

## **Cultural History of Beliefs and Rituals: A Study of Ao-Naga Tribe of Nagaland, India**

**Dr. Vulli Dhanaraju**

Assistant Professor, Department of History  
Assam University (Central University), Diphu Campus  
Diphu, Karbi Anglong, Assam-782462, INDIA  
E-mail: vullidhanaraju@gmail.com

&

**Ms. Nukshirenla**

Research Scholar, Department of History  
Assam University (Central University), Diphu Campus  
Diphu, Karbi Anglong, Assam-782462, INDIA  
E-mail: nukshirenla@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*Every tribe has its own sense of historical identity. It is notable character of tribes which reflects in oral traditions. Tradition can be described as the culturally sustained, repeated pattern of behaviour or beliefs that are passed down from one generation to another. Like any other tribals in India, the Ao-Naga tribe has their own rich cultural heritage preserved in the form of oral traditions. Ao-Naga is one of the major tribes in the state of Nagaland in northeast India. This paper tries to examine to shows how the ritual practices play an important role in sustaining cultural history of the Ao-Nagas. The rituals are significant component of Ao-Naga culture and history. These rituals are associated with festivals which are link to their day to day life and are mostly performing for the welfare of the society from birth to death that include rich harvest, for good health or general prospective and welfare, illness and epidemic or to eternalize behaviors, actions and occasions.*

**Keywords:** Tradition, Rituals, Religion, Culture

### **1. Introduction**

Every society has beliefs, faith and practices. The rites and rituals vary from culture to culture, however these rituals are interconnected with supernatural powers. In the epistemology religion is defined as any set of attitudes, beliefs and practices pertaining to supernatural powers, whether that to be forces, gods, spirits, ghosts or demons. Rites, rituals, prayers, sacrifices and offerings hold true in the religious life of the most of the tribal communities. There are series of activities involved in ritual gestures like words, and objects, performed in appropriate place, and performed according to set order. Rituals may be prescribed by the traditions of a community, including a religious community. The main characteristic features of rituals' are formalism,

traditionalism, invariance, rule governance, sacral symbolism and performance<sup>1</sup>. Rituals of various kinds are a feature of almost all known human societies, past or present. They include not only the various worship rites and sacraments of organized religions and cults, but also the rites of passage of certain societies, atonement and purification rites, oaths of allegiance, dedication ceremonial coronations and presidential inaugurations, marriages and funerals, school rush tradition and graduation, club meetings, sports events, Halloween parties, veterans parades, Christmas shopping and more. Many activities are apparently performed for concrete purposes.

## 2. Sources and Methodology

The main objective of this work is to construct the Ao-Naga history through the study of ritual practices and religious beliefs. The qualitative research methods and tools are used for collection of the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources of the study are mainly gathered from oral narratives in Mokokchung district of Nagaland during February-March, 2016. Oral narratives are collected exclusively from six persons who were having knowledge on ritual practices and belief system of Ao-Nagas. The secondary source material also collected in form of published or unpublished written material, books, articles, and documented by folklorists available in the form of published anthologies. But both the sources are merged in the process of constructing this paper.

## 3. Who are Ao-Nagas?

Ao-Naga is one of the major tribes in the state of Nagaland in northeast India. The Ao-Nagas call themselves *Aoer* or 'those who came' crossing over the Dikhu river. With definite dialectical differences, the four main sub-groups of the Aos, such as *Chungli*, *Mongsen Changki* and *Sangpur* had enjoyed distinct identities. Among these four, Mongsen was considered most important as all the traditional songs, poetry were in *mongsen* dialect in the past, while *chungli* was used for conversation and communication. According to the oral tradition, the ancestors of the Aos have emerged from six stones located in the *Sangtem* Naga village at *Chungliyimti*. The Ao territory is divided into six continuous parallel hill ranges, such as *Langpangkong*, *Asetkong*, *Changkikong*, *Japukong*, *Ongpangkong* and *Tsurangkong*.

## 4. Belief System

Like any other tribal societies, the Ao-Naga also practices intense beliefs. The traditional faith, religious belief and ritual practices of the Ao-Nagas show definite sign of being animistic in nature<sup>2</sup>. They may also be called as polytheists, worship several benevolent and malevolent spirits and gods, at different times and occasions for different purposes. Their belief in the existence of gods forms the core of their religion and is a guiding principle of their conduct in life. Traditional Ao-Nagas believe in the existence of supernatural powers in the universe. They perform animal sacrifices by offering cock, pig, cow etc, to pacify their Pantheon<sup>3</sup>. The Ao-Nagas believe in the existence of supreme being, the creator of everything and is regarded as the fountain of all blessings for human beings and that he provides them protection and prosperity.

It is difficult to trace the evolution of faith in God, but it is interesting to explore how our forefathers had developed the concept of God. They might have developed a feeling of the presence of an effective power in their surrounding; at the same time a sense of fear and security for which they submitted themselves to that unseen power. Thus they had developed rituals to bring themselves close to god, to propitiate the omnipresent, the mysteries of the universe beyond the grasp of their control. That is the first experimental science of mankind with his surroundings. It was proved to be working to appease the unseen power and thus the beginning of the rites and rituals.

## 5. Religious Beliefs

Religion is enduring expressed in everyday life which reflects in the socio-cultural history of the Ao-Nagas. The role of religion in an individual's life is the example of the role of religion in the socio cultural system of a people. Panger Imchen (1995) in his book argued of the interrelation of religion and socio-cultural life of the people among the Ao-Nagas. According to him, "An Ao cannot conceive of a world apart from religion. The whole universe is sacred and filled with gods....Religion possesses ideas and values that are the guiding principles of one's behaviour..."<sup>4</sup>

Religious beliefs and concepts are articulated in the form of symbols and rituals that influence the individual, and communicate one's attitude towards the world of nature, and one's fellow beings<sup>5</sup>. It also can be understood that ceremonies and rituals which are the expression of belief and ideas can be better understood after considering the belief systems of a people<sup>6</sup>. The Ao-Naga religious beliefs and practices are systematic and well-established. The Ao-Naga worship, respect and fear their gods and ask for protection, blessings, security and well-being<sup>7</sup>. They believe that the gods and spirit may create troubles and sufferings to their family and community due to the dishonor. So, the Ao-Nagas observed rituals and offer sacrifices to pacify spirits and deities from causing danger to them. In J.P. Mills's monograph *The Ao-Nagas*, he speaks about the Ao-Naga's religion that "The religion of the Ao is not a moral code. It is a system of ceremonies...will not prosper if he omits the sacrifices.....to the deities around him who ....are ever ready to blight his crops and bring illness upon him..."<sup>8</sup>

According to Resenmenla Longchar (2015), "the domain of religion is highly pervasive as it represents not only the cultural beliefs and practices including moral codes, rituals and spiritual ideologies but also mythology that speaks about the creation, nature and purpose of the universe and the role of a god, gods or other superhuman agencies therein. Further, the origination of the user communities of the particular religious ideologies is linked with their respective pantheon."<sup>9</sup> This means the devotees are being linked with gods through ritual

observances and practices prescribed in the belief system. Consequently, the religion establishes an identity with its people.

The traditional Ao-Naga religion is full of ceremonies, rituals and sacrifices. There are public ceremonies and household or individual ceremonies observed throughout the year<sup>10</sup>. Every Among (ceremony) is preceded by genna,<sup>11</sup> called *Anempong* that refers to severe restriction.<sup>12</sup> It can be seen that “*Anempong* are the days of purification before and after the *Among* (ceremony). The period of *Anempong* may vary from one to six days or even more in case of severity of the nature. Failure to observe or misconduct of such *Anempong* leads to tragedy or misfortune. That is why no ritual is performed without strict observance of *Anempong* to avoid misfortune”. Indeed the ancient Ao-Naga religion is symbolized by a number of regular and irregular or emergency ceremonies and sacrifices, which kept them conscious of being religious.

## 6. Major Ritual Ceremonies and Cultural History

The following are some of the important types of the ceremonies practices by Ao-Nagas. They are:

**6.1 *Sungkhu Meshi***<sup>13</sup> (cleansing of new jhum land): This is a community ritual of dedicating a new area of land for cultivation. A particular day is set, and all the villagers go to their respective plots to cultivate them. They clear a small portion of the jungle on which they build a field house, and light a fire. As soon as the fire is lit, the head of the family offers rice beer from his cup as an offering to the spirit of that particular land or site.<sup>14</sup> Taking the cup of wine, the head of the family addresses the gods saying, “Take this, you drink first.” Pouring the rice beer, he continues to say, “Oh Lord, god from today onwards we shall continue to come here, so I pray you save us from all hardship, sickness as we work here on this land, and bless us by providing an abundant harvest for our labour”. After saying these words, he consumes the remaining wine.<sup>15</sup>

**6.2. *Sungkho Lepden***<sup>16</sup>(The first cutting of jungle): The next day after *sungko meshi*, when children and others observe *anempong*, the village priest, assisted by his wife, goes to the spot and offer egg or chicken, cleaning the old fireplace which he or his forefathers had used for this same purpose long ago. This is also called *loza*, the first day of cutting the new field. Minor children are not allowed to participate in this ceremony. The next, day other household members join the work for the new cultivation.

**6. 3. *Talen walok***<sup>17</sup>(Field path cleaning ceremony): the footpaths are cleaned first before the operation of shifting cultivation. When the village elders decide a certain area for new cultivation and before the villagers starts to walk the new path, the priest offer sacrifice to *Lichaba* for safe

journey to and fro. This is observed again after burning the slash before they take the first step on the same path. The main purpose of this ceremony is to gain protection from jabbing the feet on stones, from evil eyes and injury. They feel that this is possible only when the footpath is thoroughly cleaned and purified.

**6.4. *Alurong Mong***<sup>18</sup>(cleansing of burnt field): It is a ritual of burning the fields for cultivation. After burning the fields, and usually on the following day, all the villagers observed a day of prayer and worship. No sacrifice of an animal was made on the first day, but on the second day sacrifices of pigs, fowls, hens etc., were offered in front of the field house. The main objectives of this *Alurong mong* ceremony was that while the field was being burned many creatures such as reptiles, birds, insects and other wild animals were burnt alive unintentionally. People feared that natural calamities such as hailstorms, pestilence and drought might occur if they did not restore a relationship with the burnt victims. This ritual was observed as a special day of prayer invoking the spirits to mediate with the deceased creatures and intervene before any calamities could occur.

**6.5. *Merok mesa***<sup>19</sup>(burnt cleansing): It is a long day ceremony that refers to cleansing of the jungle that might have burnt while burning the jhum field outside of the demarcation of fire line. This ceremony is observed following the day after burning the jhum field. The priest and representative of each clan go to the village altar and offer a pig on behalf of the whole community. It was believed that grass would overgrow the seeds resulting in a poor harvest, if any wildlife were burnt alive while burning the jungle. On such occasion, a dog is normally preferred for sacrifice. In order to avert the likelihood of any unwanted occurrence, this ceremony becomes inevitable. This is still practiced today. The Ao-Naga does not kill wild animals during the cleaning of jungle to avoid misfortunes.

**6.6. *Tenden mong*** (first seed sowing ceremony): This is one of the most interesting and important ceremonies of the Ao-Nagas. When the field is thoroughly cleaned and ready for sowing the seeds, it is observed by the chief priest, while the villagers observe a holiday with *Anempong*. The priest goes to the village gate with a handful of paddy seed saying “this year too, *Lichaba*,<sup>20</sup> let the new seeds grow healthy and after you eat the remnants”. The priest utters with a cock in his hand and at the end of each syllable, the cock’s feathers are pulled out. The priest returns to the village after fencing the spot with *shimekatsu* (bamboo splits). The next day every household with pigs, chicken or eggs according to their wealth, go with their children to the new field and perform their household sacrifices with the family priest. This is followed by a feast, which makes the seed-sowing season with a fresh mood. Mass seed sowing takes place after this ceremony.

**6.7. *Metsu walok*** (seeds offering): When the seeds take root and grow, another ceremony is observed. The village priests brings a few newly grown plants from the field and transplants

them near the village gate while the whole villagers observe another genna for one day. A feast with pork, egg and chicken was follows after transplanting the plants . The *putir* (priest), clans representative of the village eat meat. If the plants grow well, it was considered as good omen.

**6.8. *Moatsu*** (Festival of blessing): This is the main festive of the Ao-Nagas which is celebrated in the spring season. It invokes blessings upon new grains in the field and also protection of new crops from all sorts of pest throughout the season<sup>21</sup>. It is normally observed just after the completion of sowing the seeds in the new field. It falls in the first week of May every year. Before the celebration of *Moatsu*, seeds of all kinds are sown in the field. Then, the farmers wait for healthy germination and growth of all seeds sown that may result plentiful harvest. For that purpose, it depends on the mercy of *Lichaba*, the creator of earth who holds the blessings of the soil and the fruits that may bear plentifully. For this reason, the festival of asking blessing is essentially required.

*Moatsu* festival is normally observed in the open field or street. It is characterized by dance with colourful traditional dresses, singing, drinking, dug of war and other activities where both men and women including children participate<sup>22</sup>. That is why this is known as the most common and popular festival of the Ao-Nagas. The dancers with their best ceremonial dresses go round and round in the open street, singing songs of joy and blessings. This ceremony is observed for six days and on the fourth day, the priest shall ask for blessing and prosperity and for pardon of possible sins committed during *Moatsu*. This festival is a real occasion of joy and pleasure. It is normally a festival of young boys and girls where they interact with each other through various activities, participating in all sorts of group actions exhibiting their best talents. Among the ceremonies, this is the only occasion in which there are no more taboos, gennas, and ethical restriction. In spite of the high degree of inter-mingling of boys, girls and unmarried adults, it is not an occasion for free sex. This festival facilitates towards selection of partners according to one's own will. As the summer sets in and the villagers finish sowing the seeds, this festival is celebrated with the gay hope of growing the seeds with the highest degree of freshness of mind and season.

**6.8.1 Course of *Moatsu*:** The *Ariju men* decide the date, usually the first week of May. It is also called *troknu mong*, which means a six-day festival. The first three days are preparatory period with strict *anempong* genna from sex, travel, guest and hard work during which all the necessary arrangements are made. During this period, a new fire is made and use for preparation of food, collect firewood, water, and so on. The next three days are the real festival. Every household makes new wine, kills pigs or hen, sticky rice, ginger pickles, various soups, visits friends, and neighbour's house to share happiness and blessings of *Moatsu*. The *Ariju* members visit the rich men's house, singing the songs of glory, and fame for the rice and the rulers. In return, wine and

pork are served to them. This is call *kimakba*,<sup>23</sup> visiting the houses singing songs in form of procession and carol.

On the fourth day, each *Ariju* kills a pig especially reared for the occasion. The meat is distributed to every household, call *pangnem* a meat of mouthful. This is roasted on the top of the *meshi* (fire-posts), made of three stones raised on which cooking pot is placed, and distributed to the children. The pig's head is given to the *Ariju Tir*, the military marshal and the four legs to the *Ariju Jozen*, the real administrators in the *Ariju* system.

The next two days, all the people put on their distinctive *supotsu* (dress), and line up for procession in the open street dancing, singing and demonstrating all sorts of festivity. The *Elangtsur* (womenfolk of the same clan) and young girls compose songs of glory *naklo* or *sangro* poems and sing to their men and boyfriends of social status and heroes. The warriors, rulers, rich men, and man of socio-political status put their metals and symbols printed on their shawls and ornaments. Ordinary men and women wear only *supo* and *surem* (a kind of plain cloth). They do not put valuable ornaments and costly materials, as they are yet to become the warriors. If done so, they are ridiculously stripped and fined according to customs because the unqualified persons cannot wear any sort of traditional shawl as they like unless they are deserved to wear according to their achievements.

During *Moatsu*, boys and girls exchange gifts with their best likings and open negotiations take place for future partnership. Those who do not go to war and abstain from joining in their regular activities are given the titles as *laphi tesu* (girlish). They do not attract attention from the opposite peer groups and are looked down. Those men of high profile are praised with nickname *narokhum* as *sangpang*, *tenem*, *walunir*, *akho tepong*, son of the land, hornbill, hero and male tiger etc. young men give bamboo made smoking pipe, weaver's button, baskets, etc to their girl's friend and young girls give *dao* slings specially woven in red with thongs, *angen*, *sujak* or *langtem*, loincloth for men etc. those men of *laphi* are allowed to wear only plain cloth, *supo* or *surem*. On such occasion, the *Arijumen* visits the rich men's house and sing the songs of glory and honour. They enjoy meat, wine, and *mapokchi* (sticky rice) too. In the past, carefree sex was often inevitable during such period, but such immorality committed during such occasion was not liable to punishment as per customs. Such practice is similar with that of the Assamese *Bihu* celebration during which there is no restriction of interaction between boys and girls.

The six days is the *tentini*, the climax. The youngest age groups of the *Ariju* organization collect *shizungzu* sword bean rope, a day ahead of the *Moatsu* festival. On the last day a dug of war is conducted between men and women, where men take the stem and women the branches.

On the seventh day the villagers observe genna, while the high priest sacrifice a pig at the village altar as a sign of cleansing of the whole village including their fields and public path leading to the field<sup>24</sup>. They resume their normal works the following day. In the past, the observance of this ceremony varied from village to village. Now it is being observed uniformly throughout the Ao-Naga region on first, second and third of May every year.

**6.9. *Lichaba kulem mong*** (worship ceremony of *Lichaba*): The Aos believe that *Lichaba* is the creator of the earth<sup>25</sup> and that the whole earth is under his control. He is supposed to be the sender of earthquakes and other natural calamities such as the landslides, storms and hailstorms that may be destructive not only for natural vegetation but also human lives. It was believed that when *Lichaba* bents down, the earthquake occurs and the pests attack the crops. For such reason, the Ao-Nagas worship *Lichaba* with great honour. The priests observe it three weeks after *Tsungrem mong*. No matter whether the *Tsungrem mong* was perfectly carried out or not, the priest observes this ceremony with a sense of great honour and sanctification so that no crop is destroyed by landslides, storms and hailstorms.

**6.10. *Yim kulemshi mong***<sup>26</sup>(Village rededication): This ceremony is observed every three years. While the whole village observes one-day genna, the village high *putir* (priest) makes the offerings. He leads the whole village including women and children, round the village fire, singing and chanting to the village deity. The biggest cow is required for offering, which is followed by a feast. The purpose of this ceremony is to pray to the *yim tsungrem* (village deity), for protection, blessing, prosperity and victory in war.

**6.11. *Tekong kulem, lung kulem***<sup>27</sup>(Mountain, range and stone worship): Some mountains or large rocks are believed to be the dwelling places of sacred powers. Therefore, each year, a sacrifice is offered to the god of the mountains and rocks for protection and blessings. The Aos were in fact, good worshippers of stones that protected them from many eventualities in the past.

**6.12. *Tongshizung kulem*** (Worship of the main post): It means, to worship the spirit of god of a particular site of the house site *kimong*. This form of worship requires intense seclusion and sanctification *anempong* on the part of the head of the family. For the sacrifice, a fowl without blemish, a sow and also an egg are offered. A few grains of rice are also wrapped in wild leaves *amji*, steamed in a bamboo vessel and placed as offerings. Meat use for such sacrifice is called clean meat *meshimeyak*. This is, but an ordinary piece of meat, which had been preserved especially for such occasion in advance. When the items are ready for worship, first, two *amji* leaves are placed overlapping each other at the base of the main post upon which the smaller strips of the same variety of leaves are laid at four places for the rice and meat to be served on. Rice is placed on two of the four laces in alternate order so that meat is also placed after each rice item. On the leaves, between the two rice items will be served six pieces of meat mixed with

ginger, and five pieces of meat, mixed with ginger positioned on the side. However, one more piece of meat is placed later on the last leaf. This is meant to cover any spirit who might have been missed while serving or to include unexpected guests.

The pig is killed in the entrance chamber. While the meat is being cut and cooked, a cock is also sacrificed outside just in front of the house. In the process, the cock is held by its wings and is beaten at its back and feathers are plucked accompanied by verbal invocation for health, longevity, and wealth. Then, its neck is slit with a sharps bamboo sliver and the blood is sprinkled on all the posts of the house. After the ritual is completed and the food is ready, all the relatives are called to *partake* the feast.

**6.13. *Wara merokdok mong*** <sup>28</sup>(cleansing of epidemic): This is a ceremony of cleansing the village from epidemics such as cholera, dysentery and small box. The oldest person of the village performs this sacrifice at the village gate. After cleansing the village, the entire village observes a day's *anempong*. The purpose of this ceremony is to avert sickness and diseases throughout the year.

**6.13.1 Course of *Wara merokdok mong*:** '*Wara*' means epidemics and general illness and *merok* means to burn off every epidemic disease. This ceremony is observed normally at the beginning of the year or any time when epidemics are likely to spread and claim lives. On this day, the whole village observes one-day *anempong/amho-genna* and the household priest performs the family worship. No one is expected to loiter in the street. While all the household stays inside the house bathing and cleaning the house, the oldest man of the village walks from one end to the other end of the village gate carrying a basket with slings on his head and a long bamboo stick shouting, *O-hai!. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-, tanu merok anogo-ani, oh! Ha-ha-* (today is the burning day of epidemics). As he passes through each house the household members shout in unison yelling with *dao* beating the walls, ceiling, posts, floors, and roofs '*a ha-ha-ha-haha, menen merok, wara merok rongdokjang ni-eeee, ha-ha...*' (Let epidemics and illness be burned today).

As the oldest person stands outside, each house priest brings old pieces of cloth, broken baskets, mats, *khangjenkhangra, milongsang* (half burnt firewood). He collects them and takes to the village altar outside the village gate and burns them off. A *shinu*, a black monkey with white stripe on the forehead, considered medicinal species is then cut into two pieces from head to tail and crucified at both the gates as a sacrifice. A black dog is also used for this purpose. The households collect the dust and waste and burn them outside their houses at sunset.

**6.14. *Kitsuk yha*** (House offering): In olden times, the Ao-Naga built their homes so closely together in order to save from enemies. When fire broke out, it resulted in the total destruction of

the village. When this occurred, it was believed that the *kitsuk long* in anger caused such a calamity. In order to avert such tragedies, the whole village observed a daylong ceremony when the high priest performs a sacrifice on behalf of the community to the *kitsuk long*. This was done by collecting the *milongsang* (half-burnt firewood) from every household and burning it off outside the village gate, followed by offering of a cock to the *kitsuk long* deity so that such devastating might be warded off.

**6.15. *Awha*:** This is a ceremony observed for cleansing the village from journey-borne diseases, sickness, and calamities. In winter, the villagers go for other business and marketing to Assam and other distant places. At their return within a given period, this ceremony is observed. The priest collects from each household the half-burnt piece of firewood in a long bamboo mate basket and burns them outside the village gate while villagers observed genna. No sacrifice is offered on this occasion.

**6.16. *Chiten mong*** (Eat-first ceremony): When the time comes for harvest, the priest who has performed the *tenden mong* collects the first fruits and offers them to *Lichaba* as a sign of thanksgiving. In the process, the priest would first taste any of the food items like rice, cucumber, maize, etc. He picks up certain items from the field and eats them saying, ah! This is bitter.<sup>29</sup> The Aos believe that by saying this, the wild animals do not eat such fruits thinking them to be bitter. Therefore, the main harvest takes place before which the first fruit is tested by the priest. It is also observed for two purposes namely; thanksgiving to *Lichaba* and petition to him for protection of paddy grains from pesticides.

**6.17. *Tsungrem mong*** (Thanks giving festival): This is a kind of pre-harvest ceremony. Therefore, before the observance of this festival, cleaning of the entire field should be completed and the things required during the process of harvest are kept ready. It is the highest and the last public ceremony, which is observed for three days. That is why it is also known as *asemnu mong*, a festival of three days. A day of worship and sacrifice is offered to *Lichaba*, the creator of the earth, for plentiful crops and harvest. A strict Sabbath is observed such as restrictions from all manual work, even stamping on the ground, spitting on the ground and walking beyond a certain limited boundary. Speaking loudly and shouting are also restricted. Only new wine and fresh food is prepared on a newly made fire offered to *Lichaba*. The next day the priest offers *Lichaba*, the biggest pig available in the village altar, so that he may bless and protect his worshippers from calamity, enemies and misfortune throughout the coming year. This is called *asemni amho*. This is the last celebration of the year by the whole villagers including children. *Lichaba*, the lord of earth being the greatest god, and responsible for the crops, rain, seasons, plants and all creature upon the earth, needs the greatest attention from men. This festival is the greatest and holiest one. The consequences of any lapse or careless observance of this ceremony

resulted in drought, landslides, hailstorms, calamities, illness and tragedies that destroy crops in the fields. This I observed in the first week of August, *tsukmapang*, just before the harvest.<sup>30</sup>

**6.17.1 Course of *Tsungrem mong*:** A week ahead, every household removes all dust and dirt from the fireplace and a few fires is made with new fire woods to make new wine to be used during offerings to *Lichaba*. Before the ceremony, all the basic requirements such as water, food and fire woods are collected. On the first day, every household refrains from work but the household priest goes to the jungle and collect firewood for the purpose and also brings *Tsungpet wo*.<sup>31</sup> It is kept on the main door of the post outside the house. This begins the holy Sabbath of *Tsungrem mong*. From this day, no one does any work including slaves. No guest and visitors are entertained, and everyone stays under strict genna. No household observes feasting during this period. As stated above, spitting on the ground, speaking loud, stamping on the ground, walking beyond the village gate and fetching water from the well is allowed, but anyone who goes to the well is not suppose to carry his load on his head but on his shoulders. On the second day, dancing, *kimak* (tug of war), visiting rich men's house is followed like *Moatsu* festival but with strict genna.

Each *mepu* (sector) contributes a pig and kills it at the courtyard of the eldest person of the sector, and distributes the meat of every household call *pangnem*, a mouthful piece of meat. The sacrificial meat is not cooked as usual but roasted in the newly made fire and distributed to the children. When there is no child it is given to the wife and relatives.

The third day, is the *tendini* (climax), almost every household performs family sacrifice by killing pigs, hens, etc which is normally killed by the father, the head of the family assisted by some kins. Widows can perform by themselves. No one is allowed to go out but observe strict genna. Meantime, the village priest kills the biggest pig especially kept for the purpose selected by *arasentsur* divine and offers at the village altar *phumen*. Along with the pig, a cock is offered and the omen is predicted from its intestine. The stomach portion is cooked in the spot, the priest takes the meat, and the remaining portion is divided among them according to customs. Any mischief in dividing and sharing the meat, results in immediate punishment from *Lichaba*. It is a taboo for children and women to take the meat as well as come to the altar even on normal days. When the priest returns from the spot, every household opens the door and throws pieces of earthen pots uttering the words:

*“Hang polang temang janlaxukogo  
ne nem ajak agutsur. Na dang Chiang  
aser onok moajang”*

Translation in English:

“Take to the breaking of the bottom  
of the pot all are given to you. All  
You take, and bless us”

After that, every household shuts the door before dark and goes for meal and silently stays in. as the sun sets, *Lichaba* is believed to appear at the village gate and appreciate the offerings, then walks through each door. During this time, if any of the houses is found without the *tsungpet wo* at the door, disaster would come to that household. Any irregularity or wrong doing during this ceremony was severely punished by *Lichaba*. The nature of punishment was sudden illness, natural calamity, drought, and deaths in the village. In fear of any lapse or dissatisfying *Lichaba* during this ceremony, the priest performs a supplementary offering after a week calls *Lichabaza*.

Thus, the festival of *Tsungrem mong* is characterized by strict genna, worship, offerings, meat eating, sharing of new wine and blessings. It is also followed by traditional games such as dug of war, leg pulling with bamboo stand, songs dance and many other activities where everybody participate as *Tsungrem mong* is a public ceremony. Display of new dress is also demonstrated in this occasion.

**6.18. *Tzubu/ayong kulem*** (well and river worship ceremony): the Ao-Naga believed in a water deity called, *Alachetla*<sup>32</sup> who devoured human beings when proper sacrifices were not offered. When the rivers overflowed and destroyed crops, it was believed that she was angry; or when the monsoon failed, it was assumed that *Alachetla* had not been fed well. For this, they observe a day's ceremony to offer sacrifices to this female deity and also a one-day ceremony to clean and offer sacrifices to the common village well.

**6.19. *Sasong dang*** (Village protection ceremony): At the beginning of the year, the leader, (the *Ariju Tir*) offers sacrifices with eggs, cow and pig as preferred by the situation at the village gate in order to protect the village from enemies. As this was the most dreaded in old times, the Ao-Naga observed this day with excitement and strict *anempong*. In the process, as the offering is made, the *Tir*<sup>33</sup> says,

“*Hoi! Yim tsungremi kum piyong  
iba yimtsung nukangma. Arrir  
iba sungkum anasa shiba arudir  
tenuk pokdakjang*”

Translation in English:

“Hoi! You the village god, guard

this village the whole year. If enemies come to near this gate let them go blind”.

**6.20. *Sungkong kulem*** (Log drum ceremony): *Sungkong* is a cultural heritage for which the Aos are popularly known. Every khel sector maintain at least one such drum. Every three years this ceremony is observed with strict *anemping*. In the past, it was performed with fresh human heads, cock and sometimes eggs too. The whole village observes a day holy, while the priest performs the ritual.

**6.21. *Jameja mong*** (Food deity): It is observed invoking deity for bountiful crops and prosperity of the village. On that day, a cow or a pig is killed. The *Tir* takes half of the share and the rest is distributed among the Tatars. No visitors are allowed to enter into the village on such occasion and no one is allowed to go out of their village hoping that the bountiful harvest and other blessings are taken away. This period is called the month of *Jameja* that refers to restoration of prosperity in their village.

Among all these ceremonies, *Moatsu*, *Tsungrenmong* and *Sungkong kulem* are most important that involves all the villagers, whereas in other ceremonies only the priest plays the main role.

## Summary and Conclusion

The rituals are significant component of Ao-Naga culture and identity. In Ao-Naga society rituals are associated with to their day to day life. Ritual and festival which are mostly perform are mainly for the welfare of the society from birth to death that include rich harvest, for good health or general prospective and welfare, illness and epidemic or to eternalize behaviours, actions and occasions, this festival and ritual have remain the test of time as an occasion of joy and entertainment held the community together and strengthen the identity. This ritual and festival symbolized how the Ao-Naga uphold and negotiate with time to represent them diverse from past to present. Ao-Naga society is blended with folk-lore, folks-song and folk-tales. Therefore, most of the traditional ceremonies and festivals are performed collectively by community which plays an important role in cultural history of the Ao-Nagas.

It is also important to see in Ao-Naga society that the traditional faith, religious beliefs and practices of the Naga tribes shows definite sign of being animistic. There is a vaguely imagined supreme creator and arbiter of mankind, and many minor deities, ghosts, and spirit of trees, rivers and hills. There are priests and medicine-men that placate these spirits, banish those who give disease, attract those who help and guard and also take the lead in the rite and festivals which stimulate the process of agriculture.

The traditional festivals, symbols and meanings of the nature continue to have an important place in the present Ao-Naga community. The importance and awareness of such festivals seems to be increasing as the people realized the uniqueness and importance of their culture. This can be seen from the fact that they are asked to wear their traditional dress and perform traditional dance and song in almost every occasions and functions. The very aspects of Ao-Naga attire that were discouraged by the Christian missionaries in the early phase of evangelization now held centre stage in almost all public celebrations. The present Ao-Naga society needs to be preserving cultural history of community through the institutionalization of rituals.

## Notes and References

---

<sup>1</sup> “Ritual”, accessed 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritual>

<sup>2</sup> “Nagaland Tourism”, accessed 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2019,  
<https://www.dovetours.com/indiatoursbs.php?name=nagaland-tourism>

<sup>3</sup> Accessed 31<sup>st</sup> August,2019, Cited in  
[https://baadalsg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105679/11/11\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://baadalsg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105679/11/11_chapter%201.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Panger Imchen, *Ancient Ao-Naga Religion and Culture* (New Delhi: Har Anand, 1995) 31.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> J.P.Mill, *The Ao-Nagas* ( London: Macmillan, 1926) 215.

<sup>9</sup> Longchar Resenmenla, “Understanding the Relation between Religion and Environment of the Ao-Nagas through Ritual Process” (Unpublished Article, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Accessed 31<sup>st</sup> August,2019, Cited in  
[https://baadalsg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105679/11/11\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://baadalsg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105679/11/11_chapter%201.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Genna- refraining from work in the field.

<sup>12</sup> Panger Imchen, *Religion and Culture*, 51.

- 
- <sup>13</sup> Bendangangshi, *The Religion of the Ao-Naga* (Mokokchung: Published by the Author, 1991), 41.
- <sup>14</sup> The Ao-Nagas believed that the spirits are found all over. For example, the spirits of Earth, river, forest, fields, hills etc and in and around dwelling places.
- <sup>15</sup> Mar Imsong, *God-Land-People: An ethnic Naga Identity* (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2011), 180.
- <sup>16</sup> N. Talitemjen and A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture: A Case Study of the Ao-Naga Society and Culture* (Mokokchung: Nagaland University, 2005) 126.
- <sup>17</sup> Bendangangshi, *The Religion of the Ao-Naga*, 126.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, 126.
- <sup>19</sup> N. Talitemjen and A. Lanunungsang, *A Case Study of the Ao-Naga Society and Culture*, 127.
- <sup>20</sup> The Ao-Naga believes that *Lichaba* god is the creator of the earth and all living things.
- <sup>21</sup> Accessed 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2019, Cited in [https://baadalsg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105679/11/11\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://baadalsg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105679/11/11_chapter%201.pdf)
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> In Ao-Naga language *kimakba* means invading or capturing the house.
- <sup>24</sup> Accessed 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2019, Cited in [https://baadalsg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105679/11/11\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://baadalsg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105679/11/11_chapter%201.pdf)
- <sup>25</sup> Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral tradition and Culture* (Dimapur: Heritage, , 2012), 52.
- <sup>26</sup> N. Talitemjen and A. Lanunungsang, *The Religion of the Ao-Naga*, 135.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, 136-137.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, 138.
- <sup>30</sup> Panger Imchen, *Religion and Culture*, 55.
- <sup>31</sup> *Tsungpet wo* is a scented plant use for sacrifice.
- <sup>32</sup> The Ao-Naga regarded *Alachetla* as the guardian of the well and water sources.
- <sup>33</sup> In Ao-Naga language *Tir* means leader.