

Christianity and Socio-Cultural Change among the Ago Nags

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Abstract: Change is an ubiquitous and continuous phenomenon and the tribes in Nagaland has also been affected by it. Change is brought about by many factors which can be both intrinsic and extrinsic to the society. In this regard Christianity has been the single most important catalyst in the lives of millions belonging to different tribes living in Nagaland today. Since their first contact with foreign missionaries the tribes have witnessed and experienced many changes in its material culture as well as traditional cultural beliefs and practices. This paper will try to look at the socio-cultural changes brought about by adopting Christianity by the Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland.

Key words: Change, Christianity, Naga, Socio-cultural, Tribal

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Ao are one of the major tribes of Nagaland. They call themselves Aor or “those who came” crossing over the Dikhu river. The Ao have three dialects they are Chungli, Mongsen and Changki. They inhabit the district of Mokokchung, in Nagaland. The Ao Nagas believe that they emerged from ‘longterok’ (six stones) which is located on the right bank of the Dikhu just opposite to Mokokchung. These stones are located in Chungliyimti village, which is at present located in the Sangtam Naga area in Tuensang district. According to legend Tongpok and his sister Lendina emerged first and they were called the Pongener clan. Then emerged Longpok with his sister Yongmenala and they were called the Longkumer clan. Lastly Longjakrep with his sister Elongshe emerged and they were called the Jamir clan. Thus three distinct clan emerged who could intermarry, as the Ao follow the rules of clan exogamy very seriously (Lonkumer, 2004).

Today almost hundred percent of the Ao are Christians. They were the first Naga tribe to accept and convert to Christianity. But before their conversion to Christianity they were animists. They believed in the existence of spirits in both animate and inanimate objects. “The religion of the Ao is not a moral code” (Mills, 2003). Theirs was a system of ceremonies which were performed to appease the dieties and spirits which were all around him in nature. “The Ao religion is full of ceremonies and sacrifices” (Imchen, 1993). There were public ceremonies and household or individual ceremonies observed throughout the year. They feared that if proper offerings and ceremonies were not performed to appease the dieties then they would not get good crops and that illness and sickness may befall upon them. The two major festivals celebrated by all the Ao are ‘Moatsu’ and ‘Tsongrem Mong’. This two festivals are celebrated even today by the Christians though without the rites and rituals of ancient times. It is celebrated just as a way to remain connected with their roots and identity.

In the year 1872 Rev. E.W. Clark, a Missionary of the American Baptist Mission went to Mokokchung area through Sibsagar district of Assam. After four years that is in 1876 he reached Molungyimchen village, which was then known to the Assamese as Dekha Haimong. This is how the first western missionaries entered the Ao area and started their mission work. However the missionaries faced resistance and hostility from the people in the beginning. Rev. E.W. Clark on October 24, 1876, led some of the converts of Molungyimchen village and moved to a new site to establish a Christian village called, Molungyimsen, which literally means new Molung. “The reason was that there had existed severe threat and vexation from villagers who would not tolerate the Christians who could not continue to live under such persecution” (Imchen, 1993).

The first missionaries confined their activities in the Ao areas, which now forms the part of Mokokchung district in Nagaland. Rev. E.W. Clark was assisted in his missionary work at Molungyimsen by the coming of two new families, Rev and Mrs. Perrine, in 1892 and Rev and Mrs. Haggard in 1893. They found that the village was not the right place from where evangelisation among the Ao’s and others could take place so they found a new and permanent site at Impur, which was forty miles from Molung, and ten miles north of Mokokchung. A mission centre was thus opened at Impur on 4th October, 1894, and the mission activities shifted from Molungyimsen to Impur. By this time a number of churches were established in different Ao

villages and there were many new converts. Impur for many years was the Christian station not only for the Ao churches but for the churches of the other Naga tribes such as the Sumis, Lothas, Changs, Phoms and Sangtams.

The primary objective of the Missionaries was not only to spread the teachings of Christian religion among the Naga people, but along with it they wanted to bring about a 'total change of culture' (Imchen, 1993, 154.) as they considered the Nagas as primitive and lacking behind them. With this aim in view the missionaries imparted education to the youths and when they were educated enough and the missionaries considered them ready, they were in turn sent to other villages to teach and spread education among those villagers. "The village schools were left pretty much to the management of local teachers with very little missionary oversight" (Sangma, 1992). And follow in the missionaries footsteps. "Christianity and education go hand I hand. Without schools, church-planting would be almost a failure in Ao country" (Imchen, 1993, 154.). "It is the schools and the introduction of English language, which became the heritage of a revolution that slowly but inexorably unfolded in Nagaland" (Ray, 2004). The new language became a means through which flowed the awareness of the world outside and new ideas . Many youths also went out in search of higher education and they could not but be influenced by the ways of life and ideas outside. This led to questionings and doubts. The traditional way of life began to be shaken.

The hard-working pioneer missionary Rev. E.W. Clark left the Ao Nagas in 1893. "But the seed of Christianity, which he had put in the soil of the Nagas, began to grow up into a charming tree" (Singh, 2008). He left behind him an Ao English dictionary. At his departure he could see a number of primary schools in the different Ao villages. His wife who was also an educationist and she had written a few books in the Ao language for use in the schools. It is more than one hundred years that Christianity has been introduced in this area, during this time Christianity has been accepted by majority of the Ao's and it has exerted a tremendous influence on them. Many of them have given up drinking ricebeer which is a traditional drink and have accepted education as a must. It has also brought about great changes in their day to day activities and also many other traditional cultural practices.

II. SOME OF THESE CHANGES HAVE BEEN DISCUSSED BELOW

Manners and Customs

When a baby is born a "genna" is observed for five days for a girl and six days for a boy. During these days the leaf of a lemon like tree is kept in front of the house to announce the birth of a baby and during this time period no outsider is allowed to come to the house. Irrespective of the sex of the baby, both the ears of the baby are pierced on the third day. The piercing is done by the senior most member of the family after the performance of a small ceremony where a cock is killed and feasted upon with prayers by members of the family. This is done so that when grown up he or she can use flower or any other thing as ornament in the ears.

On the third month, the head of the baby is shaved, dress is given and bead necklace is put round the neck irrespective of the sex of the baby. It may be noted here that both men and women use bead necklaces, but the more elaborate and beautiful ones are worn by the women. Up to this time, that is, before giving dress to the baby, the mother could not take part in any social function. With dress and necklace the baby is ushered into the society. The above practiced is however no longer practiced because people have converted to Christianity and so have done away with any practices related with the traditional religion.

In some Ao villages in olden days there was the system of marriage price or bride price to be paid to the bride's father, and in other villages there was no such thing. Under this system, the would-be-groom is required to work in the field and house-hold of the father or guardian of the would-be-bride. The period of work varies from six months to one year. During this period the boy is to prove, by his work and labour, his ability to maintain a wife. By such selfless act he is to win both the girls heart and the affection and confidence of the girls parents. In some villages there were no such practices; instead the boy is to present some articles such as dao and spear etc as a matter of honour to the parents of the girl. This presents were to be offered when the marriage is settled. In both the cases, marriage price or no price, it was the responsibility of the boy to construct a house of his own where he would bring his wife after marriage and start his own family.

On the appointed day of marriage the boy together with some of his close relatives go to the house of the girl carrying gifts of baskets of paddy and other presents. The groom's party goes to the house of the bride in the evening and feasts there along with other invitees. The cost of the feast is borne by the groom. In the house of the bride, the elders of both the party talk and agree to the various conditions of the marriage. Then feasts follows and thereafter the bride is brought to the newly constructed house of the groom. Marriage generally took place in the month of March-April that is just after sowing, when there was not much field work.

The majority of the Ao's are Christians and they do not observe the old rules and rituals of marriage. Therefore traditional rules of marriage are no longer found among them. The groom no longer serves the father-in-law's house nor does he have to pay any compensation. But often, probably as remnant of the tradition, the son-in-law voluntary helps the father-in-law financially or otherwise. "Today majority of the Nagas have

embraced Christianity, yet aspects of their traditional religion continue to influence their behaviour.” (Kikhi, 2009). It may be mentioned that Christian marriages takes place in the church and with all Christian rituals.

Before the advent of Christianity and administration to this area, the people used to keep the dead body exposed on a platform in the premises of the house for several months (two or three months) and thereafter used to throw the remains in the specified place in the jungle. But the system has long been abandoned. Nowadays the Ao's, irrespective of religion, bury the dead and feast before the burial.

Christians pray for the eternal peace of the departed soul, and church bell tolls for the departed soul. In the church a funeral service is conducted. Then a quiet funeral procession is led to the cemetery. There people take to singing and the pastor reads scriptures and a prayer is offered for the departed soul after which the dead body which is already put in a coffin is placed in the grave. The Christians nowadays plant a cross over the grave in place of skulls of games which were displayed in the past. Stone tablets are also planted to perpetuate the cherished memory of the deceased ones.

Arichu or Bachelor's Dormitory System

“The Arichu was a traditional learning academy where boys who had reached adolescence, were required to join the arichu or dormitories and sleep there” (Lonkumer, 2004. 24). At present as a result of Christianity and modern education the olden system of arichu or bachelor's dormitory has fallen into disuse and is no longer practiced. In the past the arichu was not only the sleeping place for the boys of the village but also served as a fortress of the village. Here the young boys learnt various arts and crafts. They were trained to be warriors and defenders of the village. In most of the social gatherings and festivities of the village the boys of the arichu played a very active part. They were tasked with the necessary collection of fire woods and bamboos to be during such occasions.

But the arichu system is no longer practised amongst the Ao's. “The dormitory system was done away with by the missionaries who did not understand its relevance and significance for the Ao villages” (Lonkumer, 2004). In the past it was compulsory for every boy of the village, after attaining puberty to enter the life of arichu where they learned various aspects of the life in the society. He was given training in arts and crafts, singing, fighting, hunting, public address and speaking etc. Life in arichu used to prepare them for manhood. After intensive training and discipline in the arichu, they grew to be good warriors, and to be a good warrior was the lifelong aspiration of every youngman in olden days. But due to the advent of Christianity the arichu system has been done away with. The Christian missionaries discouraged this practice of bachelors dormitory as they considered it the agent of pagan practices and customs. The Christian converts dissociated themselves from anything that had to do with their pagan past. “Boys in Christian families are refusing to serve at the young men's house. This was an important educational institution for the boys” (Smith, 2002). In this way the bachelors dormitory was abandoned by the Ao's. Missionary schools came up and took the place of the arichu. “With the decline of the Arichu system which was the most important part of village life, much of the customs, folklore and arts and artifacts and architecture of the Aos have been lost forever. For it was in the Arichu that such aspects of Ao culture was embedded” (Lonkumer, 2004. 30).

Tsuki or Girls Dormitory System

Just like the arichu was for the boys, the village also maintained a dormitory for the girls of the village called Tsuki. This was the place where young girls were taught how to weave, make handicrafts, sing traditional songs and other social etiquettes which were expected from a girl. In certain villages each clans maintained their own separate tsuki's. it was supervised by an unmarried women from the clan. It was taboo for a girl to enter the arichu but it was not taboo for the boys to enter the tsuki and it was here where the boys and girls of the village mingled and socialised. But even the tsuki system has been done away with due to the advent of Christianity.

Head-Hunting

Before the introduction of Christianity head-hunting was practised by the Aos. In the past there were frequent skirmishes and enmity between different tribes and even between different villages of the same tribe. Frequent raids and counter raids used to take place which lead to loss of lives and property. After the killing of the enemy their head used to be cut off and carried away by the victor as the head was highly prized by them. A man who had cut an enemy's head was ceremoniously honoured and much respected by the people as a warrior and hero. In fact, it was regarded as the greatest honour and glory for a man to be a successful head hunter with an enemy head to his credit, as it was for the rich man's wish to offer feasts of merit. “War honours were greatly prized. A man without such was without respect. For such honours, the head of a woman or a child counted as well as that of a man.” (Sangma, 1987). By accomplishing an of these feats only, a man was entitled to wear special status. Hence the much coveted shawl called Tsungkotepsu, which symbolises success in head hunting and wealth, can be worn only by warriors, that is, successful head-hunter, and rich men who had offered feasts of merit. Ordinary people had no right to wear it.

Life of the Nagas, and so the Aos also was regarded incomplete unless a head had been taken or feasts of merit had been given. "To the Naga there is nothing more glorious than bravery and success in battle, which meant the bringing of an enemy's head back to the village, because of which his praises would be sung." (Smith, 2002). Taking heads in war was required before a man could wear certain ornaments and clothes. It also gave him the right to decorate his house with certain motives and symbols which marked his home and identified him as a great warrior among his fellow villagers. It was such deeds that earned the men respect and honour in the community and also made him attractive and desirable as a partner in the eyes of the women.

The days of head-hunting are gone and have fallen into oblivion due to the influence of Christianity and civilisation. It is now a thing of the past. The evils of head hunting are now remembered only with remorse as morbid practice of the heathens.

Feasts of Merit

Feasts of Merit had a very important place in the traditional Ao social life. "The idea of giving a feast is to perpetuate one's own memory after feeding a multitude of men in the village" (Nshoga, 2009). It was the wish of many to perform the feasts of merit as it conferred high status and respect upon the giver. It was a costly affair and only the rich people could afford to give the feast. There were a series of three feasts and ceremonies, each one more important and costlier than the preceding one. Each ceremony required the killing of pigs and cows or bull which culminated with the killing of the mithun. The entire village was invited to partake the meat of the killed animals and there was much celebrations. The person who offers the feasts of merit is much respected and honoured in the community. Each feast entitled him to social distinction for himself, his family and his clan too. The village also benefitted when someone threw a feast of merit as performing sacrifices was said to bring favour of the spirits for prosperity among the village too. By offering a series of feasts of merit the host earns the coveted right of wearing certain clothes such Tsungotepsu (for men), and some other clothes and ornaments etc for the women. It was only the married people who could offer feasts of merit because the wife played an important part throughout the festival. With the advent of Christianity, the people began to distance itself from everything to do with traditional religion and culture. Hence this practice of giving feasts to the entire village by wealthy men also slowly ceased to exist. Nowadays people no longer give the feast of merit.

III. CONCLUSION

We can see that the introduction of Christianity among the Aos has brought about many changes to their society. "In trying to establish the Church of Christ among the Ao, there was lamentable destruction to valuable ancient tradition, customs and moral values" (Imchen, 1993). It led to the decay of their traditional religion and practices associated with it. "Christianity has weakened their taboos and their systems of social control" (Smith, 2002). There was a clear antagonism between the new converts to Christianity and those who still followed their old religion. The converts refused to take part in collections related to traditional religious festivals and rituals and they also refused to observe traditional genna's and rest days. In this way social control over the members of the village began to loosen and slowly even the taboos and customs ceased to be observed. Despite the tremendous damages inflicted on the Naga social milieu by the Christian missionaries, one must admit that they also brought a wider humanising influence, a new gospel of love and tenderness and the benefits of modern education (Horam, 1988). Education opened the door for the Aos to forge ahead and become pioneers in many fields among the Nagas.

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