

The Nation and Its North-East: A Critical Reading of *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* by Temsula Ao

Mehebab Alam and Maya Shanker Pandey

Abstract

This article will explore the idea of the Nagas through a reading of *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition* by Temsula Ao. Ao has made a significant contribution to the literature of north-eastern India. Her learning and exposure to the culture, customs, and heritage of her community inspired her to record the oral tradition of the Ao-Nagas. This book is the most authentic available document about the Ao-Naga community specifically, and tribes of Nagaland in general. The Ao of Nagaland inhabit a hundred villages surrounding the Mokokchung district of Nagaland. Ao was inspired by her community's racial memory and the Ao-Naga's oral tradition in its entirety that has shaped and nurtured the Ao-Naga people for so many generations. Besides exploring the ethno-cultural identities of the Naga tribe, this paper critically analyses the question of Naga identity and ethnicity in general.

Keywords: North-East, Ao-Naga, Orality, Ethnography, Ethnic Identity.

Introduction

At the far end, in the lush green hills of eastern Himalayas, is the land of the Nagas. It is a widespread belief that they came out of stones and were the first humanoids to attain civilisation. As a distinct ethno-cultural race, the Nagas have settled across the Eastern Himalayas since prehistoric times through a long course of migratory history. There are various competing theories on their exact racial origin. History has shown that in ancient times, roughly four thousand years ago, they migrated from South China to their present home in the north-east of India. According to B. P. Singh,

The Negroids, who came from the south and southwest China, are the present Nagas of Nagaland. They have shown tremendous love for freedom and have developed strong village institutions. Men and women are accorded equal rights, but the latter is discouraged from

participating in politics, fighting, and hunting.¹

The Naga Institute of Arts and Culture believes that the group formed as long ago as 3000 BCE. Ancient relics at Longtrok are presented as historical proof, but the dating of these remains complicated and unfinished. According to Naga oral traditions, it is claimed that six persons (three males and three females) emerged from Longtrok ('six stones') at Chungliyimti in the Sangtam area of the Tuensang district of Nagaland. At Chungliyimti, the Aos first attained cultural and social enlightenment. There are sixteen major ethnic groups with other sub-tribes constitutes the Naga nation. Each tribe has distinct identical features in its customs, culture, language, and clothing.

There is no formal definition of the word Naga. The individuality of all the existing Naga tribes is characterised by their ethno-cultural and linguistic traits, customary laws, and socio-economic institutions. All such factors made the Naga tribes alienated from each other; all bore marked differences from the people of the plains. Each tribe has its own distinct cultural identity and personality, having creation myths, routes of migration, ethnic lineage, clan consciousness, and a vast repository of Indigenous knowledge. Before the arrival of British and American colonisers, the Nagas lived in complete isolation for many centuries. Following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, the British annexation started across the north-east of India, and Naga Hills was no exception. In 1851, the British succeeded to establish a military camp in the Naga Hills. The arrival of missionaries into the Naga Hills completely changed the scenario. As of today, eighty-five percent of the Naga population is Christian. The adoption of Christianity into Naga society brought significant changes to their lifestyle.

The Nagas' interactions with modernity have been mixed. Since colonisation, an effort has been made to script Naga dialects and languages. In post-independent India, another narrative concerning the Naga has come, with reports of insurgency with the hope of achieving a sovereign Naga

Mehebab Alam is presently working as an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, LBS PG College- Mughalsarai, Uttar Pradesh, India. He is also a research scholar at the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, working on North-East India Studies. Professor Maya Shanker Pandey is the senior professor in the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi with over three decades of teaching and research experience. His areas of interest include Contemporary Literature, Diaspora Literature, English Language Teaching, Indian Literature in English, Language Communication, and Teacher Education. He has authored several books and articles across the disciplines.

¹ B. P. Singh, 'North-East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1987), pp. 257–282.

territory called “Greater Nagalim.” Due to insurgent activity and revolt against the Indian state, the Nagas appeared in the national and international press. In the wake of independence, the Naga national identity was under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo, but the engagement of national leaders in the gigantic problems of Partition put the Naga demands into cold storage. Despite reluctance from the Indian side, a group of Naga rebels “demanded complete independence for their people on grounds that their area had never been part of India and that they were culturally quite distinct from India.”²

Temsula Ao: A Creative Ethnographer

Temsula Ao is an acclaimed writer from Nagaland. Her deep knowledge of the culture, customs, and heritage of her community inspired her to record the oral tradition of her community, Ao-Naga. Research on oral traditions, myths, rituals, law, customs, belief systems, and folktales is included in her ethnographic work *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (1999). This book is the most accurate work about the Ao-Naga community and tribes of Nagaland in general. Her writings include collections of poems, such as *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and *Songs from the Other Life* (2007). Her short story collections include *These Hills Called Home: Stories from A War Zone* (2005) and *Laburnum For My Head* (2009). The former tells the saga of Nagaland’s work toward independence and national identity. Her stories sprang up from the internal fault-lines of the Indian nation-state, where she speaks of home, country, nation, nationality, ethnicity, and identity. Her accounts are a touching and at times harrowing glimpse into this little-known conflict zone. *Laburnum for My Head* is also about the lives of Naga people. Other notable works include: *Aosenla’s Story* (2016); *On Being a Naga: Essays* (2014); and *Once Upon a Life* (2013), a feminist memoir.

From the Nagas’ past to their present, Temsula Ao has chronicled the colonial past and its contemporary scenario through an analytical perception of her tribe Ao-Naga in an ethnographic manner. In all her writings, be it poetry or essays, there is a conscious awareness of her identity. Despite being an ethnographer of her community, Ao is also vocal about the equality and rights of women, and how the Naga community often fails them. She identifies her own experiences of misogyny as typical of women in Naga spaces. While her poems or songs speak for the lost glory and the past

² B. G. Gokhale, ‘Nagaland: India’s Sixteenth State’, *Asian Survey*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1961), pp. 36–40.

anecdotes of an ethnic tribe, equally it chronicles the pangs of the individuals, unbearable sufferings of insurgency and ethnic unrest, and the detention of a whole population in the name of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which allowed the Indian Armed Forces to “maintain public order” as they saw fit.³ Every write-up from the oeuvre of her literary creations is stained with the concern for her homeland, its people, and their problems. Wherever she lectured, she was always conscious to assert the identity of her Ao-Naga tribe settled in the terrains of the Eastern Himalayas.

The Ao Naga Oral Tradition: A Discussion

The Ao Naga Oral Tradition is the outcome of a research project carried out at the University of Minnesota, where Temsula Ao was appointed as a Fulbright Fellow. During her stay in the United States, she met a number of Native Americans and acquired a great deal of knowledge about individual cultural practices across Indigenous American cultures. For instance, she notes her time observing a group of young Ojibwe people attempting to learn their Indigenous language.⁴ Over the course of colonisation, much of the community has lost its language, and thus many aspects of its culture. The pangs and agony of losing a language, a script, and a culture saddened her deeply; with that sense, she has taken the initiative to document the lore of her Ao-Naga tribe. Initially, the book was projected as *Collection and Translation of Ao-Naga Folktales*, though its title later changed to its present. Commenting on the context, she said: “... in an age when the written word reigns supreme and any reconstruction of the past depends on empirical data, the Ao-Naga oral tradition finds itself increasingly marginalized.”⁵

India’s north-eastern regions are a veritable paradise for folktales. The rationale that prompted her to pick up the fascinating story world of her Naga people is: “...that I needed to understand the Ao-Naga oral tradition in its entirety which has shaped and nurtured the Ao-Naga people for so many generations.”⁶ She further states that: “...the vulnerability of all indigenous cultures in the face of rapid modernization and other related forces. It also taught me to look at one’s own culture with a fresh insight and greater

³ The Armed Forces Special Power Act is an act of the Parliament of India to control the insurgent activities across the country.

⁴ As per the US census, Ojibwe is one of the major tribal groups among the Native Americans. They have a significant presence in Canada too. They have a population of around three million and speak a variety of languages.

⁵ Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (Baroda: Bhasha Publications, 1999), p. 7.

⁶ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 1.

appreciation. Above all, it created in me a sense of urgency to ‘learn’ more of my culture before time caused any more diffusion and loss of the lore.”⁷

While writing this book, she sensed a notion of ignorance of life and lore of her people and culture. She states: “even as a native speaker of the Ao-Naga language my knowledge about my own culture was limited and peripheral. It was so because I represent the so-called ‘educated, urban’ fringe of the people.”⁸ She relied heavily on knowledge from various members of her community who knew the creation myths, legends, folktales, history, and culture, to explore the racial legacy of her tribe. Little is known about the early history of Aos, as the Naga Hills were largely undocumented before the British invasion in the North-East.

The name Ao, by which they call themselves, will not be found on any of the older maps or in publications on the hill tribes of Assam, but, instead, are used certain Assamese designations-as Hatigorias, Dupdorias, Assingias,⁹ and a few others-given them in the time of the old Assamese kings.¹⁰

Writing about the Aos was very rare prior to the twentieth century, and began in earnest in 1925 with W. Carlson Smith, an American missionary who authored a substantial volume. Surendra Nath Majumdar, a member of the Assam Medical Service, wrote another book in the same year. Next J. P. Mills wrote *The Ao-Nagas* (1926) in six parts, describing domestic life, customary laws, traditions, religious beliefs, folktales, songs, and language. This book attracted wide attention. Mills, who lived with the Nagas from 1917 to 1924, carefully documented their cultural practices. Mills remarked:

The name Ao is a current mispronunciation of ‘Aor’ their own word for themselves, meaning, according to their own statements “those who came” (i.e., across the Dikhu), as distinct from Mirir (“those who did not come”), the term used for Sangtams, Changs, Phoms and Konyaks. Under the term Ao I shall include only those who speak the Chongli, Mongsen, Changki, and Sangpur dialects.¹¹

This book is primarily a collection of folktales and stories spread across the region, and the tales in this collection bring us to the fascinating story world

⁷ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 1.

⁸ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 2.

⁹ R. G. Woodthorpe, ‘Notes on the Wild Tribes Inhabiting the So-Called Naga Hills, on Our North-East Frontier of India. Part I’, *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 11 (1882), pp. 56–73.

¹⁰ John Avery, ‘The Ao Naga Language of Southern Assam’, *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1886), pp. 344–366.

¹¹ J. P. Mills, *The Ao-Nagas* (London: MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1926), p. 2.

of the Naga people. It is not a decontextualised anthology of oral traditions, but an integrated and holistic approach to Naga life and lore. The tales in this collection chronicle the anecdotes of their pre-colonial society. The book is written in several parts, and has a foreword by Birendranath Dutta, an eminent folklorist from Assam. The foreword states: “The Ao-Naga oral tradition is not a mere form of ‘story-telling’ as opposed to a written, recorded version. It is indeed in many ways the source of the people’s literature, social customs, religion, and history.”¹² Dutta continues, “It has evolved into a comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge systems, incorporating art with reality, history with imagination, and the ideal with the practical.”¹³

The book opens with the chapter “The People and The Oral Tradition” which describes the Ao Naga people in detail, covering their origin and ancestry. The sacred geographical locations of significance, along with the creation myths, are unveiled. Here she speaks of their dress, dialects, customs, and rituals: “All Ao social and domestic life was governed by a set of well-articulated laws and customs.”¹⁴ She also writes of village councils called *Putu Menden*, which represent a democratic system. The absence of any kind of feudalistic setup is notable here.¹⁵

¹² Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*. (Baroda: Bhasha Publications, 1999), p. vii.

¹³ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. vii.

¹⁴ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 5.

¹⁵ See ‘Understanding Local Self Governance in Nagaland’, *The Naga Republic*, 10 October (2017). At: <https://www.thenagarepublic.com/fact-check/nagaland-state/understanding-local-self-governance-in-nagaland/3/>. Accessed 20/12/2022. Putu Menden are described as follows: “The Nagaland Village Council Act gives due recognition to other traditional village institutions such as the “Putu Menden” in Ao Areas – to function according to their custom and usage – as a village council. The Putu Menden – roughly translates as ‘seat/government’ (menden) of a generation (putu) – is the federal assembly of elders representing different founding clans of the village. Elders are also selected according to the mepus (sectors) of a village and hence the size of Putu Mendens vary from village to village. There are broadly five established putus (generations) amongst the Aos and each putu rules the village for 30 years in a cyclic pattern. Within each putu are a seven to nine of age/peer groups units called Zünga. Each Zünga consists of people born within a three-year period and this forms the order of precedence within each Putu. The elders hold forth over their juniors and accordingly, the work distribution and roles and responsibilities in each Putu is established. Within the timeframe of 30 years of governance of a Putu, different züngas succeeds one another as and when the time arises. At the end of the allocated 30 years, all councillors of that outgoing Putu vacate their position and a new Putu Menden takes over.”

The next part of this chapter, “The Oral Tradition in Ao Folklife,” reveals the myth of Longterok,¹⁶ which refers to the six stones at Chunglymti village in the Tuensang district of Nagaland. These stones, three males and three females are considered as forefathers of all the Ao-Naga clans. The primary belief among the Ao-Nagas is that they attained civilisation at Longterok. Mills writes, “Ao tradition states quite definitely that the ancestors of the tribe came out of the earth at Lungterok (six stones), sometimes called Ungterok, lying on the top of a spur on the right bank of the Dikhu just about opposite Mokongtsu.”¹⁷ This part of the book gives a brief reference to Arju, the boys’ living quarters.¹⁸ This is an important institution in Naga social life. As per Naga customs, once men are of age, they are no longer permitted to sleep in their homes. Though they belong to particular families and participate in all the household chores, at night they are required to be at the village longhouse, where all young adults and unmarried males sleep together. Temsula Ao describes the tradition:

The Arju was the equivalent of an Academy where the youngsters were governed by strict rules. This is where discipline was taught and enforced. The manly arts and handicrafts were taught and learned here. The youngsters were told of the brave exploits of the heroes of the tribe. They were told which villages were friendly and why; they were also told the enmity with other villages. It was here that the young men had a foretaste of community life and were indoctrinated about the need to follow rules in order to survive in hostile surroundings. But most important of all, it was here that the history and traditions of the tribe and the particular village were taught.¹⁹

The next section of the book deals with traditional songs. It mentions various types of music, such as Non-Ken, or war songs; Tsuki-Ken, or songs

¹⁶As Naga folk tales go, six persons – three males and three females – emerged from *Longtrok* which means “six stones” and is situated at Chunglyimti in the Sangtam area of the Tuensang district of Nagaland. At Chunglyimti the Aos first attained cultural and social enlightenment.

¹⁷J. P. Mills, *The Ao-Nagas* (London: MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1926), p. 6.

¹⁸The Arijui is one of the most important social institutions among the Nagas. The blog ‘The Naga Republic’ defines Arijui as: “The Arijus are a self-governing autonomous imparted life-centered learning, value systems and exposed one to customary practices, traditional knowledge and governance. There also existed institutions for girls known as ‘Tsüki’. The Morungs served as a strong means of social control and an institute for learning and protection under the village authorities. All in all, it was like a university that combined lessons on warfare, governance, social sciences, and moral and ethical studies.” See Menden, ‘Understanding Local Self Governance in Nagaland’.

¹⁹Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 9.

chiefly sung in the girls' dormitories; Mesemba-Ken, or songs of disappointment; Ningsang-Ken, or songs in praise of a certain man or clan; Mojing Araba-Ken, or songs to defend against the evil spirits; and Mera-Ken, or group songs to celebrate Motasii festival. These songs play an important role in every aspect of their social life and constitute an important part of their oral tradition:

No account of the oral tradition among the Aos would be complete without a reference to its poetic form. Singing either of ballads, lullabies, dirges, hunting or fishing songs always formed an integral part of any narrative account...Singing in its purest form is governed by certain norms. Each different occasion calls for the appropriate song.²⁰

The next section, 'Names, Textiles, Artefacts and the Oral Tradition', brings a comprehensive outlook on the nomenclature of the Naga people. In response to the classic question, "What is in a name?", the author answers 'everything', as names bear an integrated understanding of their ethnic lineage, clan, societal position, language, dressing sense, and place of birth in Ao-Naga society. She writes:

Personal and first names are the exclusive property of a clan in a village, and within the clan there can be no duplication of a name. For example, the name Sungjemkaba belongs to a particular clan of the village Changki. As long as he was alive he was the only one with that name within his clan. And when he died, the name was given to a male child born within that clan. It is through this tradition of such exclusiveness that old historical names have become the denominators of the different Ao clans.²¹

The next chapter, "Ao-Naga Society", presents an overview of Aos as a society. "In Ao language, the concept of society is enshrined in the word 'Loktiliba'. Roughly translated, it means a way of life of the people."²² Their society has always been considered 'loosely democratic' in its structure.²³ Right from the birth of a child to their adulthood, they are trained in all the customs of the clan. 'Lipok Otsu' is the Ao-Naga creation myth. Their stories of origin, migration, ethnic affinity and all other identities are encoded here. She clearly describes the sacred nature of this story: "Anyone trying to distort or bring extraneous material to the traditional version of the story is fined

²⁰ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 13.

²¹ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 21.

²² Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 29.

²³ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 29.

five cows and pigs.”²⁴ Unlike Arju, the girls are also being trained in similar kinds of institutions. Oral traditions and customary norms define the status of good citizenship, cultural upbringing, and harmonious relation. In their society, the identity of an individual depends on their merits and skills:

his position in society is judged according to the measure of his contribution or otherwise to this entity. From the moment of birth, an Ao child is viewed as a potential member of society and the whole process of his or her education prepares the youngster for a definite role in society when he or she attains adulthood.²⁵

The clan is the defining factor among the Aos. “All its members are considered to be brothers and sisters. Therefore, marriage among clan members is considered incestuous and is strictly forbidden.”²⁶ Traditionally, Ao society is patriarchal, and the father’s clan defines the position of children. The distinction between major and minor clans is enthusiastically preserved among the villagers. Major clans refer to those clans whose members and their ancestors had founded a village and have a major share of land-holdings. On the other hand, a minor clan is a clan whose members came to a particular village and were allowed to settle there by existing groups. They have little holdings over the land. Both the clans enjoy equal rights and privileges as citizens. However, there are some differences, such as in dress code, the right to wear certain ornaments, and the right to hold upper positions in the Putu Menden, the village council. Even after marriage, an Ao woman retains her membership in her original clan. “Clan affinities know no village boundaries. People living in different villages of a particular clan share the same sense of belonging and are governed by the same rules concerning inheritance, dress code, ornaments, and all other formalities.”²⁷

In legal terms, the Nagas are considered under article 371A (i) of the Indian Constitution, which excludes them from many aspects of Indian civil law. “The Indian Penal code and the codes of Criminal and Civil procedure are not in force in the Naga Hills.”²⁸ Most community disputes are settled in the village councils. Customary law courts are also observed. During the period of British occupation, a certain number of magistrates were appointed to perform the judicial system. A group of ‘Dobhashis’,²⁹ or interpreters, who

²⁴ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 39.

²⁵ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 29.

²⁶ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 31.

²⁷ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 31.

²⁸ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 35.

²⁹ Dobhashi means ‘bilingual’ in Bengali.

know both English and Naga languages often assist in this. Though these officials are not highly paid, they were considered in great esteem in society. Besides these, the ‘Gaonburas’,³⁰ or village headmen, play an important role in maintaining the law and order. They are often considered a bridge between the government and the villages. In any Naga society, customary laws play a crucial role. “These laws encompass almost every aspect of village life. They deal with civil and criminal cases, and land disputes within the village and between neighbouring villages. Norms about marriage, divorce, and inheritance are also encoded in these laws.”³¹ Besides the customary laws, there are other kinds of law concerning the authenticity, interpretation, and disputes related to the tradition. ‘Yimkum’ and ‘Lipok’ are such examples:

The clan/clans which are traditionally accepted to be the first settlers of a village are called Yimkumer or Yimkumers. This traditional right is sacrosanct and cannot or should not be challenged by anybody. To belong to such a clan/clans is a matter of great prestige because, by virtue of being the first settlers of a village, they possess the prime land holdings, are automatically allotted the more important posts in the Putu-Menden and are generally considered the ‘upper-crust’ of village society.³²

Family is of vital importance to the Nagas: the family is the first social unit in any culture: “family for the Aos is a nuclear unit which must exist independently of any direct parental authority.”³³ Marriage ceremonies are organised between both households and feasts are a common aspect of the celebrations.

The next chapter we must consider is “The Ao-Naga Belief System”, which reveals many details about their history through the cultural artifacts embedded in their beliefs and practices. Many aspects of Naga cosmology involve the supernatural, though Ao is careful to distinguish this belief from

³⁰ An important institution of local administration across the North East. As per a report published in *The Indian Express* ‘Gaon Buras’ can be defined as: “The institution of Gaon Bura in Assam dates back to the colonial era when the British appointed the oldest person in the village as the head, who would oversee matters relating to land and revenue in a particular area. The position would usually go to the oldest, most knowledgeable man who had good personal ties with everyone in a village, or a cluster of small villages. In Arunachal Pradesh, too, the Gaon Buras (and Buris) are the most important village-level functionaries. Post-independence, the government continued with the institution and made the Gaon Bura a formal part of the Assam Revenue and Disaster Management department, increasing his responsibilities, and eventually introducing a small honorarium for the role.”

³¹ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 35.

³² Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 39.

³³ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 43.

Western concepts: “the concept of an all-powerful deity did not exist in the ancient tradition. Their perception of evil was attributed more to the complexities of human nature than to any malevolent spirit or god.”³⁴ Generally speaking, they consider a god known as Lijaba to be the creator of the universe.³⁵ He holds supreme power and expresses his disapproval through natural disasters. He is said to dwell below the earth. Human beings may receive his blessings or curse according to their attitude towards him. When it comes to humans, it is generally believed that every individual possesses multiple souls; men have six while women have five. Out of these souls, there is a principal soul that sustains the life force of a man or woman. With the death of a person, it departs to heaven. The next important soul turns into a hawk and flies away. “It is believed this soul also goes to the ‘Land of the Dead’ and visits the earth in its hawk form from time to time.”³⁶ Minor souls, remaining in the body, turn into mundane things such as stones or and become part of the earth. “The Aos believe that when a person is ill, it is because one of these minor souls is being held captive by evil forces. Thus, appropriate sacrifices are offered to a Tsungrem, or god of a particular place, for the release of the soul, so that the sick person may recover.”³⁷

In the Ao-Naga belief system, it is believed that the soul is immortal and there is life after death. “Man’s sojourn journey on the earth is but a phase and does not come to an end with the death and decay of the corporeal body.”³⁸ It is a popular belief among the Nagas that human beings, animals, and gods dwelt together at a certain point in time, and no distinction was observed between light and darkness. Men were familiar with black arts and could bring back the dead to life. The land of the living is known as ‘Akumliyim’, and the land of the dead is known as ‘Asu-Li-Yim’. This part of this book contains some of the finest tales from the Ao-Naga oral tradition. These tales connect human beings with animals and with the spirit world. It

³⁴ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 49.

³⁵ “Lijaba: The god of a tribe believed to have descended from Longtrok, a cluster of six stones. Lijaba did just that, saving the Aos from a long phase of pestilence followed by famine. But Lijaba was very demanding; he wanted all the Ao males – females in certain cases – to abstain from all pleasure and to perform rites to expiate their sins. The Aos not only obeyed, but they also incorporated the rites.” Rahul Karmakar, ‘The deities of the hills’, *Hinduism Times*, 12 September (2008). At: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/the-deities-of-the-hills/story-OMOhlhqsvfymVjYOdDXDPI.html>. (Accessed 20/12/2022).

³⁶ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 53.

³⁷ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 53.

³⁸ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 53.

is a vivid reflection of their belief system, inherited through the generations.

The last chapter in this book is “Ao-Naga Language”, which provides a thorough understanding of their linguistic affinity. Ao writes: “In a culture where the very principles of life and society are encoded in the spoken word, language becomes the communicator, prescriber, and preserver of the tradition.”³⁹ The Ao language is primarily oral. Though “no grammar or considerable vocabulary of the Ao Naga has hitherto been published”,⁴⁰ some attempts were made during colonisation to record and/ or translate Naga language. One such example is a collection of Naga words in Sir George Campbell’s *Specimens of the Languages of India*, which compares it to the Assamese.⁴¹ However, no other Western scholar had more understanding of the Ao language than E. W. Clark, who spent ten years of his life in the service of the American Baptist Missionary Union. In 1889, he published an Ao-Naga vocabulary in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*. This provides a comprehensive idea and understanding of the linguistics of the Ao-Naga people. As per the records found in George Abraham Grierson’s *Linguistic Survey of India*, all Naga languages and their dialects belong to the Tibeto-Burman group.⁴² The Ao language has two distinct dialects, Chongli and Mongsen, though Mills also identifies other dialects, such as Changki, Yacham, and Longla. J. H. Hutton writes, “Turning to language, I suppose there is no part of the world with so much linguistic variation in so small a population or in so small an area.”⁴³ This occurs due to the “isolation of village communities, living entirely independently and often with almost entirely self-contained economies, cut off from their neighbours by forest, mountain, and river, has led to the development of some thirty different languages, as different as those of different nations in Europe.”⁴⁴

³⁹ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 159.

⁴⁰ John Avery, ‘The Ao Naga Language of Southern Assam’, *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1886), pp. 344–366.

⁴¹ George Campbell, *Specimens of Languages of India: Including those of the Aboriginal Tribes of Bengal, the Central Provinces, and the Eastern Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴² G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, India, 1903).

⁴³ J. H. Hutton, ‘The Mixed Culture of the Naga Tribes’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 95, no. 1 (1965), p. 19.

⁴⁴ Hutton, ‘The Mixed Culture of the Naga Tribes’, p. 19.

Conclusion

Ao concludes by summarising the entire Naga life-world. She asserts that the lack of written documents, written scriptures, and a lack of written history has put the Ao-Nagas in a marginal space. She remarks, “In the absence of any written history, the numerous myths, legends, tales, and names, as well as other aspects of the tradition, have been the only link between the historic past and the present.”⁴⁵ Everything is encoded in orality, though this oral tradition is often overlooked due to Western bias towards the written word as the true form of ‘legitimate’ history. “The storytellers, singers, and raconteurs have been the custodians and transmitters of this ‘history’ from generation to generation.”⁴⁶ An interesting and intriguing phenomenon observed in advent of colonialism upon Ao-Naga traditional life is the spread of education, the rise of enlightenment, and the awakening of individualism. Some are eager to adopt modern lifestyles by rejecting their old insular society where collective identity and common endeavour are a great concern.

As a holistic document, Ao’s text is highly successful in cataloguing the beliefs, worldviews, and traditions of the Ao-Naga peoples. Rituals, customary norms, superstition, and primitivism remain an abiding motif in most of the communities here. I conclude with the following remark by Temsula Ao:

The inherent vulnerability of any oral tradition needs no great elaboration. In the context of the Ao-Nagas too, the inevitable variables in human memory and performance led to a gradual depletion of the literary contents and poetic language of the tradition. In addition, some exorable facts of history further hastened the process of deterioration. The most decisive blow to the fabric of the tradition was struck when the new religion i.e. Christianity began to win converts quite rapidly. Acceptance of the new religion demanded total abandonment of the ‘old’ ways. A way of life, which had sustained and nurtured generations, suddenly became ‘taboo’. Thus, indigenous forms of belief and worship, observance of the various festivals and rituals, and chanting of traditional songs which contained not only religious elements but also much of the literature and history of the people became taboo. Food and dress codes too had to change according to the ‘new ways’.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 175.

⁴⁶ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 175.

⁴⁷ Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 175.