan of the village Changki. Legend has it that at one point of time, this clan was about to end with KHARIBONG (son of ACHUSANGBA) as no woman was willing to marry him because he was blind. There was a girl called TSUNASANGLA of the ALINGER clan, whose parents

wanted her to marry Kharibong, telling her that though he was blind, she could become the mistress of vast landholdings and large cultivated fields, and could live a life of comfort. But she flatly refused saying that she could never marry a blind man.

It so happened that these two families were neighbours whose houses were pretty close to each other. Being blind, Kharibong could not do any work except to sit on the open, extended platform, keeping guard over the paddy being dried in the sun. He was given a long stick with which to drive away the chickens when they came to eat the paddy. From the adjoining platform, Tsunasangla used to tease Kharibong by imitating the chickens eating paddy. This went on for sometime before Kharibong's parents became aware of it.

So one day, they tied a charm (AWALONG) at the end of the stick and as usual Kharibong sat guard over the paddy. When Tsunasangla began teasing him again, on the pretext of chasing away the chickens, he hit her with the charm tied to the stick-end and the legend says that she immediately became enamoured of him. That very night, she told her parents that if she married at all, it would be to Kharibong only. The parents told her that since she refused to do so earlier, the matter ended there. But she insisted and eventually, Kharibong married Tsunasangla. There was great rejoicing when a son was born and he was called POKTENBA which means 'begins to burst forth' because they said that a clan which was on the verge of extinction has begun to *burst forth* from Kharibong. Two more sons, YANGRUSANGBA and IMLISANGBA were born, to further augment the great hope expressed through the name of the first born. The name POKTENBA as well as the other two names have been handed down from generation to generation in this clan.

Moreover, because of the alliance between the two clans which assured the continuance of the founding clan, the special relationship which began then is still cherished by these two clans. How such historical affinities are kept alive can be best exemplified through two other names relating to these two clans.

Mezaongdang and Engenongdangla

The lore regarding these two names has its genesis during the time when Changki had declared a state of war- (*Ritu Tongpang*). Two men named Nemsari (Alinger clan) and Poktenba (Changkija clan) had gone out of the village on a short journey meaning to

return the same evening. But being late in returning they could not accompany the rest of the villagers to the war front. Though not in the thick of the actual battle, they correctly anticipated its progress and lay in wait at a strategic position through which they knew the fleeing enemies would pass. They hid themselves in a hole-like depression after setting enough obstacles. Just as they had anticipated, the enemy group, being chased by the other villagers ran towards them whereupon, between the two of them they took sixteen enemy heads. According to the legend, so much blood was shed that day that the *dao*-handle of Nemsari got stuck to his fist because of the coagulated blood and it could be freed only when his clanswomen broke egg after egg over it and eased the handle off.

At that time both the wives were pregnant and these two men resolved to commemorate this historic event by giving appropriate names to the children about to be born. If a son was born, the name *Mezaongdang* would be given, and *Engenongdangla* would be the daughter's name. In due course, a son was born to Poktenba who was named *Mezaongdang* and the daughter born to Nemsari was called *Engenongdangla*. (Both these names roughly mean obstructor or stopper of thousands or many). On 16th October 1993, these two clans met and formally decided that since these two names refer to the same event where victory was achieved through the joint efforts of these two patriarchs, both the clans can now use both the names. So far, the boy's name had belonged only to the Changkija clan and the girl's name to the Alinger clan.

The October meeting of these two clans has ushered in a new stage in the evolution of the oral tradition. The old legend was recalled and retold in the presence of the young, 'modern' generation as an act of remembrance to remind them of this particular event in the history of their clans. By a general consensus, the legend connected to these two names, was written down, thus transforming the oral into a written chronicle. The names of the four story tellers were also recorded, two of whom have since passed away. The document which contains these accounts has been endorsed by the Chairman and Secretary of the Village Council, thus affirming that this is a 'true' account of the legend and that there is no controversy attached to it.

II. Modern :

Though the term modern is applied to this category of names many modern innovative names still hark back to the ancient history of the tribe:

As the population increased, and new names had to be found, a new category of names came into existence. Out of the lore or history of a particular clan, new names were invented. For example, the name *Imtinochet* belongs to a particular clan in the village Changki. The name is certainly a new coinage because it is still at the first generation stage, but the lore surrounding it is ancient. It refers to a certain event in the history of the clan. A young eligible bachelor of this clan happened to fall in love with a non-Ao girl of a neighbouring village. At first, marriage between them was unthinkable. But through the cunning of the girl's father, things came to such a pass that the young man, who belonged to the founding clan of his village, had to promise to bring up the girl's entire clan and give them land and recognition in his village as the condition of his marriage to her. Thus he became responsible for the migration of an entire people to a new habitat. Therefore, in order to renew this lore, the name *Imtinochet* was coined. The name, when translated, means 'one who brought up an entire clan or people'.

Such innovative names however, have more recent historical references. For example- the son of the noted Olympian Late Dr. T. Ao, (Retd. D.H.S. Nagaland) is called *Indianuba* - which means 'one who led India'. This name was coined in order to commemorate, for posterity, the fact that Dr. T. Ao was the Captain of the Indian Football Team which participated in the London Olympics of 1948. In other words, according to the simple reasoning of the Aos, he led India to this great world arena and therefore his son bears this name in all honour and homage to this fact.

Personal achievements of the father and even relatives are commemorated in names given to the new generations. *Zulutemba* is such a name. This name denotes that either the father of the child or a close relative has achieved high academic qualifications, or in simple parlance has reached the 'end of learning and writing' which is the literal translation of this name.

Exceptional bravery in warfare has always been recognised and

rewarded in every society. In the tribal culture of the Aos too, such feats are commemorated in their names. A modern example of this category is the name *Tongpangmeren*. This name was given to the son of Late Yangrusangba of the village Changki to perpetuate the fact that the father distinguished himself in the Burma campaign of World War II and was awarded the Military Medal by the British for his bravery. Incidentally the name means 'great distinction in battle'.

Personal and first names are the exclusive property of a clan in a village, and within the clan there can be no duplication of a name. For example, the name *Sungjemkaba* belongs to a particular clan of the village Changki. As long as he was alive, he was the only one with that name within his clan. And when he died, the name was given to a male child born within that clan. It is through this tradition of such exclusiveness that old historical names have become the denominators of the different Ao clans.

However, a certain clarification needs to be stated here regarding the concept of duplication of modern names. It is possible to find the same name among more than one clans of the village. But since all names have their own lore, the significance of the same name will differ from clan to clan. Because such names belong to different clans, there is no question of 'usurpation' of the name. The concept of usurpation relates to the belief that attempting to use a name within a clan while a bearer of it is still alive is tantamount to wishing the older person dead. It is also believed that any person who deliberately attempts such a fool-hardy thing always meets with dire consequences. Besides, such incidents are very rare because the clan as a unit will never countenance such attempts. There have been instances when a name already given was used by another within the clan due to ignorance of the fact. In such cases, it is mandatory, by clan law, for the parents of the younger child to find another name for their child.

As far as historical names are concerned, such an eventuality is almost unthinkable because of the ancient lore embodied in the names which has become an integral part of the collective oral tradition. Such historical names have thus been recognised as the sacred, exclusive property of the specific clans. Any attempt to appropriate an ancient name which traditional history does not

associate with a particular clan, is interpreted as an attempt to distort and falsify tribal history and is considered an unforgivable act of treason against the tribe itself.

Since the meanings of names are so steeped in tradition and history, a certain aura of mystery and power surrounds each name. Therefore, it is inevitable that superstitions surround the very process of choosing names. If in a certain family, many children die young one after another, a child born after these tragedies would be given a name with negative connotations. For example there is a first name among the Aos called *Taku* or *Teka* which means 'bitter'. Children born in such unfortunate families after successive deaths of older ones, are given this first name in order to ward off the evil from the family. A name like *Takunaro* which means 'bitter flower' is the name of a girl, given to denote that after much bitterness, a flower has come to the family. It is at the same time an attempt to tell the spirits who have been snatching away the children that this one is 'bitter' and hence should be of no interest to them.

There is also another situation where illness and death is attributed to the name of the ailing one. When a child after being named, begins to ail or show signs of abnormality in growth and mental capabilities, it is believed that the name given to the child is too awesome and therefore it is suffering due to the powerful aura surrounding the name. There have been many instances when such names have been abandoned and new supposedly more appropriate names have been chosen for such children. For example, if a male child has been given the name 'Rongsentemjen' - which means 'fortunate in wealth', and the child is ill most of the time and does not appear to be developing as he should, it is assumed that the name is too powerful. The parents then, may change the name by choosing any of these prefixes - *Taku*, *Teka*, *Longri* or *likok* - which all mean bitter, thus believing that by adopting this new name, whatever 'evil' or bad aura was plaguing the child has been removed.

Some ancestral names are believed to be too powerful and strong and subsequent namesakes are known to have suffered due to this powerful aura surrounding a particular name. One such name is *Yarangchang* of the village Longkhum belonging to the Imchen clan.

Tradition says that Yarangchang was a co-founder of the village Longkhum. The other founder, belonging to the Longkumer clan

was called Okhipong. Yarangchang was the founder of the Mongsen Khel and Okhipong of the Chungli Khel of Longkhum.

It is said that Yarangchang was not only the founder but a priest of his clan as well. The priestly clans did not eat beef, entrails of animals and also the meat of animals which died due to accidents, like falling off a cliff etc.

Yarangchang is believed to have been a tall, handsome man with a deep, resounding voice. It is said that when he coughed, the echoes could be heard miles away across mountain range. He possessed such a powerful personality that subsequent namesakes could never live up to his traits. And it is said that many such persons died young. In traditional lore, only one namesake attained adulthood who also possessed a powerful voice.

Among the descendants of Yarangchang, there is a young man, now in his thirties, who was given this name. But the parents noticed that from his very first breath, he developed a loud growl-like sound. The mother recalls that passersby, hearing the noise, began to come to the house to look at the child with the big voice. Being already acquainted with the awesome lore regarding the name, the parents decided, that the child was 'burdened' with the powerful aura of the forefather's name and therefore changed his name from Yarangchang to Lanusosang. They also claim that the name Yarangchang, though so vividly remembered, has not been given to any member of the clan because of the mysterious aura surrounding it.⁸

Names play a significant role in the interpretation of dreams too, among the Aos. Many times, people would aver that dreaming of persons with rich connotations are good omens for the dreamer. For example, if one dreams of a person called Rongsenkaba or Rongsenkala (meaning one with immense wealth) the dreamer will meet with success or achievement. But on the other hand, if one dreams of a person called Takumayang (meaning bitter revenge) or Mokokba (unable) the dreamer's plans will not meet with success.

There is an Ao village called Mangmetong which means a place where 'dead bodies made to stand erect in a row'. It is considered extremely unfortunate to dream of this village, either going there or being there in the dream, because such a dream is supposed to portend a grave danger to the life and limb of the dreamer.

In a society where names play such an important role in the philosophy of the people, along with the superstitions, certain taboos also are attached to certain unlucky names. In some villages, there is a tradition that if a person with a particular name turns out to be barren or infertile, that name can be retained only upto the third generation after which it is abandoned forever. In other words it is considered taboo to use that name again in that clan. In the same way, the names of lunatics, thieves, murderers and other notorious characters are also taboo. The names of those who meet with unnatural death are generally not renewed. If a famous name is renewed and the new bearer also is distinguished then it is believed that the spirit of the deceased has taken abode in the new person.

Similarly, the renewal concept is evident from an accepted practice among the Aos. If a child dies young, and another one is born soon after, the name of the dead is retained by the particular family and given to the newborn baby to signify that by renewing the name, the dead child somehow continues to have an existence in the family:

A family can also declare to its clan members that a certain name be kept in abeyance until such a time when it feels appropriate to release it for renewal in the clan.

The process of choosing a name for a newborn child is simple. From the lore of the clan, if an ancestral, historical name is vacant, then that name automatically is given to the newest member of the clan as long as no controversy or superstition surrounds the name. On the fifth day after the birth of the child, if it is a male, and the sixth if it is a female, a simple ceremony takes place in the child's house, where its name is formally announced. Tradition says that the paternal grandfather comes and whispers the name to the child's father who in turn whispers it in the child's ear. Only then is it announced to the company gathered for the occasion. It is done so because of the belief that if the name is announced before the child 'appropriates' it, the spirits might 'snatch it away'. On the same day, the child's ears are pierced, male and female both, to mark it as a 'child of man' because it is believed that the spirits do not like 'deformed' or 'marked' people. Usually, the privilege of choosing a name for a new-born rests with the paternal grandfather. In case such a person is already dead, then the oldest male member

of the clan is consulted. In some cases a list of both old historical as well as modern innovative names are provided, out of which the parents of the child can make the ultimate choice. In recent times however, parents are known to exercise exclusive privileges in choosing names for their children.

The Aos have a patriarchal form of society. But even so, the name of girls within a clan are as sacrosanct as those of boys and the exclusiveness pertains to all names, both male and female. The following account of the ritual farewell given to a bride will further illustrate this point.

When an Ao girl marries, she leaves her parents' home, marries into another clan in order to establish a new family and raise children for her husband's clan. But all through her life, her identity as a member of the particular clan is very strictly and properly maintained. That is why, when she is about to leave her old home for the new one, the father, in all solemnity and formality, declares to all present, 'from this day onwards, this daughter of ours is yours. Her duty, her devotion, and even her physical being will be yours. But on the day her soul leaves her body, please bring her *name* back to us'. This signifies the immense importance attached to a person's name.

'Giving the name back' to the clan is a custom which is prevalent even today. For example, when this writer's aunt died in 1994, after the period of mourning was over her sons came to the mother's clan elders with some agricultural tools (a small hoe and a weeding implement called 'ayah' in this case) for the ritual of handing over the mother's name Talitsungla back to the clan. The father had died sometime back, otherwise the ritual would have been performed by him. Subsequently, a girl born into the clan shortly afterwards has been given this name, thus perpetuating the name which belongs to this clan only.

Thus, one can state with emphasis, that from an Ao-Naga point of view, a name is not a mere appendage to a person but is rather an enhancement of the physical identity because it is a reflector and preserver of all history, culture and philosophy of a people to whom the person belongs. And in this manner, names, and the lore surrounding them have been an integral part of the oral tradition of the Aos perpetuating ancient legends and re-vitalizing the tradition

because the very process of naming and coining new names is a dynamic and evolutionary social activity. Each time a name is given, if ancient, the history surrounding it is reminded to the people and if new, a new wealth of significance is added to the existing lore. Thus the tradition lives and grows to new dimensions.

Ao-Naga names are therefore statements of facts and not mere plays of imagination on words for achieving a certain poetic dimension in them. The idea behind the whole process seems to be that because these facts pertain to the tribe, they ought to be remembered in language. Thus Ao-Naga names become an integral part of what N. Scott. Momaday calls 'racial memory',⁹ so that every time a name is uttered, the collective memory is revitalized. In as far as this is true, this form of traditional 'artefacts' play yet another role within the same tradition. While preserving the history of symbols depicted on clothes, houses and certain implements of daily use, they also function as denominators of social status.

There is a famous Ao shawl called *Mangkotepsu* or *Tsiingkotepsu* which can be worn only by those persons who have performed a *mithun* sacrificing public ceremony. This is a ceremony which can be performed only by a rich person as well as one who has won renown in battle. The shawl is a kind of badge earned by him and acclaimed by society during the festival following the ceremony. On the white strip in the middle, certain symbols are depicted: *mithun* head, a tiger or an elephant, a cock and spears and *daos*. Sometimes the sun is also added to the legend of the symbols to signify the wearer's status and fame in society. In the olden days, the use of this item of clothing was confined to such persons of status only and anyone who attempted to wear it without proving his merit either in warfare or by sacrificing a *mithun* was liable to be fined by the village *Putu Menden*. This particular shawl can be worn by men only.

In the same manner, the structures erected by the rich as their houses were easily discernible by the size and ornate designs on the entrance posts which were elaborately decorated with carvings.

Traditionally, Ao men used to wear an apron-like cloth round their waists to cover their genitals. Even here, the rich people used elaborate designs on their aprons whereas the poor man's was a simple, nondescript one.

Ao women wear a lungi type of skirt round their waists which is called a *supeti*. This particular item of clothing has long been a medium of creativity for the womenfolk. It also served as a clan marker. The different clanswomen in a village used to wear distinctively designed *supetis* which declared their clans. The designs and colour combinations of these *supetis* have remained the same till today. Even here, the rich women used to add conch-shells, tiny bells and long tassels as a mark of their wealth.

In the same manner, on the tribal level too, a particular suit has been designed as the Ao national dress for women. During festivals and formal occasions this suit is worn.

In the present times, there is a proliferation of beautiful *supetis* woven by Ao women who derive their designs by skilful adaptations of old traditional motifs and using a variety of colours to replace the old ones which were mainly black, red and indigo. But the traditional colour schemes and designs of the clan *supetis* retain their original nature even today. The famous Tsungkotepsu mentioned earlier has also been preserved in its original colours and design.

Though actual lore is attached to only the traditional *supetis*, the new innovations still serve to link the present generations to the old and help them to retain the art of the ancients in which a part of the oral tradition resided.

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Conclusion

The oral tradition that has been discussed here dates back to as yet undetermined centuries. That it has defined and regulated the life-pattern of a tribe in such a sustained manner is a testimony to the soundness of its nature. The unquestioning acceptance of the tradition by the people as the way of life has been the strength of the system which exists even today in every Ao village. It is so, because it evolved and took a final shape through popular experience and practice, and it was not the prerogative of any one class of people among the tribe to dictate its terms. The values and principles embodied in this tradition are based on life and reality and it has therefore been able to withstand the test of time, and, at times, even to adapt to changing circumstances without compromising the basic truths.

The Ao-Naga oral tradition is not a mere form of 'story-telling' as opposed to a written, recorded version. It is indeed in many ways the source of the people's literature, social customs, religion and history. But at the same time, it is much more than that; it has evolved into a comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge-system, incorporating art with reality, history with imagination and the ideal with the practical. In this sense, the tradition constitutes for the Ao the world of his origin as well as the idiom of his continuance within that world.

By being what it is, the tradition imposed a great responsibility on the people to revere and live by the ethics of the spoken, given word. It gave a definite identity to the people, delineated their culture and moulded their character. At the same time, it gave the people a system of self-government most suited to the environment in which they live. Centuries before the Panchayati Raj concept acquired relevance in the political parlance of the country, here was a tribal group which had evolved such a sound democratic system and was governing itself accordingly. More importantly, it was a system based on the morality and sanctity of the given word

and held sacrosanct by the people without the aid of any written, codified articles of governance.

In the absence of any written history the numerous myths, legends, tales and names as well as other aspects of the tradition have been the only link between the historic past and the present. The tradition may not be 'history' as we understand the term to be. But it is also not 'fiction' because, to use Momaday's words again,

We are concerned here not so much with an accurate representation of an actuality, but with the realization of the imaginative experience.¹

In this sense, 'history' which is of direct relevance to the people lies within the ambit of the oral tradition. And the storytellers, singers and raconteurs have been the custodians and transmitters of this 'history' from generation to generation.

For centuries, the given context of the tradition remained static and idyllic because its application concerned compact, well-defined groups of people living in geographically contiguous habitats speaking the same language. But no society, however isolated and insular, can remain untouched by the dynamics of social changes taking place at large.

The inherent vulnerability of any oral tradition needs no great elaboration. In the context of the Ao-Nagas too, the inevitable variables in human memory and performance led to a gradual depletion of the literary contents and poetic language of the tradition. In Addition some inexorable facts of history further hastened the process of deterioration.

The most decisive blow to the fabric of the tradition was struck when the new religion i.e. Christianity, began to win converts quite rapidly. Acceptance of the new religion demanded total abandonment of the 'old' ways. A way of life, which had sustained and nurtured generations, suddenly became 'taboo'. Thus, indigenous form of belief and worship, observance of the various festivals and rituals, chanting of traditional songs which contained not only religious elements but also much of the literature and history of the people became taboo. Food and dress code too had to undergo changes according to the 'new' ways.

Writing about this period, W.C. Smith in his book *The Ao-*

Naga Tribes of Assam says,

Familiarity with missionary attitudes and practices, which are all too characteristic, make inevitable the conclusion that there is entirely too much negation, too much 'taboo' and too little that is positive.²

As a result of such indoctrination, much of the language of poetry, myths, legends and history of the people have been lost. What remains today is the legacy of those who remained faithful to their 'racial memory' and managed to transmit the lore to the younger generation. But with the passing away of most of the knowledgeable elders of the tribe, these inheritors often find it difficult to reaffirm the lore and fill the gaps in memory due to non-performance over long periods of time. However, in spite of the loss of this aspect of the tradition, the principles of self-governance and customs were so intricately woven into the social fabric that even today, the people are governed by them in the heart of the land, i.e. the villages.

The other factor which had a different kind of impact on the tradition was the introduction of liberal education, first through missionary schools and then government ones. In order to pursue their studies young boys and girls had to go to the townships in the then Naga Hills district and to other towns in Assam. Their sojourn in these places distanced them from the tight village communities with their unchanged way of life. The more 'educated' they became, the more alienated they began to feel from a way of life which seemed obsolete and primitive. They began to look at themselves through other people's eyes and the superficiality of obvious comparisons created in their minds a sense of confusion and conflict. Thus an insidious process of rejection seems to have begun in the minds of the 'educated' younger generation. They became increasingly indifferent to the tradition, as a result of which a psychological divide was being created among the people. Exposed to an outside world changing rapidly with modern technological advances, the ancient knowledge-system embodied in the tradition must indeed be perceived as puny and irrelevant.

The early decades of this century was the period of transition for the people; coming out, as it were, from the 'dark ages' of their primitive existence into the enlightenment ushered in by the new

religion and new education. Whereas in the old days, societal authority was paramount in a compact society, a gradual awareness of individual identity emerged among the new 'elite' as a result of stepping outside this unit and being 'enlightened'. The old insular society in which survival depended on collective identity and common endeavours, now faced a new phenomenon called modern education which produced individuals reluctant to be subsumed by the whole called 'society' ! They were not willing to return to a way of life in which their new found knowledge did not seem to fit in. They had to find new lifestyles to suit their new found status as educated individuals. For this, they needed a new environment.

The result has been a steady exodus of the educated people to urban areas seeking government jobs and evolving a new lifestyle away from the confines of the old tradition. The demographic displacement caused a certain measure of diminution of the once-upon-a-time absolutist authority of the tradition which no longer holds sway over an entire group of people. What effect the adoption of a new lifestyle in the urban settings has had on the language has already been discussed in the previous chapter.

Whereas in the past, the people lived as unified discrete groups (villages) within the sanctions of this tradition, two distinct groups of the tribe have emerged; the educated modern group is moving away from the centre and purview of this tradition, while life in the villages goes on more or less in the old way. However, it needs to be stated here that in spite of the physical distancing, the urban Ao has not totally abandoned his cultural bearings. Every Ao male's membership in the *SENSO MUNG DANG* of his village and that of his clan is a case in point.

Under the changed circumstances, the tradition manifests itself as a curious synthesis of the old and the new, both in the urban and the rural settings during important occasions like marriages and funerals.

Marriages are now solemnised in churches. The bride and the groom in the urban areas, are invariably dressed in gown and suit, accompanied by bridesmaid, flower girls etc. The bride enters the church to the tunes of the Wedding March on her father/brother's arm. Back at the reception, the guests are welcomed by nattily dressed ushers through the archway of a traditional Morung specially

constructed for the occasion. And in the kitchen area, the responsibility for feeding the guests has been handed over to the TANUKERS, those whose mothers belong to the clan of the bride's mother as well as those married to such clans women. This is an ancient traditional practice. Not to follow this custom evokes great criticism by saying that so-and-so has forgotten his SOBA-LIBA ! The ancient form of bidding farewell to the bride by her family and handing her over to the boy's family, saying only her name has to be returned to her clan, is still observed. (See chapter on Ao-Naga Names....)

During funeral services too, along with the prayers and Bible reading, time is given to the family to bid farewell. During this part the closest relative addresses the deceased and says, "Go in peace, without looking back or remembering anyone, for now the water separates you from us". 'Looking back' or 'remembering' by the deceased may cause another death in the family and this form of address is an ancient admonition to the deceased to move forward to the land of the dead. The ancient belief about the spirituality and immortality of the soul thus finds continued expression through this ritualistic farewell, even though a new religion has replaced the old. Also in the funeral service another formality is observed if the deceased is a man. His nearest male relative (father/brother/Uncle) announces to the gathering, "If unknown to us so-and-so (the deceased) owes money or has any other commitment, please bring the matter to us along with evidence, within a stipulated time so that the debt can be settled. "In the absence of any documentary evidence, the testimony of witnesses is accepted for the settlement of such debts.

Such occurrences have been observed both in the rural and urban communities. (Almost all the Aos are Christians.)

These are some examples which show that the tradition is passing through a phase of acculturation and that, in spite of the destabilization brought on by time, certain traditional values are still relevant to the people.

But in an age where the written word reigns supreme and any reconstruction of the past depends on empirical data, the Ao-Naga Oral Tradition finds itself increasingly marginalised. For instance, any logical explanation regarding the Myth of Lungterok will

eventually lead to a migration theory. But to be able to do that, researchers will first have to circumvent the intransigence of the purists zealously guarding the sanctity of this myth. The inherent problem with the myth lies in this that it is both fact and fiction. While Lungterok and Chungliyimti are specific, verifiable locations, the emergence of man there is the essence of 'imaginative experience'. This is the last traceable point in the oral history of the people and therefore going beyond this in search of empirical data to prove otherwise constitutes a serious threat to the very fountain-head of the Oral Tradition. Such an exercise also threatens to diffuse the exclusive identity of the people. In the mid-fifties, a scholar had the temerity to suggest that the people might have originally migrated from elsewhere in South-East Asia. He was promptly hauled up before the Tribal Court and fined for his 'crime' of trying to distort the traditional history of the people. Such intransigence is symptomatic of the fear of denial/debunking of a tradition already beset by other forms of rejection.

It is an undeniable fact that the rhythm of the tradition is disrupted and its relevance certainly diffused. In many ways it finds itself out of step with the modern world and it is at a stage where ostensibly, the only acknowledgment it receives is in the wearing of traditional garments and ornaments, on special occasions. Old songs and dances are re-learned in a hurry and presented awkwardly. But on another level one believes that the moral values imparted by the tradition are still relevant and they continue to govern the people wherever they may live, not because they are the values of a certain people but because they are universal human values.

There is a saying in the Changki dialect of the Ao language, '*Alakba ja-aka, meka.*' It means 'Nothing is greater than forgetfulness'. This acknowledges the fact that man is utterly helpless when memory fails. In certain ways, the imperfection or incompleteness of the oral tradition is due to genuine memory lapses, but in many other ways 'racial memory' was allowed or induced to lapse. It is in this imperfect form, that the new generation has inherited the tradition. Acknowledging this heritage is to remember, and only by making sense of the remembrance can a more stable form be given to the tradition - a new written literature, codified customary laws and perhaps a new history of the people.

This task of re-creating the tradition is both a challenge and a necessity. But as of now, the oral tradition stands poised between the uncertainties of the young and the intransigence of the old, yet both identifiable as the 'stone-people' from Lungterok from where it took form and is still evolving within the precincts of a given language.

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