

A Naganized Christianity from the Perspective of the Ao-Nagas¹

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ABSTRACT

The Ao-Nagas are one of the 17 major tribes of the Naga nation. Religion occupies a central place in the life of an Ao. In the traditional Ao understanding, religion was not and is not a moral code but a convention. With the coming of the first foreign missionaries to the Aos, 1872 marked the establishment of the Church in the Ao country. However, many foreign missionaries had a discriminatory attitude towards the Nagas. Every messenger of the Gospel has the tendency to convey it in terms of their own cultural worldview and sometimes biases. The foreign missionaries failed to look at the Naga culture without their imperialistic and culturally biased foreign lenses, thus, failing to understand and engage with the Naga culture. As a result, the introduction and spread of Christianity in the Naga country had both positive and negative effects.

Ao culture and religion, in terms of Christianity's spread, served as a preparatory foundation for the coming of the Gospel. The culturally biased approach of the foreign missionaries blinded them to that fact and stood contrary to the true spirit, heart, and essence of mission – love. The Church is called to live and work on the earth and not apart from it, thus, requiring her to engage with cultures in a way that brings transformation, not termination of cultures.

Keywords: Ao-Naga; Contextualization; Tsüngrem; Cultural Lenses; Worldviews; Religion; Colonial; Imperial; Christian Missions

INTRODUCTION

It has been 152 years since the coming of Christianity to the Ao-Nagas, then subsequently to the rest of the Naga people.¹ Today, about ninety percent of the population of the northeastern Indian state of Nagaland are Christians, out of which about eighty percent are Baptists, thus, being dubbed “the only predominantly Baptist ethnic state in the world.”² The impact of Christianity on the Nagas is great and can be traced to the American Baptist Mission. However, it must be noted that the term “impact” does not necessarily mean a positive one; there is also the negative aspect of it. Christianity did bring the different head-hunting Naga tribes together under the banner of the church, but at the cost of much destruction of ancient tradition, customs, and moral values.

Thus, through this paper I will attempt to present a brief discussion on the interaction between Christianity and the Ao-Naga religious and cultural life. For this, the background of the Aos and their ancient religious and cultural belief system will be presented as it will lay the setting for the foundation of the Gospel. This will be followed by an evaluation of the coming of Christianity and its impact on the Ao-Naga life. Finally, I will argue for employing a contextual approach to mission through the example of the Ao-Naga Christianity that may perhaps be able to serve as a model or example for Christian Mission in its interaction with different cultures.

The Ao-Nagas

The Ao-Nagas, or simply Aos, are one of the 17 major tribes of the Naga nation who occupy a territory called Mokokchung, which is one of the seven districts of Nagaland. They are comprised of two phratries – *Mongsen* and *Chungli*. The Ao territory comprises of long unbroken ranges of mountains and hills, and this perhaps accounts for the fact that the entirety of the territory is divided into six administrative ranges. Villages are grouped into units according to their proximity to the various ranges and, thus, named as the:

- i. Langpangkong Range
- ii. Asetkong Range
- iii. Ongpangkong Range
- iv. Changkikong Range
- v. Japukong Range
- vi. Tsürangkong Range

There are no satisfactory answers regarding the etymology of the word “Ao”,³ but according to local tradition, and as was also noted by J. P. Mills, the word “Ao” comes from the verb “*Aor*” or “*Aoer*”, which means “to go” in reference to the group who crossed the Dikhu

¹ Researchers have been drawn to the nomenclature of the term “Naga,” which has frequently led to misunderstandings. Since each tribe and, in certain cases, village was a sovereign and independent state, the name “Naga” is most likely an exonym. See Panger Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2021), 25-29; N. Talitemjen Jamir and A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture: A Case Study of the Ao Naga Society and Culture* (Lumami: Nagaland University, 2005), 12-13.

² C. Gordon Olson, *What in the World is God Doing: The Essentials of Global Mission: An Introductory Guide*, 5th ed. (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publishers, 2003), 258.

³ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 33.

river. This separates the Ao tribe from the four eastern tribes – the Sangtam, Chang, Phom, and Konyak – who did not cross the Dikhu.⁴ Thus, “*Aoer*” stands in contrast to the term “*Mirir*” (*Marur?*), which means “not coming”.

According to the Ao-Naga tradition, the Aos trace their ancestral origin to Long Trok (Six Stones) located at Chungliyimti. From these six stones burst out (*poktet*) 3 males and 3 females, who were the younger sisters of the male stones.⁵ Each of the male married one of the others’ sisters which eventually led to the emergence of the three main clans – (Tongpok – Pongen clan; Longpok – Longkumer clan; and Longjakrep – Jamir clan) and subsequently to the people known as the Aos or Aoer/Aoertem.

Social Life

With the subsequent increase in population, the Aos started migrating to different places where they made their settlements and formed individual villages located in the aforementioned six ranges. Ao villages would generally be established on the hilltops, serving as a strategic location by offering a clear view of the territories below, particularly in defense of the village from hostile villages and tribes.

Each Ao village is governed by a ruling body called the *Putu Menden* (lit. Generation Seat). It has a two-tier structure comprised of the *Tongti* (chief representatives of the different clans) and *Jameja* or *Khuenba* (lit. “load carrier”). The *Mongsen* phratry practice the *Tatar Menden* which is headed and presided over by the *Ungr* (titular head), who is a senior member normally of the Tongpok (Pongen) clan.⁶ For the Aos, and also the other Naga tribes, a village was a sovereign state, capable of internal administration and external diplomatic relations and welfare, with a pure form of democracy. There were and are no kingdoms nor concepts of it, but each village is an independent state within its jurisdiction like the ancient Greek city states.⁷ The sovereignty of the Ao villages, and also that of other Naga villages, is observed by both natives and foreigners:

- i. Verrier Elwin: “Each village amongst the Aos is a small republic, and each man is as good as his neighbor, indeed it would be hard to find anywhere else more thoroughly democratic communities. Headman, *tatar*, do exist but their authority is very small.”⁸
- ii. J. H. Hutton sums up the European perception of the Nagas: “The least that can be said of the Naga is that in general he has mental outlooks and mental processes far more consistent with those of the European than has the ordinary native of India, whose thought has for generations been stunted by the cumbrous wrappings of the caste and Hinduism.”⁹

⁴ J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1926), 1.

⁵ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 33; L. Sosang Jamir, *Ao Naga Customary Laws and Practices* (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2012), 1; Sentiakum Yaden, *The Ao-Naga Illuminati: Divergence from the Tides of Restraining Cultural Elements* (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2021), 18.

⁶ *Tongpok* is believed to be the eldest from among the three male stones of *Long Trok*.

⁷ Jamir and Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 37-50; Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*,

⁸ Verrier Elwin, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 324.

⁹ J. H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas: With some notes on the Neighbouring Tribes* (London: MacMillan, 1921), 38.

- iii. John Butler's observation about the Naga village which Elwin noted: "Every man follows the dictates of his own will, a form of the purest democracy which it is very difficult indeed to conceive as existing for even a day; and yet that it does exist here is an undeniable fact."¹⁰
- iv. Joseph Puthenpurakal notes on how Nagas enjoy democratic freedom under the village state system and their respect for the village council: "First of all a Naga by nature is one who is ever eager to know things. It is for this, that he discusses a problem first at home, then at the level of his clan, then in the meeting of the representatives of his entire tribe. At each level anyone present has full freedom to express his views and to ask questions...It is here, that one notices a wonderful blend between freedom of discussion and service of authority."¹¹
- v. Andrew Gray on the political independence of the Nagas note the sense of freedom and democracy they enjoy: "Coupled with democracy of the Nagas there was the factor of independence of villages. These "village states" were linked to Greek city states, an image which British used at the time to conjure up as the height of civilization. In this way the Naga people were regarded as having a cultural nobility which was, perhaps, one of the reasons the British excluded them from the hierarchical influence of the plains."¹²
- vi. A missiologist and ethnographer, Panger Imchen, posits that the ancient Ao village republic was even more ideal and superior to both modern democracy and the known Greek city states as, unlike the Greeks, the labour force was not exploited and it was not the ruling class who had power and authority, but the common citizens; that "class systems were and are unknown in the Naga *putu menden* structure. Each clan, minor or major in number, has equal status except for some exceptional cases such as latecomers or non-confirmed citizens of the village under some circumstances."¹³
- vii. Naga politician, Dalle Namu, writes: "Democracy is a way of life for Nagas...If the Greeks had City states, in Nagaland every village is a small Republic. Before the British occupied a part of our territory, every village enjoyed sovereign authority to declare war or to make peace...Every village has an unwritten constitution made up of customs and usages based on age-old traditions. If Athenians had the popular Assembly known as Ecclesia, the Nagas have the popular Assembly of chosen "Village Elders" in the village legislative, executive and judiciary...This sounds unbelievable but

¹⁰ Elwin, *The Nagas*, 525-26.

¹¹ Joseph Puthenpurakal, *Baptist Missions in Nagaland* (Shillong: Vendrame Missiological Institute, 1984), 5-6.

¹² Andrew Gray, "The British in Nagaland – the anthropology and their legacy," in *The Nagaland Nation and its Struggle Against Genocide: A Report compiled by I.W.G.I.A.*, Document 56 (Copenhagen: I.W.G.I.A., 1986), 46.

¹³ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 129, 131.

it works magnificently in Naga society. Just how firm is the Naga village polity?”¹⁴

On the social life of the Aos, Imchen also sheds light unto the status of women in the Ao society:

“Women have a high place in society, much higher than that in Vedic texts of Hinduism, the Old Testament of ancient Jews, Koranic law, early Greeks and so-called tribals both ancient and modern... The purdah system was not known. Women participated in all social and religious ceremonies... except in certain religious offerings which are restricted to priests only.”¹⁵

Arju/Arichu and Tsüki/Züki: The Learning Institution

If an external observer appreciates the ancient Ao traditional way of life, then the credit for this goes to the *Arju/Arichu* system. Adolescent males were required to spend their evenings in the *Arju* until they were adults. The *Arju* served as a dormitory but at the same time it was more than that. It was the initial stage of teaching the youth about the customs and rules of the Ao community.¹⁶ Similarly, adolescent girls had an *Arju* equivalent known as *Züki*. They learn to accept one’s responsibilities and duties towards this “whole,” which is the Ao society.¹⁷ There would be around five to seven different age groups known as *Yhanga* in Mongsen or *Zünga* in Chungli in the *Arju* under the collective authority of the elders and a *tir* (chief of the organization).¹⁸

Ao-Naga Religion and Belief System

Religion occupies a central place in the life of an Ao and their whole being comes under the purview of religion. In the traditional Ao understanding, religion was not and is not a moral code but a convention.¹⁹ Imchen correctly puts, “An Ao cannot conceive of a world apart from religion.”²⁰ Thus, the religious beliefs of an Ao dictate his/her emotional, spiritual, and social life. It would be a blunder on the part of anyone looking into the Ao religious life if they take up one aspect of religious behavior and identify religion with that single aspect.

That said, the centrality of religion in the lives of the Aos is further seen through the fact that their social, cultural, and political organizational set-up is depicted in their idea of God. The religious beliefs and concepts of the Aos are expressed in a way “that influence the individual and communicate one’s attitude towards the world of nature and one’s fellow beings.”²¹ The

¹⁴ Dalle Namu, *The Prisoner from Nagaland* (Tuli: Labon Press, 1987), 17-18.

¹⁵ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 165-66.

¹⁶ Jamir and Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 75.

¹⁷ Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2017), 31.

¹⁸ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 143; Jamir and Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 83-91.

¹⁹ Jamir, *Ao Naga*, 79.

²⁰ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 47.

²¹ Imchen, 48.

foundational tenet of the Aos' traditional religion is the existence of supernatural forces in the cosmos – *Tsüngrems*, spirits, *tanela* (soul), etc. In the Ao pantheon, no spirit or *Tsüngrem* is singled out as evil.²²

The Tsüngrems of the Ao-Naga Religion

In the Ao vocabulary, “*Tsüngrem*” is used in a non-discriminatory way to denote G/god/s. The word “*Tsüngrem*” is an amalgamation of two words, “*Tetsüng/Tsüng*” which means “foot/feet” and “*Arem/Mokrem*” which means “to bury or hide (one’s face by bowing)”. Thus, *Tsüngrem* is the being at whose feet a person bows in reverence. The question of whether there is only one God or several gods is debated even among local researchers. For example, Lijaba, the Creator of the Earth, is a *Tsüngrem*, and so is Meyutsüngba, Lord of the Land of the Dead. An Ao can name several other gods, but would ultimately say, as noted by Imchen, that “there is only one God invisible from whose eyes no one can hide...Before *Tsüngrem*, an Ao stands in fear and reverence and yet, turns to him for protection, security, well-being and blessing.”²³ For the Aos, *Tsüngrem*, is a personal being who is actively working in the nature of the universe. The following are the descriptions of three of the primary *Tsüngrems* of the Aos, which are only seen as different titles of the one God:

i. Lijaba – the Creator of the Earth

Lijaba is believed to be the creator of the earth and everything upon it. He is said to dwell under the earth, thus, the name Lijaba – “*Li*” from “*ali*” (earth/ground) and “*ja*” or “*za*” (to go in); “*ba*” indicates the masculine – and is responsible for everything that happens in relation to the earth and vegetation (from good harvests to natural calamities related to the ground, like earthquakes).²⁴

According to Ao mythology, Lijaba would also occasionally incarnate himself as a man, usually a beggar, ask for assistance from mortals, and he would reward those who voluntarily assisted him. One of the Ao tales speak of two orphaned sisters who were the only ones who gave him food and a place to stay the night. He cursed the fields of the other villagers who turned him away and blessed the paddy field of the two sisters.²⁵

ii. Longtitsüngba – Lord of Heaven

Longtitsüng or Longtitsüngba is also called Aningstüngba (“*Aning*” which means “sky” or “heaven”, and “*Tsüngba*” which means “Chief” or “Lord”). He controls all the heavenly elements (Sun, Moon, stars, seasons, air, rain, etc.)

²² Ao, *The Ao-Naga*, 54.

²³ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 49.

²⁴ Imchen,, 49-50; Ao, *The Ao-Naga*, 54.

²⁵ Yaden, *The Ao-Naga Illuminati*, 23-24.

and all natural forces connected to the solar system. Accordingly, he is also called *Lata-Zuni Tsüngrem* (Moon-Sun God).²⁶

iii. Meyutsüngba – Lord over the Dead

It is said that Meyutsüngba is the Lord of the Land of the Dead. He also goes by the names of Motsüng and Mozing. He is considered as the god of justice and truth. He is also the last arbiter of life and death, and his gate separates the world of the living from the world of the dead. He judges each person based on their earthly deeds. He demands humility, honesty, high morals and ethical standards, and a life that is just and pure. As a result, traditional Ao society places a strong emphasis on the virtues of honesty and truthfulness as well as a high standard of ethical and moral behaviour. Meyutsüngba is claimed to only be able to distinguish between right and wrong; he is said to not know forgiveness and incapable of it. He is the god of righteousness and therefore no form of worship is given to him since there is no room for pleading with him for mercy through sacrifice.²⁷

Coming of Christianity to the Ao-Nagas: A Brief Overview

The year 1872 marked the coming of Christianity to the Aos then subsequently to the rest of the Nagas. But it was not a human strategy that brought the gospel of Christ to them. The missionaries who worked in Burma, Bengal, and Assam were unaware that there was a Naga country in northeastern India. The American Baptist Mission, which initially aimed to go to mainland China via Burma, was tired of waiting for a chance to go. They, thus, moved their mission center to Sadiya and later to Sibsagar, both in the state of Assam. They did not see a prosperous harvest in the plains of Assam among the Assamese who were deeply rooted in Hinduism and the tribes of the plains. One of the main reasons for the easy penetration of the Gospel to the Aos was because there was no influence from any of the other (Indian) religious traditions, philosophies, and other ethnic groups.²⁸

Prior to the coming of the gospel, tribal warfare and inter-village feuds were common among the Nagas. Without success, the former British government attempted to subjugate the Nagas and force them into the British Empire. Instead, due to the large number of Empire's soldiers falling victim to the Naga warriors, the British were sceptical about their chances of defeating the Nagas. The Nagas, on the other hand, were similarly subjected to intense pressure from the British's military power and were unsure whether to uphold their sovereignty or yield to the aggression of the white man. But they did believe that in the event that the British force ever overran them, they would lose their freedom.

²⁶ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 51; Ao, *The Ao-Naga*, 55.

²⁷ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 53-54; Ao, *The Ao-Naga*, 55.

²⁸ Imchen, 217, 221.

It was in such a context that Dr. Edward Winter Clark and his wife, Mary Mead, came as the first foreign missionaries to the Aos. They left Boston in October 1868 and reached Sibsagar in March 1869 initially as missionaries to the Assamese. Clark encountered the Nagas when they came down from the mountains to the plains of Assam to barter. Subsequently, he was attracted by the Naga's frankness, openness, and hospitality. Despite their uncompromising attitudes for headhunting, he was able to befriend some.

At this point, another person needs to be mentioned, Godhula Brown, an Assamese evangelist who worked with Clark in the printing press at Sibsagar. Godhula had a close bond in faith with Supongmeren, an Ao from Dekhahaimong village, modern-day Molungkimong (old Molung). From December 1870 to October 1871, Supongmeren lived with Godhula and his wife, Lucy. During this time, Godhula learned a great deal about the life of the Naga people and also began to learn the Ao language, after which he was inspired to travel to the hills.

At first, Clark cautioned him not to venture outside the tea gardens. Nevertheless, Godhula went to Dekhahaimong at his own risk. He was detained for several days upon his arrival since it was believed that he was an agent of the East India Company, which the Naga people detested. His imprisonment would turn out to become his "Philippian jail" moment. The villagers were amazed when Godhula kept singing hymns and preaching to them in Assamese and broken Ao. The people became interested in this and approached further. In the end, he gained their trust, and they then showed him their love and gave him protection.²⁹ He returned to Sibsagar after three weeks to the amazement of the missionaries and the British officials.³⁰

Godhula made several more trips to Dekhahaimong up till April 1872, which led to nine villagers being brought down to Sibsagar to be baptized on November 1872.³¹ Clark visited Dekhahaimong on December 18, 1872, accompanied by Godhula and another Sibsagar church member. On December 23, 1872, fifteen additional villagers were baptized. From that time onwards, Clark made more visits to Dekhahaimong. On the matter of Clark's travel to the Ao country, Mead observed that it was unimaginable for even a British official to spend the night in the dangerous Ao nation since their lives would be in danger the moment they arrived. This was pointed out to Clark himself. He was only allowed to enter the country of the Nagas after realizing that he might actually lose his head.³² Suspicion that an East India Company agent had been hosted in Dekhahaimong grew across the Ao country in the weeks that followed Clark's visit. As a result, the village was warned and threatened by the other neighbouring villages, saying, "You will find sooner or later that this great rajah preacher is a disguised agent of the company. Has he not the same white face?"³³

Owing to these warnings and more threats from those who would not put up with the Christians, Clark led the new converts from Dekhahaimong to a different location on October 24, 1876, where they established a new Christian village known as Molungyimsen (new Molung village). Rev. and Mrs. Perrine (1892) and Rev. and Mrs. Haggard (1893) helped with the

²⁹ Mary Mead Clark, *A Corner in India* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 11-12

³⁰ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 218.

³¹ P. T. Philip, *The Growth of Baptist Churches in Nagaland* (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1983), 53.

³² Clark, *A Corner*, 16.

³³ Clark, 17.

missionary work at the new site. However, after concluding that Molungyimsen would not be suitable for evangelizing the Aos and others, they found a new, permanent location in Impur, which is roughly 65 kilometers away from Molungyimsen. As a result, in October 1894, Impur was founded as the mission center, from which missionary work is still carried out today.³⁴

That said, it must also be noted that many of the western missionaries went to the Naga country with imperial, colonial (perhaps subtle), and discriminatory attitude towards the Nagas. Consider these words from Mead on the Nagas:

“To my husband and friends in this and other lands whose prayers and love and interest have been our constant inspiration these many years; and to the young men and women who are needed to further plant the banner of the cross among savage tribes.”

“Mine album is the savage breast, where darkness broods and tempests rest without one ray of light; To write the name of Jesus there, and point to worlds all bright and fair, And see the savage bow in prayer, is my supreme delight.”

“It is sent forth with the earnest prayer that the young men and women who may chance to read it will not only be entertained, but moved to action on behalf of the savage tribes whose habits, customs, and possibilities are here depicted from personal observation through many years.”³⁵

Mead’s book, *A Corner in India* from which the above statements have been extracted, was published in 1907. This means that, even after three decades of mission work and interaction with the (Ao) Nagas, she was still guided by the West’s imperialistic and colonialist notion of what a civilized society is. Thus, any culture that does not live up to that same notion is seen as uncivilized and its inhabitants as savages. Employing the term “savage/s” reflects the outlook of the western missionaries that made them see the Nagas as wild, untamed, and forest-bred. As seeing head-hunters living in the villages up in the mountain forests would have been a stark contrast to the westerners’ view of a society. They failed to see the honor-shame culture deeply enshrined in the Naga practices, beliefs, and customs. C. Gordon Olson also views the old Naga way of life in a derogatory way and calls them “formerly savage Nagas of northeast India and Burma.”³⁶ Only after the acceptance of Christianity and doing away with all things “cultural” were the Nagas termed as “formerly savage”. Such derogatory attitude was seen more so in later foreign missionaries whose decisions and actions led to the destruction of the Ao culture, as will be highlighted in the next section.

Impact of Christianity on Ao-Naga Culture

Historians have observed and agree that when a new philosophy of life is introduced to a foreign culture and it is to work in that culture then both positive and negative changes have to take place. The introduction and spread of Christianity among the Aos also saw both positive as

³⁴ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 219.

³⁵ Clark, *A Corner*, dedicatory page and preface.

³⁶ Olson, *What in the World is God Doing*, 186.

well as destructive effects on their old cultural heredity; it witnessed acceptance, submission, rejection, division, and change in the lives of the people.

On the positive aspect, Christianity has been an agent of change and progress in the Ao society.

- i. Put an end to head-hunting: At both inter and intra tribal levels, Nagas practiced head-hunting. The westerners saw it as savagery but it was an honorable practice for a warrior. Its importance as a point of honor in the ancient Ao society is similar to *hara-kiri* or *seppuku* in the ancient Japanese society. Albeit seen as honorable, it still led to killing. Christianity's teaching against murder, though head-hunting was not murder, brought it to a halt.
- ii. Progress in education: The missionaries set up schools with the help of the British government. Christianity and education go hand-in-hand, and this combination would turn out to be the strongest agent of change and progress for the Nagas. F. S. Downs correctly notes, "This new order ushered in a period of tremendous change. The main agent of change was the government itself. Christianity provided the means whereby the people of the region (at least some of them) were able to accommodate themselves to the new world brought in by the British."³⁷
- iii. Medical care: With the coming of the British, and later the American Baptist Mission, also came their advanced medical knowledge. However, it can also be argued that formerly unknown diseases were also brought in, which is true for any cases involving outsiders entering into a once isolated region. No matter which side one leans towards, the fact remains that healing is one of the major ministries of the Church, which encompasses both the spiritual and the physical. The Impur Christian Hospital (ICH) is a testament to this aspect which has been nurturing the healing ministry ever since it was set up under the supervision of Dr. J. R. Bailey, an American Medical Missionary, in 1912.³⁸

On the negative aspect, Christianity, or more specifically, the imperial and colonial mindset and approach held and adopted by the foreign missionaries led to certain losses. Here, Imchen correctly observes that "the new faith which penetrated the old produced what is often termed as missiological issues."³⁹ These issues can be grouped together under one point:

- i. Destruction of the Ao culture: Everyone is conditioned by their cultures and so they hear the Gospel through their culturally conditioned ears. Thereby, the proclaimed Gospel is what they have heard through their culturally conditioned ears. Clark's decisions and actions, were mostly, if not all, conditioned by a western or American understanding of what

³⁷ F. S. Downs, *Christianity in North-East India* (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1983), 196.

³⁸ Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang, "Impur Christian Hospital," accessed on 20 May, 2024, <https://abamimpur.org/Institutions/ICH>

³⁹ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 226.

Christian action and life should look like. However, this gave rise to the aforementioned missiological issues. Note the following section on the setting up of Molungyimsen from Clark's report to his Home Board in March 1877:

“Their village government is a government much higher even from the civilized nations. To build another village separate from the others for the sake of the Gospel creates division...should not disturb their village government system...had I known it before I would never have built a new (Molungyimsen) village.”⁴⁰

In another letter, Clark further mentioned his regret for separating the Christians from the non-Christians: “To build a new village with the believers separate from non-believers will not be fair to the Gospel. What I have done may be a mistake...”⁴¹

On the destruction of the Ao culture, there are two opinions so far. One group maintains that the missionaries are not totally to be blamed for the issues resulting from the interaction of two cultures, while the other maintains that the missionaries plundered and destroyed the Ao culture. I posit that it is a combination of both, as the earlier missionaries did try to act contextually to a certain extent, however, the later missionaries were observed, as noted by Imchen, to have “prohibited all cultural songs, dances, stories, folklore, and festivals on the grounds of immoral behavior such as excessive drinking and waste of wealth and energy...that most of them were connected with old religious practices.”⁴²

The foreign missionaries believed without exception that all ancient cultures were bad. This resulted from their incapacity and, to some part ignorance, to investigate the meaning and value system underlying the Ao cultural conduct because of their cultural biases. M. Alemchiba Ao comments: “They felt every ceremony should be abolished...The tendency was to abolish abruptly the old things and substitute individualism for the strong community feeling...The result was a conflict not necessarily a conflict of arms but of culture...”⁴³ Due to such actions by the foreign missionaries, an attitude of total rejection of all Ao culture began to spread. The influence of the tendency to think that anything that was western was good permeated beyond cultural practices. This is also seen in the distortion of the Ao language which happened as a result of placing the English language on a higher pedestal.⁴⁴

Accepting and embracing the western way of life led to a degradation of moral living. Before the coming of the foreign powers, Nagas, due to their traditional village administration, and high ethical and moral standards, could take pride in being a unique nation without police, jails, brothels, dancing halls, bars, gambling grottos, beggars, and even cases of murder and

⁴⁰ Molungkimong Baptist Church, “Centennial of Two Churches,” (Molungkimong: Molungkimong Baptist Church, 1982), 15.

⁴¹ L. Kijung Ao, *Nokinketer Mongchen: Abode of Warriors* (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1972), 48.

⁴² Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 227, 230.

⁴³ M. Alemchiba Ao, “Problems of Readjustment to a New Situation with Special Reference to Naga Tribes,” *Hilander* 4/1 and 2 (March-April, 1976), 3, quoted in Panger Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2021), 229.

⁴⁴ Jamir and Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 332-333; Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 236.

theft were extremely rare. However, Nagas today acknowledge their shame and concede that their claim is no longer valid with the cultural change that has taken place, as “this old system of village government has been changed”, notes Renthly Keitzar.⁴⁵

Finally, the negative impact of Christianity with regards to the ancient Ao religion is especially seen in the distortion of the original meanings of the supernatural beings. An instance of this is seen in the case of Meyutsüngba. As noted earlier, he is also known as Meyutsüng/Motsüng/Mojing/Mozing. Today, after the acceptance of Christianity, the Ao term for the devil is Motsüng/Mojing. Thus, we see a deterioration of the original meaning of Meyutsüng from meaning the god of righteousness to the devil; from being seen as the epitome of neutrality in his dispensation of judgement to now being associated with evil.

***Missio Dei* Contextualized: A Necessity**

To a certain degree, if not significantly, every messenger of the gospel conveys it in terms of their own cultural worldview, concept, norms, and traditions. Additionally, the recipients will undoubtedly interpret the Gospel in light of their pre-Gospel cultural upbringing. When missionaries and missiologists try to share the gospel in a cross-cultural environment, this is their biggest issue. It is here that Imchen correctly notes the danger of presenting the Gospel while wearing one’s cultural mask. It is more dangerous if missionaries are unwilling to give up their own cultural perspective, especially when they travel to a people and area where the culture is entirely different from their own. The risk here is that they may introduce the populace to aspects of their own culture rather than the core of the message of Christ.⁴⁶

This has been the case when the Gospel was brought from the West to the Aos. D. A. Thangasamy notes Parani Andi’s comment that “Christianity, though of Eastern origin, has come to us dressed in a Western garb; I mean, both in thought and practice, in its social, moral and political aspects. Unless Christianity is adapted to suit the tastes of Eastern nations, it will continue to make little or no progress.”⁴⁷ Thus, to contextualize means to look at something in its own context – simply put, wear the local lens. In the case of the Aos, many foreign missionaries failed to do so. Instead, whatever form and degree of contextualization has happened, all came from within. Elwin notes:

“In some ways, however, the last few years have witnessed a revival of Naga culture. Even the Christian Nagas are showing a new interest in their own traditional dances; they want to build up their own literature in their own language, to record their epics and stories... They are in fact beginning to feel that there is less conflict between yesterday and tomorrow than they had once feared. Their innate essence of beauty (sic) their good taste, their own self-reliance will probably maintain... but with new motives and a new direction.”⁴⁸

Below is a list of some aspects of the ancient Ao religion and culture that shows how the internal contextualization of Christianity was built upon and done:

⁴⁵ Renthly Keitzar, “Church and Ao Culture,” (paper presented at the ABAM Seminar, Impur, 1983), 17.

⁴⁶ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga*, 232.

⁴⁷ D. A. Thangasamy, “Theological Pioneering in India,” *Religion and Society*, 17/1 (March 1970): 76.

⁴⁸ Namu, *The Prisoner*, 16.

- i. It was easy for the Aos to understand and later accept the Christian understanding of God – a God who is the creator, ruler, and judge. The path and foundation for the Christian God’s coming was already set in the minds and life of the Aos.
- ii. There was no difference between the religious and secular for the Aos. One of the key essences of Christianity is it being a call to a way of life, not just a religious belief system. Thus, it was easy for the Aos to understand what lies at the heart of the Christian faith.
- iii. Same as the Christian theological thought that humans are to be stewards of the earth in reference to the Genesis account, the Aos maintain that care of the earth is the responsibility of human beings. It does not belong to any human, but to God himself, specifically, Lijaba in the case of the Aos.
- iv. The ancient Ao religion was actually monotheistic. The different names of the gods presented earlier are titles of the same one God. Thus, the aforementioned conclusion of all Aos to say there is only one God.
- v. The concepts of life after death, and heaven and hell are significant for the ancient Ao religion and they have corresponding meanings with Christianity.
- vi. The ancient Ao concept of sin, though not exactly like that of Christianity, helped the Aos see that no longer was their suffering due to a deity who demanded sacrifices. But it was due to sin (separation from God), whereby everyone needed a savior for everyone was a sinner.
- vii. The incarnate Christ and his salvific act correspond to the incarnation of Lijaba and his act of blessing the people and the land.
- viii. The structure of the *Putu Menden* (village administration) serves as the administrative structure of the Ao Baptist churches. The *Putu Menden* has the *Tongti* and *Jameja* or *Khuenba*. Similarly, the church has the Deacon Board and the *Mapangsür* (stewards). The *Unger* in the village republic is adopted in the church structure as *Mission Kibur* (lit. Mission Head).

Thus, we see that the ancient Ao culture served as a preparatory foundation for the coming of the Gospel of Christ. Through all these, I maintain that Christian mission is only human mission if pursued without contextualization. It is no longer the *Missio Dei* because one fails to present the Gospel; instead presenting what the gospel bearer’s culture believe is the Gospel. However, there is also the danger of over-contextualization, which should be avoided at all costs. This is perhaps the opposite extreme of not sacrificing one’s culturally conditioned outlook – contextualizing too much that the Gospel becomes too distorted and no longer bears any resemblance of what it should be, that is syncretism.

Finally, contextualization in missions would mean nothing if the missionaries do not have a heart for missions. This heart for missions can perhaps be best defined by the words “love” and “friendship”. Reflecting on these two words, one will find that the Aos have a unique understanding of friendship. Fundamentally, there are two Ao words that can be translated as “friend”. They are “*medemer*” and “*temba/tembar*”. However, they do not hold the same degree of meaning in terms of friendship bonds. Simply put, we can understand “*medemer*” as a formal use for everyone who are one’s friends and can also imply “an acquaintance”. In comparison,

“*temba*” is casual yet only used between two people who have had a long-shared history of friendship and bonding, even to the degree of understanding it as “blood brothers”. Thus, a *temba* goes beyond the modern-day understanding of best friends or the pop-word “besties”; rather, a *temba* is one with whom one is able to completely trust and place one’s life upon the other. We can understand this further by returning to the mention of *hara-kiri* or *seppuku* made earlier. Through historical records, we know that a “helper” in the role of the “*kaishakunin*” (usually the closest friend) was present to chop the head of the one who commits *seppuku* as a show of mercy by giving a quick and honorable death – an act of showing respect and honoring the dead warrior.⁴⁹ The bond of trust between *tembas* can be viewed similarly as to the bond between a samurai who commits *seppuku* and his *kaishakunin*.

In the discussion of the importance of friendship to the Aos and to Christian mission, the words of the Rt. Rev. V. S. Azariah, the first Bishop of the diocese of Dornakal and the first Indian bishop in the churches of the Anglican Communion, from his speech at the World Missionary Conference (WMC) of 1910 at Edinburgh clearly highlights the need for missionaries to go into the fields with a genuine heart and intention to build bonds of friendship, and not of master and servant:

“I do not plead for returning calls, handshakes, chairs, dinners, and teas, as such. I do, on the other hand, plead for all of them and more if they can be expressions of a friendly feeling, if these or anything else can be the outward proofs of a real willingness on the part of the foreign missionary to show that he is in the midst of the people, to be to them, not a lord and a master, but a brother and a friend.”⁵⁰

On a very similar note, the need for missionaries to engage with the locals and look at the situation in the mission fields from the perspective of the context itself was aptly brought out by Chang Ching-Yi, a 28-year old delegate at the same 1910 WMC from the London Missionary Society, China, who said, “but, friends, do not forget to view us from our standpoint, and if you fail to do that the Chinese people will always remain as a mysterious people to you.”⁵¹

Reflecting on these, and on the stage of the current-day, the spirit of the recent Lausanne 4 (Lausanne Seoul Conference 2024) is to be commended. A part of the framework of Lausanne 4 had its basis on the insights drawn from the Lausanne Generations Conversation 2023 (LGC23) which took place in Biola University, California, namely the Intergenerational Leadership Pyramid. From the many “building blocks” that formed the pyramid, one that stood out was the call for friendship. It was a call for a bond that goes beyond traditional partnership models – beyond generations, cultures, genders, and missional interests. Quoting from Micaela Braithwaite’s “Bridging Differences: A Guide to Cultivating Diverse Communities: Navigating the Complexity of Diversity: Drawing Insights from LGC23” we can now clearly understand

⁴⁹ “*Seppuku*,” accessed 1 Dec, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/seppuku#ref1226173>

⁵⁰ World Missionary Conference, *The History and Records of the Conference Together with Addresses Delivered at the Evening Meetings* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; and New York, Chicago, and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 311.

⁵¹ World Missionary Conference, *Report of Commission VIII* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; and New York, Chicago, and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 196.

the importance of genuine friendship in mission as “...reached people groups become unreached if they are not reached generationally,”⁵² and might I add “culturally” as well.

However, I start to question: Though always a good and welcomed aspect, why are missionary conferences still now discussing friendships on a basic level? Was a century not enough for Christian mission to have understood the importance of building bonds of friendship when and after people like Azariah and Ching-Yi highlighted it? Thus, along with the positive aspect, there is a possible negative aspect. That all such talk within Christian mission remains as only talk. Considering the case of the Ao-Nagas and Christianity’s engagement with their culture, and the fact that Christian mission is still talking about creating friendships, we see that the need for the resolutions of all the past missionary conferences calling for a re-evaluation of doing Christian mission, or more specifically, looking to develop genuine friendships is real and greater now than ever before and must be made manifest across the world.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen the main aspects of the Ao religion and culture. In so doing, references have also been made on how foreign missionaries were blinded by their own cultural lenses and biases, and failed to engage, understand, and consequently degraded the ancient Ao culture and people, which led to distorting the heritage of the ancient Aos. Such an approach to mission goes against the true spirit, heart, and essence of mission – love.

To truly see a healthy growth of Christianity, one must first acknowledge that the Church is called to live and work on the earth and not apart from it. This does not, in any way, mean that the Church succumbs to the “ways of the world”. Instead, it needs to engage with cultures in a way that it brings about transformation (*metanoia*), and not termination of cultures. This can only be achieved when diverse cultures are viewed as different expressions of life as demanded in different contexts and the Church appreciates them. Today, just as the Nagas have been “Christianized”, Christianity needs to be “Naganized” too. Any imperialistic and colonialist mindset – one that views one’s own cultural perspectives to be superior or the “correct way” – are hindrances to the propagation of the Gospel. Thus, we have seen that contextualization is key, while yet being cautious of the existing danger of syncretism. Further, the aspects of the ancient Ao culture and religion have served as a sort of preparatory foundation for the coming of the Gospel. This only reiterates the significance of properly contextualizing.

Finally, I quote Bishop Azariah again to reiterate the importance of missionaries to genuinely engage with the people and the context as friends: “Through all the ages to come the Indian church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for *love*. GIVE US FRIENDS!”⁵³

⁵² See Micaela Braithwaite, “Bridging Differences: A Guide to Cultivating Diverse Communities: Navigating the Complexity of Diversity: Drawing Insights from LGC23,” accessed 1 Dec, 2024, <https://lausanne.org/about/blog/bridging-differences-a-guide-to-cultivating-diverse-communities>

⁵³ World Missionary Conference, *The History and Records of the Conference*, 315.

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