

**STATUS OF AO NAGA WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS
INSTITUTIONS IN NAGALAND**

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled, “**Status of Ao Naga Women in Religious Institutions in Nagaland**”, submitted by Ms. Imtirenla Longkumer, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Degree of Master of Philosophy has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University. To the best of my knowledge this is an original work.

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Introduction

Definition of the Research Problem

This study seeks to look into the position of Ao Naga women in traditional religious institutions and the changes and continuities in their position, with institutions, the advent of the new religion Christianity. I seek to analyze the impact of Christianity on the status of women among the Ao Nagas of Nagaland with special reference to their status in the church. The present study investigates the nature of changes that have taken place in the status of Ao women over the years and analyses the role of Christianity in those changes.

The Ao Nagas are one of the major tribes of Nagaland. They were the first among whom Christianity was established in Nagaland. The area in which they live is bounded by the Tzula (Dikhu) river on the east, the Kyong tribe on the west, the plains of Assam and Konyak tribe on the north, and the Sema tribe on the south. Mokokchung serves as the district headquarters for this region. The Aos have their own language, culture and traditions. They speak two main dialects, Chongli and Mongsen, though Chongli has become the dominant one, because it was the dialect that was given a written form by the missionaries and is thus the language of all Ao literature.

In the Ao culture, women were confined to the household and to food-gathering duties within the confines of the village. Within that sphere, the Ao wife was a constant partner to her husband. At birth, a girl child was welcome, she had freedom to choose her husband, and while absolute fidelity was expected of her in marriage, divorce was also common. Women were always expected to marry, though some may have lived a single life if divorced or widowed early. She had the choice whether or not to remarry.

Women were by customary law barred from inheriting land, but a widow or divorcee could purchase and own land of her own.

According to Wati Longchar, male dominance among the Aos became more prominent because of headhunting practices. Headhunting was considered a prestigious practice among the men folk. The status of a man in the society was determined by the number of heads he brought back from wars. The one who brought back the most heads was considered a hero and was respected by the villagers. This practice brought about many changes in the society¹. It gave the women a secondary position. Headhunting was considered a very difficult and risk involving task, for which women were considered unfit. Since the position of a person in the society was determined by the number of heads he brought from the war, the consequence was that women lacked status in the society. The duty to protect the village was completely the responsibility of the men, and therefore women were not allowed to participate in the village council meetings. Also it was understood that heads of the enemies were considered to be a blessing for the family and the village at large, therefore since it was men who brought the heads from war, they were believed to be the blessing of the household. Since women were not allowed to participate in headhunting practices, it was believed that it was not necessary for them to offer prayers to gods too. Because of all the above-mentioned practices and beliefs, in due course of time women lost their position even in the religious institutions.

Janet Hoskins takes a comparative look into the aspect of headhunting for different societies. She mentions that in Burma, the societies practicing headhunting, competitive feasting, continual warfare, with tendencies towards reciprocal exchange, the

¹ Wati Longchar, Tebur Yimli Nung Tetsur Jenjang, Impur, Nagaland, 1991.p.14-15

dissolution of chieftainship and even the establishment of anti-chiefs in isolated village communities were structural transformations of societies based on large scale politically expansive theocratic chiefdoms, that took the slaves instead of heads². She also cites the example of Kachin society, which took slaves they captured and who were eventually assimilated into grandchildren and became part of the labour force³. In contrast, the Nagas took heads instead of slaves and converted the heads into ancestors who were supposed to maintain fertility and bring good crops to the community.

In the religious institutions, despite the fact that women have played an important role in the history of Christianity among the Ao Nagas, there continues to be limitations placed upon the ministry in the church that one does not find in Baptist churches elsewhere in the world. Their role in society in general has similarly been limited. This indicates that the primary reason for the subordinate role assigned to women lies in the socio-cultural traditions rather than in theology or interpretations of the Bible.⁴ The study seeks to establish the above and further to demonstrate how Christianity has affected the traditional status of women. The study highlights that it was women themselves, through their various organizations and efforts, who were mainly responsible for whatever progress has been made towards more equality between men and women in the society and especially in the Church.

² Janet Hoskins, *Headhunting and the Social Imagination in Southeast Asia*, Stanford University Press, California, 1996.p.9

³ Ibid

⁴ Narola Imchen, *Women in church and society*, Bartaki & Co., Assam, 2001.p.9

Elaboration of the Problem

Before the conversion to the new religion as introduced by the western missionaries represented by the American Baptists, the traditional Naga religion was shamanic in its nature and manifestation. Their religiosity was one of nature and human spirit continuum, which directed their traditional worldview, a religious outlook that bound the world of the human in harmony with the nature and the spirit realm. The different spheres were inter-connected and bore influence upon each other. The Naga traditional religion was an indigenous religion also categorized by scholars as a primal religion, which had an entirely different orientation and values from the so-called categories of world religions. The traditional religion of the Naga people had no founder, no written sacred texts and no elaborate religious rites. Their religious worldview was consistent with the nature and the spirit world that remained a mysterious force for them to comprehend and master. The traditional worldview stipulated a respect for the nature around the community, and lived in conscious awareness of the mystery that surrounded them as known in their daily experiences and encounters. This mystery was acknowledged in the form of a Supreme Being, who was recognized as the source of life and its living.

Within this context, the arrival of the British colonials and the American Baptist missionaries took place. Subsequently, both forces brought to bear upon the traditional Naga society tremendous changes. Prohibition, stipulations, and a new code of conduct were introduced; no traces of the old ways were to be seen, at least on the surface level. Practices ranging from headhunting to the dormitory system, from the shamans to the drinking of the native rice beer were prohibited. Seemingly, the old ways of belief

and practices were obliterated and replaced by the new religion and its strict requirements.

The Naga church which is primarily Baptist, exercises a dominant role in the community, and Christianity permeates the whole society, thus making religion a conscious part of the society and its functional tenets. To a large extent, on the surface at least, western Christian culture has impacted the Nagas in their religion, education, and contemporary lifestyle. For instance, today, the celebrations of Christmas and Easter have emerged as the major festivals in the Naga society, replacing earlier festivals associated with spring/sowing and harvest seasons.

However, in the transition to Christianity, there survive remnants of the traditional subordinate position of women in the primal religion and the functions they perform in the Christian community. It is within this milieu of contemporary Naga religiosity the present research problem is formulated to inquire into the elements of continuity and change in the position of women in religious institutions and its functionaries.

Area of Study

The study envisages an inquiry into the Ao Naga women and its status in religious institutions. AOs refer to women as *Sungolong* (A bunch of leaves). This is indicative of the fact that in Ao society women have been assigned a lower status than men. In order to study the position of women in the church, women's traditional, cultural, social and economic positions are also highlighted. Since Naga religion prior to

Christianity was indigenous, the study also looks into the position of women in the primitive society and the changes that the new religion brought into this aspect.

The form of education that the Christian missionaries imparted to the Aos is also a very important area to be discussed when we study the changes it brought about in the lives of the people of the state especially with reference to the role of missionary' wives among the Ao women. The study also deals with the process of social change among the Ao Nagas with special focus on the Ao women. With regard to this it is important to look into the factors that led to these changes in the society- from 'traditional' to the so called 'modern' Ao society.

Methodology and Theoretical Issues

Levi-Strauss' theoretical views are set forth in his theories on structural anthropology. Briefly, he considers culture a system of symbolic communication, to be investigated with methods that others have used more narrowly in the discussion of novels, political speeches, sports, and movies.⁵

Historical information is seldom available for nonliterate cultures. The anthropologist fills in the details with comparisons to other cultures, and is forced to rely on theories that have no evidential basis whatever, the old notion of universal stages of development or the claim that cultural resemblances are based on some untraced past contact between groups. However, to Levi-Strauss, a truly scientific analysis must be real, simplifying, and explanatory. Phonemic analysis reveals features that are real, in the sense that users of the language can recognize and respond to them. At the same time, a phoneme is an abstraction from language--not a sound, but a category of sound defined

⁵ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books Inc. Great Britain, 1963.

by the way it is distinguished from other categories through rules unique to the language. The entire sound-structure of a language can be generated from a relatively small number of rules.⁶

Even though Levi-Strauss frequently speaks of treating culture as the product of the axioms and corollaries that underlie it, or the phonemic differences that constitute it, he is concerned with the objective data of field research. He notes that it is logically possible for a different atom of kinship structure to exist--sister, sister's brother, brother's wife, daughter--but there are no real-world examples of relationships that can be derived from that grouping.

The purpose of structuralist explanation is to organize real data in the simplest effective way. All science is either structuralist or reductionist. In confronting some matters as the incest taboo, one is facing an objective limit of what the human mind has so far accepted. One could hypothesize some biological imperative underlying it, but so far as social order is concerned, the taboo has the effect of an irreducible fact. The social scientist can only work with the structures of human thought that arise from it. And structural explanations can be tested and refuted. Therefore, a mere analytic scheme that wishes causal relations into existence is not structuralist in this sense.

Maria Mies carefully analyses old concepts and views them in a completely new, sharper, deeper and more comprehensive way. She proceeds to do this through a historical dissection of issues. Mies identifies the paradigm of Man-the-Hunter as the origin of the paradigm of the patriarchal growth model of development. She also delves into the political economy of housewifisation. She shows her readers how the whole process of pushing women out to the margins, and out of the sphere of productive

⁶ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books Inc. Great Britain, 1963. pp.24

labour actually served the whole international process of capital accumulation and perpetuated violence against women in the light of the capitalist accumulation process.⁷ Women can achieve liberation only if they are freed from domestic labour and participate in socially productive labour. This is true also of the way both capitalism and socialism regarded nature as an object of domination and exploitation and a complete denial of the value of nature's work in the production and reproduction of life. It is also a manifestation of the dualistic attitude towards humanity and nature, where human is considered higher and natural as lower. This makes nature a dominion of humans, completely vulnerable to their exploitation and control.

With regard to the study on mythology Levi-Strauss argues, "Myths transform themselves".⁸ These transformations, he believes, bear sometimes on the framework, on the code, or on the message of the myth but without it ceasing to exist.

The study is ostensibly based on the secondary sources that are available. The dissertation seeks to study and analyze the historical records and ethnographic accounts of studies made by outside observers as well as local writers. It looks at the direct evidences provided in reconstructing the status of women with a view to glean from the past indicators that are helpful in comparisons with the status of women in the contemporary context. It also aims to look at cultural characteristics that provide for social mobility in women: seeing that in the modern and post-modern era women have made remarkable strides in their status towards equality with the men in their society.

⁷ Mies, Maria, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, London, Zed Publications, 1986

⁸ Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology-2*, Peregrine Books, Great Britain, 1973.p.256

The study involved contextual studies of the social, religious and political history of the Nagas in general and the Aos in particular. Historical records on the advent and growth of Christianity have been well recorded though not many sections are devoted on the condition of women.

Chapterization

The dissertation consists of three chapters. All the three chapters are interlinked and highlight the transition of the Ao Naga from a traditional society to the modern contemporary one.

The first chapter takes up the task of introducing the Naga people in general and the Aos in particular. The chapter discusses the geographical location, early migration of the Nagas, mythology of the origin of Aos, lineage and defining socio-cultural characteristics of the Naga people. The chapter locates the study in its specific context of the people and their socio-cultural heritage. Hence, the chapter describes the identifying features as headhunting, dormitory system and position of women among other aspects. It would be important to note that in each section, women's aspect has been given more importance. Traditional, political, social, economic and religious systems have been analyzed with reference to women's position in the society.

In the second chapter, the introduction of Christianity and the works of the missionaries among the Nagas are discussed in length. The entry of American missionaries is dealt with in two waves. Early mission works have also been elucidated. The chapter deals with religious transformation from the primal to the new religion and its impact on the lives of the Aos- its advantages and disadvantages. The role of the missionaries and most importantly the role of the missionaries' wives in uplifting the

position of the Ao women, directly or indirectly have also been sighted. Towards the end of the chapter, the formation and development of women's associations with the help of the missionaries in the beginning, and later by the Ao women themselves are discussed with a focus on the challenges they faced, and the changes they brought about within themselves and the Ao society at large.

The third chapter looks into the status of women in society and church in the contemporary Ao society. The chapter throws light on the changes that have been brought by Christianity and modernization in the status of women in society, economy, education, culture, politics and religious realm. Since the study focuses on the religious institutions, much importance is given to the position of women in the contemporary church scenario. The factors limiting the growth of women in this field and institution have also been analyzed

Chapter I

Traditional Naga Society

1.1. Introduction

The Nagas have a legacy of an identity that was constructed during the modern period. It was defined by their cultural and social practices as observed and classified by the conquering British colonials. In spite of this hegemonising influence, the defining culture of the traditional Naga society was distinct. In this chapter, I am concerned with the question of tradition and change, focusing specially on the issue of understanding the changes and the transformations that had taken place among the people as well as its primal religiosity with reference to Ao Naga women.

The group of people generally known as the Nagas is a confederation of the so-called indigenous people, who inhabit the mountainous regions of the Northeast of India. Nagas lived mainly in three Northeastern states of India: Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. There are said to be groups of people in Myanmar who are categorized as Nagas. To write of modern Naga history, beginning with the colonial and christianizing period i.e., the nineteenth century, would be relatively easier than to describe the preceding period. For the Naga people, information for posterity was transmitted orally. Hayden White in his analyses of narratives writes:

Narrative discourse permits us to account for its universality as a cultural fact and for the interest that dominant groups have not only in controlling what will pass for the authoritative myths of a given cultural formation but also in assuring the belief that social reality can both be lived and realistically comprehended as a story. Myths and the

ideologies based on them presuppose the adequacy of stories to the representation of the reality whose meaning they purport to reveal. When belief in this adequacy begins to wane, the entire cultural edifice of a society enters into crisis, because not only is a specific system of beliefs undermined but the very condition of possibility of social significant belief is eroded.¹

He goes on to say that narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, possesses content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing.

Only after the arrival of the Christian missionaries and the British administrators were historical records put into writing. Thus, because a written historical record begins only from the nineteenth century, reconstructing an authentic Naga ethnic history prior to the British administration poses a daunting and complex task, especially from this point in time. Therefore, portraying Naga society preceding this period must depend heavily on the Western production of the ethnographical texts and the local writings that came later. Hence, the depiction of the traditional Naga society is inevitably mediated only by the sources available as left by the colonial agents and Christian missionaries.

In a conventional ethno-history, “origin” or “migration” of a people is set forth in the history of the people; however, there is no certainty as to the “origin” of the Naga people. Since there were no written records until the arrival of the missionaries, the oral stories in the form of myths and legends tell of many mythical origins. These stories collected by the missionaries and the British ethnographers, are the source from where history begins. They provide the defining identity of the Naga people and culture. Despite their mythical nature, these legends share a common thread, which aids in ascertaining a

¹ White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form*, The John Hopkins University Press, London, 1987.p.x

common lineage, given adequate studies of linguistic, ethnographical and anthropological analysis.

To dwell deeper into the question of identity, we can bring in Ashley Montagu who criticizes common misconceptions. Notably, he aims to refute the erroneous belief that there is a “genetic linkage” between the physical appearance (phenotype) of the individual, the intelligence of the individual, and the “ability of the group to which the individual belongs to achieve a high civilization”.² Other myths countered by Montagu include the myth that intermarriage leads to degeneration, the myth that blacks and whites have different body odors, the myth that the Jews are a “race,” and the myth that there is equal educational opportunity for Native Americans denied access to their cultural heritage. While racists frequently employ “evolutionary” arguments in their work, Montagu reminds us that it makes more sense to assume that natural selection has placed a “high premium” on educability for all groups. Indeed, a central lesson in his theory is that variability in physical and intellectual traits, when it exists, is usually greater within a population than it is between populations. Montagu’s work suggests that what will begin to effect social change is “enlightened action,” not what he defines as tolerance (“*recognition of difference which one must suffer—generally, not too gladly*”).³ Thus, the reality of human races, castes or tribes as social constructs having no biological validity needs to occur earlier in the developmental cycle and educational process.

² Ashley Montagu, *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, Oxford University Press, London, 1974, p.31

³ Montagu, *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, p.241

1.2. Geographical Location

A primary question for anyone beginning to read about the Naga is, “Where do the Naga people live?” This is perhaps the first database the British colonials had to establish, in their quest for conquest, as well as inquiry into the “origins” of humans. The more remote a people were, the more backward and removed from the civilization as such. Hence, for the benefit of the interest of the European community back at home as well as for the imperial government’s administrative purposes the geographical location of the native was established. In this quest, the colonial records give the area of the Naga tribes, the rugged hills beyond the plains of Assam and before the plains of Burma⁴.

The Naga tribes inhabiting different parts of Nagaland are Angami, Ao, Chakhesang(Chokri/Kheza), Chang, Khamniungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sumi, Sangtam, Yimchungru, Zeliang of which the Angamis, Aos, Konyaks and Semas are the largest Naga tribes. Tribe and Clan traditions and loyalties play an important part in the life of Nagas. Weaving is a traditional art handed down through generations in Nagaland. Each of the major tribes has its own unique designs and colors, producing shawls, shoulder bags, decorative spears, table mats, wood carvings and bamboo works. Tribal dances of the Nagas give an insight into the inborn reticence of the people. War dances and other ritual and festive dances belonging to distinctive tribes are a major art form in Nagaland. Some of these are Moatsu, Sekrenyi, Tuluni and Tokhu Emong. More than 80% of the people live in rural areas. Nagas lack a common written language and speak 60 different dialects belonging to the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Nagamese, a variant language form of Assamese and Hindi is the most widely spoken language. One

⁴ Sipra Sen, *Tribes of Nagaland*, Mittal Publications. Delhi, 1987

interesting part is that every tribe has their own mother tongue language and these tribes communicate with each other in Nagamese. As such Nagamese is not a mother tongue of any of the tribes nor is it a written language. English, the official state language is widely spoken in official circles and is the medium for formal education in Nagaland.

Nagaland is rich in flora and fauna. About one-sixth of Nagaland is under the cover of tropical and sub-tropical evergreen forests - including palms, bamboo and rattan as well as timber and mahogany forests. While some forest areas have been cleared for *jhum* - cultivation - many scrub forests, high grass, reeds are still found and secondly dogs, pangolins, porcupines, elephants, leopards, bears, many species of monkeys, sambar, deers, oxen and buffaloes thrive across the state's forests. The Great Indian Hornbill is one of the most famous birds found in the state.

Nagaland has a largely monsoon climate with high humidity levels. Annual rainfall averages around 70-100 feet - concentrated in the month of May and the climatic temperature is sub-tropical and ranges from 70 degrees to 104 degrees fahrenheit. In winter, temperatures do not generally drop below 39 degrees fahrenheit, but frost is common at high elevations.

The Naga people, a small indigenous group, live in a geographical location that is quite remote to many outsiders. The Naga people inhabit the picturesque mountainous regions of the northeast of India bordering Myanmar. The area inhabited by the Naga people remains till today far from the centre of modern facilities. The mountains and steep hills, homes for the Nagas are 900 to 3840 meters above sea level.

Nagaland has a population of 1.988 million (2001 census) and the area occupied is 16579 Sq.Ft⁵. However, because of the vast area under different political structure that the Naga people reside in, it is difficult to account approximately the Naga population. The numbers vary depending on the source. Because the Naga people are agrarian, most of them live close to land and its products. Apart from rice grown in *jhum* and terrace rice fields, timber and bamboo are the forest products gaining commercial momentum. Sipra Sen sums up candidly the strategic location of the Naga people, when she states, “geopolitically Nagaland is very much a sensitive state as the nations like Burma in the east, and China is being close in the north and Bangladesh near to the western borders”⁶. Here Sen is referring to the modern Nagaland state, but inadvertently, her observations of the location points to the vast area of the land that Naga people inhabit, though remote it may be. Any description of the Naga people includes the notorious practice of headhunting and such descriptions were the primary representation of the Naga people to the outside world. Still, these features such as Mongoloid and headhunters do not point to any meaning to the term “Naga”. It can be deduced that the term Naga was a descriptive term to denote the indigenous people, not necessarily a term that was employed by the tribals themselves. Therefore, it can be sufficed that the term “Naga” was a creation of the British colonials. Many theories have been put forth to explain the origin of “Naga” once the encounter of these tribes took place with the arrival of the British colonials. It is claimed that the earliest use of the term was in the second century of the Common Era. Today, the Naga people are in different bureaucratic and technical state jobs within the state as well as in other parts of

⁵ Source: *Census of India*, 2001

⁶ Sipra Sen, *Tribes of Nagaland*, Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1987.p.3

India. With the new era of globalization, communication, and tourism, the homeland of the Naga will not continue to be isolated from the modern commerce and trade for long.

The idea of 'indigenous people' is an issue of considerable contention today. The early ethnographers were not very clear about the distinction between tribe and caste in India. In the 1901, Census of India, tribes were defined as those who practiced animism.⁷ In the subsequent censuses animism was replaced by tribal religion. The colonial ethnographers showed tribes as those who lived in complete isolation from the rest of the population and therefore, without any interaction or interrelation with them. Tribes are primarily seen as a stage and type of society. They represent a society that lacks positive traits of the modern world and thus they are generally believed to constitute a simple, illiterate and backward society. It is important to note that there is a gap in the sense in which the term tribe is used and understood by the tribals and in the sense in which others understand it. For others, communities are tribes only if it is listed in the Constitution. Tribes on the other hand do not view tribes in the sense of politico-administrative category. Rather they view them in the sense of belonging to the same community irrespective of whether they are listed in the Constitution or not.⁸

1.3. The Early Naga Migration

There are many theories on the origin and early migration of the Nagas. It is evidently clear that many Mongolian races now living in Northeastern India in the Himalayan region have migrated from China and South East Asia. During the ancient Indo-China relation, the Chinese visitors came to India following the Yunan river bank through

⁷ Source: *Census Of India 1901*

⁸ *Tribes as Indigenous People of India*, Virginius Xaxa, Economic and Political Weekly, Dec.,18,1999.p.3589

the present Myanmar. It is believed that the Nagas also came through such a route during the end of B.C and in the beginning of A.D. According to recent research findings, Nagas have migrated from South East Asia through the present North West Myanmar following different directions and places.⁹

The term Naga does not indicate any essential nature, but certainly the term is understood to describe the Indo-Mongoloid people inhabiting the rugged hills between Assam and Myanmar. The term Naga is in most possibility a modern, colonial legacy used to describe the people that looked different and lived a more “rugged” life than the mainland India. Julian Jacobs and the team too reiterated the Mongoloid nature of the Naga people both in their physical and cultural outlook¹⁰.

Any description pertaining to the Naga people includes the notorious practice of headhunting and such description were the primary representation of the Naga people to the outside world. Unfortunately, the practice of head hunting was a defining hallmark of the people. Still these features such as Mongoloid and head-hunters do not point to any meaning to the term “Naga”. The term Naga, representing the people living in the periphery of India and Myanmar is associated with colonial rule. With the formation of the British administrative block in the region, the term Naga gained prominence and solidified the people’s modern identity. As R.G. Woodthrope, a colonial engineer and soldier posted in the regions inhabited by the Naga people in the last quarter of the nineteenth century reported that the term “Naga” was foreign to the Nagas themselves. He wrote, “They

⁹ Bendangyabang, A., *History of Christianity in Nagaland: Social Change 1872-1972*, National Printing Press, Bangalore, 2004. pp.24.

¹⁰ Julian Jacobs with Alan Macfarlane, Sarah Harrison and Anita Herle: *The Nagas: Society, Culture and the Colonial Encounter*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1990. p.10

[Naga] have no generic term for the whole race, or even for each of the various tribes constituting the race. A Naga when asked who he is, generally replies that he is of such and such village, though sometimes a specific name is given to a group”¹¹.

From the above colonial records, it can be deduced that the term Naga was a descriptive term used to denote the indigenous people, not necessarily, a term that was employed by the tribals themselves. Therefore, it can be sufficed that the term “Naga” was a creation of the British colonials. Many theories have been put forth to explain the origin of the Nagas once the encounter of these tribals took place with the arrival of the British colonials.

From Woodthrope, we get the information that various derivations of the term Naga have been attempted, one being that which is derived from the Bengali word *Nangta*, which means “naked”¹². Another theory of the word “Naga”, subscribed to the Assamese people, comes from Hokishe Sema, who concluded that in Assamese the word “Naga” means naked. The Assamese people, the immediate neighbors of the Nagas, used the term “Naga” as the Nagas were then scantily clothed, almost naked. However, this assumption is contentious, because with the simplest argument, Naga people had colorful shawls and kilts that attired them and were not completely naked.¹³

A native writer, Tajen, one of the earliest writers, believed that the word “Naga” originated from the language of the Kachari, among whom the Nagas were known as “*naungra*”, meaning warrior or fighter. This explanation might be probable, given the

¹¹ R.G. Woodthrope, ‘Notes on the wild tribes inhabiting the so-called Naga hills, on our N.E Frontier of India’ in Verrier Elwin ed. *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, 1969,p.47

¹² R.G. Woodthrope, ‘Notes on the wild tribes inhabiting the so-called Naga hills’, on our N.E Frontier of India’ in Verrier Elwin ed. *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, 1969,p.47

¹³ Sema, Hokishe, *Emergence of Nagaland*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd. 1986.pp.23

ferocity associated with the Nagas by the neighboring people as exemplified, for instance, by the practice of headhunting and the raids conducted by the Nagas. “*Naungra*” became “*nhuga*” in Assamese, and from it the term “Naga” may have developed¹⁴. M. Horam, another native pioneering Naga writer, does not venture into explanation theory of the Naga people, but makes a relevant point that the present day Naga people are a race of mixed people, especially taken after the Tibeto- Burman race and culture. Horam rightly affirms that among the Naga tribes, there exists both homogeneity tracing to a common origin as well as a “culture that is varied and diversified: variations occur on regional, tribal and environmental basis”¹⁵.

The most plausible theory of the word “Naga” is the Burmese connections. In Myanmar, the Naga tribes are called “*Na-Ka*”, which means “people with pierced ear lobes”. Piercing the earlobes is a common and important practice among all the Naga tribes. There is a theory that the Nagas could have traveled through the territory that is today Myanmar, to settle in their present area. The word Naga could well have originated from Myanmar¹⁶. As W.C. Smith, author of one of the earliest records of the Nagas, has enumerated; several characteristics of the Nagas are strikingly similar with the tribes of South East Asia. Such practices include sleeping houses for the unmarried youngsters, disposal of the dead on raised platforms, tattooing by pricking, etc. because of these parallel practices, Smith maintains that the Nagas might have originated from South East Asia¹⁷.

¹⁴ Tajenyuba Ao, *In Memory of our Ancestors: A History of Anglo Naga Affairs, 1832, 1913*. Mokokchung: Author, 1958

¹⁵ M. Horam, *Nagas: Old ways , New Trends*, Cosmos Publications, New Delhi, 1988.p.9

¹⁶ Hokishe Sema, *Emergence of Nagaland*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd. 1986.p.3

¹⁷ W. C. Smith, *The Ao Assam: A study in Ethnology and Sociology*, Macmillan & Co.,London, 1925.p.7

1.4. Mythology of the Origin of the Aos

According to Edmund Leach, "Myths are reservoirs of articulate thoughts on the level of the collective".¹⁸ However, he believes that they are not simply 'articulate thought' in vacuum. They represent the thought of people about themselves and their condition. To Claude Levi Strauss, culture is a system of symbolic communication, to be investigated with methods that others have used more narrowly in the discussion of novels, political speeches, sports, and movies.¹⁹ Historical information is seldom available for nonliterate cultures. The anthropologist fills in with comparisons to other cultures and is forced to rely on theories that have no evidential basis whatever, the old notion of universal stages of development or the claim that cultural resemblances are based on some untraced past contact between groups.

Every tribe has its own legend and belief system of their origin. There are certain oral tales that speak about their migration from one place to another in search of a permanent place. It is believed that Aos emerged from *Long-Trok*, *long* meaning stone and *trok* meaning six. It also means six leaders. The importance of allegory in the understanding of myth has often been discussed. In Levi-Strauss' view, the kind of knowledge that the so-called historical method was supposed to provide, that is to say, "historical knowledge" was hardly distinguishable from the mythic lore of "savage" communities. Indeed, historiography by which Levi-Strauss understood traditional, "narrative" historiography was nothing but the myth of Western and especially modern, bourgeois, industrial, and imperialistic societies. The important point in his view of the matter is that there is no such thing as a single scale for the ordering of events; rather, there

¹⁸ Edmund Leach, *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, Billing & Sons Limited, London, 1967.p92

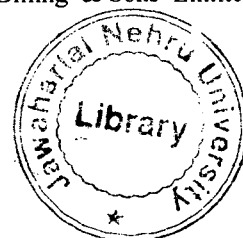
¹⁹ Ibid.

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are as many chronologies as there are culture-specific ways of representing the passage of time.²⁰

The chronicle of the migration of Aos is not a matter of few years. The history of their itinerary from one place to the other in search of permanent settlement is recordable. They first settled at *Chungliyimti*, for which there are sufficient sources of oral information. By the time they stayed for about three generations (*aso*) at *Chungliyimti*, the rapid growth of population created a problem for civilization within the desired jurisdiction. In Ao terms, in one generation *aso*, means 30 years. As they lived for three *aso* at *Chungliyimti*, a sizeable number of households and population increased. Therefore, it was not convenient for them to stay any longer at *Chungliyimti*. As a result, they took a momentous decision to leave this historical village for a better settlement.

The Aos viewed another distant location, *aonglenden* which means plain forest; perhaps, a better place than the original one that was beyond Dikhu river. They had to locate a better settlement by climbing the tall trees and also from mountaintops. This was one of the methods of their forward journey. Towards the east of *Chungliyimti*, they saw the land of their choice that was lying beyond the Dikhu River. But their main obstacle was to cross the river. However, they had to overcome that obstacle by any means to enable themselves to reach the chosen land. They left behind some of their fellowmen who called themselves *merir*, meaning those who were left behind the river. It is worth mentioning that the pregnant women and rich men who were ever ready to perform the Mithuns' feast were preferred while they were about to establish a new village or settlement. The birth of a male child and celebration of the Mithun feast, within a short period after the establishment of the village, was considered a good omen.

²⁰ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1966.p.255

Chungliyimti is no more an Ao village because they had abandoned it long ago. It is situated in a commanding place, which is beautifully located in the eastern side of Mokokchung town. Later on, the Sangtam tribe of Tuensang district occupied this place. The Aos lived there for many years approximately from A.D. 100-1025²¹ during which a sizeable number of population and households were increased.

While in *Chungliyimti*, the first phase of socio-cultural development took place in a noticeable way. There were two distinct sectors *mephu* (upper and lower sector). The *Mongsen* group occupied the lower *khel*, and *Chungli* group the upper *khel*. They lived side by side, having clear demarcation of administrative set up and maintaining different *Ariju* system, apart from a common one known as “*Senden Riju*”. It is understood that every clan / *mephu* constructed separate *Ariju*²². After migrating from a legendary place called Longtrok, they established this new village where they first re-organized the village administrative system. Construction of a new *Sungkong* (log drum), added to the grandeur of the village. Actually, the nucleus of the Aos administrative system was founded at *Chungliyimti*, which prevails even today.

It was a unique village in itself, from where the first phase of civilization of the Aos begun. Beginning from this village, a partial socio-cultural revolution took place. It was based on indigenous wisdom in many fields such as village administrative system, customary laws, refinement of marriage, beliefs and practice system, art and culture, group dynamics living system, war tactics, weaponry, traditional technology, farming system, etc. Many a times there was misunderstanding between *Mongsen* and *Chungli* language groups while at the village. However, a common approach towards common way of living was

²¹Panger Imchen, *Ao Mongsen Lipok*, 1990. p.23

²² Talitemjen Jamir & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, Bartaki & Company Pvt. Ltd., Jorhat, 2005. p.27

developed, forgetting all differences for the common cause. For these reasons, *Chungliyimti* is not only known for the refinement of the Ao civilization but as a place of reconciliation. This village demonstrated a kind of small republic in itself having everything for its requirements. Therefore, the history of *Chungliyimti*, the first Ao village is of great importance and significance even today. It marks the beginning of a new era in the early history of the Aos.

While at *Chungliyimti*, a better farming system was developed by introducing different seeds including cotton apart from a variety of paddy seeds. Weaving, spinning, pottery, basketry and construction of house were improved to a great extent. The use of new agricultural tools also improved and this led to a flourishing society. This facilitated to celebrate the most significant Mithun's sacrifice and feasting, in order to demonstrate ones affluence and position in the community. The use of ornaments, dresses and tattoo system were redefined based on clan holdings and their status in society. Thereby, a nucleus of social transformation evolved at *Chungliyimti*. The reorganization of their society, formation of the village government, distribution of powers, establishment of customary laws, regulation of unwritten laws, moral code of conduct etc. were the remarkable achievements during their location at *Chungliyimti*.

Thus, the first Ao renaissance took place while living in *Chungliyimti*. Therefore, this place is known for its importance where the social living pattern was redefined, the place from where the social transformation of their people had taken place. For this reason, *Chungliyimti* is perhaps known as the birthplace of the Aos, the beginning of their civilization, what they termed, "*Chungliyimti sumedem*"²³, which means, reconciliation or

²³ Talitemjen Jamir & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, Bartaki & Company Pvt. Ltd., Jorhat, 2005. p. 29

making things uniformly at *Chungliyimti*. Therefore, the literal meaning of *sumedem* may be decoded as social reconstruction or social leveling removing all the stumbling blocks in the real sense. This is the meaning of *lipok*, *ali lipok*, *lipokdak* and *lipoker* which refers to social refinement, or what they called *Chungliyimti* civilization. It is interesting to note that though they have now been converted to Christianity and educated; they still hold the tradition of their origin at *Longtrok*. This is the binding force of their culture.

1.5. Political System of the Ao Nagas

1.5.1. Village

Traditionally among the Aos, the largest political unit was the village. It was bound together by social, political and religious ties²⁴. The Ao villages were situated at the highest points of the long, straight ranges, which are such a conspicuous feature of the Ao region. Only a few villages are on spurs running out from the main ranges. In the old days, the villages were fortified by the ditches and fences studded with bamboo and spikes to defend them against enemies²⁵. A village is divided into two or more sectors and each sector is called a *mephu* or *khel*. Also a village of any size is normally divided into two halves called *impang* (upper Village) and *imlang* (lower village). Again, in the villages where the *chungli* and *mongsen* groups are more or less equally represented, members of each group occupy a separate sector called *Chungli mephu* for the *chunglis* and *Mongsen mephu* for the *mongsens*. Each of the various sectors had its own organization and exists practically as a separate village²⁶.

²⁴ W.C. Smith, *The Ao Naga Tribe of Assam: A Study of Ethnology and Sociology*, Macmillan & Co. London, 1925. p.51

²⁵ Milinda Ganguli, *A Pilgrimage to the Nagas*, Oxford & I.B.H Publications Co. 1884, Calcutta. P.114

²⁶ Tajen Ao, *Ao Customary Law* (1980), Mokokchung, Tribal Gospel Publishers Shoppe, 1984. p.14

Prior to the coming of the British, every Ao village functioned as what amounted to a separate state, a small republic meeting virtually all its requirements from within the village lands. Chosen representatives of the dominant clans governed the villages. The tribe as a whole did not have a political organization, but their respective village organizations were similarly based upon the clan. In spite of changes that have taken place at the higher level, village communities follow the same pattern of government even today.

The male inhabitants were regarded as citizens of the republic, and they performed the role of the citizenship. Women inhabitants were not regarded as citizens. As Tajen Ao says, "Every citizen contributes his share of duties and services for the common welfare of the republic"²⁷. Women were not seen as having this responsibility in the same way.

According to Aristotle, the universe adheres to a natural order organized along strictly hierarchical lines within which each moves towards fulfillment of its own particular end. He went on to say that women and slaves exist for the sake of rational male citizens and they remain in the realm of necessity rather than freedom, a prerequisite of the good life rather than participants in it.²⁸

1.5.2. Village Council

After a village was founded, one of the first things that were done was to establish a village council made up of representative chosen by the dominant clans²⁹. The council is called *Samen Menchen* among the *mongsens* and *Tatar Menden* among the *chunglis*. The main task of the council was to lay down laws and regulations for the social and political administration of the entire village.

²⁷ Tajen Ao, *Ao Customary Law*(1980) p. 114

²⁸ Aristotle, *The Politics*, Translated by T.A. Sinclair Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1975.p.60

²⁹ Imti Aier, *Ao Naga Social and Customary Genealogy*, Mokokchung Pioneer Book Stall, 1967. p.4

The village councilors are elected male elders from each clan. A woman had no place at all in the village council. No woman could be elected as a councilor, though she might be the eldest person in the village. She could not participate in any public debate or discussion³⁰. Thus, women had no part in village administration. However, apparently this was not always the case. J.P. Mills notes, "It is interesting to note that two of the earliest villages founded were ruled by women. One was *Sangtamla*, where the present sub-division officer's bungalow stands, and one was the first foundation of *Kabza* on a site a short distance from its present one"³¹.

There was no hereditary chieftainship worth the name among the Aos. The administration of the village was in the hands of the councilors. The council met according to local conventions and regulations, discussed matters of common interest, worked for keeping law and order and settled disputes in the village. Even today it is the most important and effective means of settling the affairs of the community. Mills says, "The most striking feature of the *Chungli* system is that at the end of every generation all the councilors of a '*khel*' vacate office and a new body takes their place. The standardized generation is usually 25-30 years"³².

Though a woman could not become a village councilor, it is said that women played an important role in the village council by indirect means. They were very influential at home and often could influence their husbands. But it was only through their husbands that they exercised whatever influence they had, not in their own right. Also, it was women who passed along the traditions of the people to their children. It was through the women that traditional history of the Aos was preserved. Here, too, there was indirect influence on the

³⁰ Tajen Ao, *Ao Customary Law*, 1980. p. 65, 115

³¹ J.P.Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, Macmillan & Co. Ltd, London, 1926. p.181

³² Mills, *The Ao Nagas*. p. 181

men who ruled in accordance to the traditions they had learned from their mothers and grandmothers.

1.5.3. Arijū

An *Arijū*³³ was an institution where the boys normally above 12 years of age were trained and learned under the senior boys. They stayed there till they were married. It was housed in a building called *Arijū Ke*. Aspects of it were later found in the modern school, especially the boarding school. A *Mephu* contains more than one *Arijū*. Each is occupied by one or more clans and each is a unit of one *mephu*. Unmarried boys of the same clan or clans lived and slept in the *arijus* of their clans. Each *ariju* had its own name such as *Senten Riju*, *Pongen Riju*, etc. Though the boys ate with their parents in their houses, they were educated and also worked in the *ariju*³⁴.

An *Arijū* was a place where war expeditions were planned and weapons made, and where every enemy head was brought after a successful raid. The members of the *ariju* represented the chief fighting force of a village. After the British prohibited inter-village warfare the *ariju* remained the centre of village social life for men for a long time. Women were not permitted to enter the *ariju* on any occasion³⁵. As Mills wrote, “it is of course forbidden for a woman to enter it”³⁶. Hence, women were excluded from one of the community’s most important social and cultural institutions. In case of Nuer society as mentioned by Pritchard, men who wore ‘leopard skin’ on their shoulders were considered

³³ The popular name used is *morung*. This is a term used for the institution as found among all the Naga tribes. Aos call it *Arijū*, Lothas call it *Champo*, Angamis call it *Kichuki*. In English it is referred to as a bachelors dormitory

³⁴ Tajen Ao, *Ao Customary Laws*.p.14

³⁵ Milinda Ganguli, *A Pilgrimage to the Nagas*, Oxford & I.B.H Pub. Co., 1884, Calcutta. p.115

³⁶ Mills, *Ao Nagas*.p. 67

as chiefs or in the language of those days 'Shaikhs' or 'Sultans' through whom the government might conduct its administration. These chiefs were considered as persons with traditional ritual functions.³⁷

1.5.4. War and Headhunting

Smith writes that from all the evidence he could gather, the Aos, as well as all the other tribes in the hills were in a constant state of hostility before the coming of the British³⁸. Warfare was not systematic, in the sense that it was highly organized conflict for the most part, between the groups of individuals without proper coordination. The warfare was often caused by bitter feuds between villages, the origins of which were, in many cases, buried deep in the forgotten past. Smith observes that, "glory in war was the pivot about which the whole life and activity of the Nagas centered". Further he observes that the real cause of this unmerciful warfare, which caused such misery, was the practice of headhunting³⁹.

Headhunting was a part of the everyday life of the Aos, as for other Nagas. The cutting and carrying away of the head was the glory of headhunting. A man who had taken the enemy's head was ceremonially honoured and respected by the people as a warrior and hero. The heads taken were required for important ceremonies such as the construction of village gates or a new *Ariju Ke* or to ensure the fertility of newly planted fields. Much of the traditional art and decoration was associated with headhunting. Therefore, the entire culture had at its centre the practice of headhunting. In fact, it was regarded as an honour equivalent to that awarded to rich men who gave feasts of merit. The much coveted shawl,

³⁷ Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, Charlton Press, Oxford.1974.p.291

³⁸ Mills, *Ao Nagas*.p.67

³⁹ Mills, *The Ao Nagas*.p. 68-69

called *Tsugkotepsu*, could be worn only by the warriors who had taken heads and rich men who had offered feasts of merit. Others had no right to wear it.

The life of an Ao man was considered unfulfilled unless he had taken a head or given a feast of merit. Only these deeds earned them respect and honour in the community. Such deeds also won the favor of the young women. Headhunting, as indicated above, was the principal inspiration for arts and crafts as well as songs and dances. V.Elwin writes that, "A man's position would be judged from the heads he brought". The man who brought in a head was no longer called a boy or a woman, and could assist in the council of the state⁴⁰.

Headhunting was a man's activity though women were indirectly involved in it. A modern Naga scholar, Wati Longchar, suggests that head hunting had the affect of giving women an inferior status:

*Headhunting involves many risks. It was purely a man's game. One's social status was solely dependent upon the success in headhunting. Since women folk could not participate in it they were excluded from all kinds of decision making process. Their voice was not heard by the society, and so they were given no status in society but treated as subordinate to men*⁴¹.

While women did not participate directly in the taking of heads, and hence did not have the same status as the men who did, they were indirectly involved in the practice. It was the women who sang praise to the warriors who came with the enemy's head. As Smith writes:

It seems rather strange that the women should do all in their power to encourage such practices, for it was they and the children who suffered the most, since they

⁴⁰ Elwin Verrier, *The Nagas and the 19th C*, Oxford University Press, London, 1969. p.94

⁴¹ "Head-hunting: A Socio-Religious Factor for Oppression of Women in the Northeast India; North East India Religious Review (Sept. 1990)p.37

*were unarmed and not as fleet-footed as the men. Thus, it was but still they sang the praises of the successful warrior, while they scornfully laughed at the young men who attended the feasts without the adornments, which distinguished the successful warrior.*⁴²

1.6. Social System

1.6.1. Family

The family, *kibong*, is the smallest unit of the clan. It is patriarchal. It consists of the father, his wife and the children. Sometimes it also includes children of relatives whose parents are dead. It may also include adopted children. The father is the head and authority of the family. Family descent is through the male.

When a daughter is married, she leaves her father's family and comes under the authority of her husband. The children of the daughter are considered the children of the husband's family; different family and clan from their mother. Therefore, the daughter and her children have no further place in her father's family. In the father's family, the daughters are regarded as the subordinate members. They do not become co-owners with the sons and do not inherit family property. The status of women is thus clearly inferior to that of men in the Ao family.⁴³

In and about the house, duties are divided. The husband does the heavy work, while the wife cooks and makes the cloth for the whole family. The wife may have paddy and money of her own and this she may increase by trade, the proceeds of which are hers to keep. Both husband and wife work in the fields. On a journey if there is only one load, the

⁴² Smith, *Ao Naga Tribe of Assam*, 72

⁴³ Tajen, *Customary*, pp. 63, 72-73

wife carries it, while the husband walks in front. If there is more than one load, the husband may help. At feast of merit, which was perhaps the greatest of all occasions in a man's life, his wife plays a prominent and honorable (though secondary) part. On days of lesser festivity she acts as hostess and talks freely with guests.⁴⁴

Though the family is patriarchal, within it Ao women played a more important role than men. As mentioned above, men did only the heavy work, but it was women who managed the home. It was her duty to cook, feed, clothe and care for her husband and children. She really had to work hard the whole day without any rest.

1.6.2. The Age-Group System

The age group played an important role in the social life of the Aos. The whole village is divided into age groups to which various communal duties are assigned. The age group system is, in brief, as follows: every three years a new group of boys born within the same years enter the *Ariju*. A boy remains in his original age group till he dies.

On attaining puberty, girls no longer sleep in their parents' homes. They sleep in the *Zuke*, which is the girls' sleeping house. The house of a widow forms the *Zuke* for the girls of the widow's clan. Girls were instructed in many things in the *Zuke*, even as were the boys in the *Ariju*.⁴⁵

1.6.3. Marriage

The Ao system of marriage is exogamous to the clan. Young men of one clan marry women of another clan through the inter clan marriage; relationship and understanding

⁴⁴ Mills, *Ao Nagas*, p. 213

⁴⁵ Temjen A, "*Aotsur Jenjang*", Unpublished Document, 1991.p.1

among the clans are promoted. Aos are monogamous; being permitted only one wife at a time. The purpose was to prevent infidelity in married life. The custom was vigorously enforced in the ancient society. A man who was found living in adultery with another woman while he was living with his wife was dealt with severely. Large fines were levied, or his house was razed to the ground by the relatives of his wife. There was no bigamous or polygamous marriage.

Ao marriage was a social contract. There was a proposal for marriage and an acceptance of the proposal. The proposal was made by the boy and accepted by the girl. The proposal and acceptance were communicated indirectly, through agents such as mother, sister, other relations or friends. The Aos do not have either the dowry or bride-price system⁴⁶. This prevented parents from 'selling' their daughters against their will. But it also tended to make divorce easy. As J.P. Mills puts it, "*Divorce is amazingly common. In fact it is very rarely that one meets an Ao man or woman of any age who has married only once*"⁴⁷. Some of the grounds of divorce as given by Tajen Ao were childlessness, poverty, family interference, adultery, conversion (when Christianity entered the region), unsoundness of mind, incurable disease, ill-treatment and desertion.⁴⁸ There was no difference between men and women with respect to seeking divorce. Either partner could take the initiative. A divorced woman or a widowed woman was always well looked after by her parents and her clan members. Her clan members were always there to support her and take care of her.

⁴⁶ Aier, Ao Naga.p.35

⁴⁷ Mills, Ao Nagas.p. 212

⁴⁸ Tajen, Ao Customary Laws.p. 48

1.6.4. Festivals

Ao festivals were similar in character to the festivals of other Naga tribes. Most of them were correlative in culture and related to war, headhunting and the fertility of the land (corresponding with different agricultural seasons). Some festivals were celebrated by all the villages; others were unique to a particular village. The two most important festivals for the Aos are *Moatsu* and *Tsungremmong*. During these festivals people sang and danced in jubilation. Beef and pork were eaten in large quantities, together with rice beer throughout the celebration of the festival.⁴⁹

Moatsu was celebrated from the 1st to the 6th of May every year, immediately after sowing was finished. It was the festival that marked the beginning of summer. The ceremonies associated with it were intended to appease the spirits and to persuade them to shower more blessings on the crops⁵⁰. On this occasion boys and girls of different age groups rejoice by singing and dancing and making merry among themselves. They also exchange gifts. Young men received new *dao* belts from their lovers or admirers, and the young women in return got new tobacco pipes. This festival is marked, even today, with much singing, dancing and feasting by both men and women. It is also a time to wear that clothing which symbolizes the good deeds in their lives. Shawls like *Tsunggotepsu* could be worn by the warriors who had taken head or rich men who had offered feasts of merit.

Tsungremmong was the second important festival. It was a harvest festival celebrated in the first week of August every year. It was observed in honor of the god known as *Lijaba*. By doing so, the people believed they would have a good harvest. The *Tsungremmong* festival was celebrated in the same way as *Moatsu*, with lots of meat, rice

⁴⁹ B.B. Ghosh, *Nagaland District Gazetteer*, 1979.p.80

⁵⁰ Aier, *Ao Naga*.p. 20

beer, singing, dancing, etc. During these days, the villagers stayed in the village. All other fieldwork was stopped. There were certain prohibitions to be observed rigidly, and if they were ignored, it was believed that bad luck would visit the households of the offenders.⁵¹

An important event of this festival was the tug of war dance. People, young and old of both sexes, dressed in their finest clothing and went to a place brightly decorated with a festive look. Then they dragged a long rope- like creeper as they sung and danced to the rhythm of a song. Rejoicing in singing, dancing and feasting, the *Tsungremmong* festival ended. The people hoped that *Lijaba* would be pleased and would shower them with rich blessings of a plentiful harvest.⁵²

1.6.5. Feasts of Merit

Feasts of merit were considered a central feature of traditional Ao society. Every man longed to be able to perform feasts of merit and to be a successful headhunter. These were the most honoured deeds that were believed to bring great honour and glory both in this world and the hereafter. There was a series of feasts and ceremonies, each one more important and costlier than the preceding one. Each feast entitled the giver social distinctions for himself, his family and his clan- and for the village also, because the sacrifices performed were said to bring the favor of the spirits on all the people.

An Ao man's elevated social status was further reflected in the architectural style and decorations of his house.⁵³ Feast of merit could only be given by married men, for the wife played an honorable and conspicuous part throughout. The sacrificer was assisted in

⁵¹ Aier, *Ao Naga*.p. 23

⁵² Ghosh, *Gazetteer*.p. 81

⁵³ Milinda, *Pilgrimage*.p. 130

all the work by two formal friends who were not of the same clan as the sacrificer.⁵⁴

Though women were not entitled to get honour, title and fame, in the songs sung at the feasts of merit, her name might be mentioned together with that of her husband. She would then be highly esteemed.⁵⁵

1.6.6. Inheritance

The laws of inheritance were basically the same among all the Naga tribes. The line of succession is through the male, and no female was entitled to inherit any property, though she may possess property. Among the Aos the property goes from father to son, and if a man dies without a son, it will go to his brother's or brother's sons as the case may be. If there are no brother's sons, it will go to his father's brother's son and so on.⁵⁶ Thus, the women had no share in the inheritance of immovable property. She could, however, inherit moveable property such as ornaments, fowls, cloths, etc. She had the right to possess wealth, trade, increase the value of or sell her property in any way she saw fit. On her marriage, her separate property did not merge with that of her husband's. On the death of her husband leaving minor children, she became the owner of the family's property till her sons grew up. She could trade to earn for the family and get immovable property by the will of her parents, relatives and husband. But with regard to land, a woman could not inherit. As Tajen Ao puts it, "it is clearly contrary to custom for women to inherit in the Ao country"⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ Mills, *Ao Nagas*.p. 257

⁵⁵ Tajen, *Customary*.p. 65

⁵⁶ Ghosh, *Gazetteer*.p. 65

⁵⁷ Tajen, *Customary*.p. 65

However, with regard to the inheritance of land, Mills gives an interesting account of exceptional circumstances. Describing inheritance of land he notes:

If a man with an only daughter and no sons were to give land and money to his daughter during his lifetime those gifts would remain valid until after his death, provided the girl had made her father even a nominal payment for the land. But all property remaining undisturbed at his death would go to the next male heirs, whatever his known wishes might be. They could give the daughter a share if they liked but need not do so. A man cannot will his property away contrary to the custom. If the daughter in the case mentioned above made her father a payment of the land it will become her private property. She can sell it or give away as she likes, but if she does not transfer it during her life it goes on her death to her father's male heirs. But if she makes no payment she can only have the use of land for life and may not dispose of it, and after her death it goes back to her father's heirs⁵⁸.

A widow received a portion of the rice and the use of the house and as much as she required of her husband's land till death or remarriage, or till she became so infirm that her sons had to support her. Thus the widow was never left uncared for. Beads and crystal ear ornaments were valuable property passed on as follows. Those brought by her husband were the wife's only for life and went to him or his heirs after her death. Those she bought herself were her absolute property, and she could give them away to her daughter or

⁵⁸ Mills, *Ao Nagas*, p. 189-90

anyone she liked. Of ornaments she had brought herself, any remaining with her at her death went to her father's heirs, her husband having no claim on them.

1.7. Economic System

1.7.1. Agriculture

Smith noted that, "the Aos are first and foremost agriculturists and only a few number gain their livelihood in any other manner"⁵⁹. This has not changed for the great majority of the people today. A contemporary writer, Tajen Ao, writes, "An Ao villager, by profession, irrespective of any profession, is an agriculturist and is locally called 'aluyimer'"⁶⁰. Surendra Nath Majumdar also notes that, "the Nagas are principally cultivators and men and women are equally industrious and they work in the fields together"⁶¹. *Jhum* or shifting cultivation is the main form of agriculture. Hardly 10% of the cultivable land is under terrace cultivation.

In the *jhum* fields, crops of various kinds were grown in addition to paddy. *Taro* or *Kachu* (colocaise-a plant of the arum family) is widely cultivated for its edible root, young shoots and leaves. Millet and maize are cultivated along with paddy. Today, potato, pulses, creeping cal, soya beans, French beans, cotton, ginger, etc. are all grown mixed with the paddy or sometimes on the outer edges of the fields. Many of these have been introduced recently, not being traditional Ao crops.

⁵⁹ Mills, *Ao Nagas*, p. 36

⁶⁰ Tajen, *Customary*, p. 182

⁶¹ Surendra Nath Majumdar, *The Ao Nagas*, 1924, p.59

1.7.2. Cottage Industries

Mills observed that the Ao people never found themselves with nothing to do. The greater part of the villagers' year is still spent in the fields, which need constant attention. After the harvest, life was more varied. Often the men would go on trading expeditions and both men and women had more time for handicraft work at home. According to Smith, as far back as 1875 many Ao men went down to the Assam valley to work in the tea gardens. Each man would build his own house and make his own furniture. There was also iron work, with each village having one or two blacksmiths. Other than iron work there was very little manufacturing.⁶²

The women made all the clothing for the whole family. Majumdar writes: "Naga females spin yarn from cotton with which they weave cloth. Every family has a spinning wheel and a handloom for weaving purposes".⁶³ According to Smith, the Naga cloths of his time were considered the best fabrics produced by the simple loin loom. Cloth of a dark blue colour is in most common use, the dye being produced from the leaves of the hill indigo plant.⁶⁴

Aos were skillful wood carvers, considering the tools that were available to them. They made excellent carvings of human figures, tigers, hornbills, pythons, mithun heads, etc. with which the posts of the *Arijus* were adorned. They also made baskets and mats. Each family made its own baskets of various kinds, and large mats from split bamboo. They also made some pails of woven bamboo or reeds, which were rendered watertight by coating the inside with rubber sap. The village blacksmith made *daos* (the all purpose chopping tool or, traditionally, headhunting sword), spearheads and simple agricultural

⁶² Smith, *Ao Nagas*, p. 36

⁶³ Majumdar, *Ao Nagas*, p. 36

⁶⁴ Smith, *Ao Nagas*, p. 37, 39

implements from iron which was brought from the plains.⁶⁵ Thus, each household produced practically all that was needed thus making it practically independent economically. In this traditional family economy the role of the woman as a producer was equally important with that of the men.

1.7.3. Trade

Trade was usually carried out either by barter or, with contact with plain civilizations and eventually the British, with coins produced outside the area. Besides salt, large quantities of dried fish were brought up from the plains. The Aos also bought red goats' hair with which they decorated their *daos* and spears. Aos also sold their cloths to the Phoms and Konyaks who were poor weavers. Aos also traded for ivory armlets and crystal ear ornaments.⁶⁶ Most Aos did some trading, but no one depended upon it for their livelihood. Thus, though the Aos could grow relatively rich by agriculture, none did by trade traditionally. It is important to note that both men and women engaged in trade activities. It was one means by which the women could increase their personal property.

1.8. Religious System

To inquire into the residue of the primal religion of the Naga people, this was essentially a shamanic religiosity, the definition of the term needs to be understood vividly. The term "shaman" is a derivation from the Siberian Tungus word "saman" which means, "to know". The term gained popularity after Mircea Eliade, the doyen of the history of religion, introduced it to describe the religious phenomenon of Siberia and Central Asia.

⁶⁵ Mills, *Ao Naga*, p. 96, 99 & Smith, *Ao Nagas*, 36

⁶⁶ Mills, *Ao Nagas*, p.103-4

Originally, the Tungus word *saman* meant a person who has entered into direct communication with the spirit.⁶⁷ Today, it is a common term used to refer to a person who has mastery of the spirits and the ability to enter into direct communication with the spirit world. As the religious functionaries holding a central role, shamans, either male or female, functioned as healers, diviners and soothsayers for the community.

The shaman, according to definition is a medicine- person, who cures ailments, who escorts the soul of the dead to the other world and who directs the communal sacrifices. A basic characteristic of the shaman is the ability to go into trance. Hence, Eliade defines the complex phenomenon of shamanism as a “technique of ecstasy”.⁶⁸ Since not all human beings can go into the realm of the sacred, only those with special abilities and skills can access the world of the sacred and subsequently become religious functionaries such as shamans and priests.

1.8.1. Deities

Before the introduction of Christianity, the religion of the AOs consisted in a system of ceremonies directed to certain deities or spirits. It was believed that if sacrifices due to the deities were not offered at the proper time one could not prosper in life. The good will of the deities was therefore sought by offering the appropriate sacrifices on all occasions. In this sense religious practice was directed ensuring the social welfare at the family, clan and village levels.⁶⁹

The AOs believed both in a multitude of spirits and in “high” gods. The comprehensive word used for them was *Tsungrem*. *Tsung* means Lord and *rem* means

⁶⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Routledge & Keagan Paul, London, 1964. p.4

⁶⁸ Mircea Eliade. *Shamanism*, p.4

⁶⁹ Aier, *Ao Nagas*, p. 48

“concealed” or “invisible”. The word *Tsungrem* primarily denoted the great deity of the sky who was responsible for the weather and seasons for humankind, and was personally called *Aning Tsungrem* (lord of the sky). Next to *Aning Tsungrem*, they believed in a great deity of the earth called *Lijaba*. He was regarded as the most important deity relating to earthly affairs, and most of the sacrifices were offered to him. Besides these two, the Aos worshipped many other deities who were regarded as less powerful and important.⁷⁰

The lesser deities included the *Kitsung Tsungrem* (house god), *Kimong Tsungrem* (god of the house-site), and *Aonglemla* (jungle ghost). Moreover, the Aos offered worship to spirits inhabiting the sun, moon, wind, huge trees, rivers, lakes and rocks. Whenever people were sick they tried to find out the place where they had displeased a deity. To appease the deity they sacrificed domestic animals. Sometimes very rich man became poor because of such sacrifices.⁷¹

1.8.2. Religious Functionaries

There were no professional functionaries among the Aos. There was no priestly class, or priesthood upon which special power was conferred by consecration. For the simple ceremonies of the home and field, a man acted as his own priest, assisted by his wife. However, for ceremonies such as the Mithun sacrifice, where the clan as a whole was concerned, one of the clan priests was called in.

The oldest man in the clan functioned as the clan priest. Two other men in the clan were included as priests' council (called *pati* or *puti*). The assistant priest would succeed

⁷⁰ Tajen Ao, *Christianity Versus Ao Nagas*, 1984, p.7

⁷¹ Nuklu Longkumer, *The growth of Baptist churches among the Aos of Nagaland*, 1988, p.10

the principle priest on his death. The head priest of the priests' council, over which he presided, was called *patisungba* or *putiunger*.⁷²

The priests were chosen from among the old men who had been counselors, and their qualifications were age, experience and freedom from serious deformity.⁷³ A woman could not become a priest even though she might have been the oldest person in the village. She was debarred from performing religious rites and sacrifices. She could, however assist her husband in family worship.⁷⁴

In regard to Nuer religion, Pritchard notes that:

*"...women do not make sacrifices and that though any man can make it only senior men who are fathers of families, 'bulls' as the Nuer call them, do so. Personal sacrifices are...performed by the head of the family or some senior kinsman and neighbor, but sacrifices which have more than domestic import and are thought of as involving a whole lineage or clan- collective sacrifices- have to be performed by a person called 'gwan buthni' meaning the master of ceremonies"*⁷⁵

Through these insights we can see that both the Nuer and Ao society did not involve women for performing sacrificial duties. They were not treated as equals.

1.8.3. Arasentsur or Arasener

The *Arasentsur* was essentially a healer. Since disease was believed to be caused by the displeasure of the deities, the *Arasentsur* was in reality also a religious functionary. The

⁷² Tajen, *Christianity*, p. 1

⁷³ Mills, *Ao Naga*, p. 243

⁷⁴ Tajen, *Customary*, p. 65

⁷⁵ Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, p.287

term literally means one who bites out or removes *Ara* (disease). Unlike the priests, the *Arasentsur* could be either male or female. A person was not chosen for this position. It was regarded as a gift. They were thus, what might be called traditional charismatic persons with healing powers.

According to Mills, the first sign that a person was endowed with powers of *Arasentsur* was the tendency to talk incoherently, believed to be conversation with the spirits, especially at the time of the new or full moon. Such a person acquired a “familiar spirit”, i.e., a wild animal (most frequently a tiger) with which they had “spiritual” relationship. They always knew the whereabouts of their familiar animal and if it was wounded, injuries would appear in the responding parts of their own bodies. If the familiar animal was killed, it was believed that the *Arasentsur* had to acquire a new one soon or die too. Even the acquisition of a new familiar animal would not save the *Arasentsur* indefinitely. It was believed that men could survive the death of six familiar animals, and the women five familiar animals only.⁷⁶ Even in this case we can see that the women were inferior.

The role of the *Arasentsur* was to diagnose sickness by means of divination or by performing magical rites. After diagnosis, they performed an operation on the patient by biting out the *Ara* (disease), which resulted in healing. Thus, their essential function was that of healing. The *Arasentsur* was also a priest, though of a different kind from the clan or village priests. This was because their function was regarded as religious- faith healers. After diagnosis they performed sacrifices and other religious rites for healing. The *Arasentsur* were also regarded as prophets/prophetesses. They predicted the course of the future events by divination, or visions. This could be a person’s destiny, future event in

⁷⁶ Mills, *Ao Nagas*, p. 247

general, the coming of rains etc. They would go into trances during which it was believed that they talked with the deities and the spirits of the people who had died.

There were also instances in which the *Arasentsur* assumed the role of the counselor. They were consulted regarding individual problems or public affairs, before building a house or beginning the cutting of the forest for jhum cultivation, etc. Also before embarking on a headhunting expedition, the making of a war drum, the construction of a Morung, the holding of public festivals and any other important public event an *Arasentsur* was consulted. They were also consulted to discover the whereabouts of lost or stolen property.

The *Arasentsur* was also regarded as a spiritual person. As mentioned above, they had a relationship with a familiar animal/spirit. Hence, they were regarded as spiritual guides for the people. They were considered as individuals who could communicate with the supernatural beings- gods, angels, spirits, dead persons, etc. They acted as mediators between the supernatural and the human- messengers of gods.

It is significant to note that all the above-mentioned functions could be performed traditionally by women as well as by men. It is thus the *Arasentsurs*, rather than the priest, who were the traditional models that can provide a basis of advocating a more leading role for women in the church on socio-cultural grounds. As indicated above, the role of the *Arasentsur* is more similar to that of the Christian pastors than was the role of the traditional priest. In any event, it was the only place in traditional Ao society where women had a significant role in the society outside of the family circle, having elements of both religious and political (advising the village council concerning public affairs) function. According to Pritchard, in Nuer society, women as well as men may become minor

prophets, though only an old and possibly barren woman called 'Coa Wut' (she became a man) would do so. However a female prophet could never perform in the sacrificial ceremonies.⁷⁷

The traditional Ao culture was significantly altered by the advent of Christianity. Elements of the traditional were maintained while others were modified or discarded.

⁷⁷ Evans Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*.p.308

Chapter II

Introduction of Christianity and its Impact on Traditional Ao Society

2.1. Introduction

Christianity came to India probably in the first century A.D. through one of the Apostles of Jesus Christ namely St. Thomas.¹ But for many years the Indian Christians and the missionaries were not aware of evangelizing Northeast part of India, which were far removed from modern civilization. It was William Carey who sent Krishna Pal to the Khasi people and started the Christianization of the Northeast Indian tribes. Perhaps in the long run American Baptist missionaries began to open various mission stations in Assam during which different encounters took place and some Nagas, particularly Aos were baptized. Until the arrival of Edward Winter Clark in 1869, no work of a permanent nature began among the Aos as well as the Naga tribe. He made good use of Godhula Rofus Brown-an Assamese evangelist, who made contact with the hill people coming to Sibsagar for trade.²

Even as Britain emerged as the “imperial power” in the region, there was the necessity of effective *modus operandi* to rule the natives successfully and efficiently. Therefore, they had to construct “forms of knowledge”. As Bernard S.Cohn wrote, “this knowledge was to enable the British to classify, categorize, and bound the vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled”.³ Knowledge was paramount for the British imperials to enhance and achieve their desired goals. This impetus to acquire knowledge of the natives that was held to be imperative to their rule was channeled through the

¹ A.M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol.1, From the Beginning up to the Middle of the 16th C, Bangalore, CHAI, 1984,p.9

² Ibid.15

³ Bernard S.Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton University Press, 1996, p.5

“investigative modalities”⁴. The first contact between the British and the Naga is occasioned by the ‘survey modalities’ that occurred as Captain Jetkins and Lieutenant Pemberton along with 700 soldiers and 800 coolies undertook the survey of a road from Manipur to Assam across the Angami Naga region in 1832.⁵ The British knowledge of the Naga people was non-existent prior to this, and therefore the policy adapted towards the Naga was gradual and directed by the exigencies.

However, there was no easy solution to the raids, and hence terror by the ‘wild savage’ habits of headhunting into the plains, the territories under control of the British government. The British carried out many expeditions to the Naga hills, however, they found that it would be wiser to withdraw their force in the Naga Hills and that their possession of the land would prove costly and unproductive without any profit. As a result, a policy of non-interference was espoused and maintained, but the raid continued unabated. After much exploration and many expeditions mostly into the regions of Angami Naga, the British government established its rule among the Naga people and created an administrative block under the name Naga Hills in the year 1867.⁶ Though the Nagas resisted, the British sovereignty was established over the Naga, not without much bloodshed and turmoil on both sides. Thus, the wild savage tribes that inhabited the hills surrounding the plains to Assam and Manipur were brought under the British administration, for the first time under one category of classification and ruling. *Kohimah*

⁴ By this, Cohn means the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, it's ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistic returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopedias. P.5

⁵Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India*, Mittal Publications, Delhi,1979,p.101

⁶ Bendangyabang,A.,*History of Christianity in Nagaland:Social Change 1872-1972*, National Printing Press, Bangalore, 2004.pp.32.

(Kohima) was selected as the suitable place to secure and establish their control upon the wild savages, because there was much easy access to the other surrounding tribes.

In the South Indian context, as is recorded in the Halle mission works, the missionaries had been taught the importance of education and scientific research by August Hermann Francke.⁷ The missionaries were aware of the connection between conversion and social reform as the goal of the mission. Hence, along with the missionary work, they studied the culture, religion, languages, the geography, history and the natural phenomenon of India.

The missionaries from Halle considered research and education as being the essential part and a crucial constituent of the mission. For this purpose, they established schools and learnt different languages. They sought to be able to speak to the people and to propagate the gospel and also to translate literature.⁸ Christianity has, since its origin been a missionary religion. Christian mission have always mixed strategies of religious growth for political purposes. As Andreas Gross states,

...the tradition that began with political religion in ancient Egypt and continued with the great empires all over the Mediterranean, the Middle East, India and China, the tradition of employing religious symbols for legitimizing, expanding and stabilizing political power, the tradition of transmitting religious concepts by violence and of forcing defeated enemies to accept the religious values of the victorious.⁹

⁷ *Halle and the Beginning of Protestant Christianity in India*, ed.by, Andreas Gross, Y.Vincent Kumaradoss, Heike Liebau, Halle 2006.p.xxi

⁸ *Ibid.*xxx

⁹ *Halle and the Beginning...*p.39

Christianity was first established among the Nagas in the Ao area. Before describing the early stages of Christianity among the Aos, it is necessary to know the context within which it happened. On 24th February 1826, the Treaty of Yandaboo opened the North East of India to the British Empire. Among the officers who served in the region in the early years of British rule, the most important was Francis Jetkins, the son of an English clergyman.¹⁰ He played an important role in the entry of the Baptist missionaries to Assam. He invited, what was then called the American Baptist Missionary Union to send missionaries to Assam, assuring them of protection and personal assistance.

The missionaries were sent for the intention of undertaking work among the Khamti and Singpho tribes, with the ultimate aim of entering Upper Burma and the interior China. Both Khamtis and Singphos were believed to be closely related to the Shans of Burma, Thailand and China. But from an early time, a missionary, Miles Bronson was interested in the Nagas. He placed his hope in the Nagas who lived in the hills of the Northeast India. In contrast, he found the Singphos exceedingly unfriendly and unapproachable. The Nagas were the Nocte Nagas of Namsang village in what is today known as Tirap Division of N.E.F.A. These Nagas frequently visited Assam to sell the salt they manufactured in the foothills. They spoke in Assamese, friendly, open and with characteristic enthusiasm. Bronson made several trips to the Naga villages near Assam to collect first hand information about them. By March, 1840 he moved up to the hills where he settled in Namsang, a village inhabited by people closely related to the Konyak Nagas but then called Namsangha Nagas, where he started a school. However, the Naga mission could not be completed because of Miles Bronson's continued ill health. But it said that the American

¹⁰F.S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspective*, 1983

Baptist Missionaries never completely lost contact with the Nagas after the Namsang work was given up in 1841.¹¹

The American Baptist Missionaries coming to North East India in the 19th century found themselves among a rich assortment of people, cultures and languages. Language study was necessary for communication, and since in most of the areas linguistics had not been previously done, they themselves became pioneers in the work of language analysis and the preparations of dictionaries and grammars. The work with languages is a real part of the church history of North East India because it shows the entry of the church into the history, life and culture of the people. When concerned foreign Christians began breaking down the barriers in the form of linguistic walls of the isolated people, many doors to new relationships and ideas were opened.¹²

2.2. Ao Naga Encounter with Colonials and Missionaries

Around 1870, two important factors helped the Aos to have better contact with the people of the plains. These factors were:

2.2.1. An Epidemic in 1870:

An epidemic spread throughout the Ao land killing many people. This epidemic was possibly either smallpox or chickenpox, a rash that killed many. Since the people did not have access to modern medical science and civilization, many young men might have left their villages and went to the plains for fear of the disease. It is said that an Ao man's son happened to join the group that left the village and went to Sibsagar. This was their

¹¹ *The Establishment of the American Baptist Assam Mission*, F.S. Downs, Indian Church History Review, 1972.p.71-72

¹² *Ibid*.pp94

annual market place; therefore, they might have made friends with the people who gave them shelter. After the epidemic, the Ao man went down to Sibsagar in search of his son. There he happened to come in contact with an Assamese evangelist named Godhula, who was looking for such an opportunity for contact. The Ao man could speak broken Assamese and appeared good at communicating. He might have agreed upon the request made by Godhula to teach him Ao language, culture, and customs. Thus, both Edward Winter Clark and Godhula Rufus Brown learnt about the people and their friendship was enriched.¹³

2.2.2. Famine in 1871

The epidemic probably was followed by sporadic famines, which forced more hill people to go down to the plains for rice and food. During this time, the people from many Ao villages went to sell their commodities and to buy food. The influx of traders to the plains seemed more constant. In the process, this people happened to see the mission printing press, the type setting and children learning at the mission school; that impressed them much. As they could not express freely, the missionaries might have used the Assamese evangelist with his little knowledge of Ao language as interpreter to communicate with the people.¹⁴

During one such gathering, some of the village elders were so overwhelmed that they requested the missionary to come over to their village and teach their children too. Clark however, replied fearing a threat to his life that, he did not wish to have his head hanging in one of their doors. But the elders promised that, should the 'sahib' come and

¹³ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & Company, Jorhat, 2001.pp.22

¹⁴ Narola Imchen, pp.32

teach their children, he would be spared and promised to give him maximum protection. This reflects the spirit of making their children and future generation to catch up with advanced cultures and society and can be noted as a sign of early social change dawning in the hearts of the 'savage' mind.¹⁵

2.2.3. Godhula's Early Missions till 1876

After several encounters and studies about the Ao people, their language and culture, Clark and Godhula Rufus Brown decided to explore the hills and start a mission station. However, the British government and even his mission board in America did not permit Clark to enter the unadministered territory. So, he decided to send Godhula, his assistant, who was keen to do so. Thus, Godhula proceeded to the hills along with some Molungkimong village traders in October 1871. He came into contact with an Ao Naga, Mr. Subongmeren, from what was known by the Assamese as Dekahaimong village, who used to go to Sibsagar for trade purposes. The Ao Naga lived with Godhula and his wife Lucy from December 1870 till October 1871. His life with the Assamese Christian family impressed him greatly that he decided to become a Christian himself. He was believed to have been baptized early in 1871 by Clark, at Sibsagar. He became the first contact person who opened the way for the entry of Christianity into Nagaland.¹⁶

Susan Visvanathan notes that, "*The initiation into the customs of the people, in order to understand them, not only implies the suspension of the believing subject, but also the dialogic attitude of empathy*".¹⁷ To her, this approach contradicts the missionaries of

¹⁵ A. Bendangyapang Ao, *History of Christianity in Nagaland*, Shalom Ministry Publication, Bangalore, 2004, p.69

¹⁶ P. T. Philip, *The Growth of Baptist Churches in Nagaland*, 1976, p.51

¹⁷ Halle... p.656

Christianity, who always communicate the antagonism to the other's perspective, and the desire to transform the subjects of their own path.¹⁸

With Clark's encouragement Godhula made an exploratory visit to Molungkimong village, taking a teacher with him. He remained there for a few days and then returned to Sibsagar. During that cold season, he made several trips to the village, and on 6th April 1872, he and Lucy left Sibsagar to take up residence there. As Downs observed,¹⁹ she (Lucy) must have been a most remarkable woman to accompany him (Godhula) as she did to such hostile places. It took great courage on the part of both of them to live among a people much feared by the Assamese for their headhunting. It is said that Lucy was very popular among the village women. They often brought vegetables and other eatables to her. She had a beautiful voice and her singing in the church was much appreciated. It is said that though her husband was often away on tours, Lucy was never afraid to be alone in the village.²⁰

After seven months in Molungkimong, the work of Godhula and Lucy bore fruit. With the permission of the *Tatars* (village councilors), every night they preached to the people gathered in front of the *Ariju*. Some expressed interest and were given further instruction about the necessity of being baptized in order to become Disciples of Christ. For many days, the people talked about this new word and idea, baptism. Finally, nine men decided to take baptism. On the evening of 9th November they went to his house to tell Godhula of their decision. The next day they went down to Sibsagar to meet Clark. This was something of an act of courage in itself, because in going to the plains they exposed

¹⁸ Halle...p.656

¹⁹ F.S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God: A Brief History of CBCNEI*, 1971, p.65

²⁰ Narola Imchen, pp.41

themselves to cholera, of which they had great fear. But they were not deterred. On 11th December 1872 they were baptized by Clark and made members of the Sibsagar church.²¹

On their return to Molungkimong, a small chapel was built in the village. Soon Clark accompanied by Godhula paid a visit to the village. On 19th December 1872, they reached the village, and on 22nd December Clark baptized 15 more young men, the first baptisms to take place in Nagaland. The new converts, including the nine baptized earlier at Sibsagar, were organized into a branch church. Downs commented that, 'though for several years having the status of a branch church of the Sibsagar church it was nonetheless the first church established in the Naga hills'.²² During the next three years, Godhula and Lucy lived in Molungkimong during the summer months, returning to the plains for the winter. They cared for the small congregation and preached in nearby villages.

2.2.4. Dr. Edward and Mary Mead Clark

Edward Winter Clark was born on 25th February 1830 in the state of New York in the U.S.A. At the age of 28 he married Mary Mead. Appointed as missionaries of the Baptist Missionary Union and assigned to the Assam Mission, they arrived in Sibsagar on 30th March 1869.²³ He was put in charge of the mission press to relieve W.Ward. But he soon became interested in the Naga mission for various reasons. He then sought to convince the home board of its importance. He was finally given permission to live in the Ao hills in 1876. Joseph Puthenpurakal, after having studied the correspondence with the home board noted that, 'at one time he was even willing to cut off all his connections with the missionary Union, and join some other society or even to work all by himself, if the

²¹ F.S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God: A Brief History of CBCNEI*, 1971, pp.70

²² Downs, *Mighty works*, pp.65

²³ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & Company, Jorhat, 2001.p.45

union was not in a position to promote his plans for the Nagas'.²⁴ The Union was at first reluctant to commit itself to a new work, but at the end they agreed to transfer him and he took up residence at Molungkimong on 2nd March 1876 of this day Mary Clark wrote:

*Taking with him only the most necessary articles, he was soon settled in part of Naga house, the luxuriance of which demanded a rental of about thirty cents a month. His cook and general housekeeper was an orphan Bengali lad, who had been our ward for some time at Sibsagar. No inducement could have persuaded an Assamese servant to accompany him. There in a crowded village fortified by a heavy stockade, was begun the mining of this unwritten language and the necessary deeper delving to unearth the real character of these new parishioners.*²⁵

Clark was at Molungkimong for about eight months. During that time he began to learn the Ao language and translated the Lord's Prayer into Ao. He also translated some songs, and taught them to the Christians. The village elders accepted his request to observe Sunday as a day of rest to worship God. On Sundays, he taught not only the Christians but also other villagers on the streets. However, he soon discovered that it was difficult to maintain Christian discipline in the village. For one thing, there were constant raids or rumors of raids. Either the warriors of the village were attacking other villages, or their village itself was under attack. It was, therefore, in a state of constant alert, which disrupted daily routine. The Christians were expected to participate in the defense of the village as well as its raids. Their reluctance to do so as well as their refusal to participate in the

²⁴ J.Puthenpurakal, *Baptist Mission in Nagaland*, Vendrame Missiological Institute, Shillong, 1983, p.56-57

²⁵ Mary Mead Clark, *A Corner in India*, American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia, p15-16

village festivals that involved drinking, made them increasingly unpopular and object of persecution. Clark, therefore, decided that the Christians should join a group of dissidents from Molungkimong who decided to establish a new village. Though all the inhabitants were not at first Christian, Clark believed that if offered an opportunity to establish a community where *the spirit of Christianity rather than of war should reign*.²⁶ On 24th October the move was made to a site not too far-flung from the old village and the work of clearing the forests and constructing houses began. The new village eventually came to be called Molungyimsen (New Molung).²⁷

2.3. Transition from the Old to the New Religion

Both secular and religious historians have observed that when a new philosophy of life is introduced to a foreign culture, if the new philosophy is to work then both negative and positive changes have to take place. This was particularly true in the spread of the gospel since the early church. When the Gospel of Christ was brought to the Aos and began to work for a better future, reactions, acceptance, submission, rejection, division and change were daily experiences of the people. The Aos had their own age-long traditional mind-set conditioned by their limited worldview.²⁸

It would be a one sided view if all the changes and progress are attributed to Christian missionaries. Rather, the major role of change was played by the British rulers at the most crucial period in the beginning. One of the main reasons for the easy penetration of the Gospel into the Ao Nagas was that, no influence existed from other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or Sikhism, nor were there any influence from any other

²⁶ Downs, *Mighty Works*, p.66

²⁷ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & Company, Jorhat, 2001.pp.46

²⁸ Panger Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, Har Anand publications, 1993,p.152

Indian ethnic groups and philosophies. The soil was fresh, people pure and solidly of one different culture. Although the British government was not able to set up Nagaland with a stable government, they had created a feeling for the presence of the British government. The Church of Christ arrived in the land of the Ao at the same time as the new political order, which prohibited head hunting. One of the reasons the British government officials did not interfere with the missionaries was that they were all Christians and equally interested in potential Christianization. However, there was a sharp difference between the missionaries and government officials as far as the motives were concerned. While missionaries were committed for a total change in culture, the British were in favor of retaining all essential elements of the old culture, including their clothes and hairstyles.

As a result of the mission work of the American missionaries, the Naga people embraced the new religion almost en masse. However, there was inherent tension as would be in any such major transition from one worldview to another foreign worldview as introduced by the missionaries. Admittedly, the British colonial administrators also played a role in the transition from a traditional to a modern way of life. Apart from the tension between the old practices and beliefs there were also opposition faced by the new converts. They were often driven away from their villages. The converts had to occupy new sites outside the village fences. The opposition from the animists was especially severe when the new way hindered the old way of life and religion. However, the similar chord that struck the Nagas was the love of a community-oriented religiosity expressed in joyous singing. Though, Christianity was quite a different nature than animist, the Nagas did not find it

difficult to embrace it when it came to them. Christianity as a singing faith and of social life was found suitable to the Nagas whom by nature are fond of singing and social life.²⁹

There were tension and ridicule for the new religion because it stipulated against the core practices of the traditional religious. Among the Naga tribes, the practice of the head hunting ensured both material and spiritual benefit. By bringing a head to the village from raids brought prosperity to the village and the individual was given the status of being a warrior. For some Naga tribes, the initial rejection of the new religion was because it was against headhunting and drinking the rice beer, therefore, they summarized that the new religion was fit only for women and not for men.

There are two opinions regarding the impact or effect of the new religion. One group thinks that the missionaries are not totally to be blamed for the issues resulting from two cultures, while the other opinion says that the missionaries plundered and destroyed Ao culture. It is observed that the latter missionaries prohibited all cultural songs, dances, tales, folklore and festivals on the grounds of immoral behaviour such as excessive drinking and waste of wealth and energy. Since in those days, non-Christians were the majority, the British also always stood on the side of the majority to defend their way of life. The non-Christians compelled Christians to observe and contribute cash collections at every festival not realizing that one day they would become Christians and find this a burden, because, evidently without Christian support they could not afford to maintain expensive old beliefs

²⁹ Atola Longkumer, *Shamans, Tanula Akuter and Naga Christianity: A Study of Religio-Cultural Transition among the Nagas*, Serampore, 2006.p.128-129

and customs. On the other hand, the increase in the numbers of Christians threatened the survival of the former practices.³⁰

For Dube, religion is not a hermetically 'sealed-off-domain'³¹ of the sacred or a static repository of timeless traditions. Instead, he defines it as an inherently historical set of signifying beliefs and practices whose meaningful constructions do active refiguring of perceptions of the social world, are at once tied to processes of domination and to strategies of resistance to authority.³² He also pointed out that what follows, is the processual nature and the simultaneously symbolic and substantive nature of religion which are closely linked to a wider transformation in culture and society. Dube explores the issues of the formation and elaboration of Satnampanth, a subaltern religious endeavor that fashioned its distinct identity by questioning the ritual power embedded within the caste and by constructing 'otherness' within the Hindu social order in the 19th century.³³

The mission of conversion among the Satnami group grew slowly, principally through ties of kinship. The Satnami converts carved out strategies of essence and fashioned their understanding of Christianity within the paternalist structure of the missionary enterprise. The missionaries' in turn participated as active agents and as hapless victims in the creation of an indigenous Christianity. The communities of Satnami convert to Christianity received regulations through the filters of local cultures, persisted with earlier kinship practices and reworked the Satnami oral traditions.

³⁰ Atola Longkumer, *Shamans, Tanula Akuter and Naga Christianity: A Study of Religio-Cultural Transition among the Nagas*. Serampore, 2006.p.131

³¹ Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Past- Religion, Identity and Power among a Central Indian Community 1780-1950*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2001.p.6

³² Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts*.p.6

³³ Ibid

Thus, in short, Christianity implanted the Ao civilization with a considerable degree of resonance not only to the Ao Naga life but also far reaching moral crusade to change the Ao Nagas personality in the direction of self-sacrifice and service for humanity. However, it should be admitted that missionaries had some weaknesses. They believed that every ancient culture was devilish with no exception. This was due to their inability to study the meaning and value behind the Ao cultural behaviour. This led to the undermining of ancient cultural features that resulted in disputes, hostility and misunderstandings.

According to Monica Junega, the history of missionary enterprise in South Asia shares a common objective of rejecting a 'diffusionist'³⁴ model of Christianization.³⁵ It subjects to critical scrutiny a narrative which focuses on the primary agency of missionaries in propagating a 'Western' religious faith among the indigenous people, and on the cultural consequences of constructing enclaves of Christian communities within Indian backgrounds. A powerful bearing in mission history has been to view conversion to Christianity not just as the adoption of a new faith, but also simultaneously as the surrender to an alien political order in the form of the colonial state.³⁶

The reasons for attempts to abolish ancient cultural features were made on the grounds that most of them were connected with traditional religious practices. For instance, to celebrate *Moatsu* by a Christian in those early stages was to go back to their old way of life. They were premature in judgement of good from bad, on the one hand, and on the other, missionaries were unable to differentiate between what was to be abolished and what

³⁴ *Diffusion refers to the dissemination of any physical element, idea, value, social practices, or attitude through and between populations. Edward Tylor's work on culture change first proposed the notion of diffusion as a means of explaining the appearance of similar culture elements in different group.*

Encyclopedia of Sociology, 2000.p.675

³⁵ Monica Junega, *Halle...* Vol.3, p.1027

³⁶ *Ibid.*1028

was to be retained. Both the foreign missionaries and the natives could not examine deeply what was actually connected with the old practices and what was customary and traditional part of life. Therefore, even before the missionaries left the Naga Hills in 1955,³⁷ there seems to have been a tendency among Christians to think that anything that was Western was good and anything Ao, satanic. This attitude resulted in danger of total rejection of all Ao culture and a copying of Western culture in the name of Christianity.

J.W. Fernandez in his account on Bwiti- one of the few religious movements in Africa, cites the profound malaise in Fang life, which manifests itself not only in the way they recount their past, but also in their ideas about the decentering of the villages, high divorce, growing materialism, failure of the intergenerational good will, and the 'apotheosis of the evil', a phrase used by Fernandez to describe a conviction on the Fang that the coming of the whites resulted in a massive increase in witchcraft.³⁸ He treats *Asumeje Ening* branch, which forms the subject of his study, as continuous with, and a reinterpretation of the old Fang cults and not as a variation of Christianity, since the movement's primary aim is to revitalize relations with the ancestors.³⁹

What distinguishes Fernandez's work on Bwiti from most other studies on religious symbolism is its treatment of the workings of metaphoric thought and its ability to describe a symbolic complex in a state of flux reacting to an environment in flux. All too often, studies of symbolic complexes create the impression, intended or not, that one is dealing with a fixed system possessing a definite structure and exercising definite functions.

³⁷ Atola Longkumer, *Shamans, Tanula Akuter and Naga Christianity: A Study of Religio-Cultural Transition among the Nagas*. Serampore, 2006.p.139

³⁸ *Africa- Journal of International African Institute*, Matthew Schoffeleers review on, J.W.Fernandez, Bwiti- An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa, 1982

³⁹ *ibid.*

Instead, one of Fernandez's guiding ideas is that, Fang society is in a state of transition and more particularly that identities are still inchoate- problematic and not precisely defined.⁴⁰

A study of the text material produced by the Halle mission brings into focus the complex and often paradoxical relationship- alienness that was inbuilt into a missionary encounter. The ultimate object of the mission was conversion, which theoretically meant the dissolution of boundaries and the integration or assimilation of the alien into a single community of believers. The missionaries also tried to highlight the cultural and religious differences on all their accounts because this gulf between the believers and the 'heathens' provided the central evidence of the challenges faced by the mission.⁴¹

2.4. Development of the Church

While Clark was the principal missionary in the area, the centre of the Ao Christian movement was the village of Molung, which eventually became almost entirely Christian. Towards the end of his service and under the supervision of younger missionaries the centre was shifted deeper into the heart of the Ao lands, to a place that was known as Impur near the district headquarters of Mokokchung. It is therefore possible to divide the history of the Ao Church into its Molung period and its Impur period.

2.4.1. The Molung Period (1876-1894)

As mentioned above, the majority of Christians together with the missionary and other dissidents from Molungkimong established a new village, about three miles to the west in October 1876. In the new village a church building was constructed that was used

⁴⁰ J. W. Fernandez, *Bwiti- An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa*, Princeton University Press, 1982.p.544

⁴¹ *Halle...*Vol.3.p.103

both for worship and teaching purposes. Though those members of the village who were non-Christians were free to worship in their traditional manner, it was agreed by all that the village as a whole would be run on Christian principles. And most importantly, the Christians were free to practice their religion without interference of persecution.⁴²

From November 1876 through April of 1878, Clark systematically visited the larger Ao villages to establish contacts. His purpose was to create good will, and to stop warfare among the villages. He believed that such a peace is necessary if Christians were to travel freely in order to share their faith. Though he was at first threatened on several occasions, eventually he was permitted to travel throughout Nagaland. Mary Mead Clark had not accompanied her husband when he moved into the hills because of ill health that had made it important for her to return to America for treatment. But early in November of 1878 she was able to join him at Molung. Within a few months she had started a school for girls.⁴³ This was the first formal school for children of either gender in Nagaland. It is significant that it was for girls. Though it was difficult to teach the children at first, the school steadily developed and in due course began to admit boys as well as girls.

Mrs. Clark named some but not all of the girls in the first batch at the Molung School. It is said that when Mary Mead started the school for girls, an Ao girl Ms. Taripisu went from the old village to attend school. After that some more women also went to study there- and were eventually baptized by Clark. Interestingly, it is said that the main reason why the girls were sent to the school was not to learn but to get the one paise which

⁴² Mary Clark, *A Corner*, p.24

⁴³ Renty Keitzar & L.T. Maja, *A History of Ao Baptist Churches*, 1985, p.2

was given to all those who attended. Later, of course, they began to understand the importance of education.⁴⁴

Mrs. Clarks writes that those older girls whose work would not permit their attendance in the mornings would come each evening to the missionaries' home. They spent an hour learning to read, sewing and discuss the new religion and other matters. Tongpangla was the first Naga woman to become a Christian. Soon she and Noksangla, who were also school girls, were baptized. Tongpangla became a valuable helper for Mrs. Clark- teaching in the day school and visiting in the village homes. She (and her husband) was also the first Nagas to be married as Christians.⁴⁵

In the context of Tirunelveli, as mentioned in the Halle Mission works in South-India, it is surprising to note that the person who laid the foundation of the first influential Christian community was a women named Raja Clarinda.⁴⁶ Though she occupied many of the most negatively valued subject positions available in her times, yet she became a powerful patroness of the church through a series of alliances with influential men. She went on to become the recognized leader of a remarkable diverse congregation after her baptism.⁴⁷

Though the Clarks had no medical training they found that the prevalence of disease and the consequent suffering of the people made it necessary for them to provide simple treatment. As Mary Mead Clark writes, 'some knowledge of medicine is of great

⁴⁴ *Molungkimong Baptist Arogotsur Centennary Otsu (1885-1985)*,p.3

⁴⁵ Mary Clark, *A Corner*, p.85-86

⁴⁶ *Halle...*p.659

⁴⁷ *Halle...*p.669

advantage, it is an open door into many homes, and puts an end to consulting soothsayers and sacrificing to demons. Medical works were therefore added to our library.⁴⁸

As mentioned already, the first thing Clark did when the new village was established was to build a chapel for worship and for teaching purposes. He believed that it was important to teach the people to read and write. For him this was a part of evangelism. To do this work he had two problems. The first was to get teachers and the other was to produce written materials in Ao language. He dealt with the first problem by bringing Assamese teachers from the plains. For the second problem, only Clark could solve the problem. He began the work of reducing the Ao language to a written form. At first he thought of using the Assamese script but in the end chose to use the Roman. Before the Clarks left for furlong in 1886 they had mastered the Ao language, and he had written a dictionary, a primer, a catechism, and translated hymnbook, gospels etc.⁴⁹

Education was the vehicle for building a modern society as the missionaries initiated the Naga people into modernizing. Particularly since the Naga people did not possess written language; it was the work of the missionaries that reduced the languages of the tribes into written forms. Translation of the Bible and compiling the first grammar primer in the languages were the work of the missionaries, and later local missionaries from the Ao churches contributed to development of the literary culture among the Naga people. The education of the natives contributed to the development of native leadership and self-support.

During this period, the Molung centre, where the missionaries were stationed was the centre of work among the Nagas. In the course of time, more missionaries joined the

⁴⁸ Mary Clark, *A Corner*, p.68

⁴⁹ Mary Clark, *A Corner*, p.74

Clarks. In 1879, Zilli, an Assamese preacher, and his wife; in 1885, Sydney and Hattie Rivenburg; in 1892, Samuel and Rose Perrine; and in 1893, Fred and Fannie Haggard were the ones that followed.⁵⁰ Eventually they agreed that as the work developed, Molung was not a suitable centre. They required a place that was more central both to the Ao villages and those of surrounding tribes. After a long search, it was decided to establish the new centre on the Tzudem, a place between Mepungchukit and Sungratsu, jointly owned by them. At first the villagers were reluctant to give the land but through his persuasion and contacts with some villagers, Clark finally succeeded. A government survey team had the land measured and payment was made to the owners. In 1894, the new centre was named Impur (meaning 'pioneer' or 'citizen')⁵¹ the centre of the Ao mission from that time onwards.

2.4.2. The Impur Period (1894- to present)

On 1st November 1894, the Haggard family moved from Molung to Impur to start the work of building the centre, and one month later they were followed by the Perrines. Clark chose to remain in Molung doing literary work. He did not shift to Impur until 24th April 1897.⁵²

To mention Halle mission works in South India, the missionaries, apart from the question of accessibility to the local population, the inclusion of Tamilians in mission work was also a matter of finances and personnel. Some missionaries as mentioned had expressed the idea that the Indians should be ordained and should be formally placed at an

⁵⁰ Mathew Muttumana, *Christianity in Assam and Inter Faith Dialogue: A Study on the Modern Religious Movement in Northeast India*, Sat Prakashen Sanchar Kendra, 1984, p.64

⁵¹ L.Kijung Ao, *Nokinketer Mongchen: Nagaland Nung Arogo Tenzukba Otsu*.1972, p.63

⁵² Philip, *Growth*, p.59, Kijung, *Nokinketer*, p.71

equal footing with the European missionaries. The intensive co-operation between the missionaries and the pastors became an established component of the mission strategy within the Danish-Halle and the English-Halle mission.⁵³

The early days were devoted to construction work. Soon a school was opened and other projects followed. The same educational policies were followed as had been adapted at Molung but gradually raised the level. The Impur School, which was started in 1896 with nine students, progressed well with students coming from several different Ao villages- and later from neighboring tribes as well. Speaking of this development, Downs writes:

*This became an important educational centre, its training school providing leadership for churches and Christian schools throughout the northern part of Nagaland. By the turn of the century a greater interest in education had developed and the distinctive requirements of their new faith. They also became active in evangelistic work, both among their fellow Aos and members of neighboring tribes.*⁵⁴

1896 was a significant year in the history of the Ao church because this year, the seven Ao churches met together and decided to form an association. Thus, the first Ao church Association (now known as ABAM) meet was held in Molungyimsen from 12th to 14th March 1897. This was the first time the representatives of the Churches met together. The objective of the association was to provide a forum for fellowship, consultation, and to

⁵³Halle..Vo2.p.704.

⁵⁴Muttumana, Christianity, p.128

promote both evangelistic and educational work. It started as its goal the opening of a school in every Ao village.⁵⁵

After having served the Ao Nagas for 39 years, Edward and Mary Mead Clark retired and returned to America in 1911. By that time the church was well established and growing. The 50th anniversary of the Ao church was celebrated in 1926. Fifty three local churches attended the convention 584 baptized members were represented. Some important resolutions were passed. They included the resolution to send evangelists to the border tribes, to raise funds for the border tribes' mission, to uplift and encourage women's education and to develop resources for self-support.⁵⁶

After the Golden Jubilee the Ao Churches started to expand more rapidly than before, which brought about many changes. The church was especially affected by the Second World War, a portion of which was fought in Nagaland, culminating in the battle of Kohima in which the Nagas aided the British army.

The war had far reaching effects. Many people had suffered physical loss; however, that was only one part of the impact. More serious was an adverse affect on the moral lives of the people, especially the youth. Many young men were recruited to work in the labour corps in France. After the war was over they returned home and began to live undisciplined and immoral lives. It was in this context that a revival movement started in the churches between 1948 and 1952. The movement took place in two stages, under the primary leaders of C.E. Hunter and Rikum respectively. During this period of awakening in the Ao

⁵⁵ Kijung, *Nokinketer*, p.71

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

churches, one of the resolutions passed during the golden Jubilee celebration- the goal of a self-supporting Church, was achieved.⁵⁷

The Ao Baptist Church celebrated its centennial in 1972.⁵⁸ Not only Ao Naga Baptist churches representative but also many representatives of the other Naga tribes attended the centennial. This was not only the first centennial of any kind ever held in Nagaland; it was also the largest gathering of people to assemble together for a single event that this state had ever seen. Some more resolutions came out of this centennial gathering. It included the resolution to start a Centennial Mission Fund, to start a new mission field in Arunachal Pradesh and to encourage missionary work and theological study through the establishment of a theological college.

However, with all the developments mentioned above, there is also a saddening loss of ancient Ao cultural value, which brought the church under attack by the intellectuals. For instance, the people are attached to a Western hymnal in the church, and in spite of their own cultural tunes in which the gospel can be inserted; there is a complete rejection of their own. Dr. Clark and Dr. Haggard tried to teach the hymnal set in Ao traditional tunes, but the latter missionaries found it difficult, and so introduced a total change.⁵⁹ Another saddening thing is the subsequent distortion of the Ao language. English songs have completely replaced Ao language in church services, youth gatherings, conferences and social occasions, whether the congregation understands it or not.

⁵⁷ *Christians in the Naga Hills: An Experienced ABM in Kohima, Assam Tells the Story of the Little known Naga Christians*, National Council of Churches in India, 1953.p.116

⁵⁸ 1872-1972, *The Ao Baptist Centennial*, American Baptist Magazine, 1973.p.34

⁵⁹ 1872-1972, *The Ao Baptist Centennial*, American Baptist Magazine, 1973.p45

2.5. Formation and Development of the Ao Women's Association

Though, as we have seen above, there has been a continual emphasis on work among girls and women from the very beginning of the Christian movement among the Aos, very little attention has been paid to this subject in books and other published writings. This is especially true of the extremely important but frequently ignored Women's Associations.

As already noted, Christianity was introduced to the Ao land in 1872. Among the first 24 persons baptized there were no women. According to A. Temjen, this was because Christianity was a new religion about which there were still doubts. Under such circumstances, it was thought best that men should become Christians and if it works out well then women could join them.⁶⁰ L.Kijung has a different opinion on this subject based upon what Clark had written. Clark said that there were some among the women who wanted to be baptized in the beginning and were qualified, but for some reasons they were not. He was unable to determine those reasons. Kijung himself found out from some elders that the people considered baptism a form of worshipping god and since men and women did not traditionally have the same role in worship it was not considered appropriate that the women should be baptized with the men.⁶¹ This explanation would be in keeping with the subordinate role that women played in the formal religious ceremonies as discussed in the previous chapter.

After the new Molung was formed, the first baptism took place on 2nd June 1878. Of the seven then baptized there were still no women. It was not until the next baptism took

⁶⁰A.Temjen, *Ao Tsur Jenjang* . 1991, p.2

⁶¹ Kijung, *Nokinketer*,p.44

place that the first two women were included. After this, according to the reports of the Clarks, baptism of both men and women took place.⁶²

Even before any women were baptized, Mary Mead Clark had opened a school for girls, as noted above. This school opened the eyes of Ao women in an entirely new way. Through this school many women developed religious belief, learned to sing gospel songs, besides learning to read and write. Because of this school- which admitted girls before boys- Ao women were the first among the people to be able to read and write, to sing gospel songs and to read the Bible.

According to Maina Chawla Singh, missionaries had anxieties about the 'aching void' in the moral and intellectual life of the 'heathen', which they believed ought to be filled with Christian literature, so that natives across the sexes were not tempted with bad books.⁶³ She argues that missionary texts, produced in a variety of forms, served as conduits for disseminating and perpetuating discourses about the "heathen". Thus, it constitutes a corpus of knowledge about the 'Other', rooted in certain religious, racial, and cultural assumptions that under girded their production. It was a professional obligation to send detailed letters with narratives, regular reports and newsletters to home societies, enumerating their progress in the field. They were also encouraged to generate promotional pamphlets for fundraising. Such endeavors, inspired by a combination of professional obligation and a zeal to produce texts that made available 'Christian truths' in 'native tongues' led to a proliferation of writings by missionaries serving overseas. It is important to note that the production of missionary literature was not a gendered domain. Women made intervention in this area in several levels. Traditionally, missionary wives had long

⁶² Kijung, *Nokinketer*, p.44

⁶³ Maina Chawla Singh, *Gender, Religion and "heathen lands"*, Garland Publishing Inc., New York & London, 2000, p.138

contributed to this body of writing in the form of letters to family and their home congregations.

Saurabh Dube in his work on the Satnami community of central India notes that, eurocentric imaginings specify the trajectories of the past and the present across cultures by orchestrating particular historical and ethnographic cases.⁶⁴ Critiques of eurocentric imaginings often have the danger of reproducing the givenness of categories derived from the very frameworks they set out to question. Dube believes that, 'theory needs to be interwoven into narrative as a critical interpretative act, as a crucial aspect of the telling power of tales, in elaborations of the ethnographic histories'.⁶⁵

Once women began to join the church, the missionaries decided that special attention needed to be given to women for their participation in the affairs of the church. Hence in 1880, Mary Mead Clark started a women's fellowship that met once a week. It had several objectives⁶⁶. First, it sought to teach the women how to manage family affairs in a Christian way, and secondly, to teach them the importance of stewardship. In due course of time, the women began to bring their offerings to the church at the time of Sunday worship. These were the beginnings of the women fellowship that was to develop considerably through years.

Through the women's fellowship the number of Christian women increased. The earliest women leaders among the Ao were Tongpangkokla, Noksangla, Jongmayangla, Chubasenla, Punayangla, Impangkokla, and Sentikumla.⁶⁷ They were courageous women with great faith. It is sometimes said that they showed greater interest than many men did in

⁶⁴ Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts- Religion, Identity and Power among a Central Indian Community 1780-1950*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2001.p.3

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Kijung, *Nokinketer*, p.56

⁶⁷ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & Company Pvt. LTD, Jorhat, 2001. p.59

church activities. From the time of the Molung fellowship onwards, the women kept separate funds of their own, out of which they paid the salaries of women leaders. This was in keeping with the traditional rights of the women to do 'trading' with their own moveable property which they, not the men folks, possessed and administered. Mary Mead Clark had also introduced to the women of Molung the practice of planting kitchen gardens with new and nutritious vegetables.

When the Clarks left for furlong in 1885, Tongpangkokla was entrusted with the leadership of the fellowship. She was also given the responsibilities as a teacher in the school. After teaching at Molung for three years, in 1888 she went down to Yajang village to teach in the mission school established there and also to serve as village pastor. This was the first time that an Ao woman served either as schoolteacher or pastor. After Tongpangkokla left Molung, Zilli's wife, Jainty was chosen as leader of the fellowship. Sometimes she too, in the absence of the pastor, assumed the role of pastor.⁶⁸

The Molung women's fellowship became the model for other churches as they were formed. In 1987, when the first Ao Baptist Association meeting was held at Molung, a collection of Rs.2 to 3 was given by the women's fellowship to be used for starting women's fellowship in other villages. A. Temjen mentioned that this was the first women's group collection.⁶⁹

Between 1897 and 1926, Christianity spread throughout the Ao area, and many churches were established. Whenever a church was established in any village, it was encouraged to start a women's fellowship immediately. In 1926, there were 55 Ao churches and 25 of them had women's fellowships. The main motivating force behind the formation

⁶⁸ Narola Imchen, p. 102

⁶⁹ A. Temjen, *Ao Tsur*, p.2,4

and development of these fellowships at that time were the missionary women. We have already noted that it was Mary Mead Clark who took initiative in this matter. The missionary women who followed her had similar interests in it.

Beginning from 1897, the Ao churches met annually as an association. Women as well as men attended. At least as early as 1914, separate women's meetings were held during the time of the association meetings. In this way, the members of the various local women's fellowship were brought together at the association, but still they did not have a separate organization at that level. Women's work at Impur grew at great speed led by the missionaries' wives. They led classes for women, prayer meetings etc. The school they had established had come into close touch with the lives of thirty two girls. Girl's work presented a big opportunity in Impur. The native women, in an association meeting voted to give Rs.100 to the girl's work, and from the weekly meeting, that had an average attendance of seventeen women, contributed Rs.5 for the same purpose. Again, from at least three other villages the women went out in voluntary bands to tell the gospel story, and this without the incentive of financial aid of the missionaries⁷⁰.

In due course of time, single women missionaries were stationed at Impur and became a source of help for the women's fellowships. Between 1905 and 1930, three single women came to teach in Impur Mission School. They were sent by the women's American Baptist Foreign Mission school. These women missionaries contributed to both the developments of the Impur Mission School and the women's fellowships. They inspired Ao women to strive for education and go forward with the Gospel⁷¹.

⁷⁰ Noksangla, p.51

⁷¹ Narola Imchen, *Remembering our Foremothers*, ETC, Jorhat, 2003. p 87.

As the women's fellowships developed, the need to have more women leaders was felt. These made the AOs realize the importance of educating women. Thus the Golden Jubilee celebration in 1926 adopted a resolution to encourage the education of women.⁷² From this time onwards more and more women started subscribing to the idea of going to school.

2.6. Formation of the Ao Baptist Women's Association

Increasingly after 1926, educated women provided the leadership of the women's fellowship. By 1943 there were women leaders of women's fellowships in almost all the churches. To train the church leaders, Bible classes were conducted at Impur. In these classes every pastor and women's leaders attended, in addition to some other members of the congregation who were selected for the purpose.⁷³

Thus, as seen, from an early time in the formation of the structures of the church, women participated both in the annual association meetings and the Bible training classes for leaders. Though they undoubtedly did so because of decisions made primarily by missionaries, the fact remains that it gave them certain status in the affairs of the church compared to the status they enjoyed in the institutions of traditional society. It was also the missionaries that were behind the next step—the formation of women's association. As early as 1943, during the annual Bible class for which a large number of people had come, Charles E. Hunter, then a missionary at Impur, asked the women to stay behind after a meeting. He invited them to his home where he encouraged them to form a women's association. He is reported to have said that through such an occasion only, which would

⁷² A. Temjen, *Ao Tsur*, p.24

⁷³ A. Temjen, *Ao Tsur*, p.3

bring all the women together, could significant work be undertaken. But the meeting dispersed without any concrete decision being taken. After the second session was over, hunter once again called the women leaders. This time they gathered in the school building. Hunter again urged the women to form an association. According to A.Temjen, Hunter said:

All of you have come from different Ao Churches. As you look after the needs of the people in your church and village, there is much need to look after the new Churches of the border tribes. The churches can only pay the pastor's salary with much difficulty. But there are many other needs to be met. To meet those needs, it is very important that you start an organized women's association. Through your organized association, God wants you to help in spreading the gospel.⁷⁴

All the women were at first confused by Hunter's proposal. They did not clearly understand what was meant by an association for them and why it was needed. As opportunity was given to the women to ask questions and express their views, there was much discussion. They became so engrossed in the discussion that the meeting went on into the early morning hours. This highlights the interest the women folk had for an exclusive women's association. In the end they agreed to form the proposed association. Three persons were selected from each range and given responsibility to find ways and means to form it. It was also decided to collect one *sorotia* (6 paise) from each woman to help the Konyak Naga students. The next day the women leaders gathered again. In this meeting the

⁷⁴ A.Temjen, *Ao Tsur*, p.3

range representatives were asked to find ways and means to hold the first women's association meeting the following year i.e.1944⁷⁵.

The first meeting of the Ao Women's Association was thus convened on 26th February 1944 at Impur. 272 women from 56 villages attended the meeting. Some of the topics discussed in the meeting were, the necessity of a Women's Association, on what such an association could do for the church and the society at large, the condition of women who were serving in the mission and its related works, the idea of increasing women's fund, the responsibility of women in the family, the benefits of cleanliness with special importance on women's cleanliness etc. From that time onwards, Ao women have been very interested in the work of their association. The first meeting gave it the form and primary purposes that it was to maintain thereafter⁷⁶.

2.7. Further Developments

After the Women's Association was formed in 1944, from 1945 up to 1953, it worked together with the Christian Endeavor Convention. But its status was elevated in 1954 when it was decided to merge the Women's association with the Ao Baptist Church. This was because of the extensive work in which it was engaged, as well as problems that it confronted. Whether independent of or in cooperation with the Ao Baptist Church association, the Women's Association has, ever since been under the leadership of four women who are called promotional Secretary. In addition to the Promotional Secretaries, there are other works such as women's evangelists, treasurer, etc. who serve the association.

⁷⁵ A. Temjen, p.10

⁷⁶ Narola Imchen, *Remembering...*p.101

Till 1945, there were still a number of Aos who had not yet become Christians. Seeing this, the Women association under its leaders, undertook a number of activities designed to spread the gospel among them. For this purpose a woman evangelist was appointed. Her work challenged Ao women to come forward. Through her work many became Christians. The first president of the Association was Jepdakla.⁷⁷ Though she did not have much education, she served with real interest and zeal. She frequently visited the Churches. She noted that men dominated everything, so she made it a special point to help the husbands understand the importance of the women's ministry. After a long struggle, she believed that they did begin to understand. Regarding the formation of women's association she said that in so far as in the traditional society, Ao women occupied a lower place, it was not easy to act freely in the church. Hence, even forming the association was not easy. The pioneers faced many problems. There was a long struggle before the association could be formed. It was not a gift given freely to the women.⁷⁸ The Silver Jubilee of the Women's Association was celebrated during the time of Noksangla, who was the next important leader after Jepdakla. She was the first Ao woman to study theology. It is said that as a result of the Jubilee celebration, the lives of many women were changed for the better. The women dispersed with determination to do even greater work for the women and the society.⁷⁹

In 1973, a change in the leadership took place. When Noksangla went to the United States for further theological studies, she was replaced as Promotional Secretary by Bendangla. Under her leadership, the Ao women's Association made much progress. Some new developments were introduced during her time. Certificates were given to new born

⁷⁷ Noksangla, *Taochi Senmanger*.p.5,6

⁷⁸ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church & Society*, p.67

⁷⁹ Noksangla...p.31

babies, father's day began to be celebrated and a vocational training centre was established at Impur. The Ao women's association had played a central in the movement against the sale of alcoholic beverages during the 1989 election. Another important development was the passing of the resolution, approving the ordination of women as well as men.⁸⁰

The Ao Women's Association is continuing to grow and progress even today. The importance of such an association in changing the status of women in the church and society is very significant. Traditionally, beyond the home, women had virtually no leadership role. It was through the local women's fellowship and then the centralized women's association that Ao women first began to learn to assume leadership roles. In fact, it almost became a women's church parallel to the men's church. It carried out many programmes at both the village and state level similar to those undertaken by the local churches and the Ao Baptist Churches Association (*ABAM- Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang*) itself. Even it had to struggle against resistance from the men. Their achievements were considerable and certainly made a significant contribution to building the status of women closer to equality with men.

⁸⁰ Narola Imchen.p.63

Chapter III

Status of Women in Society and Church in Contemporary Ao Society

3.1. Introduction

We find different opinions with regards to the position of women in the 'tribal societies'. Some would say that tribal societies generally assign a high status to women while others opine that in 'primitive' societies women were no better than a mere sex object or otherwise of an inferior sex. The position of women in the home and outside the home and to determine the status is closely interlinked and intermingled, which cannot be separated. The status of women is not uniform among all the different communities and varies from tribe to tribe and sometimes within tribes¹. History teaches us that the class or social group, which plays the principle role in social production and performs the main functions in production must in the course of time, inevitably take control of the production. Women performed both household and food production functions.

To acquire status in the society through ability, one should have a clear understanding of the term 'status'. The term status refers to a position of women or men as an individual in the social structure defined by her/his designated rights and obligations. Ralph Linton has defined status as 'polar position...in patterns of reciprocal behaviour'.² To him, 'polar position' consists of rights and duties, and a role as dynamic aspects of status. Status also denotes the position of an individual in a social system and also encompasses in itself the notion of rights and obligations in terms of power, authority and grading. The concept of status is used to indicate that the ordering individuals in terms of

¹ Dr. Lucy Zehol, *Women in Naga Society*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 1998.p.13

² Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man-An Introduction*, Appleton Publications, New York, 1976

attributes-level of education, occupation, income etc. and these attributes are responsible for the status of women, which varies from country to country.³

Despite the fact that women constitute half of the population of the Ao society and half the membership in the church, and despite their undeniable importance to both, they have been marginalized. They are treated as inferior, and this treatment has left women to think of themselves as inferior. This fact hinders them from full participation in the social affairs.

The role of women in the church has always been defined by in large measure by the traditional role of women in Ao society. The subordinate role they played in the traditional society was reflected in the role allowed to them by the men who control the church. Even today the condition of women in society determines their status in the church. In this chapter, we will examine the developing role of women in society for the purpose of helping us understand the role that they play in the church.

The impression of many people in the world is that in contemporary India women have played an important role in public life. They have not only reached the highest position of power-the Prime Ministership, been granted equal political and civil rights with the men, but have also increasingly joined the highest ranks in the administration and public service where they have acquitted themselves with distinction. While behind this impression is the fact that there has been improvement in the political, social and economic spheres of women, it is nevertheless true that their status is still not equal to that of men. Indian society in general is male-dominated, with the women's place mainly confined to the home. Her role is limited to procreation, upbringing of children and catering to the

³ *'Status of Tribal Women in General'*, Dr. John Mao, Women in Naga Society, Dr. Lucy Zehol.p.10

needs of the comforts of men. There may be exception here and there but this hardly affects the ethos of the nation as a whole.

A number of social and religious customs, taboos, inhibitions, rituals, etc., prevail in Indian society which comes in the way of women's freedom to be educated or to work outside of the home. Especially in the rural areas, women perform multiple duties by combining all types of household work, including childcare with other jobs such as farming, animal husbandry, household industry, etc., depending on the opportunities offered by the complex social, economic and organizational structure of rural life.⁴

Though tribals often affirm that their women enjoy equal status with men, in fact the situation among the Aos is similar to that of other tribal communities in rural India. In this chapter we will examine the role of women in the present Ao society to determine whether or not change has taken place. Later we will attempt to determine the extent to which these changes have been brought about by Christianity, and the extent to which they are reflected in the roles played by women in the church as it developed.

For a long time the Ao Nagas were isolated from the rest of the country. They lived a simple village life and kept their traditional social customs and culture essentially unchanged. With the coming of Christianity into their society, and the imposition of the alien British administration, things began to change. The British government exerted an alien influence on the Nagas much earlier than the missionaries. The influence was very extensive. They opened up communications between villages and made it possible for women who were formerly virtual prisoners in their own villages (for fear of ambush by head-seekers) to travel freely. They opened schools in different places to educate people. Another agent of change was the number of people who traveled outside the area.

⁴ Sahabdeen Maurya, *Women in India*, Chugh Publications, Allahabad, 1980, p.6-7

Especially significant were the number of Aos who came in contact with the outside world during the First and Second World Wars. Upon their return they questioned the old ways.

Christianity has also been a major agent of change. Most important was the impact upon the Aos by the wives of missionaries who came to live in the Ao area. The people were impressed with their extraordinary courage and active involvement in the work, which provided a role model for women quite different from anything they had had before. This acted as a challenge for Ao women.

Thus, under various influences Ao society began to change. Relating to social change, Hokishe Sema observed that,

Social transformation among the different tribal societies of Nagaland was indeed rapid. The seclusion of one tribe from another, which once was the main obstacle in the path of tribal understanding and co-operation, no longer exists. With the improvement in the communication system, social interaction has become more dynamic. As educational facilities increased and became available to more and more people, Nagas began rising above narrow parochial concerns and inhibiting tribal constraints to think of the common good of Nagaland.⁵

In the fast changing life situation, development activities also increased. In such a context, the changing roles of women in Ao society are significant- though the change had its limits. Women are trying to play a role in all aspects of the life of the society, but have thus far been able to do so only in a limited way.

⁵ Hokishe Sema, *Emergence of Nagaland*, Vikas Publishing House, 1986.p.184

3.2. Population Balance by Gender

In normal circumstances nature maintains a balance between men and women, and the two sexes should be approximately equal in number. In developed countries women have a slight edge in numbers over men, partly because they are biologically the stronger sex and partly because the men may have unhealthier lifestyle and are subject to more stress. However, the difference in number of men and women in these countries is marginal.⁶

3.2.1. Female/Male Ratio in Nagaland

Compared with the “norm” of a more or less equally balanced sex ratio of women to men, the Census of India 2001, indicates that in Nagaland between 1901 and 2001 the number of women had been consistently lower than men to a significant degree (with the exception of the 1941-51 decade).⁷ Except in the decade indicated the sex ratio has been unfavorable to women. It is especially significant to note that despite all the improvement that have taken place in communications and the availability of medical treatment, the sex ratio for women has steadily declined since 1941.

Sobha Nambisan, referring to a similar imbalance in her state suggests that, this imbalance in the numbers of the two sexes can be explained by one of the two factors- (1) the out-migration of one sex, thus leading to a larger number of members of the other sex, and (2) higher mortality rate for one sex.⁸ Since it is clear that neither in Karnataka nor in Nagaland has there been a large-scale migration of women out of the state, it is understood that the second reason is true. It therefore reflects discrimination against females and

⁶ Sobha Nambisan, *Demographic Profile of the Indian Women*, 1991.p.4

⁷ *Census of India*, 2001

⁸ Sobha Nambisan, *Demographic...*p.6

neglect of their health from the time of birth onwards. This has resulted in greater morbidity and mortality of females.

A.K. Agarwal is also of the opinion that in general the death rate of females compared to males should be lower for biological reasons, as females resist disease more effectively than males. Therefore, if the number of females per 1000 males is always lower it is because of human factors. While he says that no fully satisfactory explanation has been given for the adverse female sex ratio he does suggest that it can probably be accounted for by the death of more female infants due to less attention and care being given to them after birth as compared with male infants, a relatively higher death rate among females at the age of puberty, and also a heavier work load placed upon them in the hilly areas. Another important factor is the poverty of the people. Having to choose between providing health and care to either their sons or their daughters, they choose in favour of their sons.⁹

3.2.2. Implications of the Declining Sex Ratio

The declining proportion of females and the high rate of maternal mortality underline several serious shortcomings in a society. First, they reveal the inadequacies of the maternal and child health services, inspite of commitments that have been made to their improvement. The available health care services have not yet touched even the fringes of the problem. This lack reveals a lack of priority for health problems especially related to women. Secondly, this problem is related to the lack of elementary education among women. Lacking education, women continue to lack knowledge to improve their condition or assert their right to health services. Thirdly, the declining proportion of females in the

⁹ A.K. Agarwal, *Economic Problems and Planning in North East India*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1987.p.27

population reflects an excessive craving for male children in the Indian families. Fourthly, the high mortality rate among women automatically results in a high mortality among infants and very young children. Fifthly, all the above are indicative of a low status being assigned to women.¹⁰

The sex ratio, thus, is a good indicator of the role and status society assigns to women. It brings to light the fact that women are an underprivileged group in societies in which males outnumber females in so far as the natural order- which one sees in most countries- is for there to be more females than males. In India while life expectancy for the population as a whole has increased in recent years, the increase for women has not kept pace with that of the males. The mortality rate for women continues to be higher. Though much of the above analysis is based on all-India statistics, the sex ratio of Nagaland indicates that the problem there is similar.

3.3. Women and Economics

Women's economic participation in contemporary Naga society maybe evaluated in relation to family, Government jobs, private business and employment.

3.3.1. Family

In traditional Ao society men and women contributed towards the economy of the family. It could be said that women contributed even more because while she worked equally with men in the field, she also had to do work at home in which the men did not help. Household duties were seen to be the sole responsibility of women.

¹⁰ Asok Mitra, *Implications of Declining Sex Ratio in India's Population*, ICSSR, Bombay, 1979,p.29-30

In rural areas the same pattern continues to exist. In addition, many rural women are involved in selling vegetables, handicrafts and running small locality shops. In these ways they contribute to the maintenance of the family. In recent years, in the urban areas more and more women are actively involved in Government services (Public Sector) and other employment outside the home. At the same time, they are expected to continue household work without male assistance. Though those women who remain at home in the traditional role are contributing to the economics of the family, this contribution is not acknowledged. Thus, at the family level whether women hold outside jobs or continue in traditional roles they are discriminated against both in the amount of work they do and in the attitudes towards that work.

3.3.2. Government Jobs

Today, as has been mentioned above, many women are employed in Government service. It is said that in 1950 there was only one woman L.D.A. (Lower Development Authority) in the Nagaland Secretariat, but at present there are large numbers of women employed there. It was in 1950 that a Naga woman for the first time became a political assistant to the Deputy Commissioner, Mokokchung. Later she worked as Secretary of the Nagaland Public Service Commission.¹¹ Since then women are joining the civil services. Today a few women are taking part as administrators both at the national and the state level. This reflects a new attitude towards roles appropriate to women among women themselves as well as the public. They have begun to realize a new identity that they can

¹¹Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & Company Pvt. Ltd., Assam, 2001.p.79

hold any position not as assigned by the traditional society, conventions nor by right but by the virtue of *their own merit through competitive examinations*.¹²

Teaching is the most common profession among the educated women. The majority of women employed outside their homes serve as teachers, lecturers and professors in schools, colleges and universities, both Public and Private. There are also a number of women involved in medical services as nurses, doctors, etc. this sort of professional employment outside the home has no precedent in traditional society and hence represents a radical change in the status of women.

3.3.4. Private Business

A few women have been involved in the business sector. One of the first business ventures to be taken up in the recent times was that of the handloom emporiums. The Government has given incentives to women to start various small-scale industries, especially handloom production and a number of women are taking advantage of that. There are some women also involved in social welfare work. They provide social services for the people, especially women and children. There are also a few who have opened vocational training centers for unemployed women. Many women earn their living through small-scale business like stitching, knitting; weaving, etc. other women are employed as instructresses in the training centers.

Looking at the present economic condition of women actively involved in government jobs and private business, one may conclude that the economic condition of women in Nagaland is satisfactory. But this does not reflect the true picture as it involves only a relatively few women. There are many more who are still unemployed. This shows

¹² Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & Company Pvt. Ltd., Assam, 2001.p.79

that unemployment is much higher among women than men.¹³ In this respect too women are still behind, as in other aspects of life.

It is important to note that there is an increasing displacement of women from economic activities, particularly in the rural areas, where their participation had been high. The expert committee on unemployment has agreed that women formed the largest section of the unemployed in both rural and urban areas. It also felt that existing data on unemployed women was inadequate as it failed to expose what might be termed as invisible unemployment.¹⁴ Some of the reasons for unemployment are the development plans and supportive services which have generally overlooked the need to strengthen women's productive roles. Programmes for women have also been marginal with respect to economic development activities. The general tendency has been to direct services designed for economic development mainly to men, seeing women simply as targets of social services. Again, the multi-purpose development projects have seldom taken into consideration either the employment potential of women or the possible impact of them, of changes ensuing from the proposed development.¹⁵ In addition, today there is also much corruption, nepotism and injustice in the government with regard to employment of both men and women. Many qualified persons are denied their right to serve in the government services. This like other factors tends to discriminate women more than men.

¹³ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & company Pvt. Ltd., Assam, 2001.p.81

¹⁴ *Critical Issues on the Status of Women Employment, Health, Education Suggested Priorities for Action*, ICSSR, New Delhi, 1977.p.6

¹⁵ *Ibid*.p.8

3.4. Women and Education

In the contemporary situation literacy is essential for personal development and economic independence. All illiterate people are severely handicapped. Literacy is closely related to economic self-sufficiency. While the Directive Principles in the Constitution of India sets a goal- free and compulsory education for all persons upto the age of fourteen, it is yet to be achieved. In the area of education, Ao women have been discriminated against. During the British period, the Christian missionary opened a number of schools. In the beginning the parents strongly objected to the education of their daughters. They believed that if they send the girls to school it would lead to their becoming lazy and living an immoral life. Also, if the girls were to be sent to school, the parents believed that there would not be anyone to work for the family. It was a prevalent belief that women were fit only for household chores. It was the missionaries who took up the cause of women's education. In due course Ao women became enthusiastic about education and despite all the obstacles put in their way, a number of women did manage to become highly educated.

3.4.1. The Present Scenario

Gradually the importance of education for women was understood and the girls began to be sent to school. In the year 1939, for the first time a Naga woman earned a B.A. degree. In 1948, when the first matriculation examination was conducted in Nagaland, six girls appeared, four from Kohima and two from Mokokchung.¹⁶

The government has taken steps to develop facilities for the education of women. Female students are provided special stipends and various training opportunities. There are no separate girls' high schools in the Ao areas, the system being co-educational in both

¹⁶ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & Company Pvt. Ltd., Assam, 2001, p.82

schools and colleges. Women are also permitted to appear as private candidates in the HSLC/PUC degree examinations without attending classes. In these ways, within the last few years women's education has made progress. As a result today a number of women hold responsible positions in top managerial and executive positions. While this progress is commendable, it should be noted that even today the literacy rate among women in Nagaland is much lower than that of men.¹⁷

3.4.2. Setbacks in Women's Education

As mentioned above, though women have made tremendous progress in education, their position is still not in par with that of men. As the lower literacy rate indicates clearly, the women are still discriminated against. When we examine this fact, Ao society in particular and Naga society in general, several conclusions can be drawn. To start, even today, girls are not given equal opportunities for education as that of boys. While at the primary level the number of girls and boys enrolled is approximately the same, at the higher levels the disparity becomes greater and greater in favour of the boys. This suggests that the traditional attitudes still exists on the part of the parents that education, especially the higher education, is more appropriate for the boys than girls. Undoubtedly this reflects the traditional cultural attitude that a girl will no longer contribute to her family when she is married. The attitude was reflected in the traditional saying that, *bringing up a daughter is like to manure someone else's courtyard*.¹⁸

In the urban areas both the sexes are equally able to attend school. However, in the rural areas boys are usually given first preference to get higher education. As Agarwal

¹⁷ Census of India, 2001

¹⁸R.L. Hnuni, *Women's Issues in Relation to North East India Situation*, Dimapur, 1989.p.4

notes, *lower literacy rates for women indicate neglect of female education.*¹⁹ N.J. Usha Rao states that though the role of education as a catalyst or agent of social change has been well recognized, this role has not been properly recognized especially with respect to women. This is perhaps because the significance of women in economic development is not properly understood. Gandhi had said that, *educating a man is educating an individual, while educating a woman is educating a family*; however, the importance of his observation has not been recognized since women's education has always been neglected.²⁰

3.5. Women and Culture

Like all cultures, each of the cultures of the Naga tribes is unique. Thus the Ao Nagas have their own traditional ways of singing, dancing, dressing, etc. traditionally, one could easily tell not only the tribe but even the clan to which an Ao woman belonged by the way she dressed. After the isolation in which the people had lived was broken following the British intervention and Christianity, many features of the traditional culture were to change. This brought changes to both men and women in Ao society.

3.6. Impact of Modernization

Under the impact of modernization, Ao women have gradually begun to give up certain aspects of the traditional culture. Except in some villages, for instance, the distinction in dress between different clans has not been maintained. Weddings are increasingly being styled after western forms with the result that the simplicity and solemn way of the traditional marriage customs are lost. Hokishie Sema laments that young boys

¹⁹A.K. Agarwal, *Economic Problems and Planning in North East India*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1987.p.35

²⁰N.J. Usha Rao, *Women in Developing Societies*, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, 1983.p.27

and girls have almost forgotten their culture and the customs pertaining to their specific tribes. The rich social traditions, which made life so colorful and attractive, are now being completely neglected. In his view, the younger generation of Nagas is becoming alienated, with no roots in the village or culture.²¹

Our concern here, however, is the extent to which these changes have affected the status and role of women. The Naga women have been involved in preserving at least the traditional Naga Christian cultural values, if not the pre-Christian values. Women have taken active participation in village developmental programmes of various kinds. In various villages there are women's welfare societies or women's organizations working for village development. Women are entitled to membership on the government-sponsored village development boards in rural areas. Social works, cleaning the village, tree plantation and other manual developmental work in the village is mostly done by women.

Many women's organizations like the Naga Mother's Association, Watsu Rogo Mungdang, NBCC Women Department, and Women's Department in various Baptist Associations, women's societies at the district, locality and village levels raise their voices against corruption and other evils that have entered the society. While they are committed to the maintenance of high social values, including traditional Naga Christian values, they are at the same time committed to positive changes in situations where the traditional ways discriminate against women. These organizations, like those within the church, have provided Naga women with opportunities of leadership and public involvement that they never had traditionally. They are almost exclusively formed and run by Christians.

²¹ Hokishe Sema, *Emergence of Nagaland*, Vikas Publishing House, 1986.p.184-85

3.7. Women and Politics

In traditional Ao society, the village council held the highest administrative power. In this arena, the women were given no role or participation. This patriarchal society did not provide any place for the public exercise of leadership for women, or even membership in any decision-making bodies. The male dominant society thus imposed restrictions on the role that women could easily play.

At the village level the traditional exclusion of women from political involvement in the councils continue as before. Women are still not members of any village council, nor can they take part in the decision making process at that level. Women are denied the right to play a political role in local administrative bodies like the legislative village panchayats and councils, town committees etc. Hence, women are reduced to the status of second-class citizens, of a lower order than men. This has implications for the roles they are permitted to play in social and religious institutions, as well as in village politics.

At the state level the situation is somewhat different, but the fact remains that male leadership dominates all political parties. When choosing their candidates the parties automatically favour males. One result of this is that, women themselves tend to be apathetic about political matters, not claiming their rights in an organized way. Nevertheless a few women have started to involve themselves in state politics at this level. One of the first Naga women to enter politics was Rano M. Shaiza, who, as a nominee of the Democratic Front contested in the general elections for the state legislature in 1970. Later in 1973, she was elected president of the party. Thus far she is the only woman who

has been elected from Nagaland as a member of the Lok Sabha.²² Among the Aos only one woman candidate, Chubala, has contested the state election till date.

There are various reasons for the limited involvement of women in politics. When examined closely, it is clear that traditional attitudes continue to influence attitudes concerning the involvement of women in politics. Politics is viewed as an area where only men can exercise power, authority and control. The votes of women are valued equally with those of men when men are seeking office. However, when it comes to the selection of candidates, people are still reluctant to select women, let alone elect them. People still find it difficult to permit women to exercise political power. Hence, the male dominated traditions are still kept intact in this context.

3.8. Women in the Church

The document produced by the Brussels's colloquium on women in the church and society includes the following:

The mentalities which we find in society we find also in the church. In its own practice the church helps to perpetuate sexual discrimination, for all decision-making and leadership structures are controlled exclusively by male clergy. Even when women are involved in an advisory capacity on commissions and so forth, they do not participate fully in the proceedings and final decisions. A small group of clergy regards it as their task to define what it means to be virtuous Christian women for all socio cultural contexts. In this mentality women are perceived primarily in terms of their sexual role as mother, spouse, and virgin. Crucial moral

²² P.K. Bhattacharya, 'Position of Women in the Naga Society', Highlander, 1978.p.17

*decisions concerning women's sexuality are made for them, which they are expected to follow even when these decisions have painful and drastic repercussions on their lives. When the church devalues women in such a way, this has a great impact on the perception and situation of women throughout the society.*²³

This can be applied to the situation of the Ao and other Naga churches. The issue of women in church is no longer a new issue. Today most people are aware of it. When examined, one finds that the reaction to the issue represents a conflict between traditionalism and modernism. These issues were not raised so long as women were willing to accept the subordinate position traditionally assigned to them. But under the impact of modernization and Christianity, women became aware of the inadequacy of their position. The new theological awareness coupled with a changing world in which new models of women began to be available made it increasingly difficult for at least well educated Ao women to accept the traditional roles assigned to them in both society and church. A number of issues began to be raised concerning women's status and participation. In the church more women felt that they were called by God into the ministry, and more and more women were seeking and being granted enrollment in theological colleges.

In the church, women have been excluded from leadership roles. The traditional attitudes towards women in such roles have been maintained in the church to a greater extent than in society generally. The role of women in the church has been limited by male control of its administrative structure. These males seek to limit the role of women to that

²³*Women in the Church and in Society: The Document of the Brussel's Colloquium Organized by the Conference of International Catholic Organization, June 9-14, Reprinted in India, WINA, 1987,p.6-7*

of child bearing and rearing, and other responsibilities in the housekeeping area. They may teach some of the young children in Sunday schools, in child Evangelism classes, as teachers in Church schools, as wardens in girl's hostels and women's work- but positions at the higher level in both the local church and association, as secretaries of different departments, pastors or administrators, or members of decision making bodies are denied to them. The male domination at that level is like an unshakable fortress, thus the participation of women in leadership roles both in the local churches and in the association is limited. The areas in which they have been able to play leadership roles are discussed below.

3.8.1. Women in Local Church

3.8.1.1. The Pastor and Associate Pastor

The pastor is considered the leader of the local church. Every church has a pastor, while some of the large churches have one or more associate pastors. The pastors are usually either licensed or ordained. Rarely women are appointed to serve as pastor in the Ao church. So far, in the history of the Ao church only one woman was ever appointed as a pastor though served for a few years only. In some churches women in charge of different departments are designated as associate pastors. However, the women in these positions do not play a pastoral role in relation to the congregation as a whole.

This is not because women are unwilling to serve as pastors. There are well-qualified, theological graduates among the Ao women who would be willing to do so. But the opportunity is denied to them because of the traditional attitudes towards the

appropriate role of women in society, and the churches have been unwilling so far to place women in leadership roles in which they would become the highest authority.

3.8.1.2. The Deacons and Deacon Board

The other office in the local church that carries authority is that of deacon board. Together the deacons constitute the deacon board, which is the main governing body of the church according to Baptist polity. In the Ao churches, the deacon board is made up of deacons, the pastor, the associate pastors, the church secretary and the church treasurer. It decides all matters concerning the church's affairs. While the claim is made that deacons are appointed in accordance with the New Testament principles, Renty Keitzar rightly observes that it is more correct to say that they are chosen in the way the members of the traditional village council used to be chosen. He goes on to say,

*If deacons are chosen as the village councilors are chosen and if the deacons themselves exercise the power as the village council, that is not according to the teaching of the New Testament and the Baptist Church.*²⁴

Thus far, with single exception of the Ao church in Kohima women have not served on the deacon boards in Ao churches. No woman has been elected to the office of deacon or church secretary or church treasurer. Women are thus excluded from the decision making process in the church, even as they were in the traditional village councils. Though women are given the opportunity to serve in other ways in the church, they are not permitted to exercise authority or power in matters that are considered important.

²⁴ Renty Keitzar, *Baptist Arogo aser Arogo Tenzukba Mapa*, Impur, 1989.p.9-10

In addition to the deacon board, local churches have several other boards and committees. In these there are women representatives. But their representation is never equal to that of the men and it is always the men who play the major role. Nevertheless these boards and committees are involved in decision-making activities, and women are involved even if it is at a rather token level. This may reflect the fact that these boards and committees have not been understood in relation to traditional institutions. This is unlike the deacon board, which is seen as continuing the function of the all-male village council

3.8.1.3. Women's Department

Responsibility for carrying out various activities in the local church is given to different departments. Among them is the women's department. This is one area in the church where women have from the beginning been able to play a leading role. The women's department of the local church always has a woman leader, a secretary, a treasurer, a cashier and other women members designated for special responsibilities. There are weekly women's fellowship meetings attended by all the women members of the church. These departments have their own funds, which are often substantial, with the result that they came to exercise considerable economic power. While their sphere is limited to the women, the women departments support work involving men such as evangelism and theological education and became the place where women developed public leadership experience that they had never had in the traditional society.

Youth department is another wing of the church, which is assigned the responsibility of working among the youth. A youth director or youth evangelist is appointed to be in charge of this department. Originally the person so appointed was

always a man. But recently some churches have appointed women as youth director or youth evangelists.²⁵ Still, even when the post falls vacant most of the churches prefer to have a man, and only when they cannot find a suitable male candidate, a woman is chosen. The woman is always a second choice even if appointed.

3.9. Factors Limiting the Ministry of Women

From the above it is obvious that while there have been a number of ways in which women's status has improved and they have assumed leadership roles beyond the traditional roles in the household, the patriarchal nature of the Ao society continues to have its influence in preventing them from achieving full equality with men. It is within this historical context that more and more women are coming forward for theological training and are expecting to become more actively involved in the ministry of the church and in its decision making process. Until the present while the church readily employs men who have received theological training, the women are not. The men who control such appointments do not want to place women in positions of authority over men as well as women. The permission is given only when the responsibility is for children, youth or other women.

The male domination of the church is said to be nowhere more evident than in large conventions and association meetings. Men hold the leadership role. Women are occasionally appointed as assistants, but no more. Women are allowed to preach in small groups but not in large gatherings. Despite the many advances women have made, the majority of men still cling to the traditional belief that a woman's place is in the household work. This is despite the fact that it is commonly recognized that the strength of a church lies in women and men working hand in hand.

²⁵ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & Company Pvt. Ltd., Assam, 2001.p.100

3.9.1. Traditional Attitudes

Traditional attitudes are certainly important in determining male and female attitude towards the appropriate role of women. Traditionally men dominated the public decision making process in the village. This attitude continues in the church with men similarly opposing the involvement of women in decision-making. Thus women do not serve on the deacon board, which is the administrative body of the local church and is responsible for the church property.

3.9.2. Cultural Context

The traditional subordination of women in leadership roles is justified on the ground that such a position reflects the authentic culture of the Ao people. Giving women non-traditional roles would subvert that culture. Whenever the role of women in ministry is discussed among the Aos, the cultural argument is advanced as the primary one. Men and even majority of the Ao women believe that they have nothing against women's participation in the top levels of decision making but that their culture would not accept woman as leader of the whole church or association. This argument ignores the fact that many aspects of the traditional culture have already changed, including changes in the roles of women in many spheres of life and even at some levels in the church, or that all cultures are dynamic. This argument can be considered as simply a way of perpetuating patriarchy.

One of the consequences of a patriarchal culture is that it not only convinces men that they are superior but also convinces women themselves that they are inferior. It seems that Ao women are accustomed to a socio-cultural set up in which they are assigned an inferior position that they simply accept it as right and feel comfortable with it. Many

women prefer to remain where they are, and are not willing to come forward to take up leadership roles. They themselves are made to feel that they are not capable of doing so. Again, men too are afraid of a reversal of the traditional situation in which women were inferior to men. They seek to prevent this by not allowing women equal participation in ministry.

3.10. Role of Women's Associations

The women's association and the women's fellowship at the local level which constitute its membership base provided Ao women with roles that they never had in the traditional society. Never before were there specific organizations in which women could exercise leadership outside the household. Here, it is important to recall that in the traditional Ao society women never had a specific organization of their own. While the boys slept in the *Morungs*, which were highly organized, the girls slept in women's dormitory that was not similarly organized. Once the women were married they no longer had any opportunity to mix with other women. After that the women's accepted role was confined to her home.

When the women's association was formed and began to develop it provided women with an opportunity to exercise leadership roles at the level even above that of the village. At least within the women's circles they came to exercise authority and wield power in a way that had never happened before. The ministries carried out by the women's association are very extensive, almost described as a parallel church structure. The initial reason for forming the women's association was for the purpose of supporting evangelistic

work in the border areas. Subsequently, it has resulted in the expansion of its scope both within Nagaland and beyond borders.

When the women's association was first formed in 1944 there were still many un-evangelized areas within Nagaland, even in Ao villages. Insofar as there were many interested in sharing the gospel with the neighbouring border tribes, the women's association often organized groups of women to go on preaching tours in that area. They also helped evangelists working in the area as well as the new Christian groups by sending clothes, money, books etc.²⁶ In addition to preaching to non-Christians, evangelists in Nagaland have also always sought to encourage existing Christian communities by visiting the churches. The women evangelists also adopt a similar pattern and on their visits they conduct services and call meetings of the women, encouraging the local fellowships to go forward.

In addition to the women's association's support for the evangelistic work among the border tribes by sending material help, they also encouraged and provided financial support to enable young people from the border tribes, men and women to undertake Bible School and Theological College Training. In this way the women helped train leaders for the new churches being established among the border tribes and hence contribute to their nurturing and further growth. Insofar as they were supporting not simply the work of women in the border areas, but the evangelism and development of the church as a whole, they function more like a church body than an organization concerned only for women's issues. The women's association also place special concern on the development of strong Christian families.

²⁶ Noksangchila Ao, *Taochi Senmanger: Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdangtsur Kum Pungo Otsu*, Impur, 1970.

From 1963 onwards, the women's association became involved in activities outside of Nagaland- the sort of activities that would usually be undertaken and supported by the church itself. In that year the women's association became a life member of the Bible Society of India.²⁷ They have contributed towards the translation and bible distribution projects both financially and with prayers. They have also contributed to many missionary projects.

3.10.1. Women's Association in Education

Education as well as the gospel came to Nagaland simultaneously with Christianity. The early missionary wives took the initiative in providing education for Ao girls and women. In fact the first school started in Nagaland was Mary Mead Clark's school for girls at Molung²⁸. The women's association has continued this tradition by contributing to the education of women in various ways appropriate to the present context. The women's association (Ao Baptist Tetsur Mungdang:ABTM) has helped many women to attain formal education. In helping women, it also provided for its own future leadership²⁹. The women thus educated, played important pioneering roles in the development of the women's association. As indicated above, in addition to help Ao women attain advanced theological education, ABTM helped many students, men and women, from the border tribes to get formal education.

The women's association also provides informal education in various ways. They frequently organize different kinds of seminars and training sessions to educate women. They conduct special training sessions for women leaders, the wives of pastors, husbands

²⁷ Noksangchila Ao, *Taochi Senmanger: Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdangtsur Kum Pungo Otsu*, Impur, 1970

²⁸ Mary Mead Clark, p. 53.

²⁹ Narola Imchen, *Remembering...*, p. 214.

of women workers, etc. The seminars are focused on different topics like family relationships, child management, house maintenance, spiritual growth, role of leaders etc. They also conduct health seminars with the help of medical personnel to educate people in first aid, family health, family planning etc. These are organized on an area specific basis. Many women as well as men benefit from these programmes.

3.10.2. Fund Raising

Fund raising has been an area in which Ao women have been very actively involved from the beginning of the Christian movement. They have adopted various means of raising funds for different purposes. The amounts raised are substantial, not only enabling them to carry out their various women's programmes but also giving them economic power even within the church as a whole. For many years the handful of rice collection was the main means by which the women raised their funds for their programmes. Every time a woman began to prepare a meal, she would take a handful of rice and placed it in a special basket. After two or three months this was collected by the women organization and sold, the proceeds of which went to their fund. Another way in which women raised money for their work in the early days was through *Nebo-Yok* (Wage Earning)³⁰. On an appointed day women volunteered to work together on some project to earn wages. The money that each woman earned on that day went to the women's association treasury.

In addition, collections are also taken whenever women's meetings, seminars or training sessions are held. Depending on the context, they also raise money through activities like making and selling handicrafts, the sale of loom cloth, and donations by individual well-wishers etc. Finance has become an area in which women play a major

³⁰ Narola Imchen, *Remembering...*, p. 115.

role. They raise large amounts of money and have complete control over how it is used. It has often been noted that women are able to raise more funds than men. Hence, fund raising projects of the whole church are entrusted usually to women.

The Ao women's association has also been actively involved in social work. They participate with most of those women's organization in Nagaland, which work for social justice, fight against social evils and corruption in government. In this connection they have been especially active in seeking to deal with the evil consequences of drugs and excessive use of alcoholic drinks.

3.11. Ordination of Women

The movement for the ordination of women is not new to many churches. Some churches in different parts of the world had been ordaining women for more than a hundred years, in some churches it is hotly debated and in yet others the question has still to be raised. In the Ao churches these issues was only raised a few years ago. For a long time the people did not give thought to the idea of women in ministry. Their thought was controlled by the traditional socio-cultural system in which women never played leading roles outside the household. The question only began to be raised among the Aos in the 1980's. From 1985 onwards Aos began to become aware of the issue.³¹ This was due to the influence that came both from the outside and from Ao women themselves. Later in the following years, the women raised the question at the association level.

In the history of the ABTM a landmark was achieved in 1990 when for the first time the issue of the ordination of women was taken up seriously. This was significant because in the Ao church structure it is only the ABAM (Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang) that

³¹ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society*, Bartaki & Company Pvt. Ltd., Assam, 2001.p.122

has the authority to ordain. It was discussed in the ABAM executive committee and then in the central council³². As elsewhere, most of the initial discussions centered on biblical, theological and historical questions. This was appropriate in the sense that the biblical tradition deals with the issue of the role of women within a particular cultural context. It came to be realized that each time the church questions the traditional roles of women, it reflected challenges to traditional roles of women within the society as a whole. The significant aspect about the debate was that even those who opposed the ordination of women came to admit that it was a cultural rather than a biblical or theological problem. It was almost certainly because of this that a resolution was finally passed by ABAM on 7th November 1990 to ordain Noksangla together with two men. She was the first to be ordained in the whole of North East India.³³ However, this led to the opposition from a group of men who went on to submit a written objection letter to ABAM, but ABAM decided to maintain its earlier decision. It is unlikely that ABAM would have taken up the ordination of women without the pressure brought upon it by ABTM. The fact that ABTM was the driving force behind the decision to ordain the first woman in North East is from the fact that, the day of her ordination was fixed by the ABTM. It is said that the ABTM was almost treated as if it were the ordaining authority.

Though there has been some progress in the status of women in both Ao society and the Ao church, attitudes towards women continue to be influenced by traditional socio-cultural ideas. The men who controlled and continue to control the church maintained traditional attitudes, which viewed women as inferior. They therefore thought that only

³² Wati Longchar, p. 36.

³³ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church...*p.123

inferior roles were appropriate for them. In the church they thought that it was right for women to be kept subordinate with respect to leadership and decision-making roles. It was women who themselves took the initiative of creating new roles for themselves.

The main instruments through which women worked were the local fellowships and gathering together of those fellowships at the central level in the women's association. In these fellowships and the association they gained experience in leadership and decision making roles, roles that were not traditional for women outside the home and which were denied to them in the structures of the church. The women's association gradually developed, expanding its role and activities in most of the areas in which the church was involved. In doing so, it became a parallel church, a woman's church. In the process its influence began to be felt even by the men, who gradually began to modify their attitudes.

In the light of the concern for women's issues in both the church and the society, it is clearly necessary for the church to reexamine and change its traditional attitudes towards women. It was these traditional attitudes, which had led to a creation of a male dominated, and male oriented church. If the church is to be reconstructed in such a way that discrimination against women is removed, then it is necessary to recognize that the origins of the problem lie in the continuance of the traditional socio-cultural attitudes rather than in the theological or biblical questions.

Hence, it is increasingly important that the AOs are made aware of the nature of the injustice done to women in their society. Many are still not aware of this reality even today. Without such awareness women's development is not possible. Education concerning the condition of women should begin at the family level. Girls and boys should be treated equally in all matters. Another arena in which the equality of men and women needs to be

established relates to the inheritance rights. The status of women and their ability to function freely is dependent on their assurance of financial security. They should thus be given an equal share in the parental estate. In his work on Ao Naga customary laws, Tajen Ao has addressed this issue, stating that women's inheritance rights remain strictly restricted to the age-old customary laws. He has observed that even the Indian Constitution has not amended this facet³⁴. This might be due to opposition from the local lawmakers, essentially male, that Ao Naga women have been deprived of this certain right. If women are to achieve a status equal with that of men it is essential that they become involved in governmental affairs, both at the village and state level. The village councils that are exclusively male centered need to open up its membership to the women. There are many women qualified to serve in this capacity at the village and state level, and with equal competence as their male counterparts, albeit for lack of the opportunity. This would lead to the establishment of a more just social order, and also strengthen society and church alike.

³⁴ Tajen Ao, p. 28

Conclusion

As a response to the missionaries' efforts to Christianity, Naga people got converted in an overwhelming movement. Today, Christianity is the established and the defining religion of the Naga people. The form of Christianity embraced by the Naga people was one defined by the western missionaries' worldview and normatives. This Christianity demanded a rejection of the traditional Naga religion of the people. The spread and method employed by the missionaries were complete rejections of the natives' way of life. Conversion to Christianity entailed the rejection of all visible cultural signs of being a Naga. For instance, Nagas could not grow long hair or wear traditional attire and ornaments. As Furer-Haimendorf had observed, "the old tribal life so enchanting in its gaiety and simplicity despite some streaks of cruelty, has ceased to exist...to be remembered and recorded but never to be observed again."¹ Rightly so, some of the practices that were rejected 'never to be observed' included headhunting and painful tattooing for the females as a way to acquire social status. Furer-Haimendorf could not be more astute in his observation for, indeed, the visible contemporary milieu of the Nagas is far from the traditional pre-British and traditional Naga time. Again, Haimendorf has recorded the situation, which helps us visualize the changes that have occurred in the Naga society; for example,

"the bachelors hall" (arichu)... was a depressing sight...empty and deserted. The Aos most cherished and valued possessions, the pride of generations, lay unheeded and scattered in the jungle, ivory armllets,

¹ Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas*, Thacker Spink & Co., Calcutta, 1933.p.1

*necklaces of boars' tusks, cowry shells, headdresses and baldrics and artistically woven colored clothes all discarded because they belong to the old times."*²

These materials and tangible forms of the Naga society were replaced by espousing westernized and material culture. Therefore, when Christianity was espoused, the local religion of the Naga people was rejected in toto. No traces of any element were tolerated. To be a member of the Christian church was to sever all practices and beliefs of the native culture. Apparently, this rejection of traditional religion was complete, until the outbreak of the revival movement. The revival movement that swept the Naga churches, with the primary motif of re-claiming the Christians who were backsliding, engendered a milieu wherein some of the religious beliefs and practices found their way into the church. As a visible sign of being revived, practices emerged that were akin to the religious practices of the former Naga religiosity. Therefore, it can be claimed that Naganization,³ as a term that connotes is a process of 're-shaping' of Christianity by the Naga people with their own defining ethos. Subsequently, the primal religious worldview and expectations have continued and remained operative, although within the new religion.

From a broad spectrum, religion is understood as that consciousness of an "other", that is of a "sacred". This consciousness of the other is further expressed in collective efforts by the way of creative responses, such as beliefs, practices, and

² Cristoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas*.p.51

³ Atola Longkumer, *Shamans, Tanula Akuter and Naga Christianity: A Study of Religio-Cultural Transition Among the Nagas*.p.272

myths. The collective efforts of response to the awareness of the sacred create a unified community of adherents in the Durkheimian perspective.⁴ Because the experiences and expressions vary from locale to local, different world religions exist. Within these responses to the sacred, primal religion is a category applied as a rubric term to the form of response and articulation by those cultures primarily identified by their lack of written, reified history and sacred text.

Despite conversion to Christianity, a defining “shared meaning” has survived among the Naga people. As Clifford Geertz has explained, religion as a cultural system wherein, the concept of culture is understood as “...an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life”.⁵ Naga traditional religion was one that included pre-dominant awareness of the divine. Towards the end, certain patterns of meanings in the form of beliefs or practices were carried out by the shamanic figures.

The lament then, is not over the loss of the cultural traits that were destructive and discriminatory. The past can be worthy only if it affirms every individual, no matter what gender, tribe or clan. There are those who lament that transition to Christianity has resulted in the loss of the Naga cultural traits and there exists a lost link between the old and the new. However, the need is not so much to turn the clock back but to attempt to recognize that Naga religio-cultural worldview has continued to bring meaning to the new religion. This is evident by looking at

⁴ Durkheim, Emile, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Translated by Karen E. Fields, The Free Press, New York, 1995.p.44 &38

⁵ Geertz, Clifford, *Interpretations of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973.p.89

the subordinate position of the women in the contemporary religious institutions in the Ao society. As in the European and Western context where many women are given equal platform and status in the religious institutions, the Naga women and Ao women in particular are still fighting for a place that would treat them equally with men in the religious set up. Therefore, it is believed that Christianity is no longer defined and measured by the Western and European standards, while at the same time life affirming practices and beliefs of the old have been allowed to emerge, continue, transform and operative within the new religion.

Within the above-mentioned context, the study focuses on the status of the Ao Naga women in religious institutions through social, cultural, economic and religious context of traditional and contemporary Ao society. Through this study it has been brought forth that though there has been some progress in the status of women in both Ao society and the Ao churches, attitudes towards women continue to be influenced by traditional socio-cultural ideas. The men who controlled and continue to control the church maintained traditional attitudes, which viewed women as inferior continue to harbor the same perspective towards women. They therefore, thought that only inferior role were appropriate for them. In the church, the men believed that it was right for women to be kept subordinate to them with respect to leadership and decision making roles. In this context it has been shown how it was women themselves who took the initiative in creating new role for themselves.

Naga traditional society was no different from any other patriarchal society; women had only a secondary role and status in the society. It would be misleading to be convinced by the observations of colonials as well as local writers, who happen to be all males. On the surface level, it appears as though Naga women enjoyed equal role and status, but on close analysis of the community structure and social practices, it becomes apparent that Naga women were no better than any other women in other parts of the world. Indeed, in comparison to such practices that discriminated against the women in certain cultures, such as sati, foot-binding etc the Naga women did not have such atrocities. Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf has left the following impression of the Naga women,

Many women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga hills, their high status and their free and happy life; and if you measure the cultural level of people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you think twice before looking down on the Nagas as 'savage' ”⁶

This observation needs to be understood in comparison and in the right perspective. Most would agree that there were restrictions imposed upon Naga women in the traditional society, for their movement or marriage. Women members of the village participated in all the festivals and celebrations along with the male members. They worked together during the day and the men could visit the women in their dormitories. Traditional Naga women could also perform certain household

⁶ Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas*, p.101

sacrifices in the religious sphere like leading the religious family ceremonies of sacrificing fowls to the deities etc⁷. Women were initiated as shaman and were successful shamans accepted and popular for their shamanic services. These factors might weigh in favor of the positive observation in comparison with other cultures.

Still, when further query is undertaken, it is obvious that the Naga woman traditionally was no more than a convenient assistant to the man in a family. Naga women could not be counted as a member of the clan since she could not represent the clan in the village council. Naga women could not serve as the village priest, when there were community sacrifices to be performed. Naga women could not possess land neither could they inherit lands. Naga women were not part of the headhunting raids, which brought status to those who brought head, but woman's head was counted as a trophy. All these, except the headhunting that is abolished now, continue to be predominantly existent in the society till date, which shows that no changes have been brought so far in these fields by any external or internal force.

Therefore, traditional Ao Naga women did not enjoy equal status and role in the society, which continues to be so in the modern, Christian society. Naga women and Ao women in particular, with their talents and abilities were accepted and consulted but formally it was and is still rare to see Ao women serve and preside over matters of the community as their male counterpart.

After the introduction of Christianity to Naga society, the Ao women, through various instruments worked for the upliftment of their status in the society.

⁷ Atola Longkumer, *Shamans, Tanula Akuter and Naga Christianity: A Study of Religio-Cultural Transition among the Nagas*. Serampore, 2006.p53

The main instruments through which they worked were the local women's fellowships and the gathering together of those fellowships at the central level in the women's association. In these fellowships and the association they gained experience in leadership and decision-making roles, roles that were not traditionally for women outside the home and which were denied to them in the structures of the church. The women's association gradually developed, expanding its role and activities in most of the areas in which the church was involved. In doing so, it became a parallel church, a woman's church. In the process its influence began to be felt even by the men, who gradually began to modify their attitudes to some extent.

It is not to say that Christianity did not have any positive impact on the status of women in the Ao society. Christianity has proved advantageous to the status of the Ao women who came to profess the religion. They have achieved an upward mobility, having come a long way from the fear-stricken pre-modern individuals to a new freedom in Christianity. But the male dominated church has still circumscribed their freedom in churches. They are still held back by what is deemed culturally appropriate. So, though women achieved an improved status by becoming Christian, they remain at mid-stage. Women in the secular sphere have achieved a more equal status with men than they have in the church. Though there are many reservations about women participating in the political decision-making, the choice has been that of the women themselves. In the church this is not the case. This becomes especially clear when discussing the appointment and ordination of

women as pastors. There the patriarchal traditions that assign priestly roles to men continue to dominate.

In the light of the concern of women's issues that is being shown in both church and the society these days, and in the light of the findings of this study, it is clear that it is necessary for the church to re-examine and change the traditional attitudes towards the women. It was the traditional attitudes, which have led to the creation of a male dominated and oriented church. If the church is to be reconstructed in such a way that the discrimination against women is removed, so that the community of believers, composed of both men and women, can live in love and harmony with one another and can thus be more effective agents of changing the society to an equal, unbiased one, then it is necessary to recognize that the origins of the problem lie in the continuance of the socio-cultural attitudes of the people in the society. Constructive measures should be taken by the government both at the state level and the district level, keeping in mind the plight of the women in their society with support from every individual in the society.

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