

Article

Voices from the Hills: A Study of Ao Literature and Oral Traditions

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Abstract: The rich cultural legacy and changing literary environment of the Ao Naga group in Northeast India are examined in the present paper. To understand how oral narratives have influenced and maintained the community's collective memory and identity, this study examines the relationship between oral traditions—such as folktales, myths, ballads, and proverbs—and modern Ao literature. In addition to examining the shift from oral to written forms resulting from colonial and missionary influences, the study emphasizes the importance of storytelling in preserving indigenous knowledge systems, values, and worldviews. This study emphasizes the adaptability and persistence of Ao cultural manifestations in the face of social and political change by examining both contemporary literary writings published in Ao and English as well as traditional oral performances. Additionally, it considers how language, memory, and performance contribute to the preservation of cultural legacy. The work's ultimate goal is to advance knowledge of Indian tribal literature and the importance of indigenous voices in the larger conversation about literature, identity, and decolonization.

Keywords: Ao Naga; oral traditions; indigenous literature; folktales; cultural identity

Introduction

A group of tribes known as the Nagas live in Nagaland, which is located in India's far northeast. This unique state was established as the 16th Indian state on December 1, 1963, and is bounded to the east by Myanmar, to the west by Assam, to the north by Arunachal Pradesh, and to the south by Manipur. Angami, Chakesang, Chang, Khiamungan, Konyak, Sangtam, Kuki, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sema, Yimchunger, and Zeliang are some of the prominent tribes that call Nagaland home. Additionally, the government has not yet formally recognized several sub-tribes. All of these tribes speak various languages that are incomprehensible to one another, and there are countless varieties within each language. In the same way that each tribe has its own dialect, "the Aos speak Ao, the Semmas speak Sema. As a result, there are as many Naga languages as there are tribes, even though there is no common Naga language" (Clement 74). The Indo-Tibetan language family includes the Naga languages. Because they have resided in adjacent areas, the Nagas share many cultural characteristics despite their linguistic variance. The Nagas are members of the stunning Mongolian race, and their various tribes and ethnic groups are beautifully represented in Nagaland. In the past, the Naga warriors were known as "Headhunters," a frequent practice.

The Nagas' head-hunting warfare was their innate nature (Atsongchanger 1). The distinctive rituals and traditions of the Naga people are deeply rooted in their vibrant culture and way of life. Oral history has been transmitted to future generations through the translation of these customs and traditions into festivals, which are infused with ancient songs and dances. The Naga people have a deep affinity for rhythm, dance, and music. Evergreen monsoon forest covers the majority of the Naga Hills. The primary occupation of the Nagas is agriculture, and they primarily use "Jhum," or "slash and burn," as their agricultural technique. Every festival and ritual has some connection to promoting the agricultural process. According to Verrier Elwin, the Nagas place a high value on society and are family-oriented. He states that each Naga's primary concern is his family, clan, "Khel," and village. He believes that this is his culture and that it should not be altered. He has a strong attachment to his land, his land tenure system, the village government, the way he organizes his cultivation, and the way the village and tribe courts administer tribal justice.

The Nagas are straightforward, jovial, and proud of their heritage. They led a simple life for a long time, "cultivating their mountains' sides in a backwater where no outside influences were present" (2). Despite having Mongolian ancestry, the Nagas' language, habits, and religion are quite distinct from those of other easterners, such as the Chinese, Indonesians, and Burmese. On their own, they are distinct. The word "naga" has multiple connotations and meanings. Some academics interpret "Naga" as "naked," while others interpret it as referring to people who live in highlands, etc. The Nagas use no written script. Through oral storytelling that was passed down from one generation to the next, their unwritten rules, customs, and practices were preserved over time. Today's Nagas are a tribe prepared to learn and advance in life. In the words of Verrier Elwin: "Nagas are strong and self-reliant, good to look at, with an unerring

instinct for colour and design, friendly and cheerful, with a keen sense of humour, gifted with splendid dances and a love of song" (Elwin 1). In terms of bureaucracy and literacy, the Aos are the most prominent of the Naga tribes. The Mokokchung district in Nagaland is home to the majority of the Ao Naga tribe. The Dikhu River on the southeast, the edge of Assam's plain on the northeast, the Konyaks on the northeast, and the Semas and Lothas on the southwest all encircle the beautiful Ao region, "which is made up of long, continuous hills that gradually slope down to modest streams" (Prasad 37). According to the Ao tradition, the tribes' forefathers sprung from the earth at "Lungterok," which translates to "Six Stones," and was situated atop a spur on the Dikhu River's right bank. Numerous distinctive traits set the cultures of the various Naga tribes apart, even though the Nagas as a whole show a general similarity in culture and share many traits in their way of life and customs. The Ao Naga tribe is the most intriguing ethnic group, exhibiting several traits not present in other Naga communities:

The first ancestors of the Aos consisted of two clans - the 'Mungsen' and the 'Chungli' clans. In the course of time, the Aos occupied a large territory reaching from the central part of the Naga Hills right to the western spurs bordering the Assam plains. The word 'Ao' is derived from the word 'Aor' meaning 'those who came' (that is, from across the Dikhu), to differentiate them from 'Mirir', which means 'those who did not come,' which refers to Sangtams, Phoms, Changs, and Konyaks living beyond the Dikhu" (Mills 1)

The social life of the Aos is complex. In the regular course of life as well as at festivals and other special occasions, they take great pleasure in mingling and having a good time. Every area of a village had its own "Morung" or "Arichu" since it was vital to the village's social life. It was where weapons were manufactured, war expeditions were organized, and after a successful raid, enemy heads were carried. Additionally, it serves ceremonial functions during yearly celebrations. The Aos' yearly festivals are the most notable aspects of their social life. After a long day of labor, the villagers have time to unwind and enjoy amusement and relaxation. As the largest social unit, the village plays a significant part in the celebrations and festivals. Everybody in the community participates in the yearly celebrations of festivals related to the agricultural cycle. There are limits and prohibitions associated with all religious holidays, or "Genna." In order for the deities that are worshipped to provide prosperity and well-being to the village's residents and shield them from disasters and catastrophes, all work must cease. The Aos observe many important and smaller festivals. The chief festival of the Aos is the "Moatsu" festival, which is held in the spring and is known as a festival of blessings. "Moatsu" is typically observed shortly after the seed has been sown in the new field, calling upon the kindness and benefits of "Lichaba," the earth's creator. Singing, tug-of-war, dancing in vibrant traditional attire, and other events are what define the festival. The depth of the Aos' culture and tradition is also demonstrated by the numerous proverbs and sayings they employ in their discourse. Using proverbs in their language is a good way to assess a man's knowledge and intelligence. Similar to the saying "azu arijui atu ama," which states that there is nothing to learn from a stupid man, it is like a dog walking into the "Ariju" (Morung), an empty hall.

Because white settlers brought Christianity to these regions of the Nagas, the Aos were historically the most affluent and development-oriented of the Naga tribes. Impur was chosen as the mission center when Christian missionaries first established themselves in the Ao regions. Even though Christianity had its own problems, it also brought benefits to the populace, such as education, which helped many Nagas overcome their darkness. However, it is regrettable that no such literary masterpiece has been created. The Bible is the oldest piece of literature in the Aos. The Bible arrived as a literary product that freed people from ignorance and superstition in a tribe that was illiterate and worshipped animals, plants, and stones. In addition to the Bible, the Ao Baptist Association at Impur released *Khristan Aeni Aoba*, a translation of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in Ao in 1983. Additionally, the well-known Ao love folktale "Etiben and Jinaba," which originated from Mopungchuket village, gained widespread recognition after being published in 1948, 1995, and 2001. Because the Ao Senden Literature Board office praised this book, it has become a legend among the Aos.

The writers of the younger generation have recently shown an increasing interest in reviving their culture. N. Talitemjen Jamir is a trailblazer among the educated Aos in depicting Naga society and its cultural elements to both the Nagas and the outside world. *Ao-Naga Cultural Heritage, Naga Society and Culture*, which he co-authored with A. Lanunungsang is one of his well-known publications that has been cited for this study. A few books, such as *Asen Kin Sobalibaren* and *Aor Tarnunger Otsu*, are also available in Ao, in addition to these English-language works. Another well-known Ao author who writes on Ao culture is L. Imtisupong Aier. His writings, which shed light on the Ao Naga society, customs, and culture, include *Akumliir Wadang*, *Aor Subaliba Takum*, and *Ayatai Ongkoroksen Ao Lima Sangro*. Recent authors in Ao literature include T. Sanka Ao, who penned short stories such as *Sensakar Nuktzu* and *Kudong Longranaro*, I. Alempokba Jamir (*Shina Yutsuba Linuk Ka*), and Mar Atsongchanger (*Unforgettable Memories from Nagaland*). In addition to these Ao writers, Dr. Temsula Ao is another Ao writer who writes in English. She is the dean of NEHU's School of Humanities and Education and a professor in the English Department.

In a collection of short stories titled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and *The Ao Naga Tradition*, she mostly depicts her culture and reflects the political unrest in her native country during the modern era. Moreover, she has a collection of poetry called *Songs from the Other Life*, some of which highlight Ao culture. Other lesser authors include T. Penzu and I. Sademmeren Longkumer, who wrote folk tunes like "Lisemi Manung Tenung," "Nokinketer Sangro," and others. In his book *Historical Development of the Ao Nagas in Nagaland*, among other works, Dr. Purtongzuk Longchar also discusses the Ao Naga culture.

They lost what they thought was a written script, according to the Aos. In Jungliyimti village, the Aos originated from "Longterok," which is where the oral tradition began. For the Aos, literature is their culture, as, like other tribal communities, their folktales and folk songs, which are the essence of Ao literature, convey all of their

joys and sorrows. The Ao literature is still in its infancy, but the books that have been published thus far demonstrate its steady development. For example, in their book *A Bibliography of Ao Literature*, authors A. Lanunungsang and A. Temsu Imchen discuss the necessity of standardizing literary output and the drawbacks of authors using different spelling patterns. Additionally, AOs lack well-known works in genres like poetry, fiction, and theatre that “deal with global themes like culture, society, morality, value education, etc., and the majority of the few books that have been written are about religion. This is the area of Ao literature’s current deficit” (Lanunungsang Imchen 3).

Nevertheless, younger writers have attempted to revive the lost culture in their works, despite all their flaws. To illustrate to outsiders the attitude, beliefs, religion, traditions, culture, and everything that sets the AOs apart from other Naga tribes, this study has examined specific oral literature, such as folktales and folksongs. Since there are not many written documents, the majority of the references would be oral. The majority of the documented literature consists of English-language reports left by missionaries, British officials, and foreign anthropologists. The majority of the few native texts are written in the Ao dialect.

Temsula Ao’s more recent book, *Songs from the Other Life*, is a compilation of poems inspired by Naga tales and folklore. Ao myths, beliefs, and customs are discussed in a few of the poetry. Here, a few poems have been discussed:

Soul-Bird:

They are chanting prayers, But I watch a lonely hawk
 Soaring
 Amidst the swirling
 Blue of the vast sky.
 The shadowy wing-span Momentarily darkens The whiteness
 Of the rushing clouds.
 It moves in hesitant circles Emitting unearthly sounds, The piercing hawk-eyes
 Seemingly riveted
 On the mound below
 Fenced in
 By new-cut bamboo
 The mourners slowly depart
 From this obscure bit
 Of disturbed earth

Now made conspicuous By the recent consignment, but grandmother clings to
 the new-made barrier Guarding the fresh mound, Refusing to accept The stark finality,

Until her grieving heart
 Senses a presence
 Hovering in the sky.
 She slowly turns heavenwards
 As her red-rimmed eyes
 Settle on the circling silhouette

And then with a sudden
 Unseemly whoop
 She draws me closer
 Whispering in my ear,
 See that keening bird in the sky?
 That is your mother's soul
 Saying he final good-bye,
 It is over
 Come, let us go home now (14-15).

The AOs believed in life after death; when a person passes away, their soul is sent to a hamlet known as "Asuyim," which translates to "dead men village." Another old AO Naga belief is that a person's soul transforms into a caterpillar, bird, or bug after they pass away. It is believed that seeing hawks shortly after a person's passing is a positive indicator that the transition is complete and that it is the loved one's final appearance on earth (SFTOL 14). The poem opens with the burial party "chanting prayer." The narrator spots a lone "hawk" amidst the swirling blue of the vast sky." However, the grandmother protects the "new mound". She refuses to acknowledge the loss of her loved one until she "senses a presence hovering in the sky," the "circling silhouette" of a hawk. "That is your mother's soul saying her final goodbye, it is over," the mourning grandma tells the narrator, finding solace and acceptance of "the stark finality" in the hawk's presence. Let us head home immediately, please (SFTOL 15). The hawk represents the concept that a deceased person's soul will eventually complete its journey on earth, which gives the bereaved family solace and comfort.

Man to Woman
 Woman, let me tell you the reasons
 Why have I courted you these many seasons?
 You may not be the prettiest
 Nor the fairest of the village maidens
 However, when you smile.
 I see my world lit up in your face
 The mododendron you wear in your ear Glows like the flame in my heart
 The curves on your calves
 Shimmer like ripe bananas
 And golden guavas
 Pale before your maiden buds.
 When you walk, your swaying hips
 Ripple with life's new promise
 And when you dance on festive days
 The earth rings out with your beads and bells
 At harvest when you gather the sheaves
 The autumn sunshine gilds your limbs
 When *you* sit at the loom
 You seem to weave my dream
 Like the sunak you gave me

This last Moatsu day
 And every time I wear this dream-cloth
 I dare think you will not say no.
 Woman, what more can I say
 To convince you why
 I want you by my fire-side
 To assuage the other fire?
 After the harvest is over
 I shall build a new house
 It will only be of thatch and bamboo
 But built with love for you
 When the time is right
 My maternal uncle will bring my offer in the night
 So tell your mother to tell your father
 To accept my offer
 For I am an honest hard-working farmer
 Who will always cherish his daughter
 Oh, woman, at more can I do
 To convince you
 That I want you with a yearning Stronger than the jhum burning?
 And as I dream and wait
 Turn away the others from your hut.
 But when I come, open the door wide
 Moreover, let me walk to next year's jhum by your side. (57-59)

The Aos place a high value on marriage, and being celibate was viewed negatively, particularly for women. Among the Aos, marriage arrangements are not standard. With their parents' approval, the lads and girls get married after meeting on their own. The Aos do not practice bride prices or dowries. Following the decision, the boy's family formally proposes. Following acceptance of the proposal, a feast is served in both homes and a marriage ceremony is planned. However, there are many responsibilities involved in starting a new family that must be met prior to marriage. Because he is the leader of the family and patriarchal culture expects men to play such a role, the groom bears the burden. He is required by custom to build a new home before the wedding, where he will transport the bride following the ceremony. His clan members assist him in building the dwelling. The young couple's new home represents the idea of complete autonomy and responsibility for this new family in society. In the poem 'Man to Woman', this traditional marital custom is maintained.

The statement "the rhododendron you wear in your ear close like the flame in my heart" depicts the man's courtship moment. Additionally, he likens the woman's curves to those of a "ripe banana." The man cherishes the "Sunak," a traditional Ao Naga shawl for men made of black yarn and faded indigo, that his lover gave him. (SFTOL 59) Invoking God's blessing for a bountiful crop, the poem also mentions the "Moatsu" festival, which is held during the first week of May. The other significant Ao festival, "Moatsu," is held in the spring, immediately following the completion of

seeding a new field. The six-day celebration features many vibrant traditional costumes, singing, and drinking. "After the harvest is over, I shall build a new house," he informs her. (SFTOL 58) This sentence highlights the Ao marriage custom, according to which an Ao man must construct a home before he can take his wife and begin a new life. As the poem comes to a close, the man begs his sweetheart to open her door so they can start a new life together.

Even in their daily lives, many old people in Ao society use "a song and a word," "Ken ka oka," and "a talk with a proverb" (tejembiba ka, shin o ka). Without including its lyrical form, no description of the oral tradition among the Aos would be complete. As the punch line is always given in the form of a poem sung by the narrator, singing—"whether it be a ballad, lullaby, doges, hunting, or fishing song—always forms an essential part of every narrative tale. The right song is needed for each unique circumstance" (Ao 13). Within the traditional Ao civilization, songs and folklore are the primary sources of conversation and entertainment. Songs were the Aos' way of expressing their deepest emotions, which their spoken language was unable to convey. Since these songs are firmly ingrained in culture, it is typically challenging to comprehend their meanings. The majority of these songs are based on traditional beliefs and activities.

On various occasions, different kinds of songs are sung. They are songs about combat, headhunting, love, religion, ritual, farming, and so forth. You cannot sing these tunes every time. They must only be sung in accordance with the song's occasion. They sing as if they are conversing with one another. Through music, they instantaneously react to one another. These songs were learned in the "Tsüki," "Ariju," and on farms. However, the younger generation lost the chance to learn such traditional songs after the demise of socio-cultural institutions like "Ariju" and "Tsüki." Every Naga tribe, including the Aos, Angamis, Semas, and Lothas, has a unique culture and set of folktales. Through the study of oral traditions such as folklore, their history can be better understood. Their traditions and rituals are brought to life through folklore. The primary means by which the Nagas pass on their culture is through folktales. They have symbolic connotations. Village elders are the ideal source of information about folklore. Singing traditional songs and narrating folklore are commonplace in every Naga village. In addition to showcasing the Aos' cultural side, these tales are educational and morally significant. In addition to teaching them about their background, they also teach them right from wrong. These folktales come in a variety of forms; some depict the relationship between humans and animals, while others tell about stepmother abuse. The folktales are also classified as humorous, romantic, and tragic. A few of these folktales are examined to highlight their social implications:

"Ongertsür Nungshijunglai atenba ken
 Pendangerkela kü chindong nung senden-angni, Nangba maorata tesha
 yatsuni.

(All strangers gather in my room but tell no one about the marriage)

Ao tsükong sema mongbu anchetria

Ora chuba kima, muluzübu arong

Koba meshimer, küyim onгна onгsemsanger.
 (All suitors travelling throughout the region of Ao tribe,
 brings different gifts of ornaments and beautiful traditional costumes to my
 compound to woo me.)
 Shinaroa mekümleni
 Sangro kenshisaki chindongyala Onger tiyong mepu, lemlemla kishitaroer."
 (She is the best woman, whom every man wants to marry) (Longkumer 22).

Given that marriage was seen as a crucial component of Aos social life, this song highlights the beauty of Nungshijungla, a member of the Orger tribe, and her desire to get married. Unless there was a problem, every man and woman expressed a wish to get married as soon as they reached marriageable age. Every male in the village aspires to marry Nungshijungla because she is the most attractive woman and has a very incredible voice. She finds it difficult to pick who to marry and ultimately decides not to get married at all since she is unable to marry some young men from two or three clans in her village because it is against Ao custom for some clans to marry each other.

It was firmly agreed upon, taking into consideration all that could or might occur. The local artist performs this song on the tape while singing along with its theme. Because of this, the Aos, like all Naga tribes, did not have written records of their civilization; instead, it was passed down orally from one generation to the next. The Aos hold a firm conviction that the deceased souls go through "Asür rikhüm," also referred to as the "gate of the departed souls," after passing away. The distance from Longkhüm village is roughly one kilometer. Following their passage through this gate, the souls arrive at a different location known as "Longri-tzü-lenden" (Longri-bitter; tzü-water, lenden-valley). Because the deceased souls satisfy their thirst here, it is thought that the water in this valley is bitter. They use "shitsüng," a mixture of bitter seeds that is used as soap, to wash their heads in addition to drinking the water. They arrive at a hill in Wokha, where the female departed souls dry their garments after passing through Longkhüm village. This specific hill is known to the Aos as "laza-sübo," which means "a place where maidens dry clothes." People think that a person should visit Longkhüm village twice in order to bring back their souls, which are thought to have been left behind on their first visit, because all of the departed souls pass through the village. Ao folklore is where the Tsüngremong festival myth originated. The Aos always feared God. For generations, they continued to be in awe of God. Chungliyimti village is where the Aos initially settled, according to history. As the population increased throughout time, they moved to Soyem. After living there for a while, they moved to Koridang because of some issues, where they lived together for many years.

For the Aos, gods or deities were always revered and feared greatly. They would constantly make sacrifices to please the gods or half-spirit, half-man spirits if they spotted any passing. In a particular Aos village called "Longsayimti," the locals have the chance to see a group of gods dancing and playing tug-of-war. The sight of these spirits both astonished and frightened the "Sangpors." In order to satisfy and appease the gods and ward off bad luck or misfortune, they all agreed to celebrate the festival. As a result, they began celebrating the "Tsüngremong" festival. Six days were dedicated to

celebrating the celebration. It was carried out with a great deal of celebration, drinking, and merrymaking, all of which were aspects of the rich Aos culture. Since the entire tribe observed it, a specific date was chosen, and Tsungremong is observed annually from August 1st to August 6th. It is a day of reverence to appease God, especially Lichaba, who created the world so that crops and harvest would be abundant.

Studying oral traditions, such as folklore, can help us better understand the history of civilization within the context of contemporary society. They shed light on their culture, traditions, and rituals, whether they are myths or realities. Older adults mostly tell these stories. They are a rich source of a society's values and the customs that preserve the knowledge and culture of a tribal civilization. "The stories provide a more or less thorough explanation of specific facets or components of a community's culture. For one's culture and heritage to be retained and continue, it is crucial to maintain this oral legacy" (Kvideland 241).

Westernization, the introduction of Christianity, political unrest, and isolation have all significantly hampered the Aos' literary production throughout the years. Local authors have recently produced works about the cultural aspects of their tribe, such as Kongshir Ken, Aor-Sobaliba Takum, Akumlrir, and Aor Tarnunger Otsu in Ao. In order to access the previously unexplored folklore of the several Naga tribes, the Department of Art and Culture has also started a project. Their goal is to gather Naga folklore, literature, and culture, research it, and disseminate the findings through publication. The young, educated Aos are currently experiencing a cultural renaissance. Unfortunately, the Aos still lack a significant literary tradition. They have embraced the Roman script but lack their own script. Therefore, the Ao literature has a long way to go and is still in its infancy.

When the Aos mindlessly embrace Western society, they run the risk of abandoning their own set of cultural and religious beliefs. This affects their moral ethics and jeopardizes family norms if it is not rigorously analyzed. As a result, the abrupt shift from the old to the new ways of living has decreased the standard of living for the Aos, leading to a surge in immorality and the dissolution of social bonds that were formerly thought to be crucial. However, it should be noted that no philosophy of life can better address a people's inner search than the indigenous one. It is important to keep in mind that "the Aos have their own cultural values and their own view of life, which may not offer solutions for every culture and tribe" (Imchen 169). One must study their culture from the viewpoint of its native people in order to comprehend it.

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