

# STATUS OF THE AO NAGA WOMEN IN THE TRADITIONAL PAST SOCIETY: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to examine the traditional past society of the Aos vis-à-vis the status of Ao women. As the traditional past society of the Aos was a patriarchal society, the position of women was somewhat subordinate to her male counterparts. The bone of contention is the denial of space for women in the traditional decision making bodies like “Putu Menden” (Council of Elders) and “Senso Mongdang” (Citizens’ Forum). Ever since Chungliyimti civilization- the anvil of the Aos’ civilization, where all socio-political evolution had taken place- women were not part of the political discourse; it was an exclusive body for matured menfolk. The Ao society still remains a bastion of male chauvinism as they believe that women are incapable of handling administrative tasks. Despite, it is observed that the Ao women enjoy considerable status in the society; she is respected and taken care of well by male counterparts.

**Index Terms:** Civilization, Culture, Custom, Inheritance, Dormitory, Paradigm, Patriarchy, Pharty, Tradition.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Aos are one of the major tribes of Nagaland. The present district of Mokokchung is the home of the Aos. This district is surrounded by Wokha and Zunheboto in the south-west, Tuensang in the East and Mon and some parts of Assam in the Northeast. According to the 2001 census, there is about 120,193 Aos living in the present habitat of Mokokchung district. However, there are more Aos scattered in various districts of Nagaland and even outside Nagaland due to their various vocations and businesses.

The Aos themselves had divided their country in to six ranges- each range comprising 15 to 20 villages. These ranges run in roughly parallel and are named as follows: *Asetkong*, *Changkikong*, *Langpangkong*, *Japukong*, *Ongpangkong* and *Tsürangkong*. The Aos speaks two major dialects- *Mongsen* and *Chungli*. *Mongsen* dialect is poetic, and all traditional songs and poetry were composed in *Mongsen* dialect. *Chungli* dialect is more of prose and it is the common language among the Aos.

Each tribe of Nagaland has its own legend and belief system of their origin. They are related to living creatures, plants kingdom or natural object like stones, caves, etc. According to the Ao mythology, their ancestors had emerged from ‘*Longtrok*’. ‘*Long*’ means stone ‘*terok*’ means six. Thus, the Aos had believed they were emerged from these stones. *Longtrok* is believed to be the symbolic origin of their leaders and ancestors, though none of them physically originated from that legendary stones.

*Longtrok* is located at *Chungliyimti* in Tuensang district of Nagaland. It is no more an Ao villages as it is now inhabited by the Sangtam tribe because the Aos had abandoned it long ago. The Aos believed to have lived there for many years approximately from AD 100-1025 during which a sizeable number of population and households were increased.

*Chungliyimti* was a unique village in itself from where the first phase of the Aos’ civilization begun. The first phase of socio-cultural refinement took place in a marvelous way based on the indigenous wisdom in many fields such as village administrative system, customary laws, beliefs and practice system, art and culture, group dynamic system, farming etc. This village was a sort of miniature republic in itself having everything for its requirements. Thus, the history of *Chungliyimti*, the first Ao village, is of great importance and significant even today. It marks the beginning of a new era in the early history of the Aos. From *Chungliyimti*, the Aos moved towards *Aonglenden* (*Aonglenden* is the present *Ungma* village, located about 5 kilometres away from Mokokchung) and from *Aonglenden*, they migrated to *Koridang*. It is believed that the Aos have lived in *Koridang* for about five generations and spread out to found new villages later.

## II. TRADITIONAL PAST SOCIETY AND THE AO NAGA WOMEN

Tradition is oriented towards a legitimate reference to the past, (*S. Langlois, International Encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences, 2001*). Thomas A. Green defined tradition as something that passed down from one generation to the next, generally by informal means, with or little or no change in the transmission of that item or in the item that is transmitted. So in this paper, the phrase ‘traditional past’ is usually referred to the pre-colonial era of the Ao Naga society.

The Aos have been following patrilineal family from time immemorial, where the major shares of the property go to the sons. Father is the head of the family and family descent is through the male members. When a daughter marry her husband, she leaves her father’s family and comes under the authority of her husband. Daughters were regarded as subordinate members as they cannot be co-owner with the sons and do not inherit family property. Ao women were metaphorically referred to as ‘*süngolang*’ (bunch of flowers) or ‘*tetsür-tanur*,’ (literally, women-children) in their society irrespective of their age, status and qualification. They were regarded as ‘subordinate’ citizens to man in society and in family circle due to their feminine characteristics. Women were not given any role in the political platform.

### III. ARJU-TZÜKI SYSTEM

There were two important institutions in the *Ao* Naga society through which they learnt the social way of life: *arju* and *tsüki*. *Arju* was the bachelors' dormitory, while the *tsüki* was for the young women folk. Both *Ao* men and women maintained separate dormitories. These institutions were the nucleus of the *Ao* Naga cultural heritage. *Arju* was one of the oldest and strongest means of social control. It was a unique institution that provide social security with trained and disciplined personnel. It also act as an agent and centre of socialization. All the boys after attaining the age of 12/13 years used to sleep in the *arju* until he gets married. But *arju* was not a mere dormitory to sleep in or it was not a night shelter or mere assembly for young boys of the village. It was a sort of boy's training school, which serves the needs of society in social security, promotion of culture and training centre of master craftsmanship. It is in fact a real training institution that promotes the process of socialization of the people in general and men folk in particular.

Like *arju*, the traditional *Ao* women's dormitory was known as *tzüki*. It is as old as the *arju* and an absolute feminist socio-cultural institution where the unmarried girls used to sleep under the guardianship of an experienced widow or normally an unmarried woman of the same clan.

*Tzüki* is established in the house of a widow, who can also serves as matron. A widow is also not a mere widow but a well-known rich widow, wife of a rich man or women, who has high command in his village by virtue of his contribution to the community. She is popularly known as '*tzükibutsüla*.' She was the real owner of *tzüki* and under her responsibility, a group of unmarried girls sleep in her house. It is a small institution where five to seven or hardly a dozen of girls can be accommodated. Therefore, there used to have several *tzüki* in every *khel* of the *Ao* villages.

*Tzüki* occupied a prominent place on young unmarried *Ao* women. They were strictly disciplined and trained into womanhood. They learnt the dignity of labour in weaving and method of cultivation. The members also learnt diversified skills and activities relating to socio-cultural activities, domestic chores, education, and economic matters. It also initiate the process of courtship between partners and, often act as the rendezvous for unmarried boys and girls, especially in the evening. Thus, *tzüki* became an epicenter of all activities for unmarried *Ao* women. *Arju* was more elaborate, dignified, and had the command of the entire *Ao* social and political system. The activities involved in *arju* itself provided a higher position to members of *arju* than members of *tzüki*. The life of *arju* is described as 'a life almost of military discipline'. They were taught and trained war tactics with hard life. A person who did not go through this *arju* life was not chosen for leadership in any village council. That speaks volume of male chauvinism in the *Ao* Naga society. *Ao* women, who had not experienced hard life as the members of *arju*, would miss leadership role for her entire life just because of the women's *tzüki* was not at par with the *arju* activities.

In her book, '*Women in Church and Society*,' Narola Imchen lamented:

*Non-member of the arju, especially, the minor boys and women were restricted from entry into this peculiar institution of young men for fear of leaking the secrecy. Even the courtyard of this house is highly restricted to women and if she comes near to its vicinity, it is regarded as a bad omen. Thus, Ao women were excluded from one of the community's most important social and cultural institution.*

### IV. THE VILLAGE REPUBLIC AND AO NAGA WOMEN

Every *Ao* village was an independent state and each village was regarded as a republic. The ancient *Ao* village was a sovereign state, capable of internal administration and external diplomatic relation and welfare, with pure form of democracy where every citizen enjoyed his freedom of speech and was respected. The *Ao* system of village government is known as '*Putu Menden*' among the *Chungli* pharty and '*Sanen Menchen*' among the *Mongsen* pharty. The representatives of various clans form this government. The dispensation of *Putu Menden* was 30 years, where only the persons who were entitled can occupy that seat of administration.

*Putu Menden* was run by a council of elders called the '*tatars*'. *Tatars* means the chosen leaders or elders, who exercise their supreme power collectively in their village administration. *Putu Menden* was regarded as the highest executive office and the seat of judgment. There is no higher authority above *Putu Menden*. Therefore, all matters- law, justice, and administration of the village were carried out by the *tatar Putu Menden*. *Putu*.

Describing the nature, character, and qualification of the *tatars*, L Panger Imchen meticulously observed: *The Aos are known for their moral standard while chosen to the highest seat of the state. As there is no compartmentalization between secular and religion, the Aos considered the tatar [Putu] Menden, the holiest and highest seat that should remain unpolluted and sanctified. Each clan unanimously chose their own representatives based on age, wealth, moral-ethical standards, and ability for leadership and service. On grounds of misrepresentation of power and character, he is called back by his clan and replaced... Son of an undeclared father, widows, invalids, or handicapped and anyone known for immoral behaviour is not chosen... Therefore, to be chosen representatives, one must be a respectable full-fledged citizen of the state.*

From time immemorial, *Ao* women were denied membership in the village assembly, or citizen's forum. It was opened only to the male members and thus it laid the foundation of male's exclusivity in the *Ao* Naga society.

### V. HEADHUNTING AND AO NAGA WOMEN

An astounding feature of the ancient *Ao* society was the practice of head hunting. Nagas in general and the *Aos* in particular, are well known all over the world for this obnoxious practice. It was a part of everyday life for the *Aos*. The cutting and carrying away of head was the glory of headhunting. A headhunter was unanimously honoured and respected as a warrior and hero in the *Ao* Naga society. More than that, a headhunter was admired in his village and his prospects of winning a beautiful bride increased proportionately. Conversely, a young man with no head to his credit found it difficult to attract a suitable partner. The life of an *Ao* man was considered unfulfilled unless he had taken a head. Only these deeds earned them respect and honour in the community.

Verrier Elwin writes, 'a man's position would be judged from the heads he brought. The man who brought in a head was no longer called a boy or a woman, and could assist in the council of the state.' Though women did not participate directly in taking heads and no status as the men folk who did it, they were indirectly involved in the practice. The women sang the songs of praise to the warriors who came with the enemy's head.

Headhunting was thus a man's activity that gave an edge to the position of an *Ao* man. It involved many risks and was always a man's game. An *Ao* man's social status was solely depended on the success in headhunting.

## VI. FAMILY, INHERITANCE AND THE AO NAGA WOMEN

The nucleus of *Ao* society was the family. The *Aos* called it '*kibong*'. It is consisted of father, mother, and children or without children. Father is the head of the family. Since the *Aos* maintained patriarchal family, family descent is through the male members. Daughters were regarded as subordinate members because they do not inherit property of the family. Male members in the family inherit properties. Under the *Ao* customary Law, inheritance has been always to the male members- sons, brothers, nephews, cousins, etc. Among the sons, the eldest son gets more preference. In the absence of heirs, brother, or uncle or nearest kith and kin, may take the opportunity in succession.

Thus, *Ao* women have only an inferior position to men. Nevertheless, there are undeniable facts that the *Ao* women enjoy considerable privileges and other rights. The *Ao* women, though second in command in the family, manage all domestic chores. Their husbands do not interfere in the domestic affairs. The wife becomes the mistress of the households and stays with her husband under his guardianship and protection. She works hard throughout the day and look after her husband and children. Cooking, washing clothes, feeding, fetching water, etc. were done by women. However, husband does the heavy works.

The daughters after their marriage come under the care of different clans and family. They are not entitled to own the properties of her father, but when an *Ao* woman marries to her husband, she does not lose her clan title nor can she take her husband's title unlike women in other societies.

## VII. CONCLUSION

It is vividly clear from the above description that in the traditional past society of the *Ao* Nagas, men were always at the helms of the socio-political arenas. It is out of question for an *Ao* woman to participate in public debates and discussions like '*Yim Mongdang*' or '*Senso Mongdang*' (citizen's forum). All major decisions were taken exclusively by the male members. As patrilineal society, an *Ao* men can play a decisive role in the society. In a society like the *Ao* Naga society, where physical strength, prowess and courage were respected, women were considered the weaker sex. But it is argued in many respects that *Ao* women occupied a better position than many other women have in other societies of the world in terms of sharing the responsibility, participation, recognition, and acceptance in the society. J. P. Mills has aptly remarked that an *Ao* woman is very far from being a slave or a drudge.

Her position is not inferior to that of a man. She always has her clan behind her and were a bad tempered husband to bully his wife, he would soon have a swarm of in-laws buzzing around his ears, and his wife would promptly leave him. Till a woman gets married, her parents act as her protector and after marriage her husband takes over the responsibility. Even after marriage, an *Ao* woman does not lose her clan identity. They were regarded as assets in the house because without them the domestic works cannot be completed. They were respected and enjoyed considerable degree of freedom although their activities were restricted to certain defined areas.

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