

CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND CHANGE AMONG THE AO NAGAS

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the Ao Nagas shows that there has been a change in all sphere of life particularly, after the dawn of Christianity. Changes have occurred or have accomplished partly by means of force, as in the case of the change in political control with all of its implications and the activities of Christian missionaries towards their culture. Other changes have occurred as a result of suggestion and imitation, due to the influence of commerce, the British Government and modern education. In some instances the changes have been abrupt, while in others they have been gradual. In certain cases the consequences of change have been of a higher order, while in others there has been a distinct decline in quality.

Keywords: Christian missionaries, cultural change, impact, status of women

INTRODUCTION

The traditional culture of the Ao Nagas has totally changed today and most of their traditional practices are no longer found as before. When the Christian missionaries entered into Nagaland and started to spread the Christian religion, they made the people believe that almost all their cultural practices were sinful and were made to feel ashamed of their own culture. Today, most of the people think that their own cultural practices are no more relevant for Christianity. The Christian missionaries also spread education along with their religion simultaneously to the people and no doubt, education improved Naga livelihood and their economic system. So, with the rapid growth of education and Christianity there was a drastic shift in the whole cultural system. But this system brought both positive and negative impacts on Naga society.

As noted by I. Bendangangshi (2008; 236), "one cannot fault the missionaries, for it was through their tireless work in the service of the lord that the good gospel came to be accepted by the Nagas, and with it, the Nagas became civilized in the modern sense of the term. However, looking back, one can understand that their condemnation of the Naga culture had been indiscriminate, because along with the bad practices, there were also many good native

traditions". So, when we look at the history of their old traditions, Christianity is the key factor that has brought drastic change to their society and culture.

In 1872, when Rev, E, W. Clark (the first missionary among the Ao Nagas) made his first appearance in the hill of the Ao Naga head-hunters. He came from Sibsagar and arrived at Molungyimsen village to explore the possibilities of his staying there. According to Thong(1997; 126). (Ibid; 127), 'at the beginning there was some opposition from the local people to missionary activities but gradually, the missionary influenced some of the people and baptized them in the village. This was the first foundation of a church in the soil of the Naga Hills. The activities of the missionaries were not merely confined to conversion but they also introduced informal education which made it easier for them to influence the local people'. Today, Nagas have accepted Christianity as their way of life but they still continue to practice some of their old traditions. However, most of their traditional practices related to marriage, festivals, and ritual ceremonies have been totally changed. Today, the Nagas follow the procedure of Christian marriage system. They no longer follow their old tradition and customs in regards to marriage except few other practices such as engagements and distribution of meat according to their entitlement based on customs. Likewise, changes had been occurred in almost all the aspects among the Ao Nagas.

CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND CEREMONIES:

N. Talitemjen and A. Lanunungsang (2005; 331) points out that "another departure in Ao religion is the total abandonment of their belief system and acceptance of Christianity in large scale within a span of few decades. It is commonly accepted that Christianity is the key factor that has brought a sea of change to their society. This gave a serious blow to the ancient Ao culture, which led to the dawn of a totally transformed society and culture. As they accepted Christianity in large scale, they have cast off everything that was associated with their old religion (*limapur yimsu*) and as such Christianity and its belief system has become the Naga way of life and belief system". The younger generation did not know much about their old traditions. In fact there is no place to learn those traditions. So, their old tradition is slowly vanishing from their society. After the coming of Christianity, they no longer believe in *Lichaba* God who was considered to be the creator of earth and as a result, many of their traditional rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices which were connected with the traditional religion have disappeared. Moreover, their belief systems were regarded to be more costly and unproductive.

So, after the advent of Christianity and modern education introduced by the Christian missionaries the traditional religion of Ao Nagas began to disappear. Moreover -the early missionaries were against their traditional religious practices and often termed them sinful according to Christian teachings. As noted by A. Wati Lonchar (1995; 158) 'even in the realm of

religion and culture, the tribal religion and culture are look down on. Anything that does not conform to the western world view is devilish, irrational, inhuman, inferior, backward, primitive and so forth'. In fact, the Christian missionary took the advantage of the Nagas simplicity and eventually designated their religion as animistic and primitive.

The traditional ritual ceremonies like Lichaba mong etc were replaced by Christian way of worship. Earlier they used to worship by offering sacrifices like pigs, cocks and eggs. There was hardly any worship ceremony without sacrifices and almost every social activity was carried out only after a ceremony is performed. But today, instead of those sacrifices they offer prayer in the church. Here, we could see some traditional elements still existing even after the inception of Christianity because among the Christians there are special occasion like Thanksgiving Day, where the church members offer their domesticated animals, vegetables and fruits to the church. So, it can be said that the pattern of worship which they have been practicing since their forefathers is still continuing even in the present Naga society. In one sense, they have simply replaced or changed their perception of belief from traditional God and Goddesses to Jesus Christ as their personal savior. Today, the role of traditional priest has totally disappeared and the pastors or church leaders have emerged as the sole winner and play all the leading roles in all the religious activities.

CHANGES IN HABITS OF LIFE:

Much of their traditional practices have been done away with since the dawn of an alien culture. First, that of the Christian Europe, then with mainstream India. The trend of -change and its direction has become quite different. Today, many of them are moving forward and settling in the neighboring states due to various reasons. Another factor which brings change in their habits of life is due to the influence of mass media. After the introduction of television especially the cable channels, the tribal lifestyle has changed totally and the degree of influence by western culture is found to be very high among the youngsters. They are adopting western culture and their lifestyle change through such channels. In fact, they have jumped from one generation to another leaving a long gap in between. This has created an irregular growth of their society creating a cultural vacuum. Most of the children do not stay with their parents at home. They are sent to study either in the urban areas within the state in great numbers. At present their outlook appearance is totally changed, they no longer practice the traditional hairstyle, ear lopes, tattoos etc. In addition to the change which has come in the personal appearance among the people, there has come a great improvement in the matter of cleanliness.

Nagaland is basically governed by an agricultural economy. The main source of their livelihood is shifting cultivation. So, most of the people depend on the produce of their fields for their livelihood. The method of shifting cultivation involves immense labour and necessitates the

destruction of forest, and is entirely dependent on rainfall, it causes severe land erosion and therefore, the state government is making the utmost effort to establish permanent terraced fields with irrigation channels and popularize permanent cultivation and modern farming. Today the cultivation system has improved to a large extent with the adoption of new scientific methods of farming. Apart from these, the agriculture department has intensified various programmes like irrigation, land reclamation, plant protection, supply of improved quality seeds and fertilizers and training in order to give maximum benefit to farmers. These measures have resulted in a substantial increase in the production of food and also facilitated the improvement of their socio-economic condition to a great extent.

Earlier woman had to fetch water for home consumption from forest springs, often a long distance away from the village in bamboo vessels (*chi*) on their backs. Today almost all households have pipe water facilities. Another remarkable progress has been achieved in electrifying the villages. At present we cannot find any village without electricity. There were no motor-able roads for communication except rough roads and paths maintained by the villagers during the olden days. But today all the villages are connected with better road communication and transport facilities. This provides not only services to passengers but ensures transport facilities for carrying essential goods to various places. Due to rapid improvement in occupational structures and the increase in sources of income, the socio-economic conditions have improved tremendously. The food habits, standard of living conditions, dressing style of life and overall living pattern have changed significantly.

Though, they have many limitations, they are now more socially aware, economically better off and more politically active than ever before. Today, they have access to all the modern amenities and are enjoying a better life than before.

STATUS OF WOMEN:

In traditional society, the status of women was considered inferior to men, but the position of women in modern Naga society is comparatively high and they are honored for their role in the family. Prof. Haimendorf (1939; 101) writing about the Naga women said, “many women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of Naga hills and their high status and their free and happy life: and if you measures the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as ‘savages’.”

Being a patrilineal society, the father is the head in the family. Yet, women are treated equally in the society. She is the in charge of the entire household chores. So, majority of the domestic affairs are in her hands. In Naga society when a woman is in trouble or when is she being ill-

treated by her husband, her parents and brothers come to her rescue. Though a woman is not entitled to co-ownership of property with brothers and major shares of property goes to sons rather than daughters, she however enjoys considerable privilege and rights in the family as well as society.

NEW TRENDS ON WOMEN RESTRICTIONS:

Women were not allowed to become as a member in the village administration (*Putu Menden*) and they still continue to practice their restriction. The reason for this becomes apparent if we look at the history of traditional administration which was mostly concerned about war conflicts. In fact the village administration played the most important role during such times. Since the womenfolk did not have any role at the time of war with other villages, they did not have any place in the traditional village administration. But at present, women are not restricted and are given opportunities to participate in modern politics. In the past, women could not become the religious head of her family, clan or the village and was debarred from performing religious rites and sacrifices. She could only assist her husband during the sacrifices. Today women are more sincere and devoted in most of the religious fronts especially in the church activities.

As a matter of fact, with the rapid social change and time, their status has become much better than before. They are playing roles that are more significant in socio economic development and change as they are now equally qualified as men folk. They are no longer considered mere house wives and child bearers as in the past. The concept of a lifetime spent serving the husband and helping him just as a house wife has now changed to a great extent. They have a better understanding of not only their personality but about the larger society due to impact of modern education and Christianity.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be concluded that much change has occurred after the coming of Christianity and modern education. For centuries, the Nagas expressed their joys through songs and jubilation through dances till the foreign missionaries tried to stop these traditional customs which they had been practicing since their forefathers. Some old traditions have been damaged beyond repair. However, now the people of Ao Nagas have realized that there is nothing unchristian in these cultural activities which are in fact healthy and harmless.

Here it should be noted that traditional practice like drinking rice beer and immoral activities should not be taken into consideration. For instance, the Nagas did not give up wearing their traditional shawls and developed new and better designs which give a distinctive charm to their appearance. This kind of interest must be given importance and encouraged among the people to keep their traditional culture alive for the younger generations while accepting new trends that

are essential and applicable in the modern Naga culture and society. Sema (1986; 186) rightly states that, "lack of interest in one's originality is the greatest danger towards the extinction of one's social and religious life. The immense potential for creativity among the Nagas and their deep rooted aesthetical sense must be given new impetus for enriching their social and religious life".

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